AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Tracy Daugherty

These six stories investigate characters who must
begin to understand their own actions, which are often
made in response to authority. In the lives of these
characters, there are schemas which they believe they
fit, certain rules placed on them by society that they
each feel they must obey. It is when they fail to do so
that the characters must inevitably make the choice
between hope and despair.
Things Not Seen, and Other Stories

by

Amy M. Walsh

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Amy M. Walsh, Author
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Things Not Seen, and Other Stories

Things Not Seen

She notices things: a small plastic casket he gave her at Halloween once filled with chalky candy, now full of safety pins; a glass vase they bought in a Decatur flea market on one of their weekend trips; a poster of a ridiculous fisherman that Jeff would always refer to as his "Uncle Lou." These things are his: the oak gun cabinet filled with old issues of Vanity Fair; the brown naughahyde easy chair with cracks in the armrests; all of the compact discs that start with "P": the Pixies, the Posies, the Pretenders. In the four years since they met, things have been accumulating, were hidden and are just now appearing from under beds, in closets, cupboards, and drawers. Everything is accentuated by the glare of the snow outside, which seeps through the curtains Sarah made.

Two nights ago, before he left for the convention in Omaha, Jeff stood in the doorway and rubbed the long, thin scar on the back of his hand--the one he always said itched when he had to lie. She'd wished at that moment that he hadn't been so honest with her in the past, giving her his secrets as if they were expected gifts, something a person is required to offer in one form or another.
"There isn't anyone else, Sarah," he said. Omaha, she thought, nodding as she watched him trace the pinkish line up and down with his thumb. His tanned brow was corrugated, and he said something about not having the same wants, desires, agreeing on the direction of their lives.

"We agreed on the apartment. Living in Barrington. We agreed to buy Best Foods fricking mayonnaise and Miracle Whip! We agree on a lot of things, Jeff."

"I need more than a grocery list," he said.

She watched him then, his droopy eyes, and then hated him for looking so helpless when he had all the power. She frantically searched the room for something, anything concrete that she could point at and say, "There, because of this. This is why we should stay together." Instead, she leaned against the side of the couch, slid to the floor and said, "What about the furniture? What about the apartment?"

He sat down next to her, cupped her chin in his hand, and stroked her cheek with his rough thumb. She pulled his hand down into hers, into her lap. Hands were important; they were the first thing she noticed about a person, a man, telling herself that she had the right to be selective on the basis of this fetish since they would be touching her. Jeff's were long and thin like a piano player's, the skin the color of cedar and just as smooth, perfect except for the scar.
She thought of him touching someone else, some nameless, faceless woman in Omaha. Probably a blonde, she thought, with a room temperature IQ, legs to her shoulders, and blue eyeliner.

"You can keep everything. I'll just take my clothes and go," he said. Sarah looked down at the gray hunting socks she wore. The bright orange triangle which should have been at the heel hit her well above the ankle. It was Sunday; she always took it easy on Sunday. She had on his T-shirt from a jazz festival they had attended, his boxers.

"But I like a lot of your clothes," she said, immediately regretting the way it sounded. Jeff stood up, made a noise that sounded like "puh," and walked into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

Sarah picked at a piece of elastic on the sock, pulling it out until it snapped against her leg, then worked on the next string. Quitters. That's what she called socks that fell down because the elastic was gone. Sarah pulled the top of the sock away from her leg, hearing the fabric give and the little rubber bands inside snap.

Now she wonders what the woman in Omaha is wearing. Something red. Something polyester that would pass for silk because only a woman would really know the difference; a man, at the beginning of a relationship, is not interested in lingerie. It is a hindrance,
something to be removed furiously and thrown into a corner. But Jeff's mistress wouldn't know this. Because Trixie, or whatever her name is, lives in one of the bum-fuckiest places to live in these United States: Omaha, which starts with a zero and ends with a "ha."

* * *

In the bedroom Sarah begins pulling things out of drawers and flattening them into boxes. She places fragile items in between layers of T-shirts: the crystal butterfly she had gotten as a bridesmaid's gift when Jeff's sister got married; the chipped ceramic angel she'd had since she was a child; a framed collage of photos taken during the last few years. She pauses before she hides the faces with a stack of folded shirts.

Sarah tries to picture her, this woman she has never met. She first creates the woman in her mind as the complete opposite of herself: platinum straight hair as opposed to her own dark curls, blue eyes instead of brown.

She turns and presses the sides of her fists against the frost covered pane of the bedroom window. She dabs her fingers above the bean-shapes where the light coating of ice has melted, making baby-size footprints. Outside it has begun to snow again, adding
to the thick blanket that already covers sidewalks, streets, and housetops, drowning out the usual sounds of the neighborhood. The sky is a bright gray, almost as white as the ground, as though they never connect at the horizon but simply blend into the same hue. She sits down on the bed and looks at the icicles that hang like fangs from the balcony above their window. She feels, in the warmth and darkness of the room, that she is in a mouth, being rolled on a tongue, savored, just before being swallowed.

She takes the quilt from the end of the bed and shoves it into the pine chest she and Jeff ordered from the *Crate and Barrel* catalog last year. It is already full; she gets cold at night and has to be neck-to-toe in blankets, quilts, and even the goosedown comforter Jeff's grandmother gave to him. He, on the other hand, wears only a sheet to his waist and still manages to give off heat. Sarah would press next to him, never able to get warm enough, until he would wake up, too hot to sleep, and ask her to move back to her side of the bed.

He'll take the comforter.

The steel headboard is cold beneath her fingertips. She grips it then says, "I hate you" softly. Reaching under the covers, she finds the fitted sheet and pulls it from the corners of the mattress, wrapping the covers inside. She collapses on the bare ticking, the cylinder
of blankets on her side of the bed. She thinks about being single once again; nothing to do but her fingernails, staying up until there isn't anything on television but white noise and colored bars—except, perhaps, the Star-Spangled Banner playing as scenes of fireworks, eagles, and memorial tombstones, curved and aligned as matchsticks flash on the screen. She will deny, then, that she has been waiting, but will not go to bed until 4:30 a.m. Then it will be past the time for him to call even if he were drunk and lonely, and looking for someone, though not necessarily her. When the people she works with comment on the dark circles below her eyes, she will tell them that she had a late night, and she will hold her smile for just a moment longer than she should.

Sarah smells Jeff's body on the sheets, a scent that is sweet and citrusy, and she wraps her arms around the blankets. First thing to do, order cable. Breathing deeply, her face burrowed into the sheets and blankets, she falls into a kicking, restless sleep.

*   *   *

Sarah stays in bed for a few minutes, keeping her eyes closed. Jeff told her once she would have a better chance of remembering her dreams this way, that it worked for him. What he had dreamt: boats with sails
flapping in the wind, trees reaching out for him, birds trapped in window wells. But she can never recall anything from her sleep, and this morning she decides that she doesn't dream at all.

She finds herself embracing the blankets, and frowns then shoves them off the opposite side of the bed. Buy packing tape. Get change of address cards for the new hovel you are moving into. Call friend to help move big stuff. Buy something soft, a cashmere sweater or a puppy.

On her way out the door, she decides to begin taking her things to her new apartment. She lifts one of the boxes, then balances the glass vase on top, thinking of the fold of Jeff's wallet and his well organized money as he paid for it.

The winter air hits her and immediately takes her breath, as though her lungs had frozen inside her chest. She pulls her scarf over her face and exhales, feeling the slight rush of warm air turn cold. The front porch, like the rest of the neighborhood, is a thick sheet of ice. She steps carefully, holding onto the snow-covered banister with one hand and the box with the other, then sighs when she makes it to her car. The interior is dark, welcoming, and Sarah feels comforted, somehow, even though driving her small Toyota is like maneuvering a sled through the unplowed streets; she has to adjust
to what the car is going to do instead of attempting to control it herself.

She stops carefully at the red light of the first intersection, and glances at all her mirrors to see if there are any cars around her. Last year after a snow much like this one, she was rear-ended by a small pickup, whose driver had thought that four-wheel drive was effective on ice. She'd had been without a car for two weeks while the dents were banged out, and now had the habit of inching forward slowly when she was approached. The streets this morning are almost deserted. Only one car is in the lane to the left, a red Honda.

She wipes the melted condensation from her side window, smearing water. The woman driving the Honda catches her glance, and Sarah smiles reflexively, but the woman ignores her, wiping her nose and looking away. Her fingers are long, and there is a large diamond ring on her left hand.

Sarah looks past her, up the perpendicular street, and sees a snow plow, its blade grinding the asphalt. It rumbles toward the intersection and Sarah realizes that momentarily the cars will be hit with a spray of sand and snow. She thinks about the way she closes her eyes when things hit the windshield--leaves, stray swatches of paper, small rocks.
The woman in the Honda grips the steering wheel. Sarah watches as she looks up at the red light, and toward the plow approaching the intersection, then touches her mouth, pulling it slightly downward. She turns to Sarah again and smiles. Her car pulls forward, wheels churning and spitting slush.

Sarah brings her hands in front of her face as the Honda and snowplow collide and bounce back against her own car. She is lifted briefly out of her seat, then slammed back down. The car is spinning, and there is a final snap before it comes to a rest. She opens her eyes slowly to see the Honda on the opposite corner. It is almost severed, pinned against a telephone pole by the blade of the truck. There are trails of liquid, red, blue, pink, mixing with the snow on the street. Sarah sits, her arms wrapped around herself, and doesn't try to move.

*   *   *

She leaves the box and vase on the porch, and fumbles her key into the lock. She had thought to take everything that was valuable out of her car before the serviceman--Jim, if you believed the patch on his coveralls--chained it up. She found cassettes, an extra set of keys, and birth control pills she thought she had lost. There were questions asked by people
Sarah could barely see, faces and nods, touches on shoulders, all of which seemed as though she had seen through water. When the officer had driven her home, asking her repeatedly if she was all right, they were still attempting to remove the woman's body from the remains of the Honda. No one was rushing.

