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MIDDLE GROUND
A NOVELLA AND COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

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B.S. Illinois State University, 1989

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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2009

Major Professor: Patrick Rushin

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ABSTRACT

This collection of fiction—a novella and a collection of short stories—focuses on the commonality of the human condition. While we create separations for ourselves by focusing on distinctions such as, religion, class, gender, and race, we are, I believe, spiritual beings sharing a human experience. My work tends to explore these distinctions and our motivations for embracing them.

In the novella, *Middle Ground*, two sisters in alternating narrative voices share the story of their parents' struggles with separation, sobriety and cancer. Their voices, as distinct as their perspectives, explore the landscape of a family, the borders between forgiveness and acceptance, the self-preserving act of looking beyond imperfections and weaknesses, and the realization that truth is an illusion and flawed love the only certainty.

The short story collection consists of eight pieces. Many of these stories explore characters in a state of recovery—a brain tumor operation, a death of a spouse, a shot to the head where a bullet rests and reminds—and plot occurs as these characters attempt to move on. They meet sandhill cranes who cry out in pain for the death of another, lovers who speak in italics, vets who swear that the blasted silence is louder than King Kong screaming in your ear. They sit with shrinks who lie, sleep with poets who stray, compete with incarcerated ex-husbands who were “man enough” to put a gun to a woman’s head and pull the trigger. They are nothing—and everything—like all of us, and readers are invited to join the characters beside the mirror of our collective Middle Ground.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not begin a page of acknowledgments without mentioning my parents who instilled my love of reading, nurtured my need to write, and supported my desire to make a living at it... even as I bartended to cover the rent in the early years. I thank my husband who spent hours in the pool with the kids, so I could “get this down before it’s gone forever” and plodded through manuscripts he pretended to understand. I thank the funny, smart women in my life who offered babysitting, dinners and bottles of wine as I attempted to finish this coursework while working part-time and raising three small boys full-time. And I thank my “writer friends,” a select group that gently reads my work and fiercely supports my art: Hunter Smith, Karen Lehman, Mary Ellen Gallagher, Paul Miller, and newcomers Mark Pursell and Jessica Ryan. What can I say? With all the literary options you have—and your own active writing lives—you still volunteer to read my work in all its flawed and fragile stages. Bless you.

And, that said, this collection of work would never have existed—in any form—without the creative writing faculty at the University of Central Florida. I walked into my first class at UCF, pushing forty and clutching a manuscript about my kids, of all things, and Lisa Roney first found a glimmer in my ramblings and then made UCF a home for me. Without her encouragement, I might not have continued the program and I would have missed working with Susan Hubbard who told me to be dark (even as she insisted I was “ready”), Jeanne Leiby who gave me opportunities to edit and pointed out my writing tics (who knew I used “would” forty-seven times in one page?), Jocelyn

Bartkevicius who encouraged me to “dig deeper” (without her *Crazy Talk* would never have made it out of my memory), Toni Jensen who graciously added one more thing to her newcomer plate, and Pat Rushin, of course, who read a chapter of my novella over a weekend and willingly took on the direction of this beast of a thesis from a stressed-out, would-be writer he’d never formally met. Your belief in my work—your openness to all my weird stuff and your intuitive ability to “get” it —has allowed me to consider myself a fiction writer. (And although I’ve been writing stories for thirty-five years, this is the closest I’ve come to trusting the title. Thank you, Pat.)

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WHAT WE TELL

Early April

This is what we don't tell your mother: everything bores you now. Sex at home, between the sheets, even with candles and wine and some complicated move, it doesn't matter. You don't want it. It has to be in an elevator or under a table in a restaurant or behind the A & P, especially if that checker you flirt with is working second shift and sliding cans of peas and creamed corn across the sensor as you push into me, each thrust, I imagine, in perfect sync with the beep, beep of her register.

And we don't tell your mom, Elaine—a tired, worried woman who worked three jobs most of her life so you and your sister could go to college, get out of South Chicago, “Let somebody call *you* boss, can you do that for me?”—that you haven't been to work in three weeks. You are absent, but you are not “missing” work (ha, ha). “Who gives a shit about software design?” you snort, and shake your head as if you never described your job as a puzzle with pieces that swell and whirl as they come together.

No, now you are watching *Spongebob* and you are finding it funny. You are going for long walks and coming back smelling like places and people I don't know. You are smoking, peeing in alleys and leaving large tips at coffee shops that make you serve yourself. You are biting me, on the neck, the shoulder, the inside of my thigh, even my breast—yes, just once, and, yes, you were drunk, but, damn it, Isaac, my *breast?*—and you are leaving red dotted ovals each time and calling them accidents.

This is what we do tell your mother: the cancer is back, yes, but we are hopeful. Both of us. You are going to beat this. Again. You are having surgery this week to remove the tumors and then your doctors—your team—will implement your treatment plan, an “aggressive” mix of chemo with radiation.

“It might not be as bad this time, Elaine, really,” I say. “There are all those new anti-nausea drugs. Maybe you’ve seen those ads on TV?”

And later, when you walk out of the home you grew up in, the door still open, but the discussion over—I guess you’ll meet me by the car?—I tell the top of her head that rests in her palms, “Don’t cry, Elaine. It’s not as bad as it sounds.”

The middle of May

This is what we don’t tell my dad: he was right. “Isaac will never take care of you,” my dad said the night he met you. “Look at him, Morgan, an hour late and there he is in the kitchen with your brother, holding a beer and you without a drink. Is this what you want for your life?”

I shook my head, “Dad, *please*. I don’t need someone to ‘take care’ of me. I can get my own drink and, besides, he had to go into work this morning and you know it’s a four hour drive to our farm.” And my dad wasn’t being fair, not then. You were only a little selfish Before. You are a city boy and certain allowances have to be made, that’s what my mother would have said if she had met you before she died.

I would have argued with her—“What do you know? You haven’t even lived in a *town* for thirty years”—but she would have noticed how the room changed as soon as you walked into it. She would have pulled me into the kitchen, hardly bothering to whisper,

“That boy grew up poor and pissed off, didn’t he, Morgan? And he’s still got a shit-eating grin and a chip on his shoulder the size of a two by four.”

But during supper, after she winced at your hard Chicago consonants, she would have nodded at the way you study your steak and sigh after the first and the last bite. She would have passed you more potatoes, gravy, biscuits and greens—“Lord, he’s hungry, Morgan”—and poured you some milk. She would have asked you to play cards, her idea of a dare, and she would have laughed at your fall to the floor, a hand on your chest, a fatal wound caused by her, always the sore loser, who would have called you a cheater, a con man. And later in the kitchen, she would have said to me as she wiped the backs of her sudsy hands on her jeans, “Well, you’ll never be bored... and, honey, that’s not all bad.”

She would have hugged you when we left. She would have stretched to reach your neck, her calloused palm rubbing your shoulder blade, and no one would have noticed the way my dad stepped around you to kiss me good-bye, saying just a little too loudly, “Now that you’re done with school, there’s no need to stay up there in Chicago.” And then, by the car, when you didn’t open the door for me, it never would have even occurred to you, “Plenty of folks need accountants down here, too, Morgan.”

You say my dad never gave you a chance, but you were always selfish, Isaac, even at the beginning. You were the first to take the biggest slice, the first to moan, the first to spend whatever we had left at the end of the month, you must see that all of that is true. But after you had your fill—and you did fill then, you brimmed even—you saw me. You did. And I was never as hungry as you were, anyway.

But now, you have cancer, the ultimate get-out-of-jail-free card. Everything you do is fine. Everything is all right. You are coping. You are struggling. You are allowed to be unsure, angry, vicious even. You are allowed to throw up all over the sheets and yell that the room stinks, why the hell can't I open some windows, let in a breeze from the lake, isn't that why we're paying so much rent every month in this goddamn "windy" city? You are allowed to tell me you're not going to chemo, not today, not tomorrow, and when I go to your A & P on the third day of your missed appointment, you are allowed to leave the apartment without a note. You are allowed to be gone for three days and two nights, do you realize that's how long it's been? You are allowed to turn off your cell phone and withdraw seven hundred dollars from our checking account. You need to put yourself first, right, Isaac? Get your head together. It's important to your survival, it *is*.

This is what I do tell my dad: "Isaac's fine, really. Me? Oh, well, I'm working from home now. Yeah, it is very decent of them, but you know, tax season's over. Well, now I can drive Isaac to appointments and keep his meds straight. Everything is going well, better than can be expected. Everything is fine. Really." And then, "Yes, Dad, I'm sure."

This is what your old friends tell me, high school buddies you haven't seen in years, the ones you called when the cancer first came back and you weren't "missing" work: No, they haven't seen you, you weren't just there, you're not drunk, you're definitely not *high*. "But, Morgan, isn't pot legal with chemo?" and then "Well, is he just taking a break from treatment? He's going back, right?" and "Oh, so it's kind of like an emergency, huh?" Well, wait, maybe they *did* see you, was it Tuesday? But definitely not

with some girl, where did I get that? No, you were absolutely alone, just having a beer, all by yourself, no one had a hand on your thigh, definitely no one with red hair and a chip in her front tooth. There were no trips to the bathroom, the car, the back of the A & P. No, absolutely not. But now that I mention it, you *were* talking to someone—well, sure, maybe it was a woman, but no one you were interested in, not in *that* way—and you said you wanted to go sky-diving. And maybe she said she knew a pilot in Santa Fe—a place everyone needs to see before they die, oh, sorry, Morgan, well...—and maybe you mentioned taking off right then, fuck it all, why not, just go, hell, we could *all* die tomorrow and, now, your friends, they're sure this doesn't mean anything, it was probably your beer talking, but, well, you *could* be in Santa Fe.

This is what you tell me when you come home eight days later and stand with your back to our apartment window, the same space where you stood every morning. Before, your eyes once on the somewhat-distant horizon of Lake Michigan, your chin skimming the trash in the streets and sweeping past the crumbling warehouses, your fingers on the pane tapping toward the coffee shop where we first met: You are not doing chemo anymore. Radiation, okay. Chemo, no. And don't I realize, don't I fucking get it, that dying from all the goddamn poison they pump through your body in chemo is *more* likely than dying from the fucking cancer? Don't I listen? Don't I read all those goddamn consent forms? Whatever. End of discussion. We're trying it your way. It's *quality* of life. Don't I get it? It's *quality*. Not quantity.

What my best friend Stacy tells me two days after you've been home wearing a chemo-free cologne that reeks of Santa Fe and sky diving: "Herpes is making a comeback. AIDS isn't the only thing to worry about."

What I tell Stacy: "It's quality of life. Not quantity." But you know what, Isaac? She didn't get it.

The end of June

This is what I don't tell Mark, a man you don't know even though you pass him in the radiation waiting room at least three times a week while he sits beside me and mediates for his mother's "return to wellness": You are not as rude as you seem. You didn't mean what he overheard last Thursday—"Maybe if it's not too much goddamn trouble, you could get your perfect-blood-count ass out of that chair and bring around the fucking car"—and that you never talked that way to me Before. I am not the kind of woman who would have allowed that. I am the type to leave you in a parking lot, to ignore my cell, to go home and pour a glass of wine and hope that it rains and you can't find a cab.

But that day, I drove you home, your bald head against the cool of the window. I asked you if you were all right, if you needed me to stop, if I could run in somewhere and get you something, anything, and that is who I am now, Isaac, a woman with bite marks who brings around the car.

Yes, without the chemo you are feeling pretty well, even the mornings after radiation. You are well enough to guilt me into sex in dirty toilet stalls with a murmur of "Life's short, Morgan." You are well enough to call your bites "kisses," your rage

“passion.” You are well enough to believe that you are beating that cancer’s ass again, but we are both becoming weaker.

This is what I do tell Mark, just today while I waited for you behind the lead walls: I keep dreaming of rats. At first it’s just one, in the corner of our bedroom. I scream and back into the closet. I turn and look for your baseball bat, just for a second, a millisecond, and when I turn back, the floor, the bed, the quilt my mother made, the nightstand, the books by my side of the bed, even your guitar is covered with rats. The room is swimming with them. I scream and shake and I wake you, but you are the one sweating. You are the one who breathes out hard in a strangled cough. You are the one with the body full of cells that don’t know their place, that silently split as they slither through your body and seep into your skin that rubs against mine.

Oh, one more thing I tell Mark, but not you, not yet: “Yes, it would be nice to go out for coffee sometime.”

The first week of September

This is what your sister tells you, after driving into the city from Schaumburg, a two-hour drive with traffic the way it is: “I brought you some soup. It’s chicken and noodles or, I don’t know, I guess you could call them dumplings. Anyway, it’s *hearty*, but not heavy, you know what I mean? It hits the spot when the kids don’t feel good. Can I get you anything else? Anything? No? Well. Oh, I know what I was going to tell you,

did you see that special on *Prime Time*? The one about bone transplants? No, not bone marrow, just bones. But, speaking of which, have you considered that? Bone marrow, I mean. I don't know if bone transplants are, you know, ready yet. Oh, well, jeez, cancer's complicated, isn't it? On TV, they make it sound like a little bone marrow works for everybody, if you can find a match and you know, Isaac—I pray to *God* you know—that *any* of us, me, Tom, even the kids, they're old enough now, *any* of us would stick out our arms and have them suck right out whatever you needed. You know that, don't you? Oh, well, right, you mentioned that bone marrow wouldn't work, but I was just saying... Anyway. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to order you that transcript from *Prime Time*, the one about the bone transplant, not the marrow. You can do that, you know, just order it online. What the heck, right? Maybe take a look at it, show it to your doctor. Who knows? It can't hurt, right?"

Right before Halloween

This is what Mark tells me the first time he and I kiss: You wouldn't mind, not if you could step back and see yourself, see that the cancer is feasting on your spirit and not just your body. You would want me to be happy. You would want me to feel love. Some part of you, some part of you that knows, that can truly *feel* that our spirits are eternal and our bodies temporary, that part of you, that child of God within you, would welcome any comfort I could find. He *knows* that to be true, Isaac. Our Collective Spirit, our Oneness with God, all of us, everywhere throughout our Human Family, it's the one thing Mark knows to be true. He can feel it. He can breathe it. It is his One Truth. And if you would let yourself, if you would *free* yourself, you would find your own comfort and you would

see me and everyone else as part of you, Divine Spirits to be honored and cherished and released when the time comes. If you could see within, you would know that to be true.

You would welcome whatever I needed. You *would*.

This is what I tell Mark: “I don’t think so.”

This is what I don’t tell Mark: If he had not been kissing me, you would have been impressed. That guy is *good*, you would have said, if we were watching some movie I had picked out. And you would have laughed at the woman who believed, who felt it to be true, or who wanted it to be true, anyway, and you would have said to the screen, “*Please*, he’s just trying to get into your pants,” and to me, “How can anyone believe a person who only talks in caps?”

After Thanksgiving

This is what your doctors tell us, after the radiation “cycle,” after the full-body scan, after your mother leaves: The radiation hasn’t cured anything, but it has slowed the cancer down. Yes, it’s in your lymph nodes and, no, that’s not what they were hoping for, not at all, but you *have* bought some time and who knows? Miracles *do* happen; doctors are surprised every day. There are no absolutes in science. Well, *few* absolutes, anyway. But you might want to get your affairs in order while you’re still feeling well enough to do so.

