

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Sherry Buchanan for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, presented on April 24, 2002. Title: Living by the Wayside and Other Stories.

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Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Tracy Daugherty \_\_\_\_\_

Living by the Wayside and Other Stories explores the tension between control and dependence and how that tension affects the ability to sustain intimate relationships. These are stories about women who struggle for independence, but experience the cost of self-rule as isolation. Living by the Wayside and Other Stories focuses on the disparity between what its female protagonists say or think and how they act. In the title story, "Living by the Wayside," we experience that irony when the psyche of a woman moving away from one man and toward another is exposed. Sasha cannot become intimate with any man because she relies on the excitement or safety provided by her relationships. In this character and the collection, one of my goals has been to capture that state of being we have all experienced, those moments when we lose the ability to direct our lives. The collection invites the reader to look within for salvation.

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Living by the Wayside and Other Stories

by

Sherry Buchanan

A THESIS

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Sherry Buchanan, Author

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for Hope

## LIVING BY THE WAYSIDE AND OTHER STORIES

### THE GREEN DOOR

When the creeks dried up and lime-green frogs and miniature toads did not come by the hundreds to be picked up and carried home to my smiley-face toy box filled with swamp water, when the Super Mercado that sold cigarettes to my more mature-looking friends became overflow parking for the high school, I learned the habit of storytelling. To avoid boredom, I named a cherry tomato patch alongside nearby apartments Candy Land, and rode my bicycle there as part of a daily ritual. I imagined the picnic bench used by the blue-suited workers at the Electric Company was a table at a five-star restaurant. I decided to discover the secrets of adults.

On a moonless evening, thorns of lavender roses snagged my bedroom screen; a rosy mist attacked my pink pinstriped wallpaper. The stripes became bars of an old-time jail. Time and place swirled to a pause, and I lay listless, a prisoner. The night spread out, pushed its way into my room, and into me, and stood in the air like a story about to unfold.

I was eleven and bored, vaguely aware of how close my mother was to dying. I lay awake, imagining Frank, the old man who had lived in the pocket of our suburban court as long as I had been alive. He could have been friends with my mother, if either had left their houses. Mom, though,



was often sick, lying on the couch and holding her stomach, and Frank could spend hours working at a piece of wood, holding it, smiling like a proud parent, and running over it with his pinkie until it was soft as skin.

Distant chimes rang. A single thorny green arm, the same color as the door inside old man Frank's garage, climbed up the screen. A breeze entered, and my scalp tingled. Sleep was coming on.

I tried to imagine myself in the story of "The Princess and the Pea." For a moment, I was sure a pea was under my mattress. I turned onto my side, but lost the bump. No, I was no princess. My mother once told me I wouldn't know what tact was if it came up and bit me after the time I had told my grandmother we would have fun in spite of her.

No, I was no princess, but I would not go down easily. I could not let the roses, too sweet and stemmy, overtake me. Sleep would only come as a sudden fog, an unexpected blanket over my head. I wiggled my toes under the heavy covers and breathed in the weight of the night with open-eyes. I laced my fingers together and cracked my knuckles, imagining the pea again, and managing to convince myself it was there. It was a small lump in my world, an abnormality just big enough to keep me awake.



It was still dark. Birds squawked from the power lines outside. I got up, pulled on my overalls and walked toward the front door with my shoes in hand.

"Em?" my mother said, half-asleep, from the couch.

I thought if I kept walking, she would nod off again, so I tiptoed farther.

She sat up. "Emily?"

"Mom? You up?"

"I thought we would watch one of your shows. Spend some time this morning. Maybe that one you told me about with the characters that look like hats?"

"That went off the air, I thought I told you."

"Maybe you did." She stood and straightened her nightgown.

"Where you headed so early?"

"Frank's," I said, adjusting a buckle on my overalls.

"You almost finished?"

"Gloss is all."

She nodded and tried to smile. Often, if she was up at this time, she was throwing up into the garbage disposal or standing with her head out the sliding glass door.

She'd have breakfast ready when I got back, I knew, so I hugged her lightly and went on my way. "Back in a bit," I said.

The windows of all the houses were dark, but the street lamps had turned off.

My shoes grew damp from the dew on the lawns as I walked toward Frank's. Until now, I had never questioned Frank's routine. For years, Frank's garage had been open every day by six a.m. He would work on quiet tasks for a few hours until the neighbors had left for work or started mowing their lawns. He would have lunch at noon and then be back in the garage the rest of the day.

It was not until Teresa, my best friend since second grade, suggested Frank was up to something behind the green door in his garage that I began to wonder about Frank.

"You're so naïve," she'd said one day as the school bus had left us in a cloud of exhaust. "You know green means horny. He probably goes in that room and plays with himself or something."

For weeks after that, I'd sat in my room watching ice cubes melt, picking calluses, or combing my hair one hundred strokes, puzzling over what I knew about Frank and what Teresa had told me. Once I thought about it, I couldn't understand why Frank volunteered so much of his time to the kids in our neighborhood. We were ungrateful, and no one expected us to use a lathe or a saw or even a sander ever again. It didn't make sense that he would want to spend all that time with us unless there was something in it for him. Frank kept planning projects for us even when his garage was filling up with half-finished mouse traps and unoiled cutting boards left by kids who had either moved, started high school, or lost

interest. He must have had some reason for cluttering up his garage and spending all his time with us kids.

Some lights in the neighborhood had come on, and I realized I had been walking and stopping, stepping over holes and mounds of dirt without thinking. I trudged on toward Frank's. I assured myself I was at no risk because I had ridden my bike up and down the overpasses where all the homeless slept with newspapers over their faces, and I had not been kidnapped or killed yet. Besides, I had grown up trusting Frank, and I liked his habit of nodding. He nodded when runs were scored on radio-broadcast baseball games, when I asked him to approve my projects, when he looked over the garage after I'd swept, and he ignored me just the right amount, more than my mother, but less than my father who had lived a state away without visits for three years.

I rounded the fence and acted as if I had been half-jogging the whole way over, wanting to appear anxious so Frank would get me set up to gloss right away without noticing my growing suspicion. When I approached, the house—its manicured bushes, edged lawn, and off-white steel siding—seemed flawless. It was so well kept, yet Frank was always in the garage and his wife was never outside. *Who was doing all the work and when?*

Frank emerged from the front of the garage to meet me. He had blotches on his face, the kind I would later recognize as cancer.

“Hey, Fatty, what are you doing up so early?”

I was hardly chubby, but Frank liked to tease. It didn't bother me because I could dish it out, too. I'd sprayed him with the hose once. After, he had stood still, and for a moment I thought he didn't even know he'd been soaked, but then he pivoted and sopped his way inside, his gray soft-leather shoes making a squishing noise. He was easy-going like that.

“Morning, Frank,” I said because I liked to say his name. It was solid, with a strong slap to it, one of those one-syllable names that can't be shortened. My name had just as many letters, but it was three syllables, more of a one-two-uppercut name: Em-i-ly. I hardly saw his wife Millie, but knew she was inside, washing the dishes by hand, or reading by the front window. She kept to herself mostly, had the grin of a secret-keeper.

I patted Frank on the arm, and tried to give him a look that conveyed that I believed in his innocence, but once inside the garage, I was wrenched by suspicion, wondering what exactly was behind the green door. I stared at the entrance to the room, the door's paint thick over the heavy grain of wood, chipped only to reveal more green layers. Frank looked at me with his head tilted. I turned away, trying to make myself interested in the bins of screws and the collection of hammers on the wall. Tools had kept my attention in the past, but at that moment, I was unsatisfied with what was familiar. I was on the verge of something.

“That's my pride and joy in there,” Frank said, glancing at the door.

“What is?”

“Maybe, if you keep doing so well with your projects, I’ll let you in sometime.” He winked.

“Sure.” I paused. “Maybe,” I said, both excited and nervous.

Frank had only mentioned the door one other time, a little over a week before. Teresa and I had been sanding. Millie had stood almost too casually in the doorway that led into the house and had leaned into the garage, not putting a foot or hand in, and had given Frank the evil eye. Frank hardly ever went in his own house. He, like one of us neighborhood kids, had to be bribed to go inside with food or an insistent call, or the evil eye. Millie’s look was much more commanding than the call to lunch that Teresa received, a loud “Meee-ho,” her mother’s term of endearment, with a bell dinging through the walls in the neighborhood, but less insistent than the sustained “Em-i-lee,” my mother piped into the air.

“Frank,” Millie had said, finally, with the ‘k’ sounding hard. He gave a slight, practically unnoticeable nod. She poked her head out further and noticed me looking at the green door. “He won’t even let *me* go in there,” she said, first looking at me and then swooping her head toward the door. “Afraid I’ll mess up his pictures or something.”

Millie had practically confirmed our suspicions—there must be some nasty magazines or photos of naked people behind that door.

Frank slapped his hands on his overalls and shook his head. "Be right in."

Terry and I had stayed, and continued sanding our name plaques, our minds racing. Neither of us said a word, but several times we caught each other glancing over first at the door that went into the house, and then at the green door. It occurred to me that we had never been so distracted. After a few more passes with the sandpaper, I couldn't stand it anymore. I walked straight over to the green door, grabbed the handle, using my sandpaper to hide fingerprints on the shiny handle and to avoid cooties and turned. Terry looked at me with her hand over her mouth. It was locked. Defeated, I returned to my name plaque and tried to hold up my eyebrows a lot when Frank returned with peanut butter at the edges of his lips.

This time, I vowed to give my name plaque all of my attention. I told myself I didn't care what was behind the stupid door. I didn't want to hurt anybody, least of all Frank. Luckily, Frank didn't notice my discomfort; he simply spread some newspaper, wedged open a can of gloss with his stubby, red-handled screwdriver, and gave me a paintbrush. He was always quiet, and today was no exception. He slid his plastic goggles into position and resumed pushing a piece of wood into his spinning jagged disk, sawdust showering outward, everything else inaudible. I took my plaque off the shelf and ran a finger down the groove of each letter, one by one. I glanced at the green door—it seemed to be a deeper green and

more impenetrable than ever. I concentrated on my name plaque, starting to question if the tail of the 'y' was too short.

Suddenly, something seemed off kilter, as my mother said about Uncle Louie when he drank too much. Over the smell of freshly cut wood was the scent of an oily lubricant, the kind one of my mother's boyfriends had smelled like after sawing metal pipes all day. I imagined shards of silver piled behind the green door, then rings of sterling on fingers of women, all kinds of women, who danced behind the door, seductively. The walls would be covered with pages from magazines, neatly clipped and tacked up edge to edge. Thighs, mostly; satiny, nude legs, a glossy parade across the four tight walls. There would be breasts, too, of all types and sizes: round and supple sets, like Millie's probably were when she was younger, pointed pairs, like I had seen on late-night TV, an ample amount of bulbous ones, like the ones in nature magazines, some with Xs on the nipples from nursing, smooth to fuzzy, pale to dark. Frank liked them all, I imagined.

"Good enough," I said over the screeching saw, sure I would not be heard.

Frank cut the power and looked at me. "Where you going?"

I stammered. "The plaque's good enough for now. I think I'll go for an English muffin." Before he could respond, I had smacked the lid on the gloss, and rushed out, leaving my plaque behind. In the alley, I shuffled my



feet to stir up dust and placed a hand on each breast, or really the beginnings of each breast, and wished I could be ten again. I didn't want Frank to be a pervert, but Teresa's words returned to me: "You're so naïve." I felt challenged, like I had to discover the truth. I would sneak over at an unexpected hour and take the doorknob off as I'd seen my mother do when she'd locked herself out of the bathroom.