Sarah had been asked what had happened, and she'd said that the woman had slid through the red light, had slammed on her brakes instead of pumping them. People believed what they wanted to anyway. The snowplow driver had simply nodded at what she'd said as if it were true, and Sarah, herself, believed for a moment that maybe it was.

She thinks of the smile the woman gave her--this final gesture before pressing down on the gas pedal. Sarah wonders if there was any connection then, what the smile could have meant to the woman. Was it simply courtesy? She imagines her sitting at a desk, a receptionist who would look up from the papers scattered around her, putting her silver Cross pen down and welcoming someone's client; standing and straightening her skirt, then offering a well-manicured hand. She would know how to dress, how to react to others.

Sarah turns on the television, keeping the sound down, and watches the top stories of the news, but there is no mention of the accident. She traces the numbers of the phone with her fingertips, wanting to call Jeff
in Omaha, certain he would understand. She thinks of all that she knows about the town and where he might stay: near Creighton, where he would reminisce about his college career; Howard Street where they could walk on the cobblestones and listen to the blues music that leaked out of pub doors; downtown, where it would be cold, the wind undisturbed in this city by either hills or skyscrapers. She puts the phone down on the parquet floor and presses her hands to her face.

She walks back to the doorway, maneuvering around cardboard and newspaper, goes outside and reaches down for the box. As she rises, the flea market vase slides. She tilts the box the other direction, overcompensating, and the vase falls. As if in slow motion, Sarah reaches for it. She feels the bottom beneath her fingertips for just a moment before it drops to the porch and shatters.

She kneels then, and sighs, picks up the large pieces of the vase and tosses them into the box. She thinks about the accident, the blur of the Honda, the jolt of their meeting. Leaning over, she carefully begins to separate the glass from the ice.
Mixed Medium

The August rush is over. The brides have come home from Barbados, Jamaica, and even the nearby Hilton, some with fresh tans, some with sore muscles--way up on the inner thighs that no stirrup machine in the gym can flex. They've unwrapped and opened up their blenders (hand and otherwise), counted their dishes and towels. When the pictures came back, they each brought their favorite one to MacGregor's Portraits. A great wedding gift! We will turn any eight-by-ten (or larger) into a family keepsake of original artwork!

Vince MacGregor, my boss, sits in his office most of the day. He keeps the door closed, trapping his cigarette smoke inside. Nicotine tints the long glass pane to the left of the door; it has become opaque, and I know he doesn't notice when I stop painting the newlyweds and work on an acrylic or watercolor for my portfolio. He probably wouldn't care--I'm his only employee, and he said when he hired me that my art came first. He just wants my work done on time.

He stays out of my way. At times I only see him when he hands me a proof for a portrait. Even then he doesn't say much, just "good job lasstime Meegun" or "more ivory in dress" in an accent I still can't quite place, then goes back into his office, the door closing
behind him automatically. He has installed one of those hinges that pulls it shut, sounding like all the air is being sucked out of the room. From where I paint, I can read the sign below his name: "Artistic Director" it says, in crisp block letters designed and applied by the printing shop down the street.

There is a certain comfort in the studio. The sounds are always soft: brushstrokes, turpentine splashing into a glass, canvas tarps being pulled to cover the worn wood floors or a fresh painting. The chipping brick walls are darkened with age, punctured with holes from the mirrors and bars that were here from the ballet dancers who used to own the studio. One day I walked in, expecting to see my reflection in front of me, to notice the slight sway in my walk, and instead there was a height of perforated burgundy and a flat box of broken glass. MacGregor saved me the pieces for my mixed medium. I never asked him to do it, just like I didn't ask him if he took the mirrors off the wall before he shattered them. This is how I picture him in my mind—the strong, silent man who goes a little crazy when no one is looking. I give him mystery.

I never meant to stay here three years, and I won't stay much longer, painting people I don't know or care about, who don't even look that good on the day they look their best: a blemish on a face, the shadow of a second chin on the bride, the bruise on the best man
(and once, even the maid of honor) as a drunken result of the bachelor party. But the paints are free, and I have permission to use the studio whenever I want. Most of my artist friends are waiting tables now, coming home late at night, staying up late, then sleeping in until an hour before they have to leave for their next shift.

At least I get to wait with a brush in my hand. The faces I paint—eyes red-rimmed from tears of joy or fright, the small, round rash of a love bite appearing above the groom's collar—these details are easily changed in my profession.

Kathy got me the lead on the job here. She works at Richfield's Drycleaners down the street, where MacGregor always takes his clothes. She made him laugh one day when he brought in some shirts to be cleaned. He hadn't bothered to unbutton them and they were still so stiff with the heavy starch he preferred that while he was filling out his slips, she stood the shirts upright, forcing the sleeves to bend at the elbow. She said it looked like someone standing with their hands on their hips. I can't believe she actually made him smile, but that's how Kathy is—she just has this way of getting what she wants.

I wish, sometimes, that she could make me smile, even if I told her what happened; how one night I was drunk and scared and needed someone, maybe my best friend. How because she wasn't there, someone else was,
and it just happened to be her boyfriend. She'd probably understand—she's like that. She'd blame herself for not coming to the first public display of my art, of what I considered myself, hanging on the walls of a bar. Then, when she apologized for not being there, I'd smile and say, "It's okay."

* * *

She wasn't there the night I stepped in The Den—nicknamed by those who knew it "The Den of Inequity"—and glanced at the band, then at the collage of my paintings and drawings on the walls surrounding them.

The bar's owner, David Baxter, was an old artist with a fetish for new ones, as long as they were female. He always referred to them, to us, as his "newest finds," and made introductions to people who could commission artists for interior murals, private works, even some corporations who still preferred oil paintings of their corporate executives.

David was as repulsive as he was important. I knew him, as did most of the girls I hung around with. He wore his graying hair in a pompadour, and his clothes dark enough to accentuate the whiteness of his skin, the length of his neck. "Meghan!" he said, spinning toward me with a drink in one hand and a brunette in the other, "do you like what we've done?" He thrust his drink
upward toward the covered walls, splashing my sleeve. The fabric immediately darkened with the liquid.

I turned away from him and looked toward the stage. The sounds from the guitars wavered in the smoky air, the fog brightened with flames from the band's pyrotechnics. The musicians all had the same dark, flowing hair surrounding their faces, hiding their expressions. I watched my glass covered prints catch the light of controlled fires. On the opposite wall some of the watercolors were carefully pinned by their edges, frameless and raw, to boards suspended by silver link. From any angle it was easy to see the mix of darks and lights, the raised surfaces of the silk and broken mirrors I had used, the wavy areas of absorbed water on paper.

I nodded to Baxter and smiled, then stepped out of his reach. I searched the bar for someone, anyone I knew, thinking that I shouldn't be by myself.

His bar was once a coffin warehouse. Thirty foot walls enclosed the cement floor, which was usually covered with a carpet of artists, musicians, and others who floated around each other, circling and observing. Most of the women wore black, as if it were some unwritten rule.

A hand pressed against the small of my back, almost covering it, then slid downward. Pulling in my breath, I turned and looked up at John. We had known each other
from the year of art classes we'd attended. Though I thought he was handsome enough to be inaccessible to most women, I could still remember him with braces and at that awkward period when his arms seemed too long for his body. He pulled me close, almost had to because of the congestion of bodies around us, and smiled. "You look great."

I smiled, then pointed to the mixed medium, noting that one of the mirrors had loosened and turned, exposing the silver backing. "Thanks, but it could have been better."

"No," he said, pulling my face to his, "you look great."

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. "Always flattering the girls, aren't you? Where's Kathy? I tried to call her but got her machine. I didn't think she'd miss this."

He ignored me for a moment, watching the people around us as they pushed and shoved, then said, "Work. It's monthly report time."

The tempo of the music had changed. The people in front of the stage began dancing; it was so crowded we had no choice but to respond, moving left and right, caught as though in a ripple, a wave.

Baxter was next to us with his brunette, who was obviously too young to be in the bar. She had overdone makeup and a look of strategy, the desire to appear as
though she belonged, in her eyes. The music dropped to a low, steady drumbeat and the crowd shifted. Baxter was pressed against my side, so close I could smell his breath, sweet and dank. He had been smoking, cloves or marijuana, either was possible. He kissed the girl, worked his hands beneath her shirt.

I looked up at John, who didn't seem to know what to do. He squeezed my shoulder. He was a full foot taller than me; I felt safer being near him—he could see what was going on from a higher viewpoint. More bodies pressed in around us, limiting me to the sight of the backs of men and hair of women.

I watched him as he looked from the older man to the girl, then back at me, saddened. "Let's get the hell out of here," he said. I tried to turn to leave, but I was surrounded by men attempting to hold their drinks, their shoulders streaked with monochromatic do-it-at-home tattoos.

Baxter's hand spread across the cheek of the girl, her small black bra now off her body and laced in his fingers. He saw me and stared back, momentarily holding her bottom lip in his teeth, then releasing it. "Exhibitionism," he said slowly, pronouncing every syllable and looking me right in the eyes, "exists only for the voyeurs of the world." He blew me a kiss, and I just looked at him, unable to move.
John pulled me hard through the crowd and onto the black street, still wet from an earlier rain. The sign blinked madly, reflecting at my feet, splashing red on the pavement. I was going tell John it reminded me of a painting, but he kissed me and I couldn't remember the artist's real name. I knew negative space had been important in the work, though, and that I was hurting Kathy, that I was kissing someone I knew too well, and that the painter was nicknamed "Jack the Dripper."

* * *

Maybe I would have been able to put it all behind me, that I slept with my best friend's boyfriend, if she had never said his name again, or if they both had moved to Barbados and left me alone, but I needed Kathy to calm me, and I needed John to believe in something beautiful, something good. What changed is that when she said his name, I started listening to what she was saying, wondering if he would be different if he and I were together, better somehow.