One week later

This is what I don’t tell Mark when he takes off my clothes for the first time, easing my shirt over my shoulders, my hands above my head in a stiff surrender to

something I can't name: I am thinking of you and those white-white briefs you wore the spring we met. I am feeling your arms, your chest, your back, all of you, all of your skin, brown and warm and not even a bit afraid. I am remembering our first time, how I took off my shirt, one button after another, how I flashed my own shit-eating grin when you held your breath as I unbuttoned my bra. I didn't try to hide my skin, my heartbeat, my perfect-blood-count self. I just pulled your head to my chest. Let you breathe in all of me. Then with my nose on top of your head, my hands in your hair, oh, God, Isaac, your *hair*, I began to laugh and laugh, do you remember that? I couldn't stop and couldn't talk, not even when you laughed a little, too. Not even after you, finally annoyed, said, "Good God, Morgan, what the hell is so funny?"—even then I laughed huge tears and gulps, like the joke was all on me. Like I never saw it coming.

This is what I do tell Mark when he kisses your bite marks and whispers to the dotted lines, his own teeth hard against his lips, "Jesus Christ, Morgan. *Jesus*": "No, Mark. Don't. Not there."

Two weeks before Christmas

This is what Stacy tells me you said today when you called her cell phone: You couldn't reach me and weren't we having lunch? You could have sworn that's what I told you when I left, the snow just beginning to pile up on the sidewalk. Well, never mind, it's just that you were a little worried, after all, it's almost four now and, well, suddenly, you wanted strawberry ice cream, just like that. Your mom used to make it every Fourth of July, it was a real treat when you were a kid, and well, you told Stacy, the day smelled

like strawberries. Hell, you know that's crazy. It's Chicago and freezing, you should be having hot chocolate, right? Maybe with some brandy? But well, you just thought maybe I could pick up some strawberry ice cream on the way home from lunch. With her. But never mind. Stacy is probably right. I must be doing a little surprise Christmas shopping.

This is what Stacy tells me before I hang up: "Herpes is making a comeback. AIDS isn't the only thing to worry about." And then, "*Do* you want to have lunch?"

This is what I would tell you if you could hear me over the cancer's silence: Last week, I saw you reach for your notebook, the skinny pad you've always kept tucked in your jeans, the place you scribbled notes with symbols and shortcuts I could never understand. I used to call you Professor Gadget and you would grin and tap your temple. "You are in the company of a genius, Morgan," you would say, your pen flying across the page, your fleeting concept caught fast, its expiration date erased.

But last week, as you reached for your notebook, your hand stopped above your pocket, remembering it's an empty space. You don't carry notebooks with you anymore. You don't file them in the nightstand by our bed. You don't flip through them or scramble to grab one when you wake with a dream still static in the space between us.

Sometimes I think that it would be all right—the bitterness, the bites, the long stretches where we can only see who we are now instead of who we used to be—if that notebook was tucked in your pocket, your guitar free of dust, your shit-eating grin still aimed at me.

Christmas Eve

You don't tell me anything when I open the door to leave Mark's apartment and find you standing in the hall, your coat loose around your shoulders, your I-quit-chemo-so-why-the-hell-won't-my-hair-grow-back? skull damp from sweat or maybe it started snowing again? You don't tell me that you followed me, that a part of you knew where I was going and where we'd end up. You don't call me names—bitch, whore, slut, who knows?—there are so many to pick from when your wife's cheek is rubbed pink, her "I'll see you after Christmas" still hanging in the air, her lover's hand loose around her waist as if it's earned a space there. You don't tell me what you thought about while I was behind the blue walls of Mark's bedroom, how you must have stood there for over an hour, each moment filled with sex that lasted longer than standing up in a restroom stall ever could. You don't tell me why you didn't knock or shout or kick the door. You just look at me, a hard blink, and you don't ask me why.

But later, after Mark lets you hit him, your fist at his chin, his own hands at his side, after you bend at the waist, your breath tight in your throat, the cancer thick all around us, waiting and watching and making you weak, after I make Mark go back into his apartment and shut the door—"Please, just *go*"—after you walk away from me and after you come home hours later and stand again with your back to the window, only then do you tell me: I am supposed to *grieve* you. I am supposed to *mourn*. You can't believe I would do this. Me, of all people, *me*. And if I don't mourn you, if I can't even wait until you're in the goddamn *ground*, what the hell kind of a wife does that make me? What does that make *us*? God, was your whole life a *lie*? Is that the bottom line of your life?

Because, I was the best part of you, I was the best thing you ever did. I was the best ten years of your whole goddamn life. Don't I know that? Jesus, I am *killing* you. Fuck cancer. You might as well already be dead.

This is what I don't tell you when we are back in our apartment, hours later, your face to the wall, your breath steady with sleep: I wanted you to see me, at least a part of me did. I wanted to look over Mark's head and find your gaze through an open door, a closed window. I wanted to meet your eyes and rest my chin on his hair, his full, thick hair that he tucks behind his ears and rests on his shoulders, his never-been-through-chemo hair. Yes, Isaac, I know, I can be cruel, too. And I wanted you to shut your eyes, your lids heavy with pain, and I would see the bones beneath your skull and you would see the anger beneath my silence. And we would both feel ashamed and we would come home and crawl between these sheets and we would both believe, just for a minute, that there are no absolutes in science or in love and we would dream in caps.

New Year's Day

This is what we don't tell anyone, especially not ourselves: You are going to die. And all the people who love you, all the people crowded into our apartment today, popping champagne and toasting new beginnings and sipping lie after bubbling lie, are going to watch. I will be the grieving widow... and I will grieve, Isaac. I will stretch out my palm on too-clean sheets and I will slide photos of who you were in the lining of my purse and I will show up at your A & P with the cute checker and I will forget what I needed and why I came. I will tell your stories at parties and I will leave out the parts

where you were callous, your last joke a little too true to be funny. I will remember how the room buzzed when you came into it and I will forget that as soon as the air shifted, I held my breath until you grinned, that I waited to see how you felt before I knew how I was.

JAMES AND JESUS ON I-24

James has a lot lizard in his rig. She's snoring away like big girls do, even though she's a skinny little thing. He picked her up ten minutes ago at the Hess Truck Stop in Kentucky, right after Jesus told him to. Didn't want no part of it, but that's the thing with Jesus. He could give a shit that James is not in the mood to chit-chat with some little-girl hooker who ought to know better than to get in a truck with a fifty-year-old man she don't know from Adam.

The girl moans and James watches her lips part. Her breath comes out soft. Except for that tat on her neck, she reminds James of his wife Clare fifteen years ago, all legs and lips.

Keep your eyes on the road, son, Jesus says. His voice is as gentle as it can be, but it's still irritating.

How about you let me do the driving, sir? James tells Jesus right back. The hell with it. James looks back at that little girl's legs and thinks about Clare's twenty-year-old thigh the summer they met and his thirty-five-year-old body, not a bit worse for wear, not one problem with his knees. He thinks about Clare on top of him, her head back, her throat white with moon, her breasts a gift he needed too much to worry about whether or not he deserved it.

James shifts and stretches his back. Shit if he isn't hard. See, he tells Clare, see what you can still do to me? Just the thought of you? Maybe if he could tell her that, just

tell it to her straight, pin her down, her head flat against the pillow, her eyes inches from his own, his hands just tight enough on her shoulders, maybe then she might see... .

“Hey, baby, you okay?” the girl next to him says, and James damn near jumps out of the rig. She laughs and James thinks about how much he’d like to hit her. He can almost feel her jaw give way and her chin loosen and shatter into something soft and useless. It makes him hard again, if that ain’t the sick truth. He stretches his fingers wide, grips the wheel tight. *Jesus, you sure you want this girl here with me tonight?*

“Big talker, huh?” she says, and laughs again.

James shrugs. He talks all the time, one big wind-up tape in his head that never shuts off. Too much time alone, Clare would say. Living in his head.

“That’s okay, baby, we don’t have to talk. I’m just glad for the ride.” She leans her forehead on the window and breathes a soft pant. “I sure was lucky to find you, baby. It’s a long way to Florida.” She sits back and draws a heart in the steam.

See? Jesus says. It’s lucky for you both that you got that job driving to Florida.

James snorts. No luck about it. James went early to get this gig. Lots of the young boys want those trips to the land of beer and bikinis, and let them have it. But there is a man in Orlando who is banging James’s wife. Or maybe the guy’s just trying to. Or maybe he just dreams about it. Or maybe she’s doing the dreaming. Or the banging. And even as James reminds Jesus of this, James can hear every word that Clare has said for the last six days since James found the e-mail. “Nothing’s happened. It’s not like that. You make everything seem dirty and small. It’s not like that, it’s like...” and that’s when Clare shakes her head or covers her eyes with her palms or picks at the lint on her pants

and James punches the closest wall and tells himself over and over that he cannot drink, not ever again, not one drop, *not one goddamn drop ever* for the rest of his sorry life.

“Baby, you talking to me?” The girl says and scoots too close. “You whispering? You want me to lean in? Is that it, baby?” She laughs when James shakes his head, looks at the top of his windshield. It’s dark as hell. He wishes the girl would go back to sleep. He wishes he could drop her off, throw her out the window like a goddamn McDonald’s happy meal. He wishes he was back home. He wishes he was done trucking, moved out of that shithole St. Louis has become and living in his granddad’s old fishing cabin. He wishes he was in Orlando, his foot shoving a copy of that e-mail up the ass of Kenan.

“Key Nin,” Clare said, “not Ken Ann,” before James pushed her into the wall, his fingers just tight enough around her neck to feel the tick of her heart. “You want to do this?” she asked him, her voice quiet, her eyes hard. “You want to play this game? You want to try this sober?” His hands were already at his side before she finished. “You want to see how fast I walk out that door if you pull that shit with me?”

Even as he walked down the hall, out that same door, slamming it hard behind him, muttering that he’d never hit her, not once, not one time, no matter how drunk he got, not once, not *once*, he could hear her through the glass: “I’m not playing. You hear me? I’m not playing anymore. That ship has *sailed*.”

James sighs and pulls into the granny lane. How long has he been hauling on the wrong side? He’s becoming the worst kind of trucker on the road, a car up his ass and he doesn’t even see it.

“You had a bumper sticker back there for about a mile,” the girl tells him, and slides a foot under her leg. She nibbles on the corner of her thumb. She’s got another tat sitting at the base of her wrist. “I was afraid you fell asleep.”

“My eyes open should have been a clue,” James says, and she shrugs.

James. Jesus says and leaves it at that.

What? A ride’s not enough? I got to be friendly, too?

Jesus doesn’t answer. James sighs. “How’d you know a tailgater’s called a bumper sticker?” he asks the girl. “You drive with truckers much?”

She shrugs and pulls her other leg up. “Nah.” Her underwear blinks out, white as a headlight coming straight at him.

Well, Jesus, James tells the white-dotted line down the center of I-24, *I tried.*

The girl leans down, hauls her bag off the floor and rattles around in it. What’s she looking for? *If she pulls a gun on me, sir, I cannot—I will not—be held accountable, not tonight,* James tells Jesus and the Lord laughs when the girl pulls out a pack of Virginia Slims.

She smiles a big you-want-to-be-my-trucker? smile and, shit, if her eyes aren’t river green just like Clare’s. “Baby, you mind if I smoke this in here? I can crack this window and blow it right on out. That okay?”

James nods once. Is she even eighteen? He snorts. You are a sorry case, James scolds himself. You got a little girl hooker in the cab, you’re crossing more state lines than a snowbird, and you’re wondering if she’s old enough to *smoke?*

“Ohhh, thank you, baby,” she breathes out and fills the cab with smoke just like Clare used to before she quit smoking and riding shotgun on short trips.

“My bones are about to rattle out of my body,” Clare said on her last run, “and these things aren’t helping me, either.” She broke those Winstons in half, one at a time, a clean break right in the spine, and stuffed them in a Diet Coke can. She tossed it into the trash when James pulled up to the house, and not one time has she lit up or been back in the rig since.

But we had some good times, didn’t we, Clare? James thinks he just might say before it’s all said and done. You remember years ago, early on, when we’d chase the moon’s tail from state to state? When it was just as dark as it is now, you’d lay your head on my thigh and I’d talk until the cab was heavy with how much I wanted you. Goddamn it, *needed* you. I was the one with all the secrets, then. I guess that’s what your Oliver Stone, Steven Spielberg, son-of-a-bitch wanna-be *Key Nin* would call “irony,” isn’t it, girl?

You know good and well that he’s a one-act screenwriter, Clare would say right back, if they could talk about *Key Nin* and, no, sir, they cannot. But James remembers when *Key Nin* was Online Professor Mennich, recommended highly, thank you very much, by your local, pain-in-the-ass, community college artsy-fartsy instructor who believed Clare had “potential” as a writer, but needed help “finding her voice.”

Yes, and do you remember what you said to her? Jesus asks and James huffs. Still can’t see what’s wrong with a man asking his wife what a hack like that does besides teach girls who don’t know how to write nothing but checks.

“Baby, you talking to me?” that tattoo-freak baby-girl-hooker fool next to him wants to know. Must be moving his lips again, letting shit pour out of him that ought to stay locked up tight. Living in his head, same old story.

James shakes his head, a never-mind that would shut most people up, but that girl's got to keep talking. "You sure are having quite the conversation," she laughs and drops her bag back on the floor. Legs still wide apart and white underwear right back in his face. "I wish I was invited to *that* party."

James cracks his window. "No, you don't." Now why is she not scared of him? He could be listening to little voices in his head, evil, dirty, schizophrenic whispers that tell him *go ahead, bury her body in the bayou*. He could be a rapist, some whack job that likes to cut. *But, hell, you don't have to rape a hooker, now do you?*

Jesus sighs and James sighs right along with him.

"There's a rest stop just outside of Nashville," James tells the girl. "We're about twenty miles out. I got to stretch some and you can decide if you want back in here with a fool who's got all the company he needs in his head." He looks at her hard.

The girl leans back into the seat, studies him with her eyes half shut. "Baby, I'm not worried about you," she tells him through the smoke. "You got a turquoise aura that's sitting over your head like a crown."

James huffs at the highway. Turquoise aura? New Age crap.

"Of course, there's plenty of gray around the edges," she tells him and tilts her head back. "Well, sugar, I guess I don't need to tell you that a lot of that gray is closer to black."

Don't take no rocket scientist or gypsy fortune teller to see that I am not in the mood for little-girl company, James does not say. But if the air or aura or whatever it is in this cab is half as dark as the crap running through his head, it must be closer to black.

“Now, see, I’m an optimist,” the girl says through the smoke. “I prefer to think that the turquoise is dominant and that the gray is passing... a cloud, you know? Not like a cave or a hole or something, well, *permanent*.”

“Ain’t nothing permanent,” James tells her before he can stop himself.

“Well, of course, you’re right,” the girl tells him, and James pinpoints just a smudge of Virginia low-mountain slang with enough polish on it that says she ain’t never going back. “But you are who you are. Everything’s decided. Where you’re going. Where you been. What you’re going to do.”

Now, what do you think about that? James asks Jesus. *We got free will or don’t we?* But James knows the answer. Ain’t nothing keeping the lid on James but James.

The girl arches her back. “That’s why I study a man before I ask for a ride, you know?” She rubs the tat on her neck. “Now, baby, you know those guys back at the truck stop?” She scoots closer and James remembers walking by this little fool in the arcade with her short skirt and her low voice asking for a ride and offering a whole lot more in exchange.