My mom was in the kitchen dipping a tea bag in and out of a mug that night when I decided to set out for Frank's. It would not be dark for at least an hour.

"Mom, I'm going to Terry's."

"Sure," my mother said, and then held her tea bag over her cup.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"No, not yet. You go ahead and eat if you can." She was in some sort of daze, so I slipped back into her bedroom and pulled a pair of her old, black gloves from her top dresser drawer. She had not worn them since her mother's funeral when I was four. I stuffed them into my pocket and waved as I passed her, still dunking her tea bag.

Instead of going to Teresa's, I went directly to Frank's.

From the street, the garage looked darker and deeper than it had before. The house's trim bent up slightly at the bottom, and the pansies wept. The cement floor seemed to echo my footsteps though the garage

was full of equipment: several saws, a lathe, an electric drill, a sander, four sawhorses, extension cords neatly coiled and hung on the pegboard walls, a roll-around toolbox, and palates stacked with wood.

I pulled my mother's cotton gloves from my pocket and slipped them on. Standing in front of the green door, I was sure of what I was about to find. I put my hand on the knob and twisted with care. I was prepared for the lock to catch, and ready to pull out a screwdriver, when, for the first time ever, the handle turned. The door didn't stick, either, but pushed open easily, weightlessly.

I caught the scent of the dirty brass knob and a hint of chemicals, something like floor-cleaner. I stepped inside and pushed my body through two heavy curtains. It was pitch black, so I stretched my arms. I felt another doorknob, turned the handle, and was allowed into the next room. The temperature was moderate, not at all muggy, as I had expected, though the smell of chemicals was growing stronger. A red light overhead shone on my hands, in my mother's black gloves, and on a high table before me. I groped for a light switch. The wall felt papery, unfinished and chalky. When I found no switches, I went further into the room, my arms outstretched, my eyes not fully adjusted to the dim red hue. Something fell over my shoulder, at first startling me, but then I realized it was a string attached to the ceiling, and tugged.

I was momentarily blinded, but when my eyes adjusted, I saw clotheslines of photographs of flowers, hung like laundry. Three rectangular tubs of clear liquid sat on a table at my eye level. I stared at the hanging photos, and watched flowers, lilacs and wildflowers I had never seen, dissolve from crisp images to hazy blurs, to unrecognizable darkness.

I heard ticking, and then a buzzer went off, and I knew I was in danger of being caught. I didn't pull the string again or shut the door behind me, but charged out, through the curtains, out the green door, and into the sun. I found myself in my backyard as if I'd been swept there. I turned the brackets that held the panel covering the entrance to the foundation of our house and carefully propped up the panel. I crawled into the musty space, panting, hoping I had not been seen, and squatted there, not full of fear, or humiliated, but sorrowful for a loss I could barely assess.

A shadow overtook me and I realized my mother was standing in front of the open panel. Her arms were crossed, the sun going down behind her. She was smiling, her hair tucked behind her ears, her hand outstretched.

I reached up and put my gloved hand in hers. Her expression did not change.

"I won't ask what you were doing," she said, and pulled me gently to my feet. My head was at the level of her shoulder, as high as it would ever reach in her lifetime. I pulled off a glove and felt her hand, appreciating the

web of lines, and the spots created by the sun. Still breathing hard, I closed my eyes and imagined my own hands as wrinkled and mature as hers. I would be a woman soon, motherless. I would give to children like myself, breakfasts and projects and truths.

## WHEN WE MET

I am sitting with my feet on the back of the couch, watching out the window for Donnie. I haven't seen him since high school graduation, and that was from the bleachers. He says he has something to tell me. My mom has just left for work, and I am sick of indecision, my own and my mother's. She has been talking about leaving dad for years, and I wish she would, not just so she'd stop talking about it, but because she needs more, and if she left, maybe I'd know there was something better in store for me. As for me, I have got to decide what to do with my life. In a way, I wish Donnie was coming here to tell me he and I are meant for each other and that he has a plan, but I know it's been three months, and I have no idea what he's going to say. I tell myself what he has to say doesn't matter. I've got a million directions I can go. After all, I'm not locked into anything, like my mom. Donnie, on the other hand, is going nowhere. He'll be caring for his mother until he's forty.

Still, I can't help it that I love Donnie—we have so much history.

When I was fourteen, at the beginning of my freshman year of high school, I decided to fall in love with Donnie Tanner. He was a year older than me, and dumb enough to let me be in charge, or so I thought. I had a faint memory of Donnie when he was in middle school. His long arms would stretch from bar to bar, his shaggy brown hair poking his eyes when

he'd jump from a platform, a twelve-year-old whose only focus was the next monkey bar, so much like me. Every morning, I practiced the cherry drop: I would hang upside down, a monkey bar clamped behind the back of my knees, and would swing until I gained enough momentum to let go and land on my feet. Then, I would rub my callused hands together—they smelled like pennies—and look toward the sun. Although kids swarmed the playground, I ignored them, vaguely aware of their presence or praise, thinking only of my next jump. Then, I was barely aware that Donnie existed, but by my freshman year, he had become like food or water, his absence forcing an ache in my gut.

I would often see him in the passenger seat of a lime-green Oldsmobile, and I figured the easiest way to get to know him would be to meet the driver, Bob, a twentyish black guy who cruised the high schools. People said he was looking to hook up with teenage girls, but I didn't care what he was after—he lived in the same complex as Donnie and seemed harmless.

Soon Bob was picking Donnie and me up from school. The three of us spent a couple of hours every day in Bob's Olds, conspicuously parked in a court facing their complex, smoking pot, watching people come and go—people with strange names, like T-bone and Byron—and telling stories.

Donnie's mom was blind, had been since she was twenty. Donnie told us she folded her bills so she knew which was which, and once he came home and when he saw her fake eyeballs in her hand, he ran out screaming. Every day, she would face the TV and listen to the news, and at two-thirty, her neighbor would bring her mail and read it aloud. More than most people who had eyes, she wanted to know what was going on.

I told Bob and Donnie about my parents, who were never home, and when they were, it was as if neither knew the other existed. My mom spent her time folding clothes by the washing machine in the garage or pressing meat into patties in the kitchen, and my dad sat on the same spot on the couch until he had to stuff pillows under the cushion to keep it from collapsing. To me, Donnie had a mysteriously good home life: no looming father, and a mom who cared about what was happening.

Bob, he ate potato chip sandwiches and knew when to duck so a frying pan didn't hit him. He was in his twenties, without a job, and his mom would tell him he was going to end up in San Quentin just like his brother. On the way to her adjustable bed, she'd throw something, a hairbrush, the TV guide, and then shut her bedroom door. She had money coming in from lawsuits, but it was barely enough to support the two of them.

My home life, compared to Bob's and Donnie's, would seem to an out-of-town relative or a casual acquaintance fairly normal, but my father was into sex videos and drank a lot of bourbon, and my mom worked hard

to ignore it. She said she liked sleeping alone, and eventually stopped trying to get my father off the couch and into the bed. I felt sorry for her, and hoped I'd never end up like her.

In the morning when she'd get ready for work, she'd ask me to look at the back of her hair to make sure there were no noticeable separations, and I'd do it.

"Cover up any bald spots," she'd say, and I'd take the wide-toothed comb and push around her hair, making sure the curlers hadn't sectioned it up. I wanted to tell her to give up the curlers, and stop coloring her hair. I wanted to say, "You'll go bald if you keep using that bleach." I really wanted to tell her to leave my dad, that he would never pay her the attention she deserved. I'd tell her about Dad's evenings, how he'd drink from the time he got home until he'd pass out, just before she got back from her split shift and try to convince her how he was bad for her, but she'd say, "He's making good money," and I couldn't argue with that. Then she'd go to work, wait tables on the swing shift and walk in at eleven at night with her shoes in her hand and her tired-looking hair. It seemed there was nothing I could do.

The three of us, Bob, Donnie, and I, on the vinyl bench seat of the Olds, me in the middle with my legs parted, one foot on either side of the center hump of the floorboard, the edges of my legs touching Bob's to my left and Donnie's to my right were a family. With them I felt at home, but



because Donnie was shy, almost too shy, I was anxious, acutely aware of the moments when our legs would touch.

Mostly, we had jeans on, but when summer breathed into the courts and apartment buildings, Donnie's bare leg would brush and sometimes rest against mine. Now and then, I'd notice Bob's leg leaning against mine, his black skin and hair a contrast to mine, and I would suddenly feel awkward. I realized Bob was feeling for me what I felt for Donnie. What was worse was that I saw myself in Bob's position, helpless and speechless, waiting to be noticed.

On a day-to-day basis, Donnie seemed unaffected by my hints—my hand patting his thigh after a joke, my head on his shoulder and feigned complaints of being tired. I started to wonder if Donnie had an assertive bone in his body. What was awkward about the whole situation was that I knew Bob liked me, and I feared that if he found out I liked Donnie, he would stop driving us around, and that would put an end to the thigh-touching I practically lived for, so I was in this predicament. I had to find an opportunity to get to Donnie and make it stick.

One afternoon, when we'd just gotten back from the convenience store and were feeding our cottonmouth with soda, Bob pulled up to our usual parking spot, and we all noticed that the curb was red. We had parked here every day for nearly a year, and it struck us as odd. We got out and looked at it more closely—Bob kneeling, Donnie tilting his head

back, taking a wide view from a few feet away—all of us recognizing the gloss of fresh paint. Bob caught a drip with his pinkie before it could reach the gutter, and rising to his feet, grunted in disgust. I ran a hand through my hair, trying to look sexy for Donnie, but he didn't seem to notice. The paint wasn't the typical red-red officially designating a no-parking zone, but a kind of blood red, and it was shoddily painted. Bob, recognizing the feeble attempt of the homeowner whose house we had parked in front of daily for a year, marched up to the door and knocked.

Donnie stood by the car with his head down. I crossed my arms and watched in suspense. A small-framed man wearing a turban stepped onto his porch, and pulled the door closed behind him, closing his wife and son inside. Bob was pointing at the curb, talking though I couldn't make out the words. The man waved an arm toward Donnie and me, and Donnie got in the Olds as if he were embarrassed. Seeing my opportunity, a moment when Bob was preoccupied, I slid in beside Donnie and let my thigh lean hard against his. I felt sinister, but I was tired of waiting, and I didn't care about the consequences.

"You want to get together later?" I asked.

He looked toward Bob, whose back was to us, his hands on his hips now. "When do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, sometime when Bob's not around. Exchange numbers and hang out."

“Sure,” he said. “We can meet at the school some night, maybe.”

“Smoke a joint or something,” I said.

We wrote down each other’s phone numbers on matchbooks and tucked them away. Bob was coming back, and I cautiously eased my leg away from Donnie’s.

Leaning in the car window, Bob said, “You believe that?”

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I told that dude I was gonna call the cops if he didn’t get that paint off.”

“What’d he say?” Donnie asked.

“He’s rooting around in the garage for paint thinner.”

“You think we should take our party somewhere else, you know, quit parking here?” Donnie asked.

“Where else would we park?” I asked.

“Fuck them,” Bob said and started the engine. He drove us each home, none of us saying a word. I was just glad I’d gotten Donnie’s number.

It didn’t take long before I used it, either. The next night, I had an excuse to call him. I peeked into the living room to see if my dad was still awake—he was smoking pot and watching one of his rented sex videos. He held out a long glass tube blackened from use with half a joint sticking

out of it. I took two leisurely hits and set the pipe down on the arm of his couch.