She asked me to paint him for her. I had given her a certificate for her birthday for "one free painting," assuming, of course, that she would take one I had already completed--the acrylic of the chair that lay on its side behind a grid of colors, the pencil sketch of the woman half submerged in water. Instead, I sat in
front of my easel, just finishing the background of the Smithson wedding: the stained glass window of Saint Augustine's I had painted so many times, the brown wood of the walls. Raw umber, straight from the tube, no mixing required. I'd left the area around the bride and groom white, only primer over the sketch so I could detail the faces later, leaving out the groom's cold sore. The result was two white ghosts beside an altar, connected by emptiness.

"And what if you two break up? Am I supposed to paint the next guy's face over his?" I said. My approach to his jutting chin, the straight bridge of his nose, would be oil on canvas, starting with lights and adding darks. I found myself thinking about breaking John's jaw, smashing the mouth that had explored me, creating the black space that was left behind by missing teeth.

I had to say I'd do it. I didn't feel like I was in the position to deny her anything. She smiled at me, then, repulsively happy. Right then, I hated her, too.

The snapshot sits on the table next to my easel. There is a thick, perfect thumbprint in the corner of the photo that I think is burnt sienna, which I used with other shades of brown and tan to bring out the sun brightening his hair.

I had to work with a lot of darks in the background. I couldn't seem to get it right. There are
still shreds of eraser all over the canvas. I could start all over, but it's not worth the time.

In the photograph the sea flattens out in a dull blue behind John, but there is a light multi-colored drip falling from the top through the middle and across the three-by-five. I considered, momentarily, dipping the photo in turpentine, but ended up just splattering across it with my brush to see what the fluid would do to the Kodak paper. The mixture of hues that it caused drip downward, splitting the scene in two, separating him from the ground. He seems suspended above the sea and the earth, although he is apparently standing on a cliff somewhere on the bay.

He looks directly toward the photographer. His hair is obedient, unaffected even in wind that makes his chambray shirt cling to his chest. His arms are extended, palms up. The horizon--the sea and a cloudless sky--is behind him, and yet he's the focus. As though he is everything.

If I enlarged the photograph to an eight-by-ten or eleven-by-fourteen I could probably see the photographer's shadow reflected in his pupils; the angle of light is correct. Kathy took the picture. She borrowed my camera, my film only hours after John, her boyfriend of two years, left me, naked, sleeping at the studio, wrapped in an old, soft tarp that we had used as a blanket. If she had come close enough, she could have
smelled him on me, the way I did when I brought my shirt
to my nose.

In the picture I can see the scratch from my
watchband, a thin, red line barely visible in the shadow
of John's cheekbone. If she asked him how he got it,
what could he have said in response? Playing with the
cat? Walking under the trees? Fucking your best
friend? That night I kissed every inch of the wound I
had given him.

* * *

I called Kathy the minute I finished the painting
and she bounded into the studio, her shoulder length
hair mocking every movement of her head. She and John
were getting along better than ever. She was happier
than I had ever seen her and in constant motion, as if
there were carbonation in her veins.

I was sitting in front of the easel applying a thin
coop of Permagel to the painting's background, and
smiled, not because I was finished, but because I was
pleased with my work, the way I had put the little brown
spot in the iris of his left eye, how I had perfectly
formed the small cleft that John has in his Adam's
apple, the slight trace of red beneath his cheekbone.
"It's wonderful," she whispered, staring at the canvas. "It looks more like him than the photograph. How did you do that?"

I rubbed my hands together. My skin was tight from turpentine and still darkened with paint. I handed it to Kathy, smiled and said, "All yours." She carried it out, the door shutting softly behind her.

* * *

After she left, I asked MacGregor for time off. I didn't know what to say, so I told him I was having female troubles. He lowered his head and mumbled something. I'm not sure what it was, but I did hear him say, "back when better...time...need..." or something of that nature, so I'll take a couple of days. I felt a little guilty lying to him, but in a way, it was the truth. It's like I'm spotting, touching everything in my life with no particular feeling, not at the right time and completely out of my own control, dabbing at my routine and turning away, hoping it will recreate itself without me having to help.

I think about what I've done and blame myself, everyone else, wonder who ruined our friendship more: John for continuing to go out with Kathy after he had slept with me, then overcompensating through his guilt and stealing the time Kathy and I used to have to
ourselves, or maybe me, for retreating into the blacks, whites, and grays of the charcoal drawings I've been doing of the water moving beneath the Kingston Bridge. It is slow, thick with life and death, alkaline and acids swirling beneath the surface, giving me back myself in the remains that float to the banks: paper wrappers, beer cans, and condoms. I watch it for hours, smearing dusty charcoal on the paper, silently cursing the tourists that corrupt my view while I sit in the litter by the shore, their foreign cameras taking quick snaps of the steel cage that pulls across the bay, while they watch from behind a pane of glass framed in metal and plastic. I wonder what they find so interesting about the bridge.

In the morning, the sun hits the water and gives off a blinding white. At times I can't watch it directly, so I'll turn around and close my eyes and listen to the movement of the tide on the beach, sketching what I hear behind me: the love sounds of water sucking at sand, clenching at the rocks like hands in darkness. By dusk the sky, the water, and my fingertips are all the same color.

* * *

On my first day back, MacGregor gives the proof of the smiling couple to me fast, as if it is something he
can't hold for long or shouldn't be touching at all, something too hot or too cold. He turns and walks back to his office, corduroys shooshing with every step and his arms crossed in front of him, hiding his hands in his armpits. But it's too late--I see how clean they are, even under his nails.

The door closes behind him, and I notice that there are two photos, that the three-by-five of John is beneath the one he has just handed me. It's possible he knows that we were here that night. Maybe I hadn't folded the cloth tarp correctly or put the couch back into the right place. Or maybe he had been in his office, reading Art & Design late that Friday because he couldn't sleep, and he heard the giggles and whispers. I think back, desperately trying to remember if there had been any sounds from the office. I take a towel and hide my face in it; the pine-like smell of turpentine fills my head, and the crags of dried paint on the cloth scratch at my nose and cheeks. I run to the bathroom.

MacGregor knocks softly at the door. "You feeling okay?"

I've been in here a while, long enough for him to notice I'm missing. I gasp, try to breathe through the solvent fumes that linger in my mouth and nose. "Yeah," I say, my voice raspy. "I don't know what's wrong, really. Must have been something I ate."
"Mmmhmm. Probably got something inside you that didn't agree," he says.

I laugh, a short burst of air through my nose that sears my sinuses. My eyes water at the pain, but his voice comforts me, something familiar at a time when I feel bombarded by strangeness that I, myself, created. I realize that MacGregor is the only thing in my life that is really what it appears to be, the only stability I have left.

I tell him I will only be a minute, then lean against the sink. I chip at the layers of paint on the wall, finding color after color beneath: blue, green, beige. Everything will be okay before I reach the final layer.
Carrying

There is a stain of ranch dressing, white and speckled as an egg, on my black apron. I pour some coffee on a bar rag and rub the spot out quickly, before J.D. sees that I haven't washed my uniform, that I have two creases down my sleeve from ironing it again. I tuck my shirt tightly in the waistband of my miniskirt, then run my hand along my stomach, feeling the slight bulge. Yesterday I knocked into one of the girls as we tried to pass each other, and watched as silverware slid off the plate she carried and onto the runner. I bent over to reach for the forks, feeling as if I'd just eaten Thanksgiving dinner, and had to grab the counter to pull myself up. All this, and I'm only four months along.

Everything has its place here; I crave the monotony of setting out the glasses, filling the Sweet 'n' Lows, opening the matchbooks in the ashtrays so the restaurant's logo, a pink neon circle against a blue backdrop, can be seen. J.D. will turn on the lights and start one of the sixteen track tapes soon, but for the moment, all I can hear is muted sounds from behind the kitchen door: pans skidding against the round open mouths of the gas burners, knives tapping against cutting boards. The chefs speak quietly now, while they are able to and can still be heard. The dining room is lit only by the neon that stretches along the wall,
coating everything with a soft pink glow. It should
always be this way, but the lunch crowd is already
starting to fill up the parking lot, chatting on
cellular phones from their company cars.

My section is almost full by 11:15--a four-top of
bored women with perfect manicures; a couple sitting on
the same side of the booth so the man can hold the
woman's thigh, unseen, beneath the table; two younger
guys in cowboy boots and backward baseball caps who suck
in their breath when they see the prices on the menu.
Sticker shock.

I see one of my regulars coming in--the attorney
general. He has this salt and pepper hair that seems to
curl just a bit out of control around his ears, a
handlebar mustache, and a slightly crooked front tooth.
He looks whimsical--disarming, even--but he's great at
his job, and has the reputation to prove it. We save
booth eighteen for him every Monday. There's something I
like about knowing him, as if he could protect me from
mail fraud or a used car salesman. When I see that he
is seated in my section, I bring out his iced tea
without him having to ask.

The new hostess comes up and tells me table twenty
has two, then spins and walks back up front. She's named
after a spice-- Ginger, or Cinnamon, or Saffron,
something. J.D. says she won't last long here, that
she's just another paper doll with hair that adds two
inches to her height, and a skirt that reaches the exact point on her thighs my small apron reaches on mine. I grab a water pitcher and head for the booth, walking fast and looking worried--people will tip better if they think you're really busy.

J.D. slips by me and says to watch out for the fossil in twenty, that she's been in here before and is pretty high maintenance. But I know how to act. I'll say "Yes, ma'am" when what I really mean is, if you're allergic to half of the ingredients used in common dishes, why are you eating out?

I've always believed that anyone who eats out in a restaurant should have to work in one for at least a week, minimum. Things would be different then; they'd see that we all earn our fifteen percent. I know I have--I go through a pair of decent walking shoes, the white leather ones, once a month. By the end of thirty days--fifty-two shifts--I have either worn out the soles on the dark paisley carpet or the leather tops have melted from the grease in the kitchen.