“Well, now, I only asked one of the truckers, because you know the one that was playing that golf game? You know who I mean?” She leans forward, close enough for James to touch. He shrugs. “Well, he had white all around him and, you know, you’d think that meant something good, now wouldn’t you? I mean, the angels had white halos, right?” He shrugs again, but she’s closer now and her words bump into each other. “But, now, see, white’s the worst, you know? White’s like artificial, like, fake. Sometimes it means that guy’s on drugs and sometimes it just means...” she shrugs and looks out her window. “Messed up,” she says to the black.

James sighs. “Hell, girl, I don’t know nothing about turquoise tiaras or white lights, but I know you got be a fool to get in a cab with a fellow you don’t know.”

But James may be the bigger fool, because back at the truck stop, Jesus said, *Why don’t you give her a ride? You’re going south. Keep her out of trouble for a few hundred miles. Be the Good Samaritan.* And now James, the “good Samaritan,” is stuck with a hooker who likes to talk.

The girl flicks her cigarette butt out the window, cranks the window closed. *Must not have a Mother Earth tat on her ass,* James remarks to Jesus.

She scoots over and says, “Give me your hand,” like he’s hers to boss. “I’m going to read your palm and I bet you twenty bucks I can tell you who you are, where you been and where you just might end up.”

James sighs and Jesus tells him, *Just keep your hands on the wheel, son.*

She’s closer now and James can feel her breath in the cab, warm and wet. He shrugs at Jesus. *Lighten up, Lord.*

James holds out his hand, palm up. “What the hell.”

She cradles his hand like it might jump. Her fingertips are hard and scratchy, a fish out of the water long enough to be dried by the sun. What she been doing? Working a farm, if James had to bet. She’s quiet for a while and he holds still. The cold creeps in and settles in his chest. Ass-freezing March.

“Now this line here? This one’s your life line, and you’re lucky, baby, it goes all the way down to the base of your wrist, see? Just a bit off your vein, see?” She taps the base of his wrist and leans back, but he can’t see a thing in the dim. “Well, now, that means a long life and not too many health problems, you know?”

James is just about to say, "I got a liver that may not agree," but she pushes her hair back with her own palm and bends back over his hand. "And this is your love line," she tells him, and draws a short line with her finger. "I see you were married and that you had it bad for her, didn't you, baby?" She pauses, leans in closer. Old fool that he is, James finds he's holding his breath. It's tight around his heart. "But she left you, right? Or she died? There's a sudden break here, you see it, baby? This little line that moves off toward your ring finger?" He feels a sudden heat. It shifts below his belt, above his groin. *Take your hand back, James, take it back.* "And you haven't been in love since, am I right? Just one woman for you?" She studies his hand and, sorry, Jesus, but James can't move it, not yet. "You're that kind of old soul, aren't you, baby?" She looks up and smiles at him like she can see that halo right around his head. *Come on now, James, take your hand back, son.* "A one-woman, couldn't-hurt-a-fly kind of guy, that's who you are, am I right?"

James jerks his hand back, grips the wheel tight. He eyes some foreign job with square heads coming up fast.

"Oh, baby, has it been, you know, like, recent?" He can feel her Clare eyes on him. He checks the mirrors. That yahoo's flying past. "You know what you need?" Hell, if James is going to nod at that. "You need to de-com-part-ment-a-lize, you know what I'm saying?" She leans closer. "See now, everything exists in threes. You got your self, right?" She holds up one finger. "Your body and all that, you know?" James squints at the sign up ahead, seven miles out of Nashville. "And then, you got the world, you know?" she waves her hand around the cab, tilts her head toward the black. Still no sign the dawn's ever going to come. "And then, you got your spirit, you know, baby? Now,

what you're doing, and trust me, baby, I see it all the time, you're thinking that your spirit and your body and this whole world are all connected, but I'm telling you, they *aren't*, they are..." she shakes her head, "...*scattered*, like little pieces of dust or snow flakes or whatever. Just because they land in the same place, it doesn't mean they're, you know, *attached*. You know what I'm saying, baby?"

"No." That truck stop that brews coffee every hour on the hour is right off exit 17A. Must be just ten minutes out. *You can make it, son. It's all right to leave her there.*

Now, shit if that little girl doesn't put her hand on his goddamn thigh and rub it up and down like Clare used to. "Here it is, baby, straight out: Your body. My body. It's just a container, a package, you know? Like Tupperware. It doesn't mean anything. What you put in it, what you do with it. It's Tupperware. You know what I'm saying?" And then she whispers and she's in his ear, her breath hot and her voice just loud enough to be heard over the motor, "You can put anything into it. *Anything*. It's just Tupperware."

James snorts, shrugs her off with his shoulder. She laughs, and she sounds like Clare, fifteen years ago, before she started smiling with just the corner of her mouth. "Little girl, we've got about ten minutes and we're going to hit a truck stop. I'm going to pull over and you're going to put your container in somebody else's cab."

But that little fool laughs again. She leans back, pulls her skirt up high and he can see those panties and there's nothing between them and him. "Oh, baby, my container is right where it's supposed to be, you know what I'm saying?" That girl looks straight at James, her legs apart, her eyes wide open.

James shrugs, keeps his eyes on the road.

“See, this morning, I got up and I could tell right away that my aura was just as green as it could be.” James looks over, but he can’t see nothing but a little yellow bouncing off her forehead from the light of the dash. “Now, I’m a purple usually, you know, like a lavender? Like what you’d paint a little girl’s room, you know what I mean?” James shrugs, keeps his eyes off those panties. She sighs. “I would *love* to be a real deep purple. Like a, uh, oh, what’s that vegetable? That squash?” She snaps her fingers. “Eggplant!” She leans back, legs as open as the road ahead. “Now, *that’s* somebody’s who’s got it all together, baby. Somebody who can really *channel*, you know what I mean?”

James sighs. He can’t even muster up the energy to snort.

She laughs. “That’s okay, baby, that’s all right. You don’t have to get it for it to work. See, today I’m green and that means I’m a healer, you know, somebody who can manipulate energies or energy systems, you know what I’m saying?” She leans forward, puts her hand back on his knee.

“No. I don’t have one clue what you’re talking about,” James tells the highway and pushes her little girl hand off his knee. *Manipulating energy?* Jesus H. Christ.

“All right, baby, here it is, straight out,” she says and puts her hand back on his leg. “I’m *supposed* to be here. You know what I’m saying? There’s no such thing as an accident or a coincidence, baby. I’m here to, well...” she laughs and, shit, her hand is on his business and it’s moving up and down like it knows what it’s doing. “I’m here to *heal* you. I’m here to make all that gray around you turn back to turquoise. You hear me, baby? You get it?”

James cuts it tight and too fast and the old rig kicks up gravel and just when James thinks she may well tip, he skids it into a full stop on the side of the road. He slams it into a steady idle and he leans over and grabs that little girl fool by the wrist. “What happens if you’re wrong? What if there’s no turquoise or green or baby-girl purple? What if there’s just black and white? What happens then?” James puts his other hand on her throat, covers that tat with his palm. “I could be anybody. I could squeeze until all the color in this cab drains out of your little fool head. I could fill up your—what did you call it? Tupperware? That right, girl? —I could fill that *container* of yours with blood. You hear me? I could do *anything*. I could be *anybody*. I could do *anything*. You hear me?”

James looks into the little fool’s eyes. They’re not even a little afraid. It would be so easy to squeeze his fingers, to sink his teeth into her neck, to be that man everybody knows he’s just a few short steps away from becoming, *don’t you think I know that, Clare? Don’t you think I’ve always known it?* He can almost taste her blood, feel it run down his chin and drip onto this goddamn shirt Clare stuck under the tree last Christmas. And why not? Why the hell not?

The girl hiccups then, a small sound at the back of her throat. Don’t matter if you do or you don’t, somebody says in James’s head, maybe Clare, maybe Jesus. Shit, it could even be Key *Nin* for all James knows. But he knows that it is the God’s truth. James can bite her, cut her, bang her, even give her a pat on the head and fifty bucks and it *don’t matter*. Ain’t nothing going to change.

James tugs at his belt with one hand, keeps the other on the girl’s neck. Why not? “Is this what you want? Is this what it’s going to take?” James asks her Clare-green eyes. “You want me to do you in a truck? You want me to type it up and post it online? Turn it

into a goddamn script?” James unbuttons his jeans, keeps his fingers tight on her throat. “We’ll have our own one-act play, okay, ‘baby?’ I’ll be *Key Nin*. You be Clare. Okay, baby? You get it?”

James tugs his zipper and Clare doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t fight. Maybe she shrugs. Or shivers. Ass-freezing March.

James, Jesus whispers.

“Shut up, Jesus,” James says, and Clare breathes out hard.

“It’s okay, baby,” she says, her voice low. “It’s okay.” Clare raises her hand and rests it on top of James’s fingers still taut around her neck. “I love you, baby. I *love* you.”

James blinks. “The hell you do.” He squeezes the little hooker’s neck one more time and pushes her away. She leans back into the seat, rubs her tat with her palm. James rests his forehead on the steering wheel. Nothing but the night talks. After a bit, he looks in the rearview mirror. No one behind him or ahead. James starts up, popping gears one at a time, and eases the rig out of the gravel and into the right side of the dotted line.

DEATH CUSTOMS (DDC 393)

If Miles were still alive—if he hadn't stepped off the goddamn curb in downtown Chicago in front of a *semi*, for Christ's sake—he would tell Sara to go home. It's snowing, he would say, pulling the fisherman flaps over his big ears. The deli will be closed, those nice Korean sisters can't even drive when it rains, and really, Sara, he would have groaned, chicken *bones*? You don't even eat meat.

No, Miles, Sara tells the sidewalk as she stomps through the snow, *you* don't eat meat. Or you didn't eat meat. Now you're dead. Dead meat, Sara thinks, and tries to laugh, but it gets stuck in her throat like, well, like a chicken bone.

The deli is closed; Miles is right. Or would have been right. No note blaming it on the snow or apologizing for the fact that it's only six-thirty, damn it, and some people walked all the way here in knee-deep snow without boots because they *need* chicken and you are a 24-hour deli, are you not? Just a dark window with a Closed sign slapped on its chest.

Sara stomps the snow off her heels, turns and sees a bar on the corner. It is dark and a lone Busch light blinks out in boredom. It is two blocks from Sara and Miles's apartment, but they have never been there. They prefer to drink their beer in the bathtub or next to the kitchen sink or while watching one of Miles's musicals.

Sara used to be annoyed during those musicals. She could never understand how a walk down the stairs could turn into a parade. "But that's the beauty of it," Miles said

when they met at the library, Sara showing him without a smile where the original tracks of live musicals are stored. Sara is a librarian—no bun, no glasses—just a person who appreciates the spine of a book and its straight line. A person who wants—okay, Miles, *needs*—a typed card with a designated space on the shelf.

But now Miles is dead and the only thing Sara wants is a chicken. With bones. Bones that she can crunch and crack while she wipes the grease from her mouth with the back of her hand. Bones that bleed marrow that gets stuck in her teeth. Yes, Miles, I know, that's crazy talk, and before he could have asked, she would have smiled and answered, "Parapsychology & occultism (133) or maybe just Aves and Birds (598)." The Dewey Decimal Classification is more of an art than a science. Miles never really understood that.

Sara opens the door to the bar and the black blinks out through the smoke. The snow rushes in behind her. She pushes the door with her shoulder and the door groans shut. Sara pulls off Miles's hat and sits down at the almost-empty bar.

There's an older man at the end and a young couple in the corner. The young man stares at the television while the woman rests her head on his shoulder.

The bartender comes over and Sara asks for wings. To go.

"Sorry, hon, we've only got pretzels," the bartender tells her and wipes the space in front of her. "They're free, got a nut or two in the mix, but that's it."

Sara sighs and decides to order wine. Red. She takes off her shoes and rubs her toes through the socks. Shit, it's cold.

The wine is bitter, the type a wino would put in a bag. Sara gulps it. Maybe she'll get drunk. *What do you think of that, Miles?*

"Miss, no offense," a voice booms out beside her. Sara looks at the man at the end of the bar. "But you look how I feel. So what the heck. Can I put another one on my tab?"

In the dark, his loud voice seems obscene—an accusation, almost. He sounds just like Crazy Louie who used to come to Sara's church when she was a child and lie down flat on his huge stomach, his nose smashed into the carpet runner of the aisle. The only time he moved was when the Our Father was said. He turned his head toward the sanctuary and roared out the prayer to the body and blood of Jesus, every word a bullet of praise or, maybe, blame.

Miles would have loved that story. "Really?" he would have said, shaking his head at her small town. "He just camped out right there in the aisle? Like this?" And he would have spread out on the kitchen floor, maybe, and shouted out the Our Father until Sara laughed.

It's almost a memory for Sara, but it never happened. She'd forgotten all about Crazy Louie until tonight. And since Miles is dead, all of Sara's stories might as well be dead, too. It's a if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest kind of thing. If Miles isn't around to hear about it, did it ever really happen to begin with?

Yes, Miles, she tells her empty glass. I *am* feeling sorry for myself.

"Miss?" the man shouts, waiting. Sara jumps again and shakes her head, struggles back into her shoes. It was a mistake to come here. She wants chicken, not

company, and, anyway, this loud man probably needs the money more than she does. But shit, speaking of which, how could she have walked out without her purse?

“Um, actually,” Sara says, feeling around for loose dollars in her jeans, the pockets of her coat. Thank God the keys are in her pocket. “I just realized I forgot my purse. Uh, could you buy the one I already had?”

“What?” the man shouts and, God, this is not what Sara needs tonight, not at all.

The bartender walks over and stands in front of the man. “She wants you to buy the one she *already* drank,” the bartender yells.

The woman in the corner lifts her head off the man’s shoulder and tilts her chin at Sara in... what? Disgust? Pity? Disbelief? Who can tell in the dark? If Miles had been here, he would have turned and explained, “It’s just that she forgot her purse,” and Sara would have whispered, “Not everyone has to like me, you know.” Humanism & related systems (144).

But the man laughs hard and loud, his stomach shaking as he pounds at the bar with the flat of his palm. “Good for you, sweetheart!” he yells. “GOOD FOR *YOU!*”

Then Sara is laughing, too. It rises up from the pit of her stomach and forces its way out in a series of hard barks. It sounds like someone else. Someone deranged. Someone, say, on a quest for chicken bones in the middle of a snowstorm, Sara thinks, and barks until she has to pee.

The man points to the seat next to her and when she shrugs—sure, okay, why not?—he gets up, still chuckling, and lumbers over to the stool next to her.

See, Miles? I can make it without you. You've been dead nine days and I'm already the life of the party.

When Sara gets back from the restroom, the couple is gone and the bartender is stretched out in the corner in front of the TV, his boots on the table and his back to the bar. Not-Crazy-Louie is sipping a clear drink, maybe gin, maybe ice water. In front of him is another full glass of red wine, shadowed by a half-empty bottle of more wine.

“Name’s Carl,” the man shouts and sticks out a hand.

Sara shakes and shouts back, “Sara.”

The man smiles and studies her mouth. “Can’t hear too well, Sally, but I read lips real good. No need to holler.”