He held up his rocks glass, almost empty, put his lips to it, and slurped the last of the amber liquid. "Sit down, while I make another drink." He went to the kitchen.

I hesitated. Smoking pot with my dad was one thing, but I'd avoided him when he was watching his videos.

"If you roll me some joints, I'll let you have one," he said, coming back with a fresh drink.

"Turn this shit off," I said, waving an arm at the TV.

"I'll turn the sound down," he said. He walked over and started a Beatles tape, "The Yellow Submarine." He'd been listening to the same tape for twenty years.

He handed me a green Tupperware container and rolling machine, and I sat down and started rolling joints. I imagine he was perfectly happy at that moment, just like he was as a teenager. I wondered what it would have been like to be around in the sixties. Love seemed to be anything but free in the middle of this broken down couch, rolling joint after joint after joint.

We listened to music, my dad watching his porno, me glancing at the TV now and then because it was impossible not to, until the bag of weed was empty and I had a stack of joints on my lap. I waited until my dad

made another trip to the kitchen, and slipped a joint into my pocket. When he came back, standing over me, twisting his mustache, I selected a good-sized joint and said, "My commission."

He nodded and sat down. I stood up and went back to my room. I tried to watch some TV, but I could hear the sounds from the living room, back to muffled moans and faked panting. It was late, but I was unable to shut out the presence of my father. My mom wouldn't be home for another two hours. I thought about Donnie, how we'd finally agreed to see each other—alone—and decided to call. Donnie answered on the first ring and whispered into the phone that he'd meet me at the middle school near his house.

He was sitting on a swing when I got there. The sky had just darkened and the shadows cast from a far away street lamp made him look strange, almost dangerous, not at all like the image I held of him years earlier. He held out his hand, but instead of holding it and sitting on the swing beside him as I'm sure he expected, I took it and pulled his arm around my waist and held myself close to him. I breathed in deeply and imagined how his bare chest would feel against me.

"You okay?" he asked.

I pulled back and looked at him. "Don't I look okay?"

"Sure, but you seem kind of different."

I felt different, too, like I was finally getting what I wanted, and it as all down hill from here. I pulled out one of the joints I'd earned earlier and gave it to him. I sat on the swing beside him and said go ahead. I told him about my dad, the strange way I'd acquired the pot.

"He's not after you, is he?"

"Hitting on me?"

"Yeah."

"No way. He's just a loser, all wrapped up in the TV. I don't think he's been able to have sex for years—he sleeps on the couch practically every night."

"Are you okay?" Donnie asked, and gave me a look I'd been waiting for. I could fall into that look and lose myself and never come back.

"No, I guess I'm not."

He put his arms around me, and I felt myself slide my hands under his shirt onto his back and lay my head on his chest. I had waited so long to touch him like this that it seemed like a dream. I imagined that I had loved him since we were kids playing here on this swing set. His skin was soft as a child's. I drifted into the hum of streetlights and let waves of relief pass through me.

"You need to come back to my house?" Donnie asked.

In a weakened state, I nodded and we began to walk, holding hands.

When we got to his apartment, Donnie motioned for me to take off my shoes. I stood barefoot on the mat outside his front door holding my shoes, and he unlocked the door. He entered, and I followed, taking steps at exactly the same time as him, like his shadow.

“Don, is someone there with you?” a voice said, and then the silhouette of Donnie’s mother appeared, sitting up on the couch, her head blocking the TV. Barefoot on the carpet, my shoes in my hand, I wondered how she could tell I was there. Could she smell me?

“No, Ma. It’s only me. Go to bed,” he said, as if he’d said it before.

By the looks of it he’d had other people over without her knowledge. He seemed to know just what to do, but when I questioned him, he said, “Just Kearney,” who was a computer-nerd he’d hung around a few years before, and I believed him. We went to his room without a hassle, but I was convinced she knew I was there.

In his room, we sat on the bed and talked just loud enough to hear each other, sometimes repeating things because we were being cautious not to attract attention from his mother. When it got late, he took some pajamas out of his drawer and handed them to me—they had fighter planes on them. I smiled, handed them back, and motioned for him to get the light. We took off our clothes and put our bodies together. For so long, I had wanted Donnie’s skin on mine, and it was finally happening. While we made love, I noticed a model plane hanging from the ceiling, but ignored it.

Donnie pushed and pushed until I was satisfied, and once he recognized that, he finished and leaned down hard. I was happy for him to be in control and thankful to lose myself to him.

In the morning, we heard Donnie's mother make coffee and go out. We went to the bathroom and took a shower. Afterwards, Donnie stood naked blow-drying his hair. He must have done this all the time, stood naked, walked around naked, and thought nothing of it. There was no need to be clothed because no one could see him. I imagined how comfortable it would be to be able to walk around without being seen. In a way, it seemed my mother was much like Donnie in this regard. She was in the background, and there she could be safe from judgment. Perhaps relationships are like that, I thought; perhaps they allow us to teeter between vision and sight, between being seen and being invisible.

It seemed that if our relationship was going to go anywhere, I was going to have to take charge and let people know that Donnie and I were serious. First of all, Bob would need to be informed. Donnie had been hesitant about saying anything—he was of the mind that we should just phase him out of our life, but one morning, I saw the perfect opportunity. I had taken the bus to the complex and met Donnie at the swing-set by the laundry room. It was early and neither of us expected to see anyone, but as soon as I saw Bob coming, a basket wedged under his arm, I knew it was time for him to see that Donnie and I could from then on occupy



ourselves. I put my arm around Donnie, and before he realized Bob was there, Donnie had pulled me toward him. There was an awkward moment, and Bob said, "You two together?" and I nodded. Donnie just looked down, but once he felt me nod, he looked up and tried to smile. After that Bob would drive by us and wave from his Olds, a choppy, sarcastic wave, and soon he had another girl tucked between him and Donnie's old friend, Kearney. That was fine by me because I just wanted others to know that Donnie and I were an item.

Several months into our relationship, Donnie and I were in my room, lying on my waterbed, kissing each other fiercely. His hand was in my hair, mine was down his pants, when we heard the front door. Rather than straightening ourselves and trying to look normal, Donnie said, "I've got to hide." I saw no reason for it—my dad condoned practically everything. Still, Donnie gripped his undone pants, sat in the closet with his knees to his chest, and signaled for me to slide the door shut.

My dad must have figured, with all the noise, that something weird was going on. He tapped his knuckle twice on my bedroom door and came in with an eyebrow up. I know I looked sheepish, maybe on purpose. I wanted my dad to know that I was spoken for, and that I didn't need his attention. I might have glanced at the closet because my dad took one look at me, turned around and, standing directly in front of the door, slid it open. Donnie was holding a coat sleeve over his face with one hand, the other

still gripping his open pants, a sliver of his white underwear gleaming. The half of his face I could see displayed not fear, but shame. My father twisted his mustache and said, "Nice. Really nice."

I think my dad was envious in some strange way. He seemed to nod at Donnie as he walked out of the room, as if they were in on a secret. Donnie was embarrassed, I could tell. I was glad for the acknowledgment that I was someone's girl. We sat on the bed and stared at the empty closet for fifteen minutes. The TV came on in the other room, and we heard the refrigerator open and close. The TV went off and the front door opened and closed. My dad's engine started, and we heard it become quieter as he drove away.

"What's he going to do?" Donnie asked.

"Asshole's probably just going back to work. Nothing to eat here."

Donnie zipped his pants. "Isn't he going to say I can't come over for a while, or put you on restriction?" He paused. "Something?"

"You're kidding. That guy lives to see stuff like this. He's probably driving over the Bay Bridge now, imagining it over and over, smiling like crazy as he hands the toll over."

"That's sick," Donnie said. "Sick that you'd think that about your dad."

"You know what he's like."

"Still . . . that's sick."

When Donnie left, we kissed goodbye. It was a strange kiss, like someone was in the room, watching. Then we didn't talk for two days. Somehow, we didn't see each other at school, and after school I found myself working harder at my homework, knowing the phone wouldn't ring, as I wanted it to.

It took a few weeks before Donnie would let me open up his pants in my bedroom again. I tried, but every time he would tilt his head and say something ridiculous, like "I gave away my trumpet," or "Do you guys have any chips?" I couldn't figure out what was going on in his head. Day after day, we would take walks around the block, looking forward to our future together: kids—a boy and a girl—a small dog, and a big yard. We would point to cars we liked, talking over which kind of car he would soon be able to afford. We talked about what we'd have, but never what we'd do to get it. That was the scary part, and we both knew it. I'm not sure if it was me or him, but for some reason, we didn't talk on that level. Sometimes, we'd sneak behind some bushes and make out, but he was nervous. He would stop and stare through the branches as someone walked by, his hand barely over my mouth to ensure I would be quiet. I would push his hand down and say, "Who cares." But he'd give me a look, like I had crossed a line, take my hand, and lead me out of the bushes.

Then Donnie had to go to New York for his mother's eye operation. One night, he called me from out of town and talked in a low whisper. It

was almost obscene and definitely arousing. Grasping the phone, I told him to touch himself. He agreed.

“Are *you* touching *yourself*?” he asked.

I lay on top of my covers in the center of my bed and worked my hand under my nightgown. “Yes,” I whispered.

“Cup it with your palm,” he said.

And I did. Our whispers became softer, and in a few moments light gasps took the place of words. Several minutes passed with no words, only reigned-in moans and light panting. Our breathing became choppy and the pace quickened. At the same moment, we exhaled the energy we had built up, letting out shaky, heavy gasps. I found myself back in my room, alone, and pulled my hand to my chest lovingly.

“You do it?” he asked.

“Yes.” I paused. “You?”

“Uh-Hunh.”

I guessed he had to clean up, so I said, “Call me tomorrow?”

Above a whisper now, he said, “You can bet on that.”

He didn't call, though, and I was glad in a way because carrying on like that would have made us strangers. I wouldn't want to continue masturbating over the phone, each of us caught up in only the feeling, unable to see each other, and eventually imagining we were with someone else. He hasn't called me since, and it's been three months. I heard he

had gotten back to town, and I knew he graduated. I was afraid I'd look weak if I called him. Every time I thought about calling, I'd just think of my mom and how desperate we both seemed.

When Donnie arrives, I open the door before he knocks. I notice his hair is much shorter, but he is as attractive as ever. We sit on the couch, leaving my dad's caved-in end empty. "You thirsty?" I ask.

"No, I'm okay."

I am dying to know what he has to say, why he is here, really. I want to yell at him, to tell him I love him, but I can't, so I just wait for him to say what he has to say. He is my first love, after all, and I realize I will not know for years what this all means.

"I want to repair planes. Work on engines."

"What? Is *that* what you wanted to tell me? You mean you want to go to technical school?" I ask, turning toward him and grasping both his hands.

"Yup. It'll be paid for, free and clear," he says. The refrigerator kicks on.

I feel myself get thirsty, but ignore it. "Do they have scholarships for that?"

"Not exactly," he says, and pulls his hands away from mine. "Let's go smoke."

He leads me into my bedroom, pulls a joint out and lights it.

"You know my big brother?" he says.

I nod even though I've only heard about Andrew, a guy in his thirties who takes Donnie to baseball games and buys him socks—I think it's odd how he has this guy in his life, a stranger, a social worker really, not his real brother, but a guy who volunteered to act like one.

"He was in the Air Force," he says, passing me the joint. I vaguely remember being told this before, and I sense that Donnie knows he's repeating himself.

I take a hit and pass it back. "So?"