But she doesn't know this and she tells me that the customer should be served, that the kitchen must surely have the ingredients to make her a good meal out of things that won't make her lethargic after eating. I tell her the cooks will do what they can, but they aren't trained dietitians. What I don't tell her is that they aren't trained in anything, really. Three of
them used to be down at Fort Selcar, in minimum security. We got them on work release to wash dishes, then put them on the cold line to make sandwiches after a while. Now they are running the hot lines, and I keep my purse up front and have a manager walk me to my car if I close.

One of them, we call him Slinger--though I don't know if this is a reference to how he puts food on plates or his list of priors with a weapon--screams at me when I tell him about the special order. He is sweating from the heat of the grill, and his brown hair is long, covering one eye, though I can see the other and it is squinting fiercely, the pupil permanently dilated and cat-like. He tells me that it's the middle of the lunch rush. Really? I have five other tables: two eating meals which I haven't had time to check on, one whose bill is still sitting face down, waiting for the first person to touch and then have to pay, and two who have laid their menus down in a pile at the end of their table so I will know they are ready to order and I'd better hurry.

From where I am in the kitchen, I can see seven empty water glasses in my section. A man with a fuchsia tie and black suit is tipping his glass back, trying to get another drop, when the ice shifts and bursts over the rim into his lap. He jumps up out of his chair,
brushes the cubes off himself in quick downward slaps as if they were flames.

"Just please do it, all right?" I say to Slinger, who rolls his eye and mouths the word--the one that starts with "c" that you never call a female.

I send Larry out to water my section. He is half-deaf and wears a hearing aid the size of a golf ball behind his left ear. He doesn't have any front teeth, and I've heard that he freebases cocaine then uses LSD to come down; that he has two kids by different women. I have no idea what kind of woman would let him near her, but he is a fast busser, and he gets the job done. We tip out two percent of our sales to the bussers and hostess, and this guy earns that tax-free bonus.

Last night someone left me a five dollar tip on a hundred dollar tab, and I thought about the fact that I truly paid to wait on them--after claiming the eight percent mandatory for our government. Three of my friends have been audited after working in restaurants, and made to prove that they had been tipped only the money they claimed, and not thousands more. Why do you have to prove you're innocent?

J.D. comes into the kitchen wearing hundred dollar gymshoes with cuffed pants and a shirt stiff from the dry cleaners. He looks at me, raises his eyebrows and parts his lips for just a second, then reconsiders and looks toward Slinger, who is still cursing and raising
his arms. They are hairless from sautéing and flipping steaks above flames, and he has baby's hands, plump fingers and skin pinkish from grease burns.

J.D. has that look on his face--the one that says that everything is under control. I know better. I know him well enough to know that he is going to make this all my fault. There has to be someone to blame. I've seen him lose his cool, scream at the assistant managers when he finds out one of them has been doing blow back in the liquor room or drinking on the job.

It's a rule here that the management can't date the waitstaff or bartenders; it's in the employee manual. I know. I wrote it. It says, clearly, "no sportfucking." But every one of the married managers, and even the owner, met their wives here. Sometimes I think that this place is the microcosm of the universe. There are the scurves--the Slingers and Larrys; the lifers, like Dixie, who has worked here since it opened; the preps, like J.D. and the rest of the managers, and even most of the waitstaff. Two of them are in their third year of medical school. We probably have the highest IQ of any restaurant in town.

You can't tell that from the way the kitchen is reacting to the special order. I feel a little sick--my doctor had told me this would happen--and I reach over to the basket of crackers by the soup tureen. The whole kitchen gets quiet, watching J.D. for some sort of
reaction. We aren't allowed to eat anything when we are on shift, even dead food--mistakes made by the chefs or the waitresses. J.D. looks at me as I put the whole cracker in my mouth, washing it down with the 7-Up and bitters I've been nursing during my shift. He huffs and walks out to the bar. I follow him out, past the framed picture of a woman's legs sticking out from beneath a Porsche. I touch his elbow softly. He turns and points his finger at me. "You," he says, pulling his hand across his head. He got a haircut the day after I told him. I can see the moles on his scalp. "You know better!"

"Yeah." I say, "I do." I walk away. I feel a bit sorry for him. He's young in a lot of ways. I realized this one morning when I walked into his kitchen and caught him laughing to himself as he read the comics. I wonder if this will make him older, more serious, if that is what I want. Still, things need to get done.

I run through my section while I'm waiting for my meals to come up. Two tables have finally decided on who gets to pay, and they each hand me their bill and credit card. I stop at the old woman's booth and tell her it will only be a couple minutes before her food is up--if you warn people, they seem to take it better.

One of the waiters brushes by me, a plate of linguini in one hand and three iced teas balanced in the other, and tells me I have food up in the window. I
head from the dimly lit dining room to the bright lights of the kitchen. J.D. is expediting, and I load my arms with the grilled chicken breast and rice pilaf for the woman in twenty, and blackened catfish for her partner. He places the parsley at ten o'clock on each of the plates as I am turning, and smiles at me—naturally—as if he really means it. I can see the slight space between his two front teeth, and the laugh lines at the edge of his eyes. I remember looking down at him, the way he brushed my hair away from my face and pulled me to his chest when we were in bed. But here it's his job to keep us happy, and when I smile in return. I feel it spread across my face like a crack.

"We didn't use butter," he says. "She's the kind that will ask—so tell her 'no lubricants!'"

I nod and walk back out, the plates balanced on my left arm, my right free to serve.

The woman looks pleased as I set down the meals.
"Now," she says, "there's no butter or garlic in here."
"No ma'am."

"Wonderful. Thank you," she says. "You don't know how hard it is to deal with these kinds of allergies." She seems to melt in front of my eyes, the folds in her skin looking less like leather and more like sheer cloth. I have the urge to touch her face, softly, as if she were my grandmother.
On my way back to the kitchen, the goat-ropers in twenty-two discuss a murder on the other side of town last year, the one where the killer was identified by the ejaculate in the victim's stab wounds. I try not to hear. A middle-aged lady with a Dooney & Bourke purse that would be checked luggage at an airport asks me who chooses the music we play, if I have any idea who Mozart is. I smile and nod. I take an order from a young couple who mispronounce "fajitas," making the word sound somewhat like part of the female anatomy. I say it back to them with correct Spanish, quietly enough so it won't affect my tip.
What We Are Served

Pam stretches across the length of the bed and thinks about people she used to know, those she has lost touch with through the years. She spells their names out in her mind when she can't sleep, beginning with the most recent--Jackie Freeman--who recently remarried and moved to the East coast. She stopped returning Pam's calls after about a month, probably too busy helping her kids adjust to having a new man in the house. She then thinks of Sue Politte, a loud, well-kept woman who owned a boutique Pam frequented. They'd been out one night and everyone had too much to drink. Ben had called Sue a bitch, and Sue turned and asked her how she could have married such an asshole. She told Sue she agreed with her husband--Sue was a prima donna who'd inherited money and no class--decided she could find another place to shop.

She has thought all the way back to the year before when she hears Ben dropping change from his pocket as he folds his pants over his arm, then the gravelly "damnit" that follows. She lies still and slowly begins to take in the scent of scotch on his breath. He stands at least three feet away from her, and though she keeps her eyes closed, she can imagine him there: his hair, which was red when they were married five years ago is now gray enough to match his
eyes; his stomach heaves out from his body—he has recently begun to wear briefs and the waistband is hidden beneath his abdomen; his legs, strong from golfing with his friends, are covered with wiry hair that still has a reddish tinge.

She waits for him to fall into bed, for the bulk of him to force the mattress down on his side, to involuntarily pull her near him. Sometimes this is something that she wants, to be close, to smell the skin of his back, but not so often anymore. She can remember times in bed together after a night at the restaurant, Pam dizzied both by the pace of the busy waiters and waitresses and the wine with dinner, and Ben would reach for her, even seem to crave her. But she wonders now who reached for whom. She quit drinking almost a year ago, and as if they were vices and went hand in hand, she and Ben stopped making love around the same time.

She doesn't really have a problem with either: staying sober seemed like a way to inspire Ben to quit drinking, to show him that life without alcohol is possible, even though he is a restaurant owner who has a full, open bar within his reach; not having sex with her husband, who drinks a bottle of Glenfiddich a day, is not really a sacrifice, but instead, is showing him mercy by not giving him a chance to fail.

She hasn't always felt like this; she never really considered him an alcoholic, but more like a social
drinker. He was never violent with her, his business was thriving, so at times Pam wonders what changed--how she had come to suddenly see what was always there. Her mother once had a saying--when you look for dirt, you'll find it. That's how Pam feels now, as if she had suddenly searched for a reason to point a finger and say, "This is what's wrong with you."

It is late on this Saturday night when she wonders if he can live without her. She hears him stumble and open the mirrored closet door, once again mistaking it for the bathroom. It's useless to pull him across the room and toward the toilet, only more damage will be done, so she's started keeping her clothes covered with clear plastic bags bought from Excalibur Cleaners. The clerks are nice there; they smile and chat with her, never ask her what she uses the bags for, or what the stains are composed of on some of Ben's expensive clothes. They never ask her, and she is well aware that they know.

* * *

On Friday nights the local celebrities--anchors on the news, real estate dealers, corporate bigwigs--gather in the lounge of the restaurant and stand beneath the caricatures of themselves on the walls drawn by a local artist. The cartoon likenesses intensify features:
noses that are normally big take up four or five inches of wall space, though this is the same size as the miniature bodies. Not everyone stands beneath their own portrait; usually it's the young ones, those new to big business--men who wear Jerry Garcia ties or ones shaped like trout, women whose wardrobes are basically still black, and who still laugh a bit too loudly.