Sara nods, the bark back her in throat. She lifts the wine glass, swallows deep and studies Carl’s gray hair. It covers Carl’s head, arms, chin, knuckles and wrists, even the top of his cheeks. He is a ball—no, a *wall*—of hair, really a wheel of fuzz and whiskers and, well, sorry, but *fat*, all primed and furry and ready for winter.

Sara gulps more wine. It loosens and spins in her stomach. The air feels thin and too warm. “Do you know of a place nearby that sells chicken wings?” Sara calls out and Carl tilts his head.

“Now, I didn’t catch that, Sally. You got to excuse me some; one of them dang-nab-it booby traps in Nam took near all my hearing.” Carl leans forward. “Look me straight in the eye, Sally, this one over here.” He waves at his left eye. “Some little bitty shrapnel from that same silly bomb took out the other one.”

An almost-deaf, half-blind Vietnam vet who uses “silly” as an adjective for a bomb. Lord. If Miles were here, he would have pulled his notebook out by now, his pencil flying across the page as he nodded hard. “Wow, man. That is *rough*.”

Carl leans forward and Sara focuses on his good eye, as if she’s the one who can read lips. “Everybody thinks that must have been one heck of a noise that bomb made, you know?” Carl shouts and his “bad” eye tilts as if it agrees. “But I tell them, it wasn’t nothing compared to how quiet it was sleeping in that swamp. You’d lay out on your back in the rain and that quiet was about to kill you. You know what I mean?”

Sara nods, but surely the quiet is better than the blast? One that left you practically deaf?

“It was like King Kong screaming in your ear, that quiet.” Carl shakes his head at his beer. “Worse than any dang bomb.”

Sara tries to smile, but it comes out wrong, as if she’s supposed to care, but doesn’t. She wants to go home, climb into bed. She’s suddenly very tired and possibly drunk. Through the window, Sara watches the snow continue to fall, its thick cold a wall she’ll need to stumble through.

She is just about to shout, “I have to go now, thank you very much” when she notices that Carl is crying, huge tears out of both pale brown eyes, one stained with fine, red lines, the other a cool, disapproving white. The tears streak a short path and skid into the hair on his cheekbones.

“Carl?” Sara shouts. “Are you all right?”

Carl tilts his head and the light from the Miller sign above the bar catches his bad eye. It gazes at Sara, as neutral as the moon, and Sara thinks of the man at the mortuary, his hand on her shoulder. “Open or closed, Mrs. Willard? It’s a personal choice, really, no right or wrong about it,” and when she couldn’t answer, her head shaking, no, no, *God*, no, this is a not a decision I need to make, not me, not Miles, *no*, the mortician reached out with the pad of his middle finger and eased both of Miles’s eyes shut, one at a time. Decision made.

“Sweetheart, *I’m* fine,” Carl yells, “But how are *you*?” and that is when Sara notices that she is crying, no cheekbone hair to stop the flow. The tears drip off her chin, slide onto the bar and pool into the shadow of her empty wine glass.

Sara wipes her cheeks as Carl fills up her glass. She shouts, “I always seem to cry when someone else does,” but that’s not true. Sara rarely cries. Or she rarely cried. She points to Carl’s cheeks and he laughs.

“Sally, aren’t you just the sweetest little thing you could be?” Carl yells. “But it’s just this silly old artificial eye of mine, leaks all the time. Dang tear ducts are still there. Been almost forty years and they’re still irritated as heck that some phony’s sitting on top of them.” Carl shrugs and wipes his face with the back of his hand. “I don’t know why the other one joins in. Must be like you, huh, Sally? Can’t let one cry alone!” Carl laughs again and thumps Sara on the back.

“Are you used to it, though?” Sara shouts, surprising herself. “I mean, after forty years, are you used to the, uh, artificial one?” And the crying, Sara does not ask. Are you used to that, too?

“Shoot, Sally, I notice my toenails more than this here eye,” Carl yells, and he pulls the upper and lower lids of his artificial eye wide. He places his index finger on the top lid and holds down the bottom with his thumb and then squeezes at the corner, a soft pinch. The eye plops out and lands in his other palm. Social interaction (302)? Etiquette & manners (395)?

Sara blinks at the space. It’s as pale as new skin, as textured as a sunken elbow. She looks at the eye, resting in Carl’s palm. He drops it in his drink and swirls the glass with his wrist. The eye falters for a moment, floating at the top of the ice, and then it settles and sinks, bumping ice cubes as it makes its way to the bottom of the glass.

“Now, them doctors’ll tell you that you need a special cleaner,” Carl yells, “but I’m here to tell you a little vodka and water cleans it up real quick like.” He raises the glass above his head. The brown eye peers out from the bottom.

Carl tilts the glass at Sara, a toast, and drains it in a greedy swallow. The eye races past the ice and rushes up to Carl’s lips, as if waiting for a whisper or a way in. Carl shakes the glass, still at his mouth, but now his lips are closed. When the eye makes it to the center, the ice crowding close, Carl slides his hand under the rim of the glass and eases the eye into his palm. The ice tumbles to the floor where the snow has melted.

“Here, Sally!” Carl yells and stretches his hand toward her, the vodka-clean eye a gift. “Go ahead and hold it. See what *you* think!” and when Sara doesn’t reach out, Carl bellows, “Come on, Sally. It don’t bite!”

Sara holds out her hand. She is shaking, maybe too much to be trusted with an *eye*, and Carl rolls it into her palm. It is lighter than she imagined, the weight of a wedding ring or a quarter. She touches the eye softly. “Is it plastic?” she shouts.

“Oh, yeah, Sally, the best Uncle Sam can buy,” Carl yells. “Got an update about five years ago and this one here’s the best yet. Can’t hardly feel it or tell it’s a phony. Can’t even break it unless you slam it down and who’d do a fool thing like that with all the money these things cost?”

The eye looks up at Sara, waiting. It is two shades lighter than Miles’s and not at all the right size. It feels as if it could come alive, it would just take the right touch, the right words, but Sara doesn’t know what those words might be. She could never even guess. She leans down and breathes on the eye, her hand cupped, her breath warm with red wine, her heart racing up to her throat. Something could happen, right now, something huge, something that alters time or reason. Something that could never be typed on a card catalogue. Something that would make Carl see or Miles be away on a trip, his flight due back tomorrow. Sara knows it. It would take just the right touch, the right words, the right medley. God, she can feel it. Can’t everyone? Can’t Carl? The moment is alive with wanting, with possibilities. It’s panting with it.

Sara raises her palm to her chin and lifts the eye out of her hand with her lips. She closes her mouth in a kiss. She shuts her own eyes and rests Carl’s cold eye in her mouth, a plastic captive that waits and warms.

She licks the eye, leads it back and forth in her mouth, a watery waltz, her tongue gentle, leading, questioning. If this were a musical, a song would begin its swell just now, before the eye came alive, before everything became clear, before Miles stepped off the

curb, but all Sara can hear is Carl shouting, “Sally? Come on now, let’s have that eye back. Sally? Don’t bite down, all righty? That eye’ll crack open like an egg. Sally? Come on now.”

In a minute, Sara will open her eyes, let the plastic fall into her palm. She will dry it on her sleeve and watch the pale brown study her without a blink. She will hand it over, a surrender, a nod of acceptance to something she’s always known, that sometimes the music doesn’t start, no matter how badly the instruments may want it to. Sometimes, maybe most of the time, a walk down the stairs does not turn into a parade, no matter who is leading. Sometimes, the smallest of acts, an eye in your mouth, a step off the curb, become something that can change everything or nothing at all. In a minute, Sara will be ready to look that truth right in its artificial eye.

But now, now, there is a buzzing in her ears, a steady, silent roar that waits under Carl’s shouts, and if you listen closely, it can deafen you. It can bury you in its white, wide loneliness. It can sound just like King Kong screaming in your ear.

30 TO LIFE

Lois sits two barstools down from Benny. On bad nights—when Lois drinks enough to get sloppy, and no one, not even Hector, will take her home, even after she’s asked for someone, please, *anyone*, to step up and ride her like a man, good and hard—she talks to Benny until the owner Gerald says, “For God’s sakes, that’s enough. It’s goddamn four in the morning. Get the fuck out of here before I lose my liquor license.”

Then Lois does get the fuck out of there, and Benny kicks himself in the ass all the way home to his mother’s basement. Benny could ride Lois good and hard. He could ride her like a man. At least he thinks he could. God knows he wants to. It’s all he wants. But Lois has a bullet in her brain and, well, that makes a man pause a bit.

It’s one thing that another man has left something behind. Most men do. Benny’s never been anyone’s first. He’s never been anyone’s second. Hell, he hasn’t been anybody’s anything going on twenty years now. “He’s got asthma and a bad back,” his mama says when he takes her to church and somebody mentions a niece going through a rough patch, a bad divorce. Maybe Benny and she could, well, have dinner sometime? “Huh,” his mama sniffs. “Benny don’t need none of that nonsense, not at forty.”

Benny doesn’t want none of that nonsense. He wants Lois. He’s wanted her for seven years. He wants her even though she’s got a souvenir he sure as hell can’t ignore. Some women, they got a kid, a walking, talking reminder that you’re not navigating new waters. Nope, you’re not even close. You’re old news before you get started. That’s what a kid will tell a man, but a bullet? Now, that’s something else entirely.

Lois laughs when Benny tries to explain it to her. Of course, he's a crappy talker, that's the God's truth, and she's a worse listener, but still their conversations tend to go like this:

Lois: Baby, I'm messed up. I need a man.

Benny, pointing to her head, shaking his own: What if, you know, something there gets, well, loose... . You going to die on me?

Lois: Baby, I'll make *you* want to die.

And she does. Night after night, Benny studies Lois's pale hair, the butterfly tattoo riding the left line of her right breast, her chipped front tooth. From two seats down, he runs an imaginary finger down her jaw, follows her chin to her chest with his tongue and places his hand between her knees. He makes love to her like the world has some meaning, like there's something to believe in. Like he's a man that's sure of his spot in the world, places to be, things to do that only he can get done right. And he watches her leave with Jimmy or Hector, a paunchy married guy, some college boy that went slumming, and, once, two guys that just got off third shift. Lois is right. She makes Benny want to die.

Benny wonders how all these other men are able to do it. It's not like they don't know Lois has a bullet in her brain. It's the first thing she tells a man. It's the first thing she tells everyone.

"Right here, baby," she'll say, lifting her hair and pointing to a thin white line behind her left ear. "That's where it went in and, thank you, Jesus, it never went out." She laughs then. "He always said I didn't have a brain in my head, but something sure stopped that bullet, now didn't it?"

Benny rarely sees a man back down after Lois has lifted her hair and tilted her chin toward the flashing light of the Budweiser sign. A man might lean in for a better look. He might take a sip of his beer and say, “Holy shit.” He might glance around to see if anyone else heard or believed this crazy bitch, but at the end of most nights, whoever he is, he’s still willing to take her home, right across the street, easy as hell, take her there and ride her like a man.

But Benny knows it isn’t just the bullet that’s stopping him. It’s the man who put the bullet in Lois’s head, it’s how that man felt about Lois, and even though Lois tells Benny—she tells everybody again and again—“That man is doing thirty to life, baby, he’s up in Pontiac Maximum Security. We got plenty of time before he catches up with me”—Benny can’t shake it. He can’t stop thinking about what a man will do when he’s in love with a woman like Lois. What would Benny do?

It’s another one of those conversations that Benny and Lois have night after night, when the bar’s just starting to fill up and there’s still an empty stool between them.

“Davy,” Lois sighs. “Now, *that* was a man.”

Davy was—“No, *is*, trust me, baby, he’s not dead yet... I would know it, I would feel it right here”—a man who knows what he wants. And Davy wants Lois. Now and then, always. He’s as permanent as Lois’s tattoo, she’ll remind Benny, rubbing her breast. And passion? “Oh, honey. You have no idea.”

Benny has a lot of ideas. He doesn’t need Lois to tell him yet again how Davy would cut his forearm and smear his blood over her body. Benny doesn’t want to see Davy’s teeth marks, a silent white O on Lois’s shoulder—“He wanted to consume me, baby, he wanted me inside him, he wanted to feed off me, don’t you get it?” Benny

doesn't want to hear about how all that passion had to end with a bullet in her brain.

"What else could happen, baby? Tell me, what else could the man do?"

"But he tried to kill you," Benny will often remind her.

"Oh, that," Lois shrugs and surveys the bar.

Benny often wonders what Lois was like before the bullet, if her stories were set to turntables then, skipping over cracks and landing back in the grooved places. Sometimes he imagines the bullet in her brain, solid and persistent, a small weight that keeps lowering the needle to the same spot on a well-worn record. Benny would give just about anything—he'd cut his own arm, smear his own blood—to erase the whole goddamn album. Start the hell over, right from scratch.

Of course, Gerald has told Benny, time and again, starting with Lois *is* starting from scratch. Every time. "There's no contact paper there," Gerald will often say after last call when Lois's eyes are roaming the strays and Benny's telling himself, over and over, as if it's a prayer, *you can do this, you can do this, you can do this*. Gerald watches Benny watch Lois and as Gerald wipes down the bar, dumps the ashtrays and flicks his own cigarette on the floor, he tries again. "Nothing new is sticking there. No flies on that wall." Gerald leans in then, looks Benny right in the eye. "You do get that, right, buddy? It's a goddamn shame, pretty girl like that, but you know there's no new episodes coming, right?" Benny nods, but he knows it isn't really true. Sometimes when Lois looks at him, he can see the best part of himself. He can see the man he once thought he was on the way to becoming. He can see Lois, the Lois before the bullet. The Lois before Davy. He can see the Benny he could have been. Could be, maybe.

But tonight, Lois leaves early with a big old boy with red sideburns down to his jaw. Benny got in late—God knows he needs the overtime, and he’s got to take those extra shifts in the mine even if they turn him into a wheezing mole—and as he walks in, Lois walks out.

“Baby,” she says, or could she have said Benny? “Where you been?”

“Working, Lois.” Benny nods at the man with the sideburns who has one arm on Lois’s elbow, the other on her ass. He’s tall and wide, with red hair everywhere, under his hat, down his arms, out his ears. He’s nobody Benny knows. He’s lived here his whole life and, still, this shit town’s just big enough to get lost in. “You all heading out?”

The man nods, but he’s looking at Lois. She steps toward Benny and breathes in his ear, “Baby, I’m messed up. I need a man.”

Benny nods. “I know. I know, Lois.”

The man pulls on Lois’s elbow, too hard, enough to make her wince, but she smiles up at him. “Baby, I’m messed up,” she whispers, and Benny feels something crack in his chest. He thinks about taking a punch at the man, a sucker punch, but it just might do it. Maybe use that bottle on the edge of the bar. Lois turns to Benny and sings, “Bye-bye, baby, good-bye,” and Benny nods again. The hell with it.

Three beers later, Benny decides to call it a night. Everywhere he looks, he sees Lois under that man. Hairy fingers pressing into her shoulders, red beard rubbing against her chest and Lois, God, Lois, saying into that ear, “Baby, ride me good and hard.” The bullet rubbing up and down. Shit. Might as well go on home. See if Mom left anything on the stove.

Benny steps out of the bar and pulls his jacket tighter. Fall comes earlier than it used to in Illinois and it's damn cold tonight. It just might be warmer in the mines. He walks on back to the parking lot and there's Lois sitting in the bed of his truck.

Her head is on her knees, but Benny would know that pale hair anywhere, that bare shoulder with Davy's wide-open teeth marks howling at the moon. Holy Mother of God. It's sure as hell Lois.