"He's doing pretty well now."

"The military's for idiots," I say. I lean all the way back on the bed, putting my hand on his thigh. "You can't be thinking of going in."

He pauses. "I already did," he says. "It's official." He doesn't move, not to take my hand or move it.

"This is your news?" I say, sitting up. Are you out of your mind?" I think to myself that it is too late, that he is lost for good. "When did you decide *this*?"

He doesn't answer right away, and during the silence, I am struck that he has made this decision on his own, and that I didn't see it coming. It occurs to me that I haven't seen him go a week without smoking weed, and his quitting and becoming a do-gooder like his volunteer big brother

seems ridiculous. I tell myself he'll be gone a month at the most, though as soon as I think it, I doubt myself.

"I'll be able to get a good job," he finally says. "You know I've always wanted to fly." He looks at me with his sad eyes, the look he gets when he wants something really badly. This was the look he had when we would walk around the block pointing to cars we liked.

That he had always wanted to fly, I recognize I should have known, but it never really registered. I remember a model of a biplane dangling from his ceiling and that he has several types of airplanes on his sheets, but my cousin has toy soldier wallpaper, and he doesn't have a thing for *The Nut Cracker*. I take the joint and re-light it. "And us, what about us?"

"We'll write," he says, and he is sincere, I can tell.

"Sure," I say, mad at myself for being so unprepared. "I can't say I'd spend four years in the military to pay for school."

"You wouldn't last a day," he says, and laughs.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I put a hand on his chin and turn his face toward mine, annoyed but hoping to salvage what we have. "You think I'm a weakling?" I say, jokingly, but feeling ill as I say it.

"You can kick my ass anytime," he says, and pulls me over so my legs straddle him.

I am happy for this affection, but it feels wrong. None of this feels real. It feels like the end of a play when the actors come back on stage and

bow, stripped of the traits that made them the characters they'd been for the last two hours. I smile and say, "You'd better go," and smile harder to keep from crying.

"We'll write," he says again, before he heads toward the door, and I think he says something else, but it's lost on me.

From the front room, I watch him get in his car, and I keep looking out the window. Looking for what, I don't know. I wave, but Donnie doesn't see me. I watch him pull on his seat belt and brush some dust from his dash. I watch him drive away, the car getting smaller and smaller and finally disappearing. Tears fill my eyes until I cannot see.

The front door unlocks, and I am startled. Through tears, I see my mom, her shoes on her feet and her hair still in place. She has come home between her split. I throw my arms around her and squeeze her hard and the tears start falling, and fast.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" she asks.

"I took him for granted and now he's gone. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I realize that in all my fear of becoming my mother, I have done just the opposite. I am my father, apologizing to my mother, wishing I could take back my perversion, my brashness, all the time I spent thinking of myself. Although she could not possibly understand, she holds me and seems to accept my apology. She is crying now too.



"It's okay, it's okay," she says. We hold each other until our arms lighten and we are filled with air and light and space. We are pure energy, particles dispersing, selfless, two people at our strongest.

## MY LIFE AS A WAITRESS

This bar I'd been working at was like a dream itself—red candle-globes lit the place, but nothing was shiny. I remember it was only four o'clock when this new guy showed up, so all the regulars were yet to arrive, but the three or four of us at the bar took one glance and hung our heads. This new guy was nervous as a long-tailed cat in a rocking chair factory. The owner, an old guy with a gold tooth in front, introduced us and I shook Jay's hand, a cold, large hand. It was an awkward handshake, the kind you have with a relative you haven't seen in ten years and you won't see in another ten. I couldn't help but notice his deep, deep brown eyes, innocent as I'd seen in a long time, sweet as a baby's. Hell, I didn't like kids, though. When he got behind the counter and opened a bottle of wine without using a knife, I could just tell he must have worked at a fancy restaurant.

Jay's shaky hands pouring rum and coke after rum and coke were a dead give away, not that he was an alcoholic, but that he had a serious case of nerves. We were sure Jay wasn't going to last. His first night, he stood over the ice, silver scoop in hand, and when I'd put an order up, he'd wipe his head three or four times with a bar towel, staring at the guest check like he needed glasses. I'd start feeling like a nuisance, so I'd walk away and go change some ash trays, and when I'd come back, he'd have all the drinks on my tray. The other bartenders made you arrange the

drinks yourself—a power thing. Jay was just asking to get walked on, forty-something and offering extra help to *me*—a cocktail waitress with absolutely no sway. I didn't realize it then, but he was putting on the moves, and I was eating it up.

A week later when the regulars were calling him Bullet, I tried not to laugh, but it was impossible to stop my smirk. Jay was bald on top—hell, his head was the only shiny thing in the place—and when his nerves got to him, which they always did, he'd sweat bullets. I called him Bullet a few times, but he gave me a look, so I gave it up.

At home, Jerry and I were either not talking or screaming. It was wintertime so there were no roofing jobs, and he'd been staying out all hours, who knows where. I suspected he was with another woman, but didn't have the words to say it. Now and then his lollygagging around all night would come up, and we'd argue. I didn't know it then, but we were typical young kids who weren't ready to live together. Probably weren't ready to be in any kind of relationship, but who's to say. One time when Jerry'd come home late, I told him, "It's over. I'm leaving"—simple as that. I would have left too, if he hadn't grabbed his twelve gauge and charged into the bathroom. At first, I thought he was bluffing, but then I got this feeling, like maybe he *could* do it, and with the idea of telling his mother her son had killed himself for me, I leaned against the door and cried.

"I've got pounds of pressure on the trigger," he said.

I pictured his shaky finger depressing the trigger and his brains flying all over the wall, and it scared the hell out of me. "Stop this. Stop this now," I yelled.

"You don't love me," he said.

I told myself I would talk him out of this, and then leave in a few weeks, when things had settled down. "I love you," I said, "but I'm so tired." I didn't want to give him too much time to think, so I started in again: "Come out. Come out, please."

"Why should I? You're just going to leave. What difference does it make?"

"Come out," I yelled. "Come out, NOW! I'm not going to leave. Just come out."

After a silence, the door handle jiggled, and I held my hand against the cold brass. The door opened inward and he pushed past me, gun-barrel toward the sky. I never saw his eyes. In the bedroom, he made a lump in the bed, the light from the clock tinting the comforter blue. It was four in the morning. I wriggled the metal tube from his hand, went out to the car, and locked it in the trunk. Back in the bedroom, I stuffed the keys under my side of the mattress, but it didn't matter because he was snoring by then. Eventually, I forgot about it, as much as I could, but in my heart, a hardness formed, like a bullet that couldn't be moved.

At the bar, I forgot all about Jerry and the fact that I couldn't keep him around the way I wanted to. It was a tacky place, torn up carpet and two-tops in front of a dance floor, but it had a stage. Every two weeks we'd get a different, seedy rock group playing the same cover tunes—these guys would hang all over the house sluts, thinking they were special, that these women pined away for them between visits, pathetic. I didn't understand then that I was just as bad, only not so obvious. I waited around for Jerry, just like those other bimbos, just as pathetic.

One night, this couple comes in. They looked okay at first, but the longer I watched them, the drunker they looked. My section was to the right of the stage, and they sat at my table, near the railing. When I stopped in front of them, they straightened up and folded their hands. She had on a brown leather coat, not too out of style, and he'd had a haircut recently.

"Two long island iced teas, please," the man said, grinning at his rhyme.

He articulated it fairly well, so I nodded, wrote "2 LIT" at the bottom of my ticket and walked to the bar.

Jay was waiting, ice scoop in hand. I set the ticket up but read the list, so he could make the drinks without hunching and squinting.

"Two spitfires. A margarita, extra triple sec. One vodka Collins. A little cherry juice in that. Three Bacardi-cokes. And two long islands."

You could only line up seven glasses on the rubber mat, so Jay set the talls for the last two to the side. I held up my finger to let a new group know I'd be a minute. Just then I saw the lady by the railing out on the dance floor. She was sliding her palms up her thighs, over her breasts and into her hair, just like a stripper I'd once seen. One of the regulars, a petite blond known for her dirty dancing, scowled at her, and walked off. It was clear to me that this woman had to go. I wasn't going to lose my permit for serving a VIP.

I told Jay to never mind the last two, and he nodded.

"Need some help?" he asked.

"Yeah. Get Clayton out here and tell him to bounce this chick."

When Clayton came around the bar—this was a guy of six feet who'd been doused with pepper spray more than once—he pointed to the woman, still dancing just like she was getting paid, and I nodded. I picked up my tray, but set it back down again, deciding to observe—everybody in my section could use a pause. Jay and I watched, me in the server station and him behind the bar. We couldn't hear what Clayton was saying, but I imagined it was something like, "Ma'am, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave," and I said that to Jay. We often made fun of Clayton, how he tried to sound official, how he acted like law enforcement. It brought Jay and I closer together.

This slut came out swinging. Her arms went flailing, and she popped Clayton in the jaw. He held his face for a moment and then seemed to realize what had happened. A few regulars walked up, but he waved them off. The other waitress must have been in the bathroom. "I've got it," he must have said. The band thought about stopping—you could tell—but they kept playing, diverting attention from Clayton getting his ass kicked. She was a wildcat! Jay and I looked at each other, and then he came over the bar, which surprised me. *I* wasn't about to get into this one. By the time Jay got over there, the woman was on her back, kicking her feet at each approach of the bouncer.

"You get her legs," Jay yelled.

This, I could hear over the band, who was playing something twangy, making the whole thing seem more ridiculous. Like a cartoon. Clayton smiled—these were the moments he waited for, more entertaining than collecting two bucks a head and checking stamps—and after a few almost leisurely minutes of quick but forceful grabs, he had her by the ankles. Just as artfully, Jay got her wrists. I must say he didn't look appalled as you might expect, having come from a somewhat fancy schmancy background—I later learned that he'd been a maitre d' and traveled some. He had this matter-of-fact look, like this was just part of his job, and it was, but still, like I said, you'd never catch me out there. I

wouldn't clean up the puke in the bathroom, and when these battered chicks would be in there, I'd say, "Who am I to call the cops?" They got themselves into this shit, and they had to get themselves out. I never realized how similar I was to these chicks, letting Jerry cheat on me and pointing the finger at everyone else.

Jay and Clayton picked the woman up—she was calmer—and carried her toward the door. Her body made a couple of whole-hearted waves to break free, though their grip was tight. I noticed her coat was still at the table, so I grabbed it and followed them. They let her down on the pavement out front, some spittle in the frizzed hair across her face, and I set the coat beside her. Not making eye contact with anyone, her man slinked by Jay, Clayton, and me and the small crowd that had gathered. He wasn't as dumb as he looked.

"I'll bring the car around," he said, almost a whisper, but she just pulled her knees to her chest.

When we went in, I patted Jay on the back. I could feel through his shirt that he was sweaty. He smiled, wiping his forehead. Clayton stayed at the door, and as Jay and I passed through, the regulars parted, leaving us plenty of room. Even the ones playing video poker leaned forward. My drinks were watered down, so I poured a bit off the tops and had Jay float some booze. Half the people wouldn't notice if their drinks were virgins—we tested that theory—but after a deal like that, we liked to make



the place a little merrier, at least let them think they were getting special treatment, since they'd waited so long.