The lighting is soft and dim in the lounge, but still enough to shine off the glossy cherrywood of the booths on both sides of the room. By the door to the patio bar a sign says "Phone" in cursive letters of pink neon. This is where "the big dogs play," or at least that's what it says in the local restaurant guides. More money per square foot than any place else in the state, and if the parking lot is any indicator, they are right: Porsche, Mercedes, Ferrari, any car that isn't made in America and is top of the line is parked in the spaces closest to the door, spaces that are only available before five o'clock. At six, the lot is mottled with Hondas, Buicks, and Chevys as well, driven by those who still have to work scheduled hours.

Pam knows the clientele. When she waitressed, she memorized the names on their charge cards. No one who was really important paid with cash; they used their company cards if they were reasonably well off and their platinum cards if they were unreasonably so and green paper had become burdensome. She called them Dave, or
Al, or Gary, these men who intimidated their workers even after five. They called her with their index finger--up in the air meant to give them another, a invisible circle on the tabletop meant the same for the table.

She remembers the crowds on Friday nights, how she had to hold her tray high above her head and shimmy between people who smelled of high-priced cologne. The first advice she had gotten from the girl who trained her: never wear a bra that snaps in front. One stray swipe of an elbow meant ten minutes trying to make your way to the employee bathroom, and ten minutes trying to get back.

Pam still finds herself paying extra attention to the waitstaff and bartenders, and even helping them when she can. Things have changed, though; she is no longer one of them. She doesn't have the camaraderie in the kitchen. Because they are no longer her co-workers, the waitstaff don't swear when she is around, or call their customers "novice diners" or "goat-ropers" or "verbal tippers" if she is in earshot.

Yet now she doesn't have to listen to comments from strangers and be unable to respond, or implement the cliché "the customer's always right." She doesn't answer to the management when she walks through the building. And Ben? Well, she doesn't have to watch him roam around his restaurant with a scotch in his hand.
but the alternative is staying home and waiting for him to return.

He was always nice to her when she worked for him, would put his arm around her and introduce her to whoever he was speaking to as "a four-point who works fifty hours a week." She liked the attention, then, and yes, she thought she deserved it. There were days when she was working her way through the university when her feet swelled up a full size; she could hardly walk up the stairs that led to her studio apartment. But she paid for her tuition, her apartment, her car with the money she made here, and when she agreed to quit waitressing and marry Ben, twenty-two years her senior and well-off, she walked into the relationship debt free.

* * *

He never had the same reactions to her that he had to the others who worked for him. He seemed to criticize the other employees more, telling them to straighten their bowties, hurry with their drinks, stop chattering so much with the customers and get their food out. He watched them more, or just appeared to. With Pam, he simply laughed and smiled, asked how she was doing. She knew that she had somehow come into favor with him, but didn't really know how. She'd heard a lot about him, about the ex-wife who had divorced him after a long
marriage and still got support, the daughter he never
talked to, who had been in college for about seven years
and still not gotten a degree. His reputation around
town was that of a bully so unconcerned about other's
opinions of him and his restaurant that he once threw a
food critic out the front door--physically--and told him
he didn't need the review. The paper, the story went,
simply sent another reporter, a female this time, over
for dinner and had her do the write-up. The restaurant
still got four stars, though mention of the incident was
included in the column.

He seemed to enjoy his reputation, even revel in
it, and Pam didn't see anything wrong with that at the
time. She actually wanted to be a part of it, something
more than a simple employee of his. He made advances,
sure, when he was drunk, but it seemed like everyone in
the bar did. A big part of waitressing is fending off
hands of those who think their tip gives them permission
for extra service.

He was protective of her once, when a slick, silk­
shirted dentist named John Brenk finally crossed the
line after one too many Bushmill's on the rocks. The
problem was, she didn't see it coming. He came from
behind.

Pam had curled her hair that night. She never
looked for dates when she worked in the bar, nor would
she have taken one if it were offered. What surprised
her is there never were offers. Not once, in the four years that she worked there, was she asked out. She used to tell herself that Ben had gotten the word out that she was not to be touched, that she was in some way his. A couple of people had asked her if she and Ben were related, if she was his daughter, but Pam chalked that up to the fact that they both had the same reddish-blond hair, and the same shape eyes, though hers were a dull blue and his slate gray.

The bar was crowded that night, as always. Pam took a round of orders and stood at the cocktail station waiting for the bartender, a new employee who hadn’t worked in bars long enough to know that filling up all the glasses with ice will save time. She watched him for a moment, trying to remember his name. They’d had a hell of a turnover lately. It didn’t seem like any of the barstaff they had hired could handle it. Finally she said, "You know, I've got a hint for you."

He looked at her for a moment, pulling his hand through his moussed hair. "I don't need your help," he said, and Pam noticed the slight shine on his fingernails, then laughed out loud at the wasted money—a bartender with a sports manicure. He turned and helped a blonde who rested her arms and breasts on the bar. She watched him flirt, leaning toward the woman and lighting her cigarette. After a minute, he faced her. "What do you need?"
She looked him straight in the eye. "If you're so fucking good, why don't you read my mind?" she said, paused a moment, then flipped her order sheet at him. He made the drinks.

She held on to the brass rails of the station, the only things that kept the crowd from dragging her away with the people that pulled back and forth, trying to bring their drinks to their mouths without spilling on themselves or someone else. Someone pushed her forward against the bar, her arms stretched behind her with her grip. She figured she could shove the people back if she held on, but then felt the hand on her inner thigh, as well as one in her hair. She heard a voice, low and hoarse in her ear.

"You know, your hair would look great wrapped around my hips."

She stood there a second, not knowing what to do, searching for the bartender, who had gone to the shadowbox for a call liquor. Then she smelled it, the sweetness of whiskey, just a touch, as it came over her shoulder and into the air in front of her. Pam knew, then, who it was. There were probably forty whiskey drinkers in the bar, but it was him—the voice, the whiskey, the attitude—and the thought of John, with his long, gelled hair and capped teeth, frightened her. It was foolish—there were enough people there that she knew she was safe, but all the same, no one had seen
what had happened. For a minute she felt completely alone, unprotected. Then he was gone, as if he had been taken by the wave of people. When she turned, she saw Ben holding John by the buttons of his shiny shirt. She thought for a moment that Ben was going to punch him in the mouth, knock out the teeth of the dentist with wandering hands, but he just smiled at him and put his arms around John. Pam felt betrayed; he had obviously seen what had happened, and yet he was smiling and nodding at John, saying things she couldn't hear over the hiccuping voice of the Irish singer on the stereo system. She noticed dark imprints beneath Ben's fingers; he was holding John tightly, and then watched as they both walked toward the door, Ben still gripping him, all the while smiling and saying hello to customers he knew. She didn't see what happened then--her drinks were up and she knew people were waiting--so she wiped under her eyes where she was sure her liner had smeared and then took out her drinks. When she got back to her station, Ben was leaning between the brass bars. He didn't say anything at first, though he motioned to the new bartender for a drink, and received a blank look in return.

"A Glenfiddich, double, up! Jesus Christ!" he said, and as the bartender went for the bottle, he turned to Pam, handing her a napkin. "Here. Clean yourself up."
She took the napkin and again wiped beneath her eyes, then reached in her apron for her lipstick and daubed it on her lower lip.

"Better," he said. The boy behind the bar set Ben's drink down quickly, and a little far away from him, as if he were afraid to come within arm's reach. "You know, Pam, if you want to run with the big dogs, you've got to learn to pee in the tall weeds."

She nodded and looked down at the checked tile floors. He had a right to be angry with her; after all, it was her job to protect herself. She had, in a way, failed to perform. But when she looked back up, he was staring across the room toward a group of his friends in the corner. For a moment Ben looked sad, and she wondered if it was really her he had been talking about.

* * *

She was twenty-six when he asked her to marry him. It came about suddenly--she had been working on the menus with him, rewriting the descriptions below the names of the items, using words like "tender" and "succulent" to describe the dishes, while Ben watched her, nodding in agreement with each word she wrote. He was quiet for a moment, then said, "Would you ever consider getting married?"
Pam had heard the question before, but usually it was more like an accusation: Why aren't you married yet? What's wrong with you to cause you to still be single, and for that matter, a waitress, at your age? But the way he asked it put it in her control, implied that there were pursuers all around her, and she was flattered. "I suppose I would if I thought it would last," she said, tapping the pencil on the menu.

Ben cleared his throat and motioned to the bartender for a drink, sweeping his finger toward the table. "No, Pam. I mean would you ever consider marrying me?"

She had worked in his restaurant for four years, and spent upwards of forty hours a week with him near her. For a moment the idea didn't sound ridiculous. "I guess we could date, then see where it goes from there." She was excited, then, thinking about all the places he could take her: the Bahamas, Paris, other restaurants. Yet the majority of their dates took place at his own restaurant, and while they continued to see each other, Pam's co-workers began pulling away from her, jealous of her relationship with the boss, unable to bitch about his criticism of their performance, aware that anything they said to Pam would go straight to Ben that night when they were in bed. By the time Ben asked her to marry him, placing a large emerald on her finger, she felt as if she didn't belong with her co-workers
anymore, and was relieved when Ben told her he didn't want her waitressing. What she didn't expect, however, was the fact that she didn't feel like she belonged near the customers, people she now had to consider friends, people Ben created business deals with in the lounge, sketching graphs or maps on paper napkins that would eventually be developed into businesses or suburban housing.

This is not to say that they treated her badly---they didn't--but she felt foolish, at times, when their drink was empty and the cocktail waitress was nowhere to be found. She would get up and get the drinks herself, then slip in the booth beside Ben. There wasn't really much else to do. She didn't have anything to add to their conversation, and at least this way she got to spend time with her husband.

* * *

She gets out of bed early. It has become a habit to rise at six or six-thirty and walk on the gray shag carpet down from the loft to the kitchen. She gets the paper from the porch and makes coffee, knowing it is what Ben will reach for. She loves the mornings now, and it seems to her like she has missed them for most of her life. When she worked at the restaurant, she would usually get off at twelve or one, then maybe catch last
call at some other place with a couple of people she worked with. She would sleep until eleven, getting up just in time to shower and catch her first class.