Benny reaches into the back of the truck, places his hand on her shoulder. "Lois? You okay?"

Lois shakes her head into her knees, but there's no "baby." No sound at all.

Benny climbs into the back of the truck. He kneels beside her, covers her bare shoulder with her coat. She looks up then and Benny breathes, "Holy shit," before he can stop himself. Blood runs from her forehead into her eye, a sticky stream that leaks past her lid and settles into the corner of her mouth. Small red circles line her cheekbone, her jaw, the space over her eyebrow... from a ring? "Sweet Jesus, Lois."

She nods, yes, sweet Jesus.

"Let's get you home." Benny lifts Lois into his arms and something silver falls. It's a cigarette lighter, one from a car, the circles on her face. Burns. That son of a bitch.

Benny carries Lois across the street. She lives in an apartment that Benny has never been in. "Where to, Lois?" She points up and Benny starts the stairs. Lois is light, as far as a body goes, but damn, his back could go at any minute. He straightens, breathes in deep, tries not to wheeze, fucking asthma. He can carry her up to the top floor if he goddamn has to.

At the third floor, Lois points to the right. Apartment 311. Another point, the key under a mat. Benny sets Lois down on the floor, guides her head gently against the wall. He straightens, pulls his shoulders back. He's winded, but, hell, nobody'd know it. The key's under the mat; the door opens easy enough. Benny bends and lifts Lois again.

The apartment is cold and crammed full of, well, just what the hell is it? Benny pauses at the door and Lois reaches out from his arms, flips on a light as Benny kicks the door shut. There are boxes, cans, shoes, white trash bags stuffed and tied with God knows what, broken toys, a man's suit, a vacuum, a computer monitor, an exercise bike, and piles of newspapers as tall as a man. Only the couch is empty, waiting.

Benny settles Lois on the couch. He turns to look for a washcloth—there's a pile of towels in the corner—and maybe some ice in the fridge, some butter for the burns, does she need an ambulance?—sweet Jesus, but Lois grabs his wrist. “Lois?” It's the quietest she's ever been.

Lois shakes her head, a don't go, and holds onto his wrist. Benny lifts a pile of magazines off the coffee table, sets them on the floor and sits down. He leans toward Lois, takes a deep breath. “Lois? Are you all right? Do you need to go to the hospital?”

Lois turns away and looks at the back of the couch, holds Benny's wrist tight. Benny studies the thin white line behind her ear. It's the first time he's seen where the bullet went in with this much light. There's more blood on the back of her head. Did the bullet shift? Did that bastard hit her hard enough to... To what? Benny wonders. What could happen if the bullet *did* move? If this didn't kill her, what would?

“Lois,” Benny tries again and when she doesn't answer, doesn't turn, Benny imagines that the bullet did shift, moved off Lois's turntable and plodded into some space

where it's never been before. Unclaimed territory. Ready to be discovered, navigated. Ready for new episodes. No repeats.

Benny studies Lois's scar and thinks about Davy's bullet. What it took to put it there, what a man would do for Lois. Benny knows he can't ride Lois like a man, good and hard. He can't bite her, burn her, bang her after last call. He can't cover her in his own blood. Hell, Benny can't even cut himself. But Benny could put a bullet in the head of that redheaded man. Benny could pull the trigger. He'd sit next to Davy in a cell, do his own 30 to life. Benny'd be glad to do it just for that moment when all the surprise went out of that bastard's face and something mixed with fear and awe took its place. Benny can almost see that son of a bitch's eyes now, at that moment, when the bullet passes into those murky waters of all the shit that's gone wrong before and ends up lodged someplace it don't want to be, watching the world from the inside out.

Benny can almost feel the gun in his hands. It's as heavy as Lois was in his arms. It's as ready as a second chance.

Lois turns. "Davy?" Benny blinks. Lois smiles, blood on her teeth. "Now, *that* was a man. And passion? Oh, honey. You have no idea."

Benny sighs, one long breath that stumbles out of his chest. Goddamn asthma. He best get on home. Benny's got to be in the mine in under eight hours and Ma's got no idea where he's at. Morning'll be here before he knows it.

THE LITTLE POET

As Caroline waters the plants on her porch, she hears a rustling in the bushes that border her side yard. It is a hushed and hurried sound and if it is that possum again, Caroline will find a rake and not feel a bit guilty about it. Those overgrown rats. They dig holes and leave all the roots exposed. Give the sun two hours and those plants are fried, even in April. That's Missouri for you, the Show Me State, as the license plates say, whatever in the world that's supposed to mean.

Caroline walks to the edge of the side porch and over there, by the chrysanthemums border, she sees the azalea bushes sway. That damn possum. Those chrysanthemums may be as old as the house and if that little *rat* thinks it's going to...

But then Caroline sees the top of, my God, is that a *head*? Yes, and it's that awful black so many young girls are dyeing their hair these days. It's the same color Caroline's own mother used back in the fifties when that was the only bottle that would completely cover gray.

"Excuse me," Caroline calls from the porch, and then, "I'm talking to you, the person in my bushes." Because, really...

The head pops up then and the girl is small, not much taller than the azaleas. A child, then? With that color hair? And, Lord, is that an *orange* streak in the front? What is her mother thinking? But Caroline knows children rarely do what we'd like them to.

“Oh, wow,” the girl says and she is not a child, not really, just petite and so very thin. “I’m, like, really sorry? I, uh, just stopped by... well, here...” she bends into the bushes and straightens with a backpack.

She steps forward and Caroline tries not to shout as she calls out, “Be careful, please! You’re right in the middle of the chrysanthemums!”

“Shit!” the girl says and stretches over the plants that are now bent and very likely broken. She heads toward the porch, swinging her backpack over her shoulder as she walks. It’s a practiced casual move, one Caroline often sees on campus when she meets Wallace in his office. Dear Lord, Caroline thinks, please tell me this is not one of his students.

The girl stops in front of the peony bushes and says, “Wow,” again as she searches through her bag.

The backpack is leather and distressed, not in any sort of authentic way, but by some wholesale retailer-type who tries to pass off cheap goods as relics. It’s exactly the sort of material manufacturers would provide when Caroline asked them for in-kind donations. Hospital fundraising: thank God that thirty-year chapter of her life is over.

The girl pulls out a thin stack of white papers and thrusts them at Caroline. “These are for Professor Kovington? I stopped by his office? But he wasn’t there, so...” She waves the papers at Caroline, urging her to take them, but Caroline doesn’t want to stretch over the peony bushes. She’s not sure she can reach and, anyway, she is not Wallace’s secretary. She gestures to the steps and the girl moves around to the front of the porch.

“He isn’t here, either,” Caroline tells the girl. “He has a faculty meeting this evening, but he had office hours this afternoon. You’re sure he wasn’t in?” But Caroline is not really surprised that Wallace is missing. He is rarely where he is supposed to be. Poetic license, he used to say with a grin, but Caroline has not found it amusing for many years.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” the girl says as she stops at the bottom of the steps. “I went by, like, six times.” She shifts and looks toward the street, as if Wallace may be driving up at any moment. There is a glint on her nose as the last of the day’s sunlight picks up the gold in her pierced nostril.

Caroline sighs. “Why didn’t you just slide it under the door of his office?” she asks, but, of course, that’s the wrong question. What Caroline really wants to know is, why is this girl here? What is she doing in their front yard and, especially, in the azalea bushes? And how does she know where Wallace lives? Lord, their address isn’t on that ridiculous website of his, is it?

The girl looks down at her paper as if the correct answer might be written there. There’s a tattoo around her thin wrist, a sort of heavy chain that Caroline would have scolded Kate about. For God’s sake, Caroline would have said, don’t you know that tattoos were used to make female slaves more attractive? And here you go, walking around like you’re somebody’s property! But this child is not her daughter and Kate, thirty now, has three tattoos—none of them chains, thank goodness at least for that.

“Well, see, I, uh, had an appointment?” the girl says and looks up. “He was going to talk to me about my poems, you know?”

That's what you think, honey, Caroline does not say. Wallace only talks about his own poems.

"I wasn't going to, you know, stop here. I was just coming by and, well. Wow. I don't know, I just..."

"You just wanted to see what was in the bushes?" Caroline watches the girl's right shoulder twitch. Caroline wonders if maybe the girl is on some sort of drug. Maybe speed, or something in that family? Drugs all are so complicated now, with detailed preparation techniques and names with hard consonants. She can't keep any of them straight—what they're supposed to do, what they're made of. Marijuana was such a friendly drug, so much more social even than alcohol. It's a pity that it's gone out of fashion, Caroline thinks, although Kate says it's making a comeback.

The girl's shoulder twitches again and she blushes. She really does have lovely skin, although it's hard to tell with that ill-suited hair and that horrible black t-shirt with its large holes and tiny skulls.

"Actually, I, like..." The girl looks down and studies her purple toenails. Then, she jerks her head up, squints over Caroline's shoulder and says with a little fierceness, "I had to pee."

Caroline lifts an eyebrow, squints, and nods once. It's her "You got to be fucking kidding me" look, as Kate calls it, although Caroline doesn't care for that word. On that, she agrees with Wallace. Profanity is such a cheap way to make a point.

"Well..." Caroline begins and almost says, "You could have driven to a gas station," but she notices there is no car on the curb. The girl also looks at the road, as if perhaps her car had followed her without her knowing it. "Did you walk here?" The

campus is a good six miles from here, and there's no way to avoid the interstate. Caroline can just imagine this girl slumping along the ramp where all those cars fly by with no regard to speed limits.

The girl shifts her cheap backpack to the other arm and shrugs the loose papers toward Caroline. "Yeah, but, uh, well, I didn't realize it was this far and, well, my cell phone's, like, dead." She lifts her chin again in that fierce little manner of hers and says, "I couldn't call anybody for a ride so I just said 'fuck it,' right? And I kept on going."

Caroline sighs. "Yes. And now you're here." *And how will you get home?* Caroline does not ask. She reaches for the papers and the girl twitches again as she passes them over. "I'll make sure he gets them."

Caroline turns toward the door—she should really leave this girl on the porch, she is absolutely no concern to Caroline, why should she be? —but this little child looks tired, and it is after five now. It will be night before she makes it home and, small town or not, she shouldn't be walking in the dark, especially along that interstate.

"Would you like to use the phone to call a friend for a ride?" Caroline asks over her shoulder.

The girl lifts her arm and pushes her hair off her forehead as she nods. Caroline eyes the red dotted oval on the soft underside of the girl's arm. *Is that a bite mark?* Caroline remembers when Kate was almost twenty, dating that miserable little musician who used to leave blue fingerprints on Kate in that same area. "Is he shaking you?" Caroline would ask, running her own fingers over the bruises, and Kate would shrug and yank her arm back. All those years of protesting and demonstrating and demanding

equality, and for what? Caroline often speculates. We build our own walls and then we paint them.

“Well, come on, then,” Caroline says, and holds the screen door open.

The girl schleps her backpack over her shoulder, tugs on her jeans that are, quite frankly, falling off that tiny frame of hers, and follows Caroline into the house.

“Wow. This room is, like, so great, you know?” the girl says and twitches. “I mean, it’s almost astral or at least that’s how it feels with the blue ceiling.”

“Thank you.” Caroline studies her own living room. The little poet is right: it *is* astral. It’s almost a perfect definition for the room with its white slip-covered couches and its apricot-painted shelves full of books and photos that sit under a Pottery Barn blue sky.

“The phone is on the wall in the kitchen,” Caroline says and tilts her head to the right. “Help yourself.”

The girl nods and steps through the swinging doors that lead to the kitchen, the last door bumping her backpack as she walks through. When Caroline and Wallace first left Boston and moved here, Wallace called the doors “saloon shutters” and Kate would waltz through them dramatically, one twelve-year-old arm up in a swoon, the other poised on her hip. “One chocolate milk, honey, and make it fast,” she would slur at Caroline as Wallace stepped around Kate on his way back to his office. “I am simply *parched*.”

Caroline slips off her shoes and sits down on the arm of the sofa. She listens to the rotary dial of that old kitchen phone, red and worn with a cracked receiver, but it came with the house and Caroline won’t part with it. It’s a wonder, though, that the girl even

knows how to use it. All that technology right at everyone's fingertips and we're all degenerating around it. Or, Caroline often muses, our decline just may be *because* of it.

The girl speaks quietly and hangs up and lifts the phone again. More rotary dialing, the click of the spin as it shuffles back, and Caroline realizes she still is clutching this girl's poems. Caroline stretches to place them on the coffee table when she notices the title "Astral." So much for the living room, she thinks. It must be on someone's vocabulary list this week.

But the first line of the poem isn't about celestial blue ceilings or any sort of ethereal ambience. No, it's about vaginas, possibly the little poet's in the kitchen, although it's hard to tell with the "you." Wallace often mentions at those tedious spouse-invited faculty get-togethers that the best advice he ever received about his own writing came from his high school English teacher: "Second-person is so *you*... *overused* and *misused*." But perhaps that applies only to his prose?

Caroline has just reread the first line and the rest of the stanza— "You call the center, where legs part and passion pants, elysian, eternal, but can't you call it like it is? Can't you feel it's just the earth and it's moving, maybe under you or maybe just away?" —when she hears the rotary spin of the phone begin again.

For a moment, Caroline allows herself to remember the international graduate student from Armenia who Wallace repeatedly termed "very promising, indeed." It was no surprise, really, when Miss Armenia stood in this living room, her hair also black, but naturally so, of course. "I think you to know," she said with this poet's same fierceness. "We love each other. It is very much."

Caroline looks at the closed kitchen doors. But this girl? This *child*? Caroline highly doubts it. She shakes her head and returns to the poem.

The voice shifts in the second stanza—Caroline can never fully resolve herself to Wallace’s fierce insistence that there are no rules in poetry, that’s the beauty of it, the wonder—and she frowns as she reads, “He tells her it means everything and nothing. He calls her the air, but says he doesn’t need to breathe. He says her name, he says it to her eyes, but there is a silent space behind his words, and she is a nullity—they are all in his abyss—and he doesn’t want to be the keeper of the key.”

The kitchen doors swing open, and Caroline jumps as the girl slides through. My God, Caroline thinks, I’m acting like one of those meddling old women who shuffle through other people’s mail. She rests the papers in her lap, covers the poem with her hand and straightens her back.

“Did you find someone to give you a ride?” Caroline asks the orange stripe in the girl’s hair.

“No, I left some messages, but I, like, don’t have everybody’s number? I mean, they’re all in my cell and, well, it’s dead.” The girl says and looks at Caroline’s lap.

“Would a phone book help?” Caroline asks, and the girl twitches and shakes her head.

“No, they’re all, like, students? They’re ephemeral to Missouri, you know?” Caroline nods and wonders if the second poem is titled “Ephemeral.” “Lots of my friends don’t even have, you know, house phones.” The girl shifts that cheap backpack to her other arm, and Caroline notices a bruise on the girl’s collarbone when her shirt slides off the shoulder. “But, it’s all right. I’ll just walk or hitch. No biggie.”

Caroline frowns and stops herself from telling this child how dangerous hitchhiking can be. Doesn't anyone read the newspapers? But the young never think anything can happen to them, especially young women, Caroline thinks. They're all so heedless with their bodies, as if they could just run out and purchase another if someone breaks it and they never worry about the damage that could be done to their spirits. And that type of damage is not "ephemeral," not at all.