Before I went to serve the drinks, I noticed a gleam in Jay's eyes, something I hadn't seen before. He was still breathing heavy. Maybe too heavy. To everyone else, he probably just looked excited, but to me he had changed; he'd witnessed something, taken part in something that he would never forget, and he would be different because of it. He had taken charge when he could have just stood by, and I admired that. Once, in high school I'd beaten a girl bloody for having sex with my boyfriend, so I'd known for some time what it was like to hold power over someone, but this was different how Jay looked. When I stood over her limp body, I felt radiant—ambivalent about myself and what I'd done—ugly and beautiful at the same time. There was a pulse in my gut, something like pride, for not having given up any of myself by running away or losing, but a nervousness too, a nauseous feeling, like I could never love another human being, ever. When the adrenaline left me, I shook it off, of course, not having really known what I was feeling. Jay was radiant in a different way. Somehow attractive now.

At table seven—the one I owed my first order to—I set drinks down in front of two long-hairs. They held out a ten and told me to keep the change—a whopping fifty cents. As I walked to my next table, I looked

back and saw Jay rubbing his hands together, nodding at a guy in the server station. He had this new energy, like he was ready for anything. I wanted to learn more about him and get him into my life to see what he knew that I didn't. He was older, and surely wiser, and there was something attractive now that I had to discover more about.

Jay and I gradually became friends, outside of work, that is, and I kept telling myself that's all we'd ever be, even though I was determined to learn what about him was so attractive. We spent a lot of time together, Jerry knowing nothing about it, except that I was hanging around a fat guy from work. When one of us was broke, we'd use our bar tabs to pay for the other's lunch. Jesus, the food was awful—baked beans and juicy-looking chicken that was bone-dry on the inside, stuff that sat on a buffet all day, but because I was with Jay, it didn't matter. I was falling for him in a way I had not for anyone else before. We'd have lunch, and then we'd go to some Goodwills. He'd do silly things to embarrass himself just to make me laugh. When he was done with his gum, he'd karate-chop the back of his head and spit it out the window. He'd pull into parking spaces going about twenty miles an hour, stopping with the bumper a few inches away from the car in front of us. At the thrift stores, he would try on hats, goofy straw ones or never-before-worn baseball hats advertising plumbing companies or TV stations, and he'd make faces like he was an inquisitive executive or a low-

IQ schmuck. One time he tried on size eighty overalls until we laughed so hard that I had to leave the store.

Jay always bought the weirdest stuff. One time, he found a pillar candle, pink and dinged up, stuck in a plastic ashtray, like the cheap, burnt-up ashtrays I'd sponge out at work.

"What are you doing with *that*?" I asked.

"It's a quarter," he said, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Who cares if it's a quarter? It's disgusting." I gave him a skeptical look.

He held it at arm's length, looking it over. "Nah, it'll go in my room just fine."

I wondered what kind of room that ugly thing would go with, but he was right—later I saw that it didn't look so out of place. I never liked stuff that looked faded or had holes in it, and you couldn't pay me to take a candle that someone had already burned. But Jay was different; he liked what he liked and that was it. And he wasn't afraid to tell me what he liked, and I respected that.

When I'd known Jay for a few months, he invited me over for an early dinner. It was a Monday, our day off. Driving out to his house, I saw nothing but high grass and manure, and when I got to Jay's house, I got the sense that he was a real recluse. Sheets were tacked up between the rooms to keep the heat in, and the floors in the kitchen and living room

were warped beyond repair. I sat at the heavy, rectangular table in his dining area, eyeing his turquoise refrigerator, but wondering if Jay was interested in me. I tried to tell myself I wasn't interested in him. I loved his sense of humor, his wit, his mannerisms, but he wasn't good looking. Not one bit.

I sat at the table while Jay cooked. There were flowers in a beer bottle in the center of the table, little blue-petaled ones from the field out back, and two place settings with cloth napkins. I watched him move a spatula around the frying pan. Then we ate our burritos, and we talked. He told me about Europe, how he'd carried an ounce across seven countries, how they had stopped him and his friends at the Czechoslovakian border, and he'd thought for sure it was over, and then when they actually made it through—him, his roommate and their girlfriends—they came to the first pullout, choked down the pot, and threw the bag in a field.

We went up to his room, past a thick flannel sheet and up some steep, crooked stairs, and I sat on his bed while he searched for his photo album. An entire wall was stacked with boxes, but I knew he'd lived there for years.

"What's in all those?" I asked, pointing.

He looked up, his hands in a box. "Mostly film stuff. You into film?"

"I like to watch movies." I scooted onto the bed and lay on my side, trying to look sexy. It was sad really, how authentic Jay was, and how manipulative I was. At the time, I was just seeing what I could get away with.

He pulled out a tattered green album. "I mean films, you know, the classics—Woody Allen, *Sparticus*, art-house flicks."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I nodded. I mean, I knew who Woody Allen was, but all I could think of was the word neurotic.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. "I got my degree in film."

I sat up, beside him, so that a cover of the photo album sat on each of our legs. "Then what the hell are you doing bartending?"

"You know, it's funny how when you do something, you think it's *the end all*. I mean, when I was in school, we thought film was at its height. But when video came in, and all the editing techniques changed, a kind of gloom settled in."

"You got a degree that's obsolete?"

"Basically, yeah."

We flipped through the pages of the album. Occasionally, Jay would point out how he had tried to capture a certain quality in a picture, red was hot, blue cool, that kind of stuff. He explained film noir, but I told him his pictures didn't seem to fit in that category—it was the seventies when he

took these pictures, for Chrissakes—and he reluctantly agreed. When I saw a picture of his whole group, I felt strange, like I'd walked in on something. The four of them, the guys on the outside, their girlfriends in the middle, stood shoulder to shoulder. They had their arms woven over necks and around sides, and they seemed to be held together by some force, like they'd never let go. It was as if their trip would last a lifetime, as if time had stopped, and they would be together forever. They all wore gauze shirts—it must have been hot—and Jay's girlfriend had these blue-tinted sunglasses on. He and his girlfriend were smiling at each other, relaxed, as if they'd just had sex. I felt strangely jealous. Everyone had long, straight hair, except Jay, who *had* hair then, but it was a giant receding afro—those were the days when men got perms. I couldn't keep from laughing, and Jay shut the book.

“What? Are you mad?”

“That stuff's not very interesting,” he said, picking at a bent corner of the album.

“I didn't mean to laugh. It's just that I hadn't imagined you with an afro. I was like seven years old then, you know, and I always think of Bozo when I see hair like that.”

He stood up and let the book fall in the nearest open box. I could tell he was upset, so I stood and tried to find something to compliment him on.

I noticed a painting above his headboard—an Indian woman whose breasts were pinched-looking and saggy. I thought I should just keep quiet.

“You like that?” he asked, tipping his chin at the painting.

I wished I did, but it was grotesque. I struggled for the right words.

“Did you frame it yourself?”

“I did,” he said, sounding surprised. “Got the barn wood frame at an estate sale and the print out of an old trunk of my dad’s.”

Why anyone would want a naked, wrinkly Indian above his bed was beyond me. I thought he was hard-up, but still, that wouldn’t do it for anyone I knew. I felt better knowing the piece had a little history behind it. “It’s nice,” I said, and looked around. He had a large drafting table, stacked with two film projectors, a slide projector, ten or more different-sized picture frames, an ashtray with about fifty cigarette butts in it, and a big silver tray with his beat-up wallet and a pile of change on it. I wondered if all bachelors lived like this. I got with Jerry just out of high school and hadn’t been around much. “How long have you been single?” I asked. Jay just stood with his hands in his pockets, and I felt my shoulders grow tense.

“Five years.” He ran a hand over his head. “Karen, the woman who I went to Europe with, started up a sewing business, and left me about five years ago.”

“What happened?”

He hesitated. “She said I never changed.”

"What do you mean?"

"I was depressed a lot back then. She wanted this business. What can I say?"

"You think you deserved it?"

"Sure," he said, and laughed so you could hear the pain. "She made clothes for me, and I was just a jerk. I'm lucky she put up with me as long as she did."

I didn't really know what to say. I figured he was growing sadder by the minute, so I walked over and put my arm around his wide back. "She made your clothes?"

"Yup, lucky, huh?"

"Damn lucky," I said, and took my arm away. I knew, even though thick curtains kept us insulated, that I had to go. It was dark outside, and Jerry was probably home waiting.

When I left, Jay stood at the door while I walked to my car.

"Look out for the mud," he said, "as you go around the garage."

It was dark, and when I turned back, I saw his silhouette, a figure with a heavy arm reaching up the door frame. "Thanks," I said and kept going, even though I wanted to ask for a flashlight, or for his arm.

When I got home, Jerry was asleep on the couch. It wasn't even eight o'clock. In the kitchen, there was a stack of dishes— a saucepan with remnants of tomato sauce, a pot coated with a ring of starch, and, of



course, a plate and fork. Two beer caps were stacked neatly, and, without thinking, I snatched them off the counter, opened the cupboard, and shuttled them into the trash. I saw enough bottle caps at work.

"Hon?" Jerry said, from the living room.

I walked in but stood at a distance. His dirty socks were propped on the table, and he had his hands folded behind his head. "How many times have I asked you to throw away your bottle caps?" Saying it made me angrier. "How fucking hard is it to pick up a quarter-sized object and put it in the trash!"

He sat up. "Jesus Christ. What the hell kind of greeting is that? I'll *never* put the damn caps in the trash with an attitude like that."

All I could do was let out a sound of disgust. I walked to the bedroom and shut the door. It was either screaming or silence, and I chose silence. Jerry slept on the couch that night, and a few nights after.

Jay and I spent more and more time together. We exchanged life stories. He told me how it was when he was growing up. You could pick up and leave town without a second thought because you could get a job anywhere in about two days. And it was safe to travel. A lot of times, you'd get a ride from strangers, and sometimes you'd end up in bed with them. There was no AIDS, and people weren't so hung up on commitments—*family values* hadn't even been invented. Sure, love was considered a rare thing, just like it is now, but then, at least you knew it

when you saw it. Naiveté has been lost, and without it, Jay explained, there can't be real love. It takes an innocent mind to conceive it. All that was admirable, and led me to think Jay had something I needed: wisdom, and that if I kept hanging around him, I'd get it.

Sometimes, after work, Jay and I would stay at the bar and have drinks till daybreak, and when the birds started chirping, we'd lock up. From our cars, we'd wave to each other, and when I'd drive home, I would miss his big hand on my shoulder, or the way he would stare at me when I talked, actually listening to what I was saying.

One weekend, when Jerry had gone to fix his mother's roof, I invited Jay over. He brought a jug of wine, and we sat in my living room until two in the morning drinking and talking. He looked at me like he wanted me. I stretched my legs onto the coffee table and leaned forward, clinking my wine glass down. When I leaned back, I noticed Jay's arm was behind me, and I was pleased. It had taken him so long to make a move. I lifted my hair over his arm and leaned my head back, so that my neck touched his skin. We both faced forward for a minute—I think he was weighing the issue—and then he leaned in and kissed me, almost too softly. The physical attraction had never been there for me, but at this instant, what we were doing felt right. I braced his chin in my hand and kissed back and, almost automatically, felt for his bulge with my other hand. He kept his

eyes closed, but mine were open, watching him the whole time. I felt like I was stealing his soul.

Jay pulled away and looked at me with the sweetest sadness you've ever seen. "Can we go to the bedroom?" he asked.

I didn't say anything, but instead took his hand and led him there. He sat on the edge of the bed, taking off his black tennis shoes. Then he pulled his shirt over his head. His stomach was hairy, and he had a scar half a foot long up his side. He seemed embarrassed, so I put a hand on it.

"Don't touch it," he said.

I took my hand away.

"Please," he said, softly.

"What happened?"

"Some surgery."