Last night it was late when he came home, when she felt him fall into bed. She lay awake for a while, thinking of him, of what she thought he was, when she heard him choking. She turned him on his side, shaking him, screaming his name, when she realized he was throwing up. She sat cross-legged on the bed most of the night, waiting for him to take his next breath, making sure he didn't turn on his back again. She wasn't angry with him at the time, nor is she now; instead, she is glad, in a way, that she had been there, and is even a bit proud of herself for staying calm and knowing what to do.

When she sees him coming down the stairs, his hair matted on one side, his eyes bloodshot and swollen, she knows she can't tell him what happened.

She hears him behind her, pouring coffee in his mug, then opening the cabinet where they keep liqueurs, the ones Pam once thought were for entertaining, then hears another splash. She doesn't turn around; instead, she looks at the sliding glass doors that lead to the patio. It is still dark enough outside for the glass to reflect. The antique hutch is visible--similar to one she had wanted before she had met him, but was far too expensive for her. Now things like that are within
reach, are given to her by his friends, his business acquaintances, people who need something from him.

She sees Ben reach for the coffeemaker again, and wonders which liqueur he is adding to it: Drambuie, Courvosier, Grand Marnier. Not that it matters. In a moment, she will turn and smile at him, and he will kiss her good morning. She will taste the coffee, the liqueur, and remnants of the night before. When she looks at him, he will catch her eye for a moment, and this will be enough--he loves her, and needs her. She will see that there is no difference, now, between what she has been given and what she has to take.
The Story of the El

The paper boy stood in the doorway, tapping his collection book against his leg and leaning against the doorjamb. He's new, Lisa thought, watching him from the recliner. She wondered if he went to her high school. She kept her book up high so he couldn't see her, but she could watch him.

"Lisa, where is the checkbook?" her mother asked, pulling drawers in the kitchen open and shutting them hard.

"The check is already written out. It's on the bookcase, where I always put it."

Her mother sighed and smoothed back her brown hair, then walked to the bookcase and snapped up the check with a well-manicured hand. "There you go. Thank you," she said, shutting the door before her final words were out.

Lisa watched her mother and felt sick, like she had seen something she shouldn't have. It used to be a good feeling, knowing exactly where everything was, what bills needed to be paid, groceries bought. It used to make her feel grown up.

"So, do you know where the checkbook is?"

"Yeah," Sarah said.
"Well, as long as you know. I'd hate to think I'd lost it."

"It's not lost." It's in the left-hand drawer of the oak desk, next to last year's tax forms, Lisa thought. And if I'm right, the gas bill is still folded in it because it's not due until Tuesday. She shook her head and looked down at her book.

Her mother stood in front of the recliner. Lisa could feel her there but didn't look up. Her mother slowly pulled the book down with her index finger. "Good book?"

"No, Mom. It's an assignment. You're not supposed to like it." Lisa shut the book, setting it on the glass end table. Her mother knelt by the chair and leaned with her elbow on the armrest. She looked up at Lisa, who avoided her eyes, and concentrated on the gray streaks that crept from her mother's temples to her ponytail, and blue eyeliner circled her hazel eyes. She still looked young, Lisa had to admit. "Mom, I've got to study. Can't you find something to do?"

"God, Lisa. Why is it that you can't be civil to me? Am I that bad of a person?"

For a few seconds Lisa said nothing, just looked at the grandfather clock she had wound earlier that day, the pendulum arcing back and forth. "No, Mom," she said, but she had waited too long and her mother ran into her bedroom and slammed the door behind her.
Lisa thought of how her life was before, when her mother smiled and meant it and treated her with a loving indifference, baked her chocolate chip cookies but didn't ask her if they were good enough. It seemed like long ago—long before, as her mother would say, "her father's departure." She called it that, as if he would return at his estimated time of arrival, his arms opened wide to hold the gifts he carried.

Lisa knew this wasn't going to happen, because she knew why he left. He had taken great pains to explain to her that it wasn't her fault, he just found something that suited him better. Her father told her his new wife loved him and wanted him with her, but didn't need him there. That made him want to be with her. It's hard enough to live your own life, he had said, without having to plan someone else's. At the time, Lisa had been angry with him, but she thought she understood now.

She heard her mother's sobs, muffled, as though she didn't want Lisa to hear. She smiled a bit; the crying kept time with the clock: uhuh-tick, uhuh-tick, uhuh-tick. She probably has her face in her pillow, Lisa thought, her eyeliner running everywhere. She felt a twisting dryness at the back of her throat, and coughed to try to clear it, then began to cry.

* * *
Lisa woke and looked outside to see if it was raining. The sky was a clear, deep blue, which meant that her mother would work today. She had said she wanted something to keep her busy, and had begun watering the plants outside local buildings for a nursery in town -- weather permitting.

Lisa waited until eight-fifteen to wake her up, though she usually left at eight-forty. This way her mother would be too busy to talk about the night before, and Lisa could slip out of the house while she was in the shower.

Her hand was on the door handle when the phone rang. She thought about ignoring it, but her mother heard the ringing from the bathroom and yelled her name. She dropped her books on the counter and put the receiver to her ear. "Deacon residence."

"Lisa?" The voice was faint. She covered her other ear with her hand.

"This is she."

"Lisa, it's Aunt Celine. Is your mother there?"

"Yeah. Are you all right?" A picture of her great-aunt flashed into her mind: her small frame, skin so thin that it was striped with deep blue veins.

"Yes, honey. Can I talk to Diane, please?" Lisa placed her hand over the receiver and yelled for her mother, then looked at the clock. She would be late for school if she didn't leave now.
Her mother came into the kitchen wrapped in a yellow towel. Her eyes looked swollen and bloodshot. Lisa frowned as she watched her mother track water across the linoleum. When she picked up the phone, Lisa pointed to the throw rug. Her mother rolled her eyes and took a step sideways onto it. Lisa wiped up the puddle, then folded the dishtowel and picked up her books.

"Aneurysm? Is it serious? But you're home. Yes, we'll be there as soon as we can, Celine," her mother said, twisting the phone cord around her finger. "We'll leave today, right after Lisa is done at school, okay?" Lisa stopped at the door and turned around to listen. "Okay," her mother said. "All right. Yes. Don't worry, Lisa can help me with the drive. She has her learner's permit now."

She looked down at the rug her mother stood on, the two dark, wet circles under her feet. She could tell from the conversation that her great-aunt was not all right, and that they would be going to the city. She felt excited and sick. She hadn't been there since she was small, but going meant being in the car with her mother, close enough to breathe her mother's used, exhaled air. Open windows and the air conditioner didn't seem to make much of a difference.
"Celine," her mother said, "We'll be there by eight. You take care of yourself." Lisa cringed at the words.

* * *

They drove through the dirty streets, trash skittering behind their car like autumn leaves. It had taken five hours to get from their home in rural Waukee, where the November trees were naked and shivering, to the city of Chicago, full of smooth metal buildings with copper colored windows.

Her mother leaned forward in the driver's seat until it looked like her nose might hit the windshield, and tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. She was trying to keep time with an old Diana Ross tune, but managed to be at least half a beat off. Lisa thought at first that she had another song in her head, until she attempted to sing along. Lisa sighed, then stretched her legs and planted her feet on the glove box. She, too, tapped along to the music from the radio, leaving dusty prints on the blue vinyl interior.

"Lisa, don't do that."

"What?"

"Put your feet up there like that. Think of what would happen to you if I got us into an accident. Your knees would crush your chest."
She saw the stop sign, though her mother didn't notice until Lisa drew in her breath, then she stepped hard on the brakes. She felt herself pulled forward, the pressure of the seatbelt cutting into her chest, hearing her own heartbeat in her ears as she watched the cross traffic in front of them. She swallowed to try and get rid of the metallic taste in her mouth, then put her feet down, kicking a McDonald's bag out of the way.

"God, Mom. Learn how to drive!"

Her mother pulled over at the next street, stopped the car, and got out, coming around to Lisa's side. She opened the door of the ten year-old Cutlass and said, "Why don't you drive. I'm not sure I'm up to it."

"But I only have a learner's permit." Lisa thought of all the nights she had taken her mother's car without her knowledge, teaching herself how to drive on empty gravel roads, then telling her mother her friends were giving her lessons.

"Please, Lisa."

"I don't know my way around the city, Mom," she said, her voice rising. "Why can't you do it?"

"Please? Let's just find somewhere to get some dinner. Anywhere you want to go. Okay?"

Lisa slid into the driver's seat and adjusted the mirrors. Looking over her shoulder for traffic, she watched as her mother folded her hands in her lap then pressed her index fingers together and held them against
her lips. Lisa thought of the game she played in kindergarten: here is the church, here is the steeple.

* * *

They stopped at one of the small cafes that line the city sidewalks. Lisa scanned the menu, then looked out the window into the dark, pressed her cheek against the glass to look up at the lights on the buildings. Still, she couldn't see the top of the skyscrapers that surrounded her. She felt safe, as if she were being held in the palm of something bigger than herself. She leaned back in her chair, rolling her head from side to side so she could feel her hair tickle her shoulders.

Her mother fidgeted, arranging the silverware and moving back and forth as if she couldn't get comfortable. The waitress approached, her pen and tablet in hand.

"What are you getting?" her mother asked.

"The angel hair with rock shrimp," Lisa said.

"Sounds good to me. Make it two."

The waitress walked off, weaving around the tables and chairs.

"Did you even look at the menu?"

"No."

"Why not?" Lisa asked. "Why do you just get what I'm getting?" She felt her face heat up, and wanted to
press it against the cold glass pane again. She wasn't hungry anymore, and the room suddenly seemed smaller. Her mother looked at her, eyes tearing and lower lip trembling, but Lisa didn't care. "What did you do when I was little? Order off the kiddie menu? Make Dad choose?"