"Well," Caroline says, and, as she stands, the poems, forgotten on her lap, slide to the floor. "Oh! I'm sorry." She bends to pick them up, but the girl drops her backpack and rushes over. She falls to her knees and slides them frantically toward her as if they might blow away.

"They're, like, ordered? You know, sequenced?" the girl says from the floor, and Caroline sighs.

"Why don't you put them in Wallace's office?" Caroline says, and points to the stairs. "First door on the left."

The girl twitches and nods, studies the order of the poems as she walks to the stairs. She starts her ascent cautiously, as if she might get lost on the narrow staircase. Caroline watches that little frame carry itself up the steps—her left hand on the railing, her chain tattoo begging to be twisted and her low-rise pants that announce to the world she's not wearing any underwear—and Caroline sighs. She is going to have to give the little poet a ride home.

How long can it possibly take to drop off some poems? Caroline wonders as she retrieves her purse and keys from the kitchen. She looks at the clock—*where* is

Wallace? —and then she hears the double ring of a phone. It is not her kitchen phone. She disconnected her cell six months ago when she retired and, anyway, Caroline realizes as she steps through the swinging doors, it is coming from that cheap little backpack.

That little sneak, Caroline thinks. Dead battery, my foot. She sets her keys and purse on the coffee table and lifts the backpack with two fingers. She holds it in front of her as if it's something alive. She starts to call the little poet—the phone is still ringing, hopefully it's someone who can give her a ride—but Caroline realizes she doesn't know the girl's name. *Was it even on her poems?*

The phone stops and Caroline looks at the stairs. She finds that she is a little afraid. It's ridiculous, but nonetheless, Caroline is hesitant to go up and confront the girl with her fully functional phone. Why is she here, really? Why the lie? What could she possibly want?

Over the years, Wallace has had his share of disturbing students. Back in Boston, at a city college, there was a boy who brought a gun to class after Wallace wrote an unkind note on the top page of the boy's poems: "It's horrifying to think that a tree was murdered so this could be produced." But the boy left the gun in his pants, rubbing the handle of it while Wallace—with his classic bravado—ignored it and continued his lecture. At the end of class, the boy left quietly.

Here, in Missouri, where the private college president often introduces Wallace as "our very own Pulitzer Prize recipient," his students are primarily children like the little poet upstairs: white and young, the daughters and sons of accountants or actuaries. Their poems are often agonizing in their attempts to be meaningful, but Caroline knows that's

not really fair. At least, they're not apathetic, and that's the world's greatest danger, Caroline believes, say what you like about personal politics.

Caroline looks at the staircase. Where *is* the poet? What could she be doing up there?

Caroline climbs the stairs slowly, one hand on the rail, the other holding the backpack. She realizes that she is walking softly, almost silently with her bare feet and her careful avoidance of the creaks in the stairs. It's ridiculous, Caroline knows, but she creeps the same way a teenaged Kate did when she came home too late.

At the top of the stairs, the hall is empty. Caroline turns to the left and walks quietly into Wallace's office. It's exactly as he always leaves it, his desk clear except for the poet's thin stack of papers and a yellow pad of paper. Caroline steps back and looks down the hall. The door to the bathroom is open and empty. Caroline looks at the bedroom door. *If that child is in there...*

Caroline hears a scratching coming from Wallace's office. She steps in again and walks toward his desk, her bare feet buried in his deep carpet.

There is more scratching and then Wallace's chair moves slightly, its swiveled back shifting toward the window. As Caroline reaches the front of Wallace's desk, his chair suddenly jerks.

Caroline peers over the desk and there is the little poet. She is lying on the floor, her head under Wallace's chair. Her arm with the bite mark is raised, her fingers high and hidden as she scratches away at the bottom of the chair's seat.

When Caroline clears her throat, a bit obnoxiously, the girl gasps. “Shit!” she pants and jumps, her hand falling to her side, her fingers, Caroline notices, gripping the handle of the small penknife Wallace keeps in his desk.

The girl sits up suddenly and bumps her temple on the seat of Wallace’s chair. “Shit,” she says again and struggles to stand while Caroline watches and wills herself to not take a step—not one—backward and away from this child and that little but open knife.

“What are you *doing*?” Caroline asks. Her voice is sharp and Caroline does not let it quiver.

“Wow. I, like, dropped something?” The girl steadies herself as she stands.

“I don’t think so,” Caroline says and looks the little poet straight in the eye.

“What are doing with my husband’s knife? Are you *carving* on the chair?”

“I, uh, I...” the girl shakes her head, her orange streak covering her eyes. “I was...” she shrugs and sinks into Wallace’s chair, her hands in her lap. “I just...”

Caroline tosses the girl’s backpack on the floor and places her palms flat in front of this child’s poems as she leans into the desk. “Why are you here?”

The girl shakes her head, her eyes down. “I don’t know,” she mumbles and then she straightens and looks at Caroline. “He doesn’t see me, you know? I’ve read everything he’s ever written. I mean *everything*, even his early stuff that’s not ever listed in his anthologies, you know what I mean? Those villanelles even, the ones about cinnamon? You know, that series, ‘the dust that dusts?’”

Caroline winces and nods.

“And, well, I *get* it, I do, I get *him*, sorry, but, well, I do and still he doesn’t *see* me.” The girl shifts and studies her backpack on the floor beside Caroline. “He stands up there in class and he says all these things about art and work and all of that sticks to you, it echoes, it’s like his words are in my head, like he’s *intrinsic* to me, like something stuck, you know?” The poet looks up and twitches. “I just want him to see me. And he says to stop by, he says we’re all poets, he says it’s all about the art and then he reads these words that he writes and it’s like you *see* him, you know? You really see him? And how many people can you say that about, right? But he doesn’t, like, see you back, you know?”

Caroline does not nod, but she knows Kate would have agreed with this little poet. “How can you stay with him?” Kate asked Caroline a few years ago, when Kate became engaged. “I mean, how do you reconcile yourself with basically just being Dad’s distraction from his work?”

Caroline had kept drying dishes, her shrug a shoulder that shifted as it reached to place the serving platter on the top shelf. “I have always had my own life, Kate,” she said, shutting the cabinet door. “I do not require a man’s full attention every waking moment.”

But Caroline remembers when she did have Wallace’s full attention. She could not describe how that felt, to have a poet like Wallace study her, to memorize the curve of her chin, to scribble words on his hand when she laughed, to wake in the middle of the night to find him watching her as she slept, one hand on his pen, the other in her hair.

He can’t see you, he doesn’t even want to, Caroline should explain to this little poet. There is a price that comes with Wallace’s words and you don’t have to pay it, you

absolutely can refuse to, but to be near him means to accept being in his... what word did this girl use in her poem? Abyss. Yes, that is what Caroline should say, and the bites, the bruises, even that chain tattoo and your horrible hair and your poked, pierced nose, you don't have to pay that to be seen, either. You certainly do not, no matter who is asking you to pay, some self-important professional poet or some grubby little bully who calls his bites "kisses." All of that is *exactly* what this child needs to hear, but Caroline only says, "I think you should leave," and picks the girl's backpack off the floor and hands it to her.

The little poet nods and stands. She bends the blade of her knife against her skinny thigh, pushing it closed, places it on her poems, and walks around the desk. She lifts the backpack from Caroline's fingers and stops, her breath heavy against Caroline's shoulder. The girl sighs and ducks her head, an apology, and walks out of the room.

Caroline doesn't turn around. She stands in front of Wallace's desk and listens to the snap of the front door as it's pushed shut. She counts to twenty and imagines the girl walking across the front porch, past the chrysanthemums, and pulling out her charged cell phone around the corner. "Omigod," Caroline can just imagine the poet saying to someone else in one of Wallace's workshops, "you'll never believe what I did."

Downstairs, Caroline can hear her old red phone ringing in the kitchen. It may be Wallace, explaining why he's late, or Kate checking in or one of the editors who try to catch Wallace at home and convince him to read or publish or judge one of those hopeless little writing contests.

Caroline walks behind Wallace's desk. She sits on the floor and carefully leans back until she is lying down. She scoots under Wallace's chair. Under the seat, in the dark wood, Caroline reads, "Mandy was he."

Was here? Caroline guesses. Mandy was here? That's it, from a poet? Caroline rubs her finger along the scratched words. She stretches and feels the bones in her back pop and spread. Mandy was here, yes, but where is she? Where is Caroline?

She traps her breath in her chest, holding it tight, and then releases it slowly, a syllable at a time. The bottom of Wallace's chair is almost black. The words are scratched clean. Mandy was he. Here? Heard?

Caroline imagines the poems on the top of the desk, a thin stack weighted with words that may not be any good, how would Caroline know? But the little poet is right about some things: Caroline's living room *is* astral. The students in this small town *are* ephemeral. And, no matter who the poem is directed to, all of them—the little poet (Mandy?) and the rest of Wallace's students, well, disciples, really, and his readers and his chairs or his deans or whatever title they fling about and, yes, Kate, God, *Kate*—all of them, including Caroline, or maybe especially Caroline, are all in Wallace's abyss.

Caroline sighs and straightens. She stretches her frame until her toes reach the wall. She lifts her finger to the last carved word. *He*, her fingers trace. *He*.

GRAY MATTER

When Amanda's children were small, she showed up at the neighborhood pool with one leg smooth and shaved, the other hairy and dry. She tied her hair in a neat knot at the base of her neck and left her bangs in her eyes. Often, on days when the laundry piled up, she forgot her underwear. She slid on her jeans and told herself that when the dryer stopped, she'd dig out her favorite pair of Jockeys and put them on when they were clean and warm. But then the phone rang or someone hit the dog or one of the boys found the markers and Amanda didn't even hear the dryer buzz. Only later, when she found a minute to run to the bathroom, did she notice she'd forgotten her underwear. She sighed, zipped her jeans and remembered the photos she had taken at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, all the compliments her professors gave her. "You have such an eye for detail," they murmured, holding her prints as if they were gifts.

It was just when her husband Rob left that Amanda came into focus. It was as if his presence were a lens cap, blocking her view of herself and when he left, the cap snapped off and the angle of her world widened. She saw herself then in sharp, unforgiving light: the one shaved leg, the messy hair, the no-nonsense absence of her underwear. She saw their average suburban home, miles from the city they loved, the last stop on a cul-de-sac that turned its back to Chicago and looked flat farmland straight in the eye. She saw the cereal bowls in the sink, the chipped door frames, the corners dusty with cobwebs and dog hair. She saw their lives, a colicky baby girl that kept them up at night, older brothers that fought, not enough money, and books they meant to read

stacked up next to an unmade bed that wasn't used for sex nearly enough. She saw it all then, and a part of her that forgot Rob always seemed so happy said, "Well, of *course*, he would leave, I would too if I could," while the other part of her called him names she never said out loud in front of the children.

Even now, after thirty-four years of marriage, Amanda still believes that children should not be captive witnesses to a parent's anger or pain. We are the *parents*, for Christ's sake, she has told Rob time and again. Their problems are our problems, not the other way around, no matter what Ann Landers or any of those so-called experts might like you to believe. But even as Rob agreed, he made it difficult for Amanda to scoot their problems under car pools and soccer practices. Since they have been married, Rob has left twelve times. And each time, Amanda has soothed away the questions her children no longer ask: Where did he go? Will he leave again? And now, when they are all facing the certainty of an Intensive Care Unit, will he be able to come back?

Amanda sighs and looks at Rob who is still unconscious in the hospital bed next to her chair. She cannot study his head any longer, his scalp scraped clean, the red zigzag line of blood seeping through layers and layers of bandages. Instead, she looks at his legs, the long socks pulled over his knees. She thinks about the blood clot, the one that doesn't yet exist and the pulsating socks hope to prevent. She pictures the clot forming in protest to what the surgeons have—and haven't—done to Rob's head. She sees this clot gathering strength and traveling right to his heart, having the final say, once and for all. The hell with the brain tumor. There are many ways to die.

The curtain slides over, and before Amanda can turn, she hears a nurse call her name. "Mrs. Weis? There's a call for you. Your daughter."

Amanda follows the nurse to the station where files seem organized and computers hum.

“God, Mom!” Amanda’s daughter Lindsey says. “I’ve been trying your cell phone for hours!”

The small monitoring boxes at the nurses’ station blink and beep. “They aren’t allowed in here, honey. The equipment. But didn’t you get my message? I called your cell right after Dad’s surgery.”

“Yes, but what does it mean? My phone kept cutting out,” Lindsey says, and Amanda notes that Lindsey is angry at her mother or cell phone services or inconvenient tumors. Then, softer and quietly, Lindsey asks, “Is he *gone*?”

For a moment Amanda remembers six-year-old Lindsey, how she asked the same question, just once, after Rob left for the fourth time. Amanda thought that Rob was late for dinner, and she said, “Oh no, honey, he’s still at work,” and Lindsey nodded once.

When Rob came home six days later, Lindsey would not hug him. Lindsey never asked Amanda again where her father was. Instead, Lindsey pretended not to notice when her father’s dinner plate sat still and quiet, its empty round face an accusation. When dinner was over, she scooped the plate up and put it in the dishwasher, as if it’d been wiped clean with a half slice of bread. She slammed the dishwasher door shut and Amanda thought that everyone was right: Lindsey has always been a lot like her mother.

Amanda sighs now, “No, honey, of course not. He’s not gone. He’s resting. But, well, I guess what you heard is that, well, the tumor isn’t gone, either.”

Lindsey says, “What does that *mean*?” and Amanda almost wishes she could be the kind of mother who told the truth, one who could tell her children, they split your father’s head open and it didn’t make a goddamn difference.

“Your father’s tumor is in the frontal lobe of his brain and it’s an astrocytoma which means it has fuzzy edges that make it hard to measure in MRIs,” Amanda says, and rubs a hand over her eyes.

“So what? They left it? How can they do that?” Lindsey asks, and Amanda realizes that she is annoyed at her husband. It’s just so typical that the only part of Rob that seems incapable of leaving is a *tumor*.

“They didn’t really leave it, Lindsey. They removed what they could and they’re hoping that radiation will shrink it enough that they can try again later. It’s called ‘debulking,’ and it’s usually very successful,” Amanda says, although she has no idea if that is true.

A nurse moves behind the station and raises an eyebrow. “Look, I’ve got to go,” Amanda tells Lindsey. “I’m tying up the phone here, but don’t worry. Dad’s vital signs are strong. His prognosis is good, really. Don’t worry.” Amanda does not tell Lindsey that there are four grades to this type of tumor and her father is already Level Three. She does not explain that the frontal lobe is where memory and behavior breathe, that her father is not himself, and that if Lindsey—or Amanda—thought Rob was inscrutable before, he will be even more so now.

When Lindsey says, “I’m taking the next plane home,” Amanda shakes her head and says, “No, Lin, no. Wait. He’ll be home soon and he’d like it better for you to see

him there.” She does not tell Lindsey that Amanda is hoping that when Rob is home, surrounded by things he knows, that he will be more like a person Lindsey can recognize.

Lindsey hesitates. “You’re sure? I mean, you’re sure that he’ll be around in a few days?”

Amanda has never been able to predict where Rob will be. She doubts his death will be any different. “He’ll be here,” Amanda tells her.

The first time Rob left, Amanda called his work, the hospitals and, finally, the police. When no one had any answers—“you sure he’s not just sleeping it off at a buddy’s, hon?”—she haunted the house. She walked in and out of the dim rooms where her children slept and she looked in the laundry room, the garage and the back hall closet as if Rob were a cat that liked to hide.