He was sort of hunched over, looking at his legs, not making a move, so I unbuttoned his pants and tugged at the cuffs, until he held out his legs, and I pulled them off without too much of a struggle. He wore big, white briefs, nothing like the silk boxers Jerry wore. He got up and turned out the light, so that I could only see him when he came within a foot of me. I took off my clothes and waited. The air grew thick, and I felt him carefully put himself on top. He was heavy, his arms shaking from trying to hold his weight over me. I peeled his underwear down to his knees, and we both forced them down the rest of the way.

“Do you have a condom?” he asked, so quietly that I could barely hear him.

“In the night stand,” I said. Then it started clicking, what I was doing, I mean. I was about to have sex with my friend, a guy I loved, but a guy who was basically ugly. As he fumbled around, I began to feel impatient, like no matter how fast he got the damn thing on, it wouldn’t be fast enough. After a minute, my leg started going numb as he leaned across it to stretch himself to the drawer. “Did you find it yet?” I finally asked.

“Got it,” he said.

Just in time, too, because I was about to call it all off. That would have hit him hard, stopping it right then. Though it was dark, I could make out his hands rolling the rubber down. And then he started. I wasn’t really ready, so it was difficult at first, but then he began to go up and down more easily.

“How’s that?’ he asked, after a few minutes.

I didn’t feel much. “It’s fine,” I said, “but can I come on top?”

He rolled over, and I could tell he was relieved. His stomach was bulky, its fine hair soft against me. I tried not to think. I couldn’t see his face, but I could tell where his head made an impression on the pillow—my husband’s pillow—and I felt nauseated, not because I was cheating, but because I was in bed with Jay, my best friend, a fat, hairy, middle-aged

man. Since I'd gone that far, and I figured I'd crush him if I stopped now, I decided to make the best of it.

The odd thing is that by the time I started getting into it, he had gone limp, not totally but noticeably. The sweat between us made me try harder. I wanted to show him I loved him, so I kept at it. He was having a good time, I told myself, but even if he wasn't, I thought if I just kept going he would perk back up. Somewhere in there, I stopped noticing his softness and forgot where I was and who I was with. I thought about the hair on his stomach going round and round, until I gripped the sheets, made one last circle, and fell on him.

"Did you come?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, and I had. "Your turn?"

"No," he said.

"You're sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," he said.

I shook my head to show I thought what he'd said was funny, but then I realized he couldn't see me. I pushed off him and lay on my back. He got up and went to the bathroom to flush the rubber, and when he came back, he got dressed in a hurry. I must have fallen asleep because when I awoke, it was ten in the morning, and I was alone.

At first, I was sure that Jay had left mad because he didn't get off, embarrassed he went soft. For a few minutes, I tried to convince myself,

but that didn't feel right. I started thinking and could come to no other conclusion than the fact that he'd actually been sincere. He was in love, and I didn't know what I was.

I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach, so I went out to the back porch for a smoke. I mean, how often do you meet someone you can really confide in? How could I salvage the friendship, or myself? I could hear a cricket in the bark near my feet, and all I could think was to grab for it, to capture it. I pulled a clump of bark into my cupped hand, and the song of the cricket stopped. I was sure I had him. A moment passed, and I felt no movement, so I held my unopened fist in front of my eyes and prepared to open my hand and see the creature, playing dead and ready to leap. I opened my hand, but found only a few wood chips and some dirt. Across the yard, a cricket began a song, taunting me with his honest voice, as solemn as my own.

That day at work, I took my first lunch order and went to the bar. I had forgotten that this was Tom's first day. He was a young guy with no experience, and not bad looking.

"Vodka tonic, light ice," I said, Tom shadowing me. After some fumbling, Jay got it out. I wanted to take Jay in the back and sit him down and tell him how I felt, but a jumble of uncertainty, immaturity and pride kept me quiet. I was glad Tom was there. He kept me from spilling my guts. If he hadn't have been there, I would have surely embarrassed

myself, and I was no risk taker. I would have taken Jay aside and told him how I loved him and that I didn't care if the world thought I was crazy for loving him, but the truth was that I needed to be seen with someone beautiful. The truth was that it would be weeks before I could only crudely relate to Jay that I couldn't be with him. It would be another year before I would realize that I needed to leave Jerry.

When the lunch crowd was gone, I began to tell Tom about the place. I told him how this job he'd landed wasn't even half as bad as the place I started at. I told him how I had to lie to get that job—I'd said I knew about cash caddies and how to make change, said I'd bussed tables since I was ten. I told him to sponge out all the ashtrays and restock the fruit. I told him about the breakage sheet.

After he was settled in, Tom leaned forward, put his elbows on the bar, and propped his head up with his fists. His face bunched up and made him look a little older. I went to the vending machine and dropped in a pocket of quarters. Walking back toward the bar, I packed my smokes on my wrist. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and got weak. This had been my life, my life as a waitress. Across the room, I saw Jay and Tom. They sat and smoked and laughed, waiting for the dinner rush.

## LIVING BY THE WAYSIDE

Raymond's scent had gotten into the sheets; his breath and hair and skin had filled them with a smell that Sasha could no longer stand, sweet but bland, textured like husks, common. That Sunday she sat up in bed, in the brisk white light, and knew Raymond must go, and though she had known for some time, she could not articulate why it was now that it had to end. The urge to demand he leave had built like a wave, deep and swirling, and she could no longer keep her words from breaking and spilling into the stale air.

"Raymond," she said in the even tone she used when she wanted distance, knowing his gray head was tucked perfectly into his pillow, "Get your things. You can have the dishwasher."

She hung her feet off the bed and faced the wall, extending her arms toward the sky. It was no surprise to Sasha, when she glanced back, that he was nodding complacently, his lips relaxed, eyes forward. Her demand was like a reminder—Raymond seemed to accept it as he might a request to take out the trash. Floating away from the bed, she took her robe from a hook on the door and pressed out of the room, already asking herself when or if he would come back. She was relieved, though, when she stood in the hall. It felt so cavernous, unending.



Standing in the hallway, she admired, as she often did, a charcoal drawing of a white-gowned young girl on a beach, grass pushing up the sides of the frame like porcupine quills. She saw herself in the portrait, alone again in the world, an innocent child traipsing down a sandy trail, abandoned on a stark landscape, yet somehow invulnerable, like an angel.

Sasha had come upon the portrait one day last summer in a cramped corner of an antique store, and though she had fallen in love with it, she had slipped it back into the stack of old artwork and swiftly rejoined Raymond, who was browsing through a basket of buttons. When he asked if she had found anything, Sasha looked down, feeling a gloss of tears. She wanted it so badly that she was almost ashamed. What would he think of her, a woman identifying with a child? Would he see the girl in the portrait as she did, solitary, powerful? Then she felt a rising independence, like a breath coming up from her lungs. She didn't care. She had to have it. At the register, Raymond paid while Sasha, smiling, held his arm. It was now time to be alone and strong, she thought, as she stared into the portrait.



When Raymond left, carefully stepping over one of the foot-tall rose bushes he had planted last spring, as he maneuvered the portable washer they had purchased together to his hatchback, he gave an almost courteous half-wave from the driveway. His coat was wrinkled, and his

jeans too tight, but Sasha, thinking how average he looked, winked at him anyway, like he was an old friend leaving after a long visit.

“I’ll call you,” he yelled.

Without another thought, she pivoted and returned to her cup of tea. In the white kitchen, she sipped Earl Grey with cream as if it were a precious cordial, holding her china cup daintily with both hands, swirling the liquid every now and then, and rolling her head self-consciously; she moved precisely, cat-like, as if she were being watched. She would call Harold.



There had been problems between Raymond and Sasha since her forty-eighth birthday, almost a year before, but Sasha knew her business trip to the lake had changed her somehow, had made everything come to the surface. It had been a three-day conference, the first since the Builder’s Association refused to cover the travel expenses of partners.

They had been to several conferences together, spent every moment that Sasha wasn’t working ordering room service and watching cable, occasionally sneaking to the spa around midnight. It would be quiet in the hotel lobby near the recreation area, and Raymond would make a scene, both embarrassing and amusing to Sasha. He would act ridiculously, pulling his trunks up high and waving his arms, at the same time slapping his feet like flippers on the wet cement, and Sasha would sink to her neck in the hot tub, peeking at him from under her hand.

Raymond had told Sasha he could work on the database he'd promised a client and that it was fine for her to go alone. It was their first separation since they'd met five years before.

When Sasha had arrived at the conference that Friday night and reached the green-toned room seven floors up, a suite with a wall-mounted TV and pictures screwed right into the wall through their frames, she dropped her travel bag in the center of the round table, scattering the coffee-stained brochures she would look at, but not use: Candlelight Cruise for two at Lake McCall, Winter Beer-Tasting Festival, a room service menu, table tent with movie listings. On one trip, they had planned to take that cruise, but Sasha had felt a cold coming on, and suggested they cancel. Now, she did not even put her toothbrush by the sink, or pull the drapes, before she called home.

The phone rang eight times and she began to feel sure Raymond was not there. He was probably with Bill, a friend of his, a man who hunted pheasants and cheated on his wife. But then Raymond picked up.

"Yeah," Raymond said, his voice scratchy.

"You sleeping?"

"Yeah," he said, clearing his throat. "Make it in okay?"

"I suppose so." Sasha pulled off one shoe at a time, and set the pair on the dresser.

“Have a cup of tea or something, and get some rest. Big day ahead.”

“Are you in the bedroom or the living room?”

“Couch. I have to get to bed. I can hardly keep my eyes open.” He let out a light laugh, meant to soften his abruptness.

Though she felt his impatience, she silently held the phone to her ear and sat down on the stiff floral comforter, staring at her reflection in the mirror over the dresser, running a hand across the starched material. She did not look her age. Every three weeks she colored her hair with extra light chocolate frost number three, and each evening she smoothed her face with a papaya enzyme mask. She ran her fingers through her hair, and situated her bangs with her pinkie. Her blazer pulled against her ribcage, so she unbuttoned it. Raymond was silent, probably nodding off.

Sasha sighed. “What’d you have for dinner?”

“You knew I was going to have spaghetti. Can we talk tomorrow?”

“Ray, I’m by myself.”

“I only slept four hours last night, Sasha. Fixed the network for that produce business, you know.”

This, she would later decide, was what had split them up, or it was at least a good part of it. Raymond could not understand her silence, her pauses, her questions that begged for a few more words; he did not know that she wanted to talk all night, like they did when they first met. Even if

he did, she wasn't sure it would make a difference. The days of discovery were over.

Sasha spiraled a finger around the translucent switch in the phone receiver's cradle, continuing to stare at her reflection, listening to the whir of the air conditioning, the hum of hotel lighting. He was tired, yes. He worked hard. He did. But she did not want him to sleep, not yet. With a quick slip of her finger she tapped the lit-up plastic, making it go dark for a second, and listened to see if she had actually cut him off; for a moment she wished he would still be there, aware that she had threatened to leave him, to end the call on her terms. Going to bed angry, she knew, was the last thing he wanted, but it would make him think of her, force him to wonder what she had wanted. Then the dial tone came. Although she wished Raymond would find the phone number and call her back, she knew he would not. She lay her head on the too-thin pillow, her hair fanning out before her open eyes.



That was the night before she met Harold, Sasha remembered now, staring into the reflection within her teacup, calculating how far she could tip the cup without spilling the contents. "He was so outgoing," she said out loud to no one.