"Yes, Lisa, I probably did. Is that what this is really about?" Her mother glared at her. "I used to think it was easier to let someone make decisions for me. I made your father do a lot for me, just like I make you responsible for things around the house. But with you it's because I want you to know how. He never taught me how to do anything, Lisa. He always did it himself. I don't ever want you to be like I am." Her mother was silent for a moment, then said, "I want things to be different for you."

Lisa crossed her arms. "Why are we here, Mother? Couldn't you find someone else to take care of her?"

"I owe her a lot, Lisa. She practically raised me. She saved my life once when I was a little girl."

Lisa tried to think of her mother as a little girl, and found it was easy. Pigtails and lacy dresses, tears when she spilled punch, small hands reaching out to whoever was convenient. She looked at her mother, her pleading eyes, her need to be asked in order to tell the story. Lisa glanced back out the window, watching the
people, dark shadows pacing quickly up the sidewalk. "So what happened?" she said quietly.

Her mother sniffled, then smiled at the chance to tell the story. "I used to spend the night with her when I was young. She was alone a lot, and would beg my mother to let me come over.

"We were going somewhere, a museum or the zoo, I think, and taking the subway. It was crowded in the station, so she held my hand as we walked. She got into the train, but the door shut before I got in, and my fingers were stuck in the door." Her mother reached for her hand and Lisa wanted to pull away, but let her take it. She pressed her thumb beneath Lisa's knuckles, her fingers on top. "Just like that." Her mother released her hand, and Lisa felt the warmth where she had been touched. "Celine was leaning down, holding on to my fingers on the other side of the doors, screaming for someone to help when the train started moving. I remember her eyes right then. She looked so scared that it made me scared."

Sarah thought about the little girl in the lace dress, so trusting that she couldn't feel afraid until someone else did.

"I was running beside the train, toward the tunnel, and I just kept looking at her. All I remember is that the train stopped and then she was hugging me so hard it
hurt. She said she did it so I didn't think about my fingers."

The waitress set bowls of steaming pasta in front of them. Lisa suddenly realized that her mother had packed for them. "I don't have the checkbook. It's in the desk at home!"

"God, Lisa, don't panic. I've got charge cards."

* * *

Lisa gathered the bags and walked up the cobblestones toward the front door, holding the key chain in her mouth, the keys slapping against her chin with every step. Her mother cupped her hand under Lisa's face. She opened her mouth to let the keys drop.

Inside, the house was warm, with thick wood trim that framed wallpaper with raised red velvet designs. The furniture was old and overstuffed. It looked wonderfully used, and smelled like her great aunt, sweet and flowery. Lisa set the bags down and leaned against the wall, feeling the smoothness along her spine. Her mother stepped past her and walked into the kitchen.

"Celine. What are you doing out of bed?" she heard her mother ask. Lisa went toward the voice, running her hand along the wall. She stopped at the doorway and watched her mother help Celine walk to her room. She turned to get the bags, then realized she didn't know
where they would be sleeping, so she sat at the kitchen table, reading the labels on the prescription bottles that sat beside three days worth of newspapers still wrapped with rubber bands.

"That's a lot of pills."

Lisa jumped, hearing her mother's voice. She turned to face her, and noticed the dark circles under her eyes, the wrinkles by the sides of her mouth that deepened when she spoke. She had never seen her mother look so old. "Do you think we can figure out which one's she needs to take?"

"Yeah. I guess so." Lisa said.

"Why don't you go say hello. She hasn't seen you in quite a while."

Lisa got up from the table and walked slowly toward the open door. She paused outside of it, listening to her great aunt's breathing. "Aunt Celine?" she said softly, then walked into the room. The only light came from a lamp covered with a patterned scarf, and Lisa remembered her mother telling her how Celine kept the light on, even when she slept. She sat down carefully on the edge of the bed.

"Hi, honey," Celine said, her voice quiet, but clear.

"How are you?" Lisa asked.

"How do I look?"
"Well, your hair is a little messed up, but other than that, you look okay," Lisa said. Celine laughed, but it sounded more like she was panting, and Lisa regretted the joke. "Are you sure you're all right? Maybe you should get some sleep."

"I slept all day, then your mother gets here and puts me right in bed. Doesn't make much sense to me. I'm going to die of boredom, if anything."

Lisa smiled and picked up her great-aunt's hand, cupping it in her own.

"You just watch, Lisa. She's going to be at that door all night, just standing there to make sure I take my next breath."

* * *

Her mother had decided to pull the hideaway into Celine's bedroom, leaving the guest room to Lisa, who was grateful. She unpacked her weekend bag, placing her clothes neatly in the top drawer of the antique dresser. The room was filled with pictures, some yellowed and old, some newer. There was one of Lisa and her mother outside their house last autumn. It was hard to see the place where the photographs were taped, but Lisa knew it was there. They'd made a game of taking pictures of each other, carefully matching the backgrounds, then splicing them into one so it looked like the two of them
were together, lining up the backgrounds so trees became complete, and the eaves of their house met. It was something they did out of necessity. She placed the frame back on the dresser and crawled into bed, sinking into the feather mattress.

* * *

She woke when she heard the loud click of the light switch in the hallway, then lay still and waited for a sound to follow it. Celine's house was quieter than her own, more stable and settled with age. After a moment Lisa opened her eyes a bit and saw her mother's silhouette in the doorway. She took a deep breath and moved beneath the patchwork quilt. When her mother turned to pull the door shut, Lisa saw her smile, and felt safe, knowing her mother would soon be asleep in the next bedroom, her face warmed by the glow of the lamp.
On The Track

The locker room is deserted, and I panic a bit, then pull my Daytimer out of my bag. There is a slash through Monday so I know that Brenda will be here. We always meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The insurance company we work for pays for our membership—as if because we are doing aerobics we won’t use up all of our sick days—then gives us little bonuses for coming at least twice a week. Sometimes it’s a gift certificate for the little boutique out front, where you can buy spandex in just about every color; other times it’s a coupon for two free sessions at the tanning spa.

I wear my workout clothes, a baggy t-shirt and sweatpants cut off just above the knee, to the gym and then shower at home. I don’t like to feel those judging, criticizing eyes. Usually there are ten or more women in towels—or less—parading around here.

I walk to the back of the room, looking down at the gray paisley carpet that always makes me a little dizzy. Wrinkles of skin have recently appeared above my kneecaps, though I’ve been coming here twice a week for the last month. It’s starting to happen now—indentations forming at the sides of my mouth that might have passed for dimples ten years ago; the gray hairs I keep pulling out growing back in a stubborn row, lined up like little soldiers. I vow silently to work the
weight machines a little harder. At the last row of dark green lockers I see Brenda slip out of a houndstooth blazer and wrap it carefully around a padded hanger. She’s one of those people that is so screwed up, she makes you feel completely together by comparison.

"Hi Bren," I say, and she smiles widely, her bright red lipstick accentuating her slightly discolored front tooth. "God. How many stray cats did you bleed for that shade?"

"Five or six. What, you don’t like it? It was a necessity." She hangs her blazer up and unbuttons her pants. They drop, unhindered, to the floor. The woman has no hips. I huff, then fake a sneeze to cover it.

"Oh really?"

"Yeah. It was a necessity that I get back at Tony and he had taken the checkbook, so all I had was the Dayton’s card. I figured a few tubes of thirty dollar lipstick would ease my mind."

"On the outs with him again, huh? Weren’t you getting along last week?" I lay back on the wooden bench, feeling my stomach flatten and my breasts pull toward my armpits.

"Yeah," she says. "No. I don’t know, Midge. At times I feel this incredible peace, like everything is going to be okay. Like it really was meant to be." She places her folded pants in her locker. "Just not that
often anymore. Lately I feel like I’m in thigh deep. I used to look at him and smile and just love him, you know? Now I’m just stuck there looking at someone I hate for not being smart enough to know that I want him to go away. Ben wouldn’t be like Tony. He’d know if I wanted him to leave.”

Ben, her insignificant other, had gone to high school with me, but he never came to the reunions and I hadn’t seen him until he showed up for lunch in the company cafeteria with Brenda. I don’t know what she sees in him, what he has that her husband doesn’t. From what I’ve heard from old classmates, he’s about one step up from homeless, living in a trailer on the south side of town and always wears a fedora that hasn’t been out of fashion long enough to be stylish again. I never liked him anyway. He would always poke me when he said hello, pressing his finger in between my ribs or in the soft area of my waist.

“Jesus, Bren. You don’t know what Ben would do.”

“Yeah. You’re right. It’s probably the opposite. Just when I wanted him to stay he’d run like hell.” She laughed. “There would be a fucking trail of fire behind him. Sometimes it’s just nice to think that someone could know me that well.”

What can I say to that? I don’t know her that well--just from the elevator and our laps around the track for the last month. She’s faster than I am, maybe
in every sense. Sometimes when we walk, I think about what her husband must be like. How horrible he must be.

"At least you have Tony to go home to," I tell her.

"What's the alternative? Brushing up on your mind games? Buying more clothes so he never sees you in the same outfit twice?"

"I'm up for a new wardrobe." She pulls on a cropped t-shirt then stretches, raising her arms above her head and exposing her white lace bra.

"You know," I say, "I heard this feminist give a lecture on why women are so obsessed with what they wear around men. She said it all goes back to the "man cannot be monogamous" argument. Women dress in different clothes so the man thinks he's with a different woman every night."

"I think it's probably that they are getting back at husbands like mine." She smiles, but too hard and her lips dissolve into her gums. "Couldn't it be that women simply like to shop? So explain why women try to outdo each other in our office."

"To get the best mate, I guess."

"Let's wear the same clothes for a week and see how many men become bored and leave," she says.

"I think they'd leave for sanitary reasons." I throw my bag into my locker and turn the dial. I spin it again to make sure it's locked.
"Men," she says, shaking her head. "They don't know why they want us any more than we know why we wear pantyhose. I mean, there are things they'll never know. Even stupid things. I've been married to Tony for six years and he still doesn't know I floss my teeth with my hair."

"What?"