It was later, in their bathroom, that she noticed his toothbrush and razor were gone. She thought of her certainty earlier—“He is not *drunk*, he is not *high*, he is not having an *affair*... something has *happened* to him, Officer”—and she felt that sureness shift to shame as quickly as undeveloped film turns to black when a door opens.

Now Amanda steps out into the hospital hall and turns on her cell phone. She calls her son Mike and gets his voice mail. She leaves the same message as before, “Call me. I’m with Dad at the University of Chicago Hospital. We need to talk.” Then, she calls her oldest son, Josh, and explains what’s happening to his wife, Ann.

“He’s on his way back from Detroit,” Ann tells her. “He was at that conference, you know, and it happened so fast,” and then Ann asks how Amanda is holding up.

“Just fine,” Amanda says, and wonders when this parent protection thing ends, when she will be able to tell her daughter-*in-law* that a man Amanda has no business still

being in love with after all these years of unexplained disappearances and unanswered questions will probably die—no, definitely *will* die—and that this is one drama of Rob’s that Amanda won’t get to miss. She will be up front and center for that final act and any questions she may have then will have definite answers, and she’ll be forced to listen to all of them.

Amanda snaps her phone shut and turns it off again. She is fifty-eight years old—she has seen a man land on the moon and a computer shrink from the size of a room to one that can fit in her purse—and she is still amazed at her cell phone, how it makes her so accessible, so *there* all the time. Invisible wires zap across the world like cracks in a sidewalk, connecting mothers with children as if they were umbilical cords.

Back during those four days of Rob’s first disappearance act, there were no cell phones, no online banking, no ATMs, no quick click that could tell her Rob had taken three hundred dollars out of their savings account and gone God knows where. It was 1981 and Reagan was President and Amanda had voted for Jimmy Carter even though she knew he couldn’t win. It was the end of something good, something clean, Amanda had known, even as she watched the hostages being released in Iran.

Rob came home the day after the hostages were flown to Washington, D.C. Amanda watched the news that evening and wondered aloud, why would they send them there for all that hoopla when they would much rather have a shower at home and climb into bed between their own clean sheets? And then she cried because it seemed as if *she* were the hostage. Her partner had escaped and she hadn’t even known that he had been in a suburban prison with three pint-sized guards. Maybe four, if he counted her and, of course, he must have.

But Rob is not going anywhere today. She sits down beside his hospital bed. The cords attached to his arms and machines hold him down more than his marriage ever did. The only thing these machines don't monitor is where he's been and where he's going.

Now Amanda worries that she may never know where Rob went. She has always imagined a long conversation near the end of their lives. Rob would say he'd become a fisherman, hitchhiked to Boulder, trailed the Cubs from town to town, meditated with monks, walked as far as he could and then back again. Or maybe Rob would confess that he had visited a lover, a woman he could not live without, but one he could not leave her for, either. Or maybe that lover was a man or a city or a spot where the sun was always bright, where fields were green and stood up in small hills. And, maybe Amanda had thought, she would be glad he told her, whatever it was, the final wash that completes a print, and she would tell him, "It's all right. It really is," and it would be.

But his memory will be the first thing to go, the doctors have said. In fact, when they removed part of the tumor, they may have "significantly altered that capacity." And, already, for the last few months, before anyone knew that Rob's brain cells were conspiring against him and gathering force, he had been acting strangely. Once he forgot the word for "butter," and even after Amanda told him what it was he wanted for his toast, he shook his head, "That's not it, but it's close."

Then it seemed as if his bad moods started like a season. They were mild at first, short-lived, a quick snap of anger where a what-can-you-do? shrug once was. Later they were full-blown raging storms, directed at waiters, drivers and even Amanda.

Rob had never been in a truly bad mood before. He'd always been content to be wherever he was. Often, Amanda complained about the region they lived in. She sweated

through the stifling summers when the air was full of hog manure and fertilizer, and, in the gray, gray winters, she dug out her old black-and-white landscape prints and hand-painted them soft washes of blue and yellow and green, always green. Sometimes, even when the weather was perfect, Amanda had a bad day, a whole spread of time when she wondered if she should have ever married, had babies, stepped into a life that fit her as snugly as her mother's wedding dress. She barked at the children, locked the bedroom door, flipped through her photography portfolio, and filled her bathtub with hot water. Rob knocked quietly and after a bit, she let him in. She took the wine glass from his hand. She straightened her shoulders so he could rub her spine. She let him read her poetry by Elizabeth Bishop, another woman who knew that you could tire of your life the way it was as much as you could need it to stay the same. Amanda stretched out on the bed and when Rob read, "Some of us stood around, waiting for the miracle," Amanda closed her eyes and shuffled the moments of all the messy miracles in her life, the portfolio she kept inside, wide open as a wound, and when he finished with "A window across the river caught the sun as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony," Amanda opened her arms and Rob crawled in and they made love and in the morning, there was spilled juice and baby spit-up and missing homework and she did not mind.

But Rob did not have bad days or bleak moods. Whenever Rob left, Amanda could never tell that his limit had been full, that his life had not turned out the way he wanted. She never saw it coming.

When Rob came home that first time, at five thirty in the morning, Amanda sat up straight in bed, as if a child had started to cry down the hall, and she said, "Is it you?"

Rob sat down on the bed and pulled her close. “It’s me, it’s me,” he whispered over and over and finally, “Don’t cry, please, don’t,” and only then did she feel her tears.

“Where were you? I thought you were dead. I called the police. I thought you were dead. Where were you? Why did you leave? Where *were* you?” and then, “You son of a bitch. You stupid, *selfish* son of a bitch. How *could* you?”

Rob cried, too. “I had to leave, can you understand? I need to know that I can leave, that I choose to be here, that I choose to come back. I need to go and not know if I’ll come back. Can you understand that?”

Amanda could understand that, she might even need that for herself, but she did not have the luxury—and, yes, let’s call it what it is, a *luxury*—to walk out a door and leave behind overdue library books, unfinished science projects, empty tissue boxes, a baby with teeth coming in, two boys with dirty hands and countless questions, even a goddamn *dog* that needed to be fed and walked. “No,” Amanda said and turned away. “I cannot understand how you can just leave your family. How you can just leave *me*.”

They were quiet for a while and then, “Do you remember those photos you took, back in school, the ones of the silverware, you know for that show?” Rob asked, Amanda’s back to him now.

“Utensils,” Amanda told the wall.

“Right, right. Well, I think about them sometimes, the way you focused in on just the prong of a fork, so close that it didn’t even appear to be a fork, but something alien and dangerous somehow.”

Amanda always thought of those photos as beautiful. The swell of a spoon, the slant of a knife's back, they said something about the power of a detail. They said something about her that she could see it and capture it.

"Well, I go around in my life, I drive to work, I play with the kids, I meet Dennis for handball on Thursday mornings, I make pasta with you on Saturday night, I shovel the driveway when it snows, and all week, I'm Rob. I'm, well, I'm a fork, I guess," Rob said, and tried to laugh. "And it's fine. But one day, it looks completely different and all I can see is this other image and I can't tell which one is distorted and which one is really me." He walked around the bed and knelt in front of her. "Can you understand that?"

Amanda did not nod. "But where did you *go*?"

Rob looked at her. "Does it matter?" And it was then that Amanda decided she would not ask him again. Call it love. Call it pride. Call it whatever the hell you like, but Amanda would not demand or beg for answers. She would stay—or she would leave—but she would not become her mother, a woman with a shrill voice and a stiff spine. Amanda might not be able to count on Rob's behavior, but she could count on her own.

But, really, what *can* we count on? Amanda wonders today, as she rests her head on the sheet beside Rob's hand. She thinks about his seizure, just two days before, how his body shook and froze. His eyes rolled back as if they couldn't bear to watch. She called 911 and then pulled him to the carpet and crawled on top of him to still his body. She listened to his heart race and felt his blood in her hair. He had bitten his tongue, but she hadn't known it then. She thought his blood was trying to escape the earthquake inside him, to push past places where most people kept contained.

Amanda strokes Rob's bandage as if it were that stray lock of hair that always fell in his eyes. Maybe Rob will live long enough for it to grow back. Maybe she can bear this. She tries to remember when she stopped being mad at him, or if she still is. After Rob came back the second time, she dropped the children off at her mother's and checked into the Holiday Inn. She drank a bottle of wine in her room and put on her tightest dress. Then, she went downstairs and sat at the bar. She let a man kiss her, hard, but she doesn't remember his face or if she was really tempted. Later, when she woke up, drained and sick, she thought she might have dreamt the man. She took a shower and wished she had been gone long enough for Rob to worry. She wanted to go home. Two could not play this game, apparently.

"Mom?" At the curtain is Mike, Amanda's second son, her middle child, the one who knows her best and uses that knowledge to comfort and pierce her. He is twenty-seven now with wild hair and baggy clothes, a semi-man who trades jobs, addresses and girlfriends like he once did baseball cards.

"Baby," she says and opens her arms wide, "I knew you'd come." But Amanda never knows what Mike will do. She watches him like farmers watch the clouds, searching for signs that God will be kind and all their hard work will pay off.

Mike kneels beside her chair and puts his arms around her. Amanda rests her head on his shoulder and he lets her, just for a moment. Then, she begins with what's gone wrong with his father's tumor, instead of what will.

Amanda repeats what she's already told Lindsey, but Mike doesn't look at her. He stays on his knees and watches Rob until Amanda tells him that the prognosis is good; Dad's vital signs are strong.

“All right,” Mike says and stands up. “So they’ve zipped up Dad’s head and they left the goddamn tumor right where they found it and they’ve got big plans to zap it with enough radiation to kill a farm animal and then what? He’s got what? A year? Six months? One?”

Amanda does not repeat the word “debulk” and that it means the goddamn tumor might be right where they found it, but that it is smaller and, hopefully, more manageable, a word that never really applied to Rob.

“You’re looking at this in the worst possible way, honey,” Amanda tells Mike, but he’s no longer looking at her. “Really, there’s so much they can do now. It’s just a matter of waiting and watching,” and just as Amanda is about to launch into new treatments being developed every day, Mike laughs a short bark.

“Jesus, Mom,” he says, and turns to her. “You never quit, do you? You never look the truth in the face and kick it in the balls, do you?” He wears his anger like his baggy clothes, loose and untucked and ready to take flight, to make impressions that can’t be taken back. He paces in the small space between the bed and curtain, his voice just contained enough not to get kicked out of a unit that quarantines the probably dying from the maybe healing. “Just once, just one time, I would like you to tell it to me *straight*.”

“I’m telling you, Mike, I don’t know,” Amanda says as Mike turns to the curtain. “We have to wait it out.”

“Well, you’re the expert on that one, Mom,” Mike tells the curtain, and Amanda thinks Mike was always angry at the wrong things, counters he bumped into, the bike when he fell, the hack photographer who hired her when Mike was nine. It was after Rob left the third time, after Amanda decided their lives could not revolve around a paycheck

that might stop coming. Rob might not come back. He might get fired. Amanda would not call his work and ask if vacation time had been approved, if anyone knew when he would be back or if Rob was deserting them, too. She took the job. She handed them her fine art degree in photography and she shot weddings, birthdays, families who faked smiles, and, once, a funeral for a woman who thought her husband never looked better. Amanda took the photos and she handed over the rolls of film to the lab. She turned her own darkroom into a storage closet and dumped her developer, toner and neutralizer behind the shed in the backyard where the grass never grew anyway.

“Mike, please,” Amanda says now. She doesn’t want to fight. She does not owe anyone—not even her son, maybe *especially* not her son—an explanation for why she waited or why she will continue to do so.

“Please, what?” Mike says, and spins around. “Please keep pretending? Please keep playing nice? Please keep acting like everything is fucking perfect?”

Amanda has never wanted anyone to pretend that everything was perfect, but she also refuses to believe that everything was imperfect. Mike chases after his life as if he were an amateur photographer attempting to capture truth. But he slows the shutter speed too much or opens the aperture eye too wide and when he processes his memories, all the images are dark and distorted. He analyzes these impressions and he believes himself to be successful—*see, this is what happened, this is who we were, this is how it felt, don’t you remember? can’t you see it?*—but Amanda studies the same images and she knows that, yes, they are technically accurate, but they lack dimension. They lack light. But then, light rays are invisible, Amanda knows that. We don’t really see light. We only see what it reflects.

“I want you to sit down,” Amanda says finally. “I want you to look at your father and tell him that you’re here. I want... I want you to be kind.”

Mike walks to the other side of the bed and sits down on the chair. His too-loose clothes puff as if they’re slowly deflating. He looks at Amanda again. “Mom. How long does he have?”

Amanda feels her shoulders droop. She pictures herself also deflating. “Three years,” she says. “At the most.”

Mike blinks. “Will he be the same? I mean, it’s the *brain*, right? That’s got to fuck him up.”

Amanda looks at Rob. She imagines standing near him in surgery, lifting his brain, weighing it in the palm of her hand, pushing the layers aside and looking deep where secrets are bound to lie, but then she remembers what the interns at this eager teaching hospital have told her. Most of the brain’s activities occur in the gray matter, the outer surface of the brain that’s made up of nerve cells and blood vessels. Nobody knows the purpose of the brain’s center, what it’s really capable of or even if it’s needed at all.

“His memory will fade,” Amanda tells Mike, “and there will be personality changes. He won’t be the person we know now.”

Mike jumps up, kicks the metal frame of his father’s bed. “We don’t know him *now*, do we, Mom? We don’t know one goddamn thing about him, not really.” Mike kicks the bed again. This time, his toe lands on the post.

Amanda stands and steps beside him. She pulls at his arm. “Mike, stop it. There are things you *do* know about your father...” she begins, but Mike flings his arm in the air, silencing her as she steps back. She does not remind Mike of the shape of his father’s

shoulder, the way he leans in when someone speaks, the countless times he carried Mike on his back or in his arms.

“Mike...” she says again, but Mike is not listening.

Mike leans into the bed, his face inches from his father. His voice is quiet now, a fierce river of words. “Why don’t you go now? Why don’t you save us the trouble, Dad? You’re good at leaving, aren’t you? One more big mystery and this time we won’t wonder where you’re at or if you’re coming back. We’ll throw your body in the ground and you’ll stay put then.”

Amanda tugs at Mike’s arm, pulls and pulls. She tries to hold him, wrap herself around his back, but Mike would never let her touch him, not for long. “Mike, for God’s sake, stop it...”

He straightens so quickly Amanda jumps. Mike spins to face her. “And you’ll be right here, won’t you, Mom? You’ll be right here just waiting. And when he dies, you won’t even ask *God* why. You won’t even be mad at *God*, will you?”

Amanda nods once, a hard shake, and turns away from Mike to face Rob. She pulls her palm to her shoulder and then swings it wide, the back of her hand landing at the edge of Rob’s lifeless jaw in a flat whack. Mike gasps. “Holy shit, Mom.”

She lifts her hand again, her palm high, Rob still and silent, but here, *here* goddamnit, and Mike grabs her wrist, turns her to him. “Mom? What the fuck?”

Amanda shakes her head, looks hard at her son. “Is that what you want? Is that who you need me to be?” She pulls her arm free, points to Rob and hisses, “This is *my* husband, do you hear me? This is mine, my problem, my life, *mine*, do you hear me?” She turns, bends and drops her head on Rob’s chest, her fingers too tight around his wrist.