Sasha had met Harold at the Saturday conference, the midsummer meeting when the top executives, not including the President because he

was orchestrating a traveling home and garden show, lay down the state's new guidelines for rural land acquisitions. Harold had been taking notes for Tim Fitmore, the CEO, and making sure the proceedings were progressing according to plan: pulling out chairs, opening doors, and requesting fresh pitchers of water and hot coffee from the Hospitality Manager, who appeared pleased to oblige. Sasha watched Harold maneuver the room, a high-ceilinged rented hall that held five hundred. She admired the seriousness with which he engaged in these menial tasks. He was tall and powerful looking, but busy, always on his way to do something. He seemed like the perfect person to ask how much time there would be before the next speaker. Raymond deserved a phone call, an apology, and she wanted to make sure he would be there later when she called.

When Sasha, standing by the podium in front of a thicket of foldout chairs, tapped Harold on the shoulder, he turned toward her with a graceful swing of both arms.

"How long before we commence?" she asked.

He smiled, revealing a spinach-covered tooth, looking like he had already forgotten her question. Sasha motioned to her own tooth, scratching it and nodding.

"About five minutes. Thanks," he said, brushing a finger over his front teeth. "You have time to get a drink if you want."

The wrinkles around his eyes were not unattractive. She was thirsty, suddenly, and took the pitcher from the table beside them and poured herself a glass of water. She drank half of it, refilled it and took another sip, more slowly and thoughtfully than before.

"Cookie?" asked Harold. "No," he said, his eyes almost imperceptibly scanning her figure, "I bet you go to the gym."

"Actually, no, I mean, I walk. No real exercise. But I try to take care of myself." She bit the inside of her cheek lightly, then found herself surrounded by several high-ranking executives: Hal Bontly, Senior Executive, whose wife had left him for Jim Freeman in accounting; William Siege, Conference Coordinator, the one who wrote the check for these events, and Vicki Stevens, the extremely young Vice President. Even though they didn't appear to be paying attention, Sasha realized how it must look, a woman her age telling a smiling stranger how she kept fit. "Listen, I should go get seated," she said.

She sidestepped the group as noiselessly as possible, found her designated chair three rows back, and made herself look ready to take notes. She could not, however, remain anonymous. This was clear to her when she again directed her attention to the group assembled near the podium and Harold nodded directly at her. She had never noticed him before, but now he seemed like someone who would be impossible to miss, a kind man amid so many too-busy men. She felt herself nod back, smiling

as she hadn't all day. She moved her gaze from Harold to the speaker and back.

What was Raymond doing right at that moment? Maybe he was at that fifties- style hamburger place with the checkered floor she hated. Probably he was somewhere he couldn't normally go with her, with that idiot, Bill.



That evening at the coat check, Sasha imagined Raymond under a blanket lengthwise on the couch, watching a nature show, perhaps a glass of milk beside him. She planned to call as soon as she got to her room.

"I'm sorry," said Harold, appearing beside her. "I didn't catch your name earlier."

"Sasha. But I have to go."

He put his hands on the counter, not looking at her. "I understand—you must be married."

A young man handed Sasha her coat, took Harold's plastic ticket, and disappeared behind a divider.

She couldn't just walk away, with him ignoring her as he was. Instead, she asked, "Why do you have to assume so much?" When he did not respond right away, she put her hand on his shoulder and turned him to face her. Touching him, she felt a surge of energy, a guilty thrill, like electricity in her veins.



"I've offended you?" he asked.

She spoke more loudly. "I live with a man; his name is Raymond."

She noticed, again, Harold's hazel eyes, the wrinkles around them pleasant, feathery.

Harold's overcoat appeared on the counter, the man who held it smiling as if he had heard many conversations like theirs.

"I was only asking your name because I don't know too many people yet." He gave a blank look and a five-dollar bill to the clerk, holding his palm up for him to keep the change. "Tom got me hired on permanent last week, and said I should see how these things work."

He was so informal, so at ease with himself. She could not help her attraction to him. Perhaps it was the slight curve of his nose, the knowing tilt of his head, which drew her to him. "Well, usually a few people gather in the cocktail lounge afterwards."

"Could we get a drink?" he asked.

"I was planning to go upstairs. Besides, I don't even know your name." If he asked again, she would have just one drink with him.

Otherwise, she would go to her room.

"Harold."

"Well, Harold, I'm afraid I'll have to pass."

He reached into his coat pocket and held out a business card.

"Take this at least. You know how hard it is to meet people at our age?"

She plucked the card from his hand and slid it into her pocket, uneasy with his assumption about her age, but satisfied that he was interested.

Alone in the elevator, Sasha ran a hand through her hair, but let her reflection, a disfigured shape in the polished steel, remain a blur. Normally, she would straighten her clothes, or smooth the makeup under her eyes, but this time she ignored the urges. This time, she did not need to look.



The night before Sasha told him to leave, she and Raymond had sat at opposite ends of the couch, under a blanket. A detective movie with a lot of shapely women in it, women that Raymond had to think were beautiful, was on cable. Sasha watched Raymond watch the TV, and when he didn't look over or say anything, she pushed her heel up against his ribcage.

"What, Sasha?"

"You think I'm still beautiful?" she asked, prepared for his reaction.

"Sasha, why—why do you always have to ask? You *know* what I think."

And she did know, but it wasn't enough. "Jesus, Raymond, couldn't you just give me a straight answer. You're more interested in the women on TV than in me."

"That's it. I'm going to bed," said Raymond. He stood up, carefully, so he did not pull the blanket away, and left the room. Sasha pressed her face into the material, breathing deeply, imagining that she could detect the thickness of old tears and skin and mucus. It comforted her.



Sasha leaned into the phone receiver, talking loudly. "Do you have a pen? Okay. Turn right on Hawthorne, and go over the railroad tracks. Go about two blocks until you come to a twenty mile an hour sign." She waited. "Got that? Okay, turn into the driveway to your right and follow it around. I'm the last townhouse in the back, the yellow one. It's the one with rose bushes out front."

A breeze washed over her, the dry dirt-and-wood smell of ivy mingled in it, as Sasha watched out the window for Harold. How pleasant it would be to talk with someone who knew so little about her. She remembered the security she felt when she first met Raymond, the safety in knowing he did not know what she was thinking. Now, deep in her stomach, she felt a liquid sensation, waves of pleasant uncertainty like tiny almost undetectable muscle spasms.

When Harold arrived, Sasha was still in her white, floor-length robe, though she thought little of it. He sat across from her.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," she said. "Coffee?"

“No, I get shaky. Tea?”

Sasha went to the stove, the kettle already on the burner, and turned it on. Harold propped himself against the refrigerator. His eyes were so green today, different than before.

He put his hand out and Sasha felt herself take it. Before she knew what is happening, Harold’s arms were around her, his lips on hers, light as air. She closed her eyes and became the dreamy young girl in the portrait, the sand underfoot, wind teasing her hair. Lost. Not abandoned, as the girl in the drawing seemed to have been. The sound of the screaming teakettle became a lighthouse wail, a beacon for far-off ships, and the steam seaspray. It was a journey in a world of grays. She was surrounded by whipping quills, spiny cutting wands slapping her, but soothing her, swirling around her, endlessly. For a moment, it was freedom; for a moment, it was . . . immortality . . .

## PEACE OF MIND

We're all at the church, Bill, Charlotte, and I. Actually, it's Pastor Michael's house, a spacious room with the TV pushed out of the way and lots of chairs facing a podium, but we all think of it as the church. Pastor Michael is talking his head off today, standing in front of those sliding glass doors like an angel. A few years ago, the Pastor left the real church and started his own—he's just that way, very independent. When Pastor Bob told us, I gripped Bill's hand, and sat with my back stiff against the pew, imagining Pastor Michael all the way across town, swinging his arms, voice blossoming, giving the best sermon our town had ever heard, without me to bear witness. I have to admit I love that man, though he hasn't spent any time with me since I was in pumps. Since then he ain't changed much, and come to think of it, neither have I.

Charlotte come into town two days ago so's she can see her father through his surgery. My poor Bill has an awful lump on his nose; cancer, they say. We haven't seen Charlie for ages. What she does for a living puts me to shame. Oh, it makes me ill to think it, sickens me worse to say it. Our girl's a stripper out west. Charlotte left us as soon as she learned to drive.

This morning I woke up and knew this was my chance to get these two out of their funks. I told Bill and Charlotte, "You two get yourselves up

and into the car. Charlotte, your daddy needs our prayers—cancer ain't something's cured over night, and you, well you're another story.”

I am full of hope this morning, first morning in some time. Usually when Charlotte comes, I'm tied up in knots, but today's different somehow. I got a good feeling. Our family's just like a reservoir at the beginning of spring, we've been filling and filling with sin, spreading out further and further, and something has to give—something has to change soon, else the dam will break. We've kept on for so long just nodding and saying things are okay, but I'm about to drown, this water is so murky.

Bill will get better, I know it.

They'll all see. Charlotte will come around.

Pastor Michael will make Charlie sorry for her prancing naked as the day she was born, make Bill take action and demand God make his surgery a success, make me come to terms with these two and all I done. Sure, I been ashamed of my family for years, Bill going nowhere and Charlotte shedding her clothes to get somewhere, but besides that there's something I been trying to say.

I'm still hopeful. We're all here, after all! Charlotte squirms a little in her chair, but Bill sits like a rock, the words pouring out of Pastor Michael. Boy, is he sharing the word today! I think he just said Bill's name.

“Give that man your prayers,” says Pastor Michael, “he and his family too. Let the Lord hear your praise to heal Bill, our brother, and make their family whole again.”

There he goes, Pastor Michael; he’s been in our town since he and his momma was passing through and she up and died, some fifty years ago. He’s been helpful to us, one and all. For instance, a month ago, when I asked his help for an add-on, a bathroom in the downstairs part of the house—my mother could have really used it her last years—Pastor Michael offered up his services quick as lightning. Bill was against it, but I asked him over on our way out of church without a second thought. The Pastor come over not knowing what was going on, ’cept I asked his company, so the three of us sat quiet on the porch with our lemonade. Though it’s been forty years that we known each other, we hadn’t all sat together like that since we were teens on the bleachers in high school, long before I was carrying Charlotte.

It was a dry day, windy, and the sun was coming over our high back fence, my roses waving back and forth, just closing for the night. I waited for Bill to ask, but after sipping two glasses, he’d said nothing. It was starting to get dark so’s I couldn’t hardly see the fence anymore, which put me in a frame of mind to come right out and ask it.

“After Bill’s surgery, he won’t be able to get down the stairs much, won’t be doing much of anything.”

"Josephine, Honey, I'll do what I can," Pastor Michael said.

Well, Bill, my husband—can you believe we've been married nearly forty years? He sat there quiet as a tree stump, so I kept on. "Doctor says we need a bathroom downstairs, so's Bill can stay in the guest room and get to things."

"You ever find the remote, Josephine?" That was Bill's attempt to look a gift horse in the mouth. He never wants help, wants to do it all on his own, hangs on to his pride like it's the last thing he's got.

"Just you let Michael get his answer out. Will you?"

Then Michael spoke up, firecracker that he is. "Sure, I'll get your bathroom done." No surprise to me, but Bill's mouth gaped. The Pastor took his last gulp of lemonade and said, "We can get it going tomorrow."

"Can't afford no supplies," Bill said.

I gave Bill a nasty glance, the loafer—he ain't earned a penny in ten years, except Social Security, hasn't had a good thing to say in five.

"Pastor Michael," I said, "We could sure use your help on this one."

"I got money, not plenty, but some. I probably owe you," Michael said and winked at me. "When's the operation, Bill?"