"You know. You get in the car or something after you've eaten and you look in the rear-view mirror and there's a piece of pepper stuck in your front teeth. I just yank out a piece of hair and floss with it." Brenda brings her hair forward. Looking down her nose, she separates a single strand, then pulls it out. She twists it around her finger until the tip turns a deep blue.

"Why would he want to know that?"

"Exactly. Tony only sees what he wants to see. Why would he want to know that I'm sleeping with Ben? It's the same thing. He thinks I'm so goddamned perfect. It's sick. They just aren't in tune. With women, their bodies, nature. If you said epididymus to most guys, they'd wonder which corner of the zoo the cage was in." She laughs at her own joke. "Anyway, at times I feel so tuned in--it gives me this great feeling of control. When I'm ovulating, I just kind of smile. I know that if I slept with someone that night, I'd get pregnant. The women in my family are real breeders, you
know. So I have this two-sided feeling about it. I could have a life inside me.” She places her hands on her stomach and smooths them down until they reach the rise of her hipbones.

“Yes,” I say, “but do you really want one when you and Tony are so rocky?”

“That’s not the point. It’s the power, the fact that I can. The other thing is, if I really wanted to, I could ruin some guy’s life. Make him pay for the care of a child I intentionally brought into this world.”

“God! That is terrible! I didn’t think anyone really thought things like that.”

“Yeah. I’m a recovering Catholic, remember?”

“I’d say fully recovered.”

“Only in a few ways. You know, I think that’s why I want Tony to leave me. I don’t want people looking at me and saying ‘she’s a failure.’”

“Brenda, who would say that? You don’t have any kids, so it’s really just between the two of you.”

“My family would never speak to me again. They love Tony, probably more than me. I can hear my father now: ‘You should have learned from my experiences.’ As if he is in the perfect position to judge. You know it’s always the people who have really screwed up their lives that won’t let you make your own mistakes.”

“So it was a mistake to marry Tony.”
She is quiet for a minute, so I pull my hair back into a ponytail and wait for her to speak. She looks down at her swollen finger, now a dark gray, and slowly unwinds the hair. "I grew up in a small town. It wasn't like here. No skyscrapers, no dance clubs. There really wasn't that much to choose from." She sits down on the wooden bench and brings her knees to her chest, then tells me how she'd wanted to go camping when she was sixteen, how her mom was long gone by then. "We had this big wooden door," she says, "with glass panes that separated that room from the rest of the house. Anyway, when he said no, I slammed the door behind me and started stomping to my room." She pauses and puts her fingers to her cheekbone, tracing up and down, then sits up and smiles. "So my father screams in this booming voice, 'Get back here!' I walked back kind of slowly, but not too slowly or I knew he'd get up out of his chair and all hell would break loose. He made me close the door softly three hundred times. He sat there in his chair, that recliner that no one else was allowed to in, and he was just smirking, counting out loud." She looks up at me, her eyes a deep, wet brown, then she frowns. "I'll never forget how much that bastard enjoyed making me do that."

I think about my own family and it's softness that comes to mind: pink walls; patterns of raised carpet, freshly vacuumed; inside voices. Silences.
“So you married Tony and left?” I ask.

“Not too long after that. There was a huge blizzard on our wedding day. There wasn't even a hotel in our town, so we ended up spending the night in this room above the funeral home. Symbolic, huh?”

She looks sad, and I want to tell her it's okay, but really, I know it's not. So I ask, “Why have you stayed with him for so long?”

“It’s a lot of things. I used to love him. We’ve been through a lot together.” She tells me about a car accident they were in after leaving a bar in her hometown. I picture the place—wooden, aged, smelling of old beer and sweat, one of those places named something clever, like “Ruby’s Waltz Inn,” with “stagger out” written in unskilled graffiti below it. “We were celebrating with our friend, John,” she says. “We didn’t have to pay for anything so we were doing shots, basically drinking anything they set in front of us. John’s driving us home and Tony’s in the front seat with him. They probably only lived because they had their seatbelts on. I was in back, passed out, as usual. Anyway, we smashed the car into a drainage ditch. I guess John was driving too fast on the gravel. I flew out the windshield.” She puts her finger to her front tooth, a few shades grayer than the rest of her teeth, then brings her hand down to her lap. “The doctor said
I tried to grab on to something to stop myself. Tony’s ear. I ripped it right off his head."

I had never seen her husband, and imagined the tiny hole that would be where his ear used to be. I wonder if her wears glasses, if it’s the ear he puts the phone to. Brenda grabs my arm, pulling me to my feet, and we head toward the track.

“He put on this black cape and went to John’s Halloween party as Vincent Van Gogh,” she says, nudging me with her elbow, and we both laugh. “Nobody got it, though. They all thought he was trying to be Dracula.”

“Do you stay with him because of the accident?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to be with him, but I don’t want to be alone. I feel like I owe him something, and maybe staying with him is the way I pay him back. We never should have gotten married in the first place.”

“And the affair with Ben?”

“Another mistake.” She stops at the edge of the track and bends to touch her toes, then looks up, her hair falling around her pale face. “Can you expect anything else from me?”

********
We walk on the inside lane, counterclockwise on the black plastic surface. The faster walkers and runners take the outside. We try to stay out of their way, although we walk side-to-side. I watch a man paint a purple stripe on the wall; his turban is spotted with the same color, and there is a smear on his cheek that resembles a bruise. We pass him and Brenda grabs my right arm.

"You must think I'm a terrible person," she says, leaning in toward me. I'm finding it hard to keep my pace swinging only my left arm, but I don't want to make her let go. "I mean, I've got a husband who loves me, who would really do anything for me, and here I am screwing this dirtball."

I slow down a bit. "I don't think any less of you."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. You don't seem like such a bad person to me. I'm not proud of everything I've done in my life," I say.

"Like you've ever done anything wrong!" She lets my arm go and laughs, and I feel naive. Really I just don't feel the need to tell people my screw-ups.

"You don't hold the copyright on foolishness, Bren," I say.

"I do when it comes to my life and my marriage." I watch her as she uses the nail of her little finger to
scrape a bit of lipstick from the corner of her mouth.
"I guess this means we're really friends now. It's a bonding moment!"

"I guess so."

"Why do you still like me?"

"Probably because I don't have any expectations of you, other than meeting me here."

"Expectations are for fools," she says, slowing her pace to a shuffle, "and I am a fool. I expected my marriage to work out. I expected to be happy."

"Sometimes I can only be happy in my memories," I say. "I can look back on it and change it in my mind. I think it gets harder the older you get. I'm thirty-five and still single, so everyone automatically thinks that I am either a slut, a lesbian, or that something is desperately wrong with me which repels the opposite sex. How can I possibly be happy with that right now?"

"Which one is it?" Brenda asks.

I think about the nights where I found myself sitting on the floor with my windows open around me. Just waiting for something or someone. The night I actually said out loud, "Can't you find me?" as if there would be a knock on the door. The times my friends brought their children over and I laughed as they dropped my Hummel figurines or spilled the planter of herbs that had just taken root, then cried later, when I was alone again and swept up the remnants of their
families. "If your marriage is so screwed up," I say, "why don’t you just take off with Ben?" I am surprised at the anger in my own voice, but she doesn’t seem to notice and begins to skip beside me. She has everything--then there’s me.

"I’ve thought about it, but it’s all sex with him. He knows what I’m like. You know, the first time we had sex was at this party. Tony was tired, so he went home and told Ben to give me a ride back." She smiles and slaps her own forehead with the heel of her hand. "So Ben and I were going at it in this side bedroom when we heard this couple start to fight. He pulled me down to the carpet and opened the door just a bit, and I watched them the whole time." She smiles. "I can’t tell you how cool it was to watch them fight and have Ben all over me!"

"I can’t imagine." Even though I’m winded, I walk a little faster. Brenda is forced to catch up with me. "I’m not going to be able to work out on Thursday," I say.

"Why?"

"I’m in a wedding in Reno. My friend Susie is getting married."

"I didn’t think people got married in Reno," she says.

"She’s a local. Actually, it’s one of the reasons I said I’d be a bridesmaid. They’re putting me up at
Harrah's, but I had to pay for my flight and buy another ugly dress."

We come around the track to the painter again, and he looks me in the eye, holding his gaze until we pass by him. I swallow hard and fight the urge to turn around to see if he is still staring at me, to tell him not to. I untuck my t-shirt as we walk so it blouses around my body. When we come around again, he is gone. His brushes and pans sit by the wall.

"How many weddings have you been in?" Brenda asks.

"Seven, I think."

"Isn't that bad luck? I thought you could only be in three--you know, that 'never a bride' stuff."

"Well, I have three sisters who all got married before me, so I didn't have much of a choice." I laugh as I think of their weddings, the colors ranging from hot-pink to emerald green, the taffetas and velvets, the matching shoes that bled onto my pantyhose when they were splashed by champagne. "I think someday my kids will have a great time playing dress-up in the gowns, wondering what the hell made me want to buy them."

"Does it bother you?"

"Buying ugly dresses that the bride insists I'll be able to wear again?"

"No," Brenda pauses. "Being single."

I smile. "Not half as much as it bothers you to be married." For a moment, I believe that.
She doesn’t speak for the next two laps and is panting lightly. “This is my last lap, okay?” she says. “I’m going to skip the machines today. See you downstairs.”

She walks off the track. I don’t feel like going to the weight room, so I speed-walk around the track three more times, pumping my arms and concentrating on my breathing. The painter is back. He straightens his turban and begins to walk toward my lane. I pull in a gasp of air and cut through the middle of the track to avoid him, stepping over the legs of people stretching in the area. My walk is almost a run by the time I reach the locker room. I say to myself with every footfall, “Leave me alone.”

Brenda is gone, but written on my locker in large block letters is “Midge, see you Tues. Bren.” I turn my combination and reach inside for the cotton towel that fills my gymbag. I scrub the words away with the thick nap, staining it with the red lipstick she had used.