"A little over a month," I told him. "He's about useless till then, and after, he won't be worth much either."

Bill sat up straight as if he knew I was about to call him on his terrible posture.



"It's settled then," Pastor Michael said, and stretched his arms toward the Almighty.

He was a tall man, even sitting down, and at that moment, he looked like an angel from heaven—glowing "I'll help you" in a language not of this Earth. He smiled surely, and spoke with a calm that made you think he knew something no one else alive did, just like an old bearded Jesus. I could have swung my arms around him and called him mine, if it weren't for Bill.

After all these years, I still love Michael, Pastor Michael, that is.

Me and Michael, we agreed a long time ago to keep it our secret. Only now, Charlotte's here and I can't help but wonder if she wouldn't be dancing in those strip clubs if I told her she had a preacher for a daddy. Oh, look at those soft hands of hers and those red nails—the devil's work. It ain't easy to hold my peace knowing what I know.

All these years, it's been easy keeping the truth at bay. Bill was at the factory most all the time when Charlotte was little. When Sundays came and the three of us sat in the old church on Elm Street listening to Pastor Michael's sermons, Bill would sleep like a baby, tired from a full week of slapping tires on whatever came down his line. Trucks made him need extra sleep, I figured out. So I didn't have to worry about him seeing

the lust in my eyes—oh, how that man, how that Michael has made my heart fly.

It ain't been hard to keep people from knowing what went on, either. It only aches *me* to think it. For my first few months carrying Charlotte, there wasn't a moment it didn't linger in my mind: "What if I could be the pastor's wife?" Oh, I knew he was going somewhere, and that was important when I was young, getting someone who was ambitious, who'd take you away from all that was familiar and stale. Michael's apartment was tiny compared to the house my mother and I lived in, the house Bill and I live in now, but I remember a sense of freedom in that tiny space, a sense of wealth I still can't quite put my finger on. Michael had filled that place with a dream. He's one of those who goes through life with a purpose so big that none of the small stuff, like eating the sweetest ear of corn you ever had or brushing a child's hair, gets a moment's thought—he's above it all.

It was sheer bliss when I was with Michael in that hot, upstairs apartment. We were both above it all then. I wished so bad I was his wife, but the years have taught me that wishing for anything never does any good. No, wishing doesn't do a thing. I dropped out of school, and spent my days at home tending my mother's tulips and feeding the neighbor's cats—they loved tuna best, those sweeties, practically my babies. Those

afternoons I was alone, between the time I got pregnant and the time I came out with it, I'd clench my fists so tight my nails would cut into my palms, just wishing for my life to work itself into a nice fairy tale. Then evening would come and toss her veil over me, and instead of a prince to sweep me away, I'd get Bill. Now that I think of it, though, those were days when I woke up fresh, without the weight in my chest that only years of wishing and dwelling on the past makes.

Truth is, I never planned on getting married, never even thought about having a baby. Don't know what I was thinking except that I had a slice of heaven in my hand. Before Michael or Bill, I planned to wait forever if I had to, if that's what it took to find a man who'd worship me. All I've ever wanted is love, true love, like the kind in the grocery store novels, but Bill ain't offered it.

Charlotte's shifting in her chair—those wooden seats *are* uncomfortable. Bill and I got the couch, of course. Charlotte's wringing her hands, and Bill's looking at her as if to console her. It seems an hour's gone by and we don't have a thing to show for it. And they say church can change you! I give a smile to Charlotte, but she looks as serious as her father, Bill, I mean. He just stares straight ahead. He don't know a thing.



Love was what I thought I was getting over to Michael's. He'd tell me how I made his apartment a real home when I'd fill it with flowers and

wait for him in a negligee. All the while, I was Bill's girlfriend, but I never did such things for him, and he never said no such things to me. He was what you call reliable. In those days, a girl had to have a backup plan. You just couldn't survive on your own, not like Charlotte does.

Bill and I dated through high school, making love every other Saturday evening or so, but he'd never given me the shiver of excitement I felt with Michael. There was a quality to Michael that I thought I could come right out and take, something real and tangible, like a ball of light I could grab and hold, but I was like a raccoon who'd seen a shiny object through glass. There was no way I was going to get away with it.

Bill had never called the afternoons I was out and, as far as I could tell, had never thought a thing about my getting pregnant. He'd just held my hands in his and swore he'd give her a better life than I had. That was sweet, especially after I'd got a lot different reaction from Michael, though I didn't think my life had been so bad.

Michael, like I said, he didn't want no press. One day, after we'd made love for an hour, I told him about Charlotte—I was sure from my gut it'd be a girl and had already decided her name. I had put my yellow sundress back on, the one with the straps that kept falling off my shoulders, and gone in to watch a Jackie Gleason re-run. Michael was making iced tea in the kitchen—I could see his middle, but his head was in a cupboard. He was finding the sugar or some darned thing.

“Sweetie, let’s move out of this town and start a real life together,” I said, running a finger along the back of the couch. Oh, I tried to lay it on thick.

Michael peeked his head around the corner. “Josie, you feeling all right?”

“You know how I told you it was bound to happen.” I waited till his brows went up. “Well, it did,” I said, happily, sure my prince had come.

He started right in: “You know we can’t tell anyone. You know it’s only us can know,” and so forth.

I turned back to Jackie on the TV screen, who was clenching his fists and turning beet red. I could hear the spoon clanking around the glass and then a glass of iced tea appeared and then Michael, he put a hand on my shoulder, as if I was some dumb dog. I sat there holding that iced tea with both hands as if it was the last drop to drink on earth. I felt a queasy emptiness like I hadn’t ever felt, and then the tears started to come. I pushed them back and said to myself I was fine. I couldn’t look at Michael’s face, that beautiful, taunting face, the face that had shaken over me half an hour before, beads of sweat glistening and falling onto my own face and into my eyes—I loved giving myself to him. I only grabbed the book I’d brung over—it had a pink cover, with a firm man cradling a girl on

the front—and walked the three blocks back home, holding my belly the whole way.

When I got there, sick in the stomach and cold from my middle, I found my mother asleep on the couch, the back door smacking shut in its own little rhythm. I went out to the porch and stared at the sky, same color as raspberry tea, until the cold and the dark and the ache of loneliness forced me in. Mother was coming out of her sleep, but I was in no mood for talking. How strange it is that what I wanted more than anything—a companion, a friend—was so easy to slough off, as if I deserved to be alone in my misery. As I went up the stairs, I could see my mother sit up and squint at the wall clock. I was determined to keep her out of my business.

In my bedroom upstairs, I called Bill and told him we had to meet. All's he could say was, "But it ain't Saturday," and, "I'm beat, Josephine," which I certainly didn't want to hear when I was calling about such an intimate thing. I told him, "Get yourself over here. I got something to say," and he showed up ten minutes later. That's the thing about Bill: he listens. He came up quietly, and that was when he got all emotional on me and said he'd take good care of Charlotte. Bill was almost crying, committing to me and the baby, but I didn't have the energy.

After that, I couldn't look Michael in the eye for a good long time. I had a life coming up in me, and it was only that and the cold, hollow ache in my chest that kept me going.

Forty years now, I've been ignoring this whorling snake of a lie, but since the three of us, Bill, Charlotte, and I, came to church this morning, I've been sick inside. I tell myself it will be over soon, that Bill's surgery will be fine and before we know it, Charlotte will be on her way home, and things will be back to normal.



Barely a word has passed between any of us, and it's pushing noon. What a place this is—a too fancy living room with white carpet, chandeliers, vaulted ceilings and all. We was here early, so's we could get the best seats in the house, as usual, but now it ain't seeming so nice. In fact, I'm downright uncomfortable. Charlotte has her chair pulled up real close to Bill's side of the couch, and she's sitting on her hands. Her real father is talking on about knowing yourself, or thy self, as he says. His voice has been reaching me on and off, like coming in from the dark. My stomach aches, and I can hear the hum of electricity. My face must be flushed.

It occurs to me that the four of us haven't been in a room together since the baptism. I haven't seen my daughter in a year. I try to focus on how much I miss her, rather than on the pounding urge growing inside me to blurt out the secrets I've been holding for close to forty years.

"We all know what's important is peace of mind," Pastor Michael says, "but what does peace of mind mean to you?" He points to Edna, my hairdresser. She puts a hand over her mouth as if she cannot allow herself to answer. I hope she'll say something just to get an exchange of words going, take the spotlight off the Pastor, but she doesn't. She's particularly quiet for a hairdresser. For her, peace of mind has to be putting down the scissors after a good cut, knowing her dollar is coming.

Michael spins around and glares at our grocery clerk. "And you, Graham. Think about what it is that gets you by, what makes you sleep easy at night." Graham lets out a sigh. He's a kid in his late teens, probably the same age as Michael when we first set eyes on each other. Rumor is he's here because he stole something, and this is his community service.

Michael's line of questioning continues on and on. His sermons usually end at noon, but now it's half past, and people are getting fidgety, leaning one way then another, scratching themselves, clearing their throats.

"Now, all of you, think hard," dear Michael says, stretching an arm across the room, pointing lastly at Charlotte, his very own daughter. Everyone in the place, except Charlotte, of course, has gone up at one time or another and received the Lord. Then his voice booms, "How did *you* come to find peace of mind?"

She half-smiles and nods, a stranger in our town.



"This may be your last chance," Pastor Michael says, "for *you* to find grace."

Bill whispers to Charlotte, "I'm awful hungry, Charlotte."

"So am I, Dad. How much longer?" she says.

Bill says, "The only way to end this is for you to go up." He nudges Charlotte. "Go on up so we can all get out of here."

"We have a newcomer here," Pastor Michael says, walking toward us. "Let's hear what she has to say about this topic, the topic of peace of mind."

Charlotte stands up, and walks right past Michael, straight to the podium. Pastor Michael at first looks a bit put off but then puts on a look of approval. As soon as Charlotte starts speaking, a ray of sunshine enters the house, and it's clear to all she has a gift. She's a natural!

"Peace of mind," she says, "is loving your family, no matter how different or similar to you they are. It's knowing who you came from, where you started, and where you're going. To have peace of mind, you can't wish things were different. You have to be sure, to be absolutely certain, things are as they should be."

I put my hands to my face and feel myself start to cry. The only thing I've ever been sure about is that I love my daughter.

"Look around," she says, glowing, just like her father, like Bill, I mean. When he has something to say, he's like a flame in the dark.

"We're in a man's living room, not a church. Those are sliding glass doors, not stained glass windows. The truth is right in front of you, just waiting to be discovered."

My daughter, skinny as a rail, shaking, throws up her arms.

"Peace of mind," she says one last time, "is knowing that pain is all around you, knowing that everyone thinks you're a tramp, and throwing off all that, all those earthly chains for the sake of love, real love, selfless, open-armed, wide-eyed love, no matter where it comes from."

Tears are streaming down my face so's I can't even see. I cry and cry because only now can I see all I done and ain't done. My poor, poor husband is facing death, and what have I done to make his life better?

I feel myself drop to my knees and I ask for forgiveness. How could I lie to him all these years? How could I lie to myself? I hear Pastor Michael on the other side of the room. "She has received the Lord. Josie has given herself over."

A crowd surrounds me. I can feel them: their breath, their skin, their concern. I hold out my arms as wide as I can and feel people I don't even know putting their hands on me. I am holding myself to a shapeless group of strangers and out of all the hands, I feel Bill's on my cheek, his wrinkled, beautiful hand, and I am sure love can save us. Love can save us all.