She listens to the beat of his heart. “Get out of here, go,” she moans to Mike and after a moment the curtain slides as he leaves.

Amanda lifts her head and sinks into the chair. She reaches to hold Rob’s hand in her own, lifts his fingers to her mouth. He is here, he is still *here*, and she needs to know, like she has never needed before, why he left. And why he always came back.

“Where did you go?” she asks the tips of his fingers. “Why did you leave?”

A nurse pulls aside the curtain; her soundless shoes slow as she checks the IV bag. “He’s here, dear,” the nurse says. She reaches for the clipboard at Rob’s feet. “Don’t you worry, now. He’s right here, just waiting to wake up.”

SAY WHAT YOU MEAN TO SAY

The bike falls hard and there is heavy pain and wet weeds and John Mayer in her headphones, too loud: *Take all of your wasted honor, every little past frustration.* Her left shoulder is broken or dislocated or. Feet, work boots, a man stands beside her. She reaches into the weeds with her right hand, rubs the earth, her fingers frantic, her glasses gone. *Take all your so-called problems, better put 'em in quotations.* He kneels, his face soft with new moon, and God, if she could just *see*, if she could just move her. He straddles her, one knee each side, weight on her rib cage. *Say what you mean to say, say what you mean to say, say what you mean to say.* His hand covers her mouth. Another unsnaps her bike helmet, jerks it off, tosses it into the weeds. She reaches up, one hand, the only one, flailing, his face, his eyes, it's the eyes you target, it's. He shifts, yanks her arm, forces it down, a knee pins her elbow. *Say what you mean to say, say what you mean to say.* There is a pause, there is a moment, a moment when she thinks maybe, please, God, maybe, a moment when his hand over her mouth hesitates, lifts. *Walking like a one-man army, fighting with the shadows in your head.* A pulling back, a fluid movement, and then his arm is back, his hand a fist, a straight shot blurry in the dusk, and her cheekbone, a bright pop, something soft and useless. *Living out the same old moment, knowing you'd be better off instead.* She is crying or moaning or, God, if she could just take these headphones off, if she could just see, if she could. He lifts, leans forward, his weight off her chest. She pants, fills her lungs. *Say what you mean to say, say what you mean to say, say what you mean to.* He reaches inside his jacket, camouflage? Army green? It's the

details you have to remember, it's. A flash of silver. A knife? God, a knife, another pocket, what is it, God, if she could just see. *Say what you mean to say, say what you mean to say, say what you mean to say.* A ripping sound, a tear, the knife tossed to the ground, black tape over her mouth, don't throw up, don't throw up, don't. *Have no fear for giving in, have no fear for giving over.* He rises, stands. She scrambles, claws at the weeds, one knee in the dirt, the other poised. He kicks, the boot under her rib. She falls. He kicks, her side, her stomach, her left breast, her shoulder, God, not the shoulder. *Even if your hands are shaking, and your faith is broken. Even as the eyes are closing, do it with a heart wide open... wide...* She rolls, pulls her knees to her chest. His boot on her back, her legs, Jesus, her shoulder, her head. *Say what you mean to say, say what.* The earphones shift, tilt, fall. Crickets, trucks less than a mile away. The kicks stop, breathe through your nose, breathe. His hand on his belt, his voice soft. "Bitch."

YOU ALWAYS DID BELIEVE IN STUFF LIKE THAT

It is Florida in early December. The sky has lost a shade of blue. Thin clouds stretch and the air lightens. Leslie breathes in deep. It is early evening and Leslie is running, her heels hard against the pavement. She is not thinking of Clayton. She is not imagining him waiting at home, the car accident a mistake, a misunderstanding, a paperwork problem or a horrible joke, amnesia maybe or a kidnapping or whatever the hell it is that brings soap actors back to life after they've been dead and buried for two months and thirteen days. But who's counting? Not Leslie. No, today Leslie is simply running.

She reaches the intersection, turns to the right and slows. There is a group of cranes standing in the middle of the road. They appear agitated. Their silver wings jerk and their long necks twitch. Leslie runs closer. The cranes are in a loose circle. Two stand on the grass in the median, another on the curb, four more on the gray pavement.

The cranes are taller than Leslie imagined. She has never been this close to one before. They must be at least four feet and as Leslie nears, she sees there is another crane. It lies in the road on its side, one wing flat against the concrete, the other broken and twisted, its feathers standing in disbelief.

Leslie pulls off her headset and it is then that she can hear it, a chorus of cries, deep rattles of k's and r's and pain. It is not coming from the crane on the pavement—Leslie is close enough now to tell that its white chest is still—it is rising from the cranes standing, mourning. They lower their red heads and study the fallen, their orange eyes

tearless and wild. They don't glance at Leslie as she nears or even as she sinks to her knees beside them. They know there's nothing an animal like her can do.

--So, when you saw the dead bird...

--Crane. Sandhill crane, actually.

--Yes, the crane. When you saw the dead crane, that was the first time that you felt, uh, empathy for...

--It's not empathy. I've told you that. It's more, well, contagious.

--Contagious? How so?

March 15, 2005

Dear Clayton,

It should be you writing this letter instead of me. I don't mean that I should have been the one who ran the red light and got hit by a truck. Let's face it. I would have seen the truck. I stop at yellow. I drive defensively. You used to call me a grandma, but now, well now... You were reaching for your cell phone, weren't you? Or messing with your iPod. Or looking up at the palm trees and smiling to yourself. Fifteen years in Florida and still an Illinois farm boy who can't believe a sky can stay so blue. No gray and here it is October. And, of course, I wasn't there. Just go get the bagels, I said. Give me twenty more minutes and then I'll get up.

We'll go to the beach. Just twenty more minutes, thirty tops, okay?
Don't forget the cream cheese. I think I said please.

Enough. What I meant when I said it should have been you writing this letter is that *you* would have believed that I could read it. You would have nodded at the doctor—I go to a shrink now, can you imagine that? Me? And not even a shrink in Tampa, some hick out here who has an office in a strip mall next to Wal-Mart. Did I tell you I'm back home? Back on the farm? I go into Pontiac for the shrink. They have a Wal-Mart now. It's awful. Everything else has closed. It's past the John Deere dealership, right before the river where we used to make out in high school. I'm back in the one place we couldn't wait to leave. Even back in my bedroom. My *Grease* poster is still on the wall, track ribbons all over the dresser. It's all so horribly unbelievable. Anyway. If *you* were writing this, you would have scribbled away and you would have felt me behind you, one hand in your hair, the other around my grandfather's coffee mug, the one with the chip I always cut my lip on. You might have even smelled the coffee. "French roast," you would have told your own mother. "She's here."

You always did believe in stuff like that.

The dry cleaner hands back the white shirts, starched just the way Clayton liked them, stiff enough to stand the heat even though it's January in Florida and the air has lightened and cooled. Leslie blinks when the Korean man asks her, "Where you husband been?"

"Europe," she lies. It's amazingly easy. "He's been setting up a computer system for a company over there." It could be true. Could have been. Last year, his boss mentioned Prague, a possible new client, a great opportunity.

"Tell him, we ask for him," the man says, gestures to his mouth. "Always big smile, very big."

Leslie nods, places her wallet back in her purse, shifts the shirts, and searches for her keys. She feels it first in her stomach, a jab that spreads and thickens. Someone else must have come into the room. There is pain everywhere. If it were smoke, Leslie would never find her way out of the building. She is covered in pain, it settles on her skin. She shakes. She does not look up—she will not—because she cannot bear to put a face with this pain, not right now, not when she is standing here holding her dead husband's perfectly pressed shirts. No. Her own pain is enough.

Leslie stumbles, her head still down, her hand in her purse, and heads toward the door. "Miss?" she hears, the Korean man, calling her back. "Your keys. Miss."

Leslie sighs and straightens. She turns. Behind the counter, the man holds her keys. A small woman, also Korean—his wife?—stands beside him, her back to Leslie, her hand on the wheel that spins the dresses and suits and shirts of dead men. It stops on a Communion dress. Its white veil waves.

Leslie hurries back, takes the keys, tries a tight smile. As the door closes behind her, the man talks to his wife, a river of hard consonants, clipped clean, a torrent of words Leslie swims out from under.

--I told you, I felt the pain *before* he started talking. Before I even knew she was in the room. I don't think anything he said *caused* her pain. She was already feeling it. I told you that.

--Yes, but you at least need to consider the possibility that it was your own pain you were feeling and not the woman you never even spoke to.

--

--Leslie?

--I was feeling both.

April 30, 2005

Dear Clayton,

I'm sorry I haven't written, but, well, let's face it, you *are* dead. It's not like you're sitting on some cloud stalking the mailbox. But, anyway, this isn't about you. It's about *me*, at least that's what my shrink tries not to say out loud. None of what I'm feeling really has anything to do with you. It's me, projecting my pain onto everyone else so that I don't have to deal with the fact

that you will never again place your palm on the small of my back.
You will never again lead me through a party I don't want to be at.
You will never again lift my hair out of my jacket and lean in to
smell my shampoo. You're dead and dead people don't smell
shampoo and I can't deal with that so I've become a crazy person
who thinks everyone else is suffering even though the whole wide
fucking world is just fine and I'm the only one who can't sleep in
the middle of a bed.

I've become bitter, did you notice that? It's not attractive.
But I'm not crazy, Clayton. When you died, something, well,
awakened in me. And now I can feel things, awful things—not just
sense them like you always could, but really *feel* them—and I can't
shut it off. It's ironic, isn't it? All those endless arguments with
you facing my back and me facing the wall. "Just tell me what
you're feeling," you'd say, and you thought I was being cold or
stubborn, but I didn't have the words. No, that's not even right. I
didn't even know what I was feeling. You suck it up in my family
and before you know it, you've forgotten what you've swallowed.

But now I'm choking on everyone else's pain. It's like I'm
this magnet for everything horrible and I can't shake it off. It stays
there, it clings to me. I feel everything that person does.

God, Clayton, you know what really kills me? (Sorry, poor choice of words.) But what really bothers me—no, *crushes* me—is that you are the only person who would have believed me.

It is February in Florida, a bit colder than the bay side usually gets. The beach is deserted, the sand a wrinkled sheet. The wind rattles the waves, shows its teeth at the surf. The sky pales next to the water's deep blue. Leslie sits wrapped in a blanket facing the open sea. Her hair flies, forms a screen between her face and the city across the bay. For a moment she longs for a cigarette, to inhale something warm and heavy into her chest. But Leslie doesn't smoke. She used to hate it when her father did. Cancer sticks, she said to him, an earnest child. Coffin nails, Daddy.

A car door slams. Shit. Company. Leslie has quit her job. There are too many people on the way there and home again and lunch time, God, that's the worst, people in cars and standing outside of banks. So much pain it feels as if the air is heavy with it, its own kind of crushing humidity. But everyone else can breathe and no matter where she looks, the world moves on with its white teeth and its blow-dried hair and its starched shirts. It enough to make you never want to leave the house.

Even here, even now, on a *beach*, for God's sake, Leslie feels a small throb of pain, like a stitch in her side when she runs in cold weather. It is a pain she is getting used to. She recognizes it—this ache—and knows it may worsen as the family from the car moves closer. Please let it be something minor. There is no way to leave without passing them on the narrow path between the turtle nests and sand marsh. *Please* let it pass.

The family crosses over to the edge of the water. The woman is tall and thin, her husband even taller. A small child, maybe six with red hair that sparks in the sun, runs ahead of them, her bare feet in the surf.

They are maybe fifty feet from Leslie, the child farther away, scrambling up the coast. The wind and the water mask their sounds, but the couple is arguing. The woman's long arms strike at the sky. The man turns his head, studies the city across the bay. The pain is manageable, a small weight not unlike the one Leslie wakes with each morning.

The woman stops and sits down in the sand. The man studies her head for a moment and then squats beside her. The woman calls out a name that catches in the wind. The child looks up. She turns and wanders toward them. Leslie feels the pain begin to spread, it snakes around to her spine. The man straightens and makes a sharp sound. The girl slows, but moves closer. The woman puts her head on her knees. Leslie takes a long, deep breath the wind whisks away. More words from the man. He is standing now, his face hard. The girl passes them carefully, a half-circle of space. She wanders on, a gentle sway, until she is between Leslie and the man and the woman. Leslie stifles a moan. The girl sinks into the sand, her back to the sea.

The pain is all around her, the wind driving it into her center. It circles her in a frenzy. She cries out, pulls the blanket tighter. But it swarms around her waist, her back, her shoulders. She tries to stand, but it hits her knees and she bends into the sand. The child looks up. She studies Leslie—an appraisal, an animal recognizing one of its own—and then the girl bends her head, studies a shell. The sand pulsates with pain and Leslie falls into it.

--Do you find it significant that it was a child that, uh, contributed to your decision to return home?

--Not really.

--Leslie, let me ask you a personal question. Why didn't you and Clayton have children?

--Oh, God. You think... No. It's nothing like that. We'd been together since *we* were children. We put each other through school. We just paid off the loan last year. We weren't ready. Well, Clayton wasn't ready. But we had time. I mean, I'm still in my thirties. Anyway, no. It was nothing like that.

It is early June and too hot for Illinois. The pavement steams in the Wal-Mart parking lot, but Leslie still takes the last spot in the back row. The automatic doors blink open and closed and you never know who is coming out or in or what they're hiding under their tank tops and t-shirts, wearing their polite Midwest masks. It's better to park farther away, to walk near the drainage ditch by the highway and then cut over to his office, the small black letters on the window, Pontiac Counseling Services.

Leslie opens the door and enters the small lobby with its empty desk and that plastic plant that can't die. There is a hot ache of pain in the room and Leslie looks at the doctor's closed door. Who is in there? Leslie has never seen another patient here.

There is a stiff chair in the corner, a cushion just wide enough to welcome a short wait. Leslie hesitates before she sits. She breathes through the pain, looks at the closed door. She hears her doctor, a loud murmur without its usual even tone. Maybe she should

wait outside. Leslie cannot handle being in this small lobby when whoever is carrying that pain opens the door to leave. She can tell from here—even through the closed door—that it is new pain, raw and red.

The door opens just as Leslie rises to leave. A shove of hurt rushes out, pushes Leslie back into her seat, grinds its palms into her ribs. Her doctor stands at the door, the office empty behind him. He drops his cell phone into the pocket of his pants and smiles. “Leslie, come in.” He gestures for her to stand, to enter the room before him. Leslie pulls her purse to her chest, a shield, and walks past him into his office.

Leslie sits where she always does, in a tan corduroy chair that reminds her of her father’s winter work pants. She takes a long deep breath, but the pain has started to move, to swirl about the small room. It spreads, a thick cover that quivers and stings.

“Well, Leslie, how are you feeling today?” her doctor asks as he shuts the door and settles into his own chair.

“How are *you*?” Leslie blurts. “I mean, what’s happened?”

The doctor flinches—yes, a slight flinch, Leslie is almost sure of it—and then he tilts his head. “What do you mean?”

Leslie is shaking now, the pain pulsating in the small space between them.

“There’s pain everywhere.” She does not mean to whisper. “It must be yours.”

The doctor laughs, a forced bark. “Leslie, *I’m* fine. Let’s talk about you.” He opens his notebook, clicks his pen.

Leslie has never stayed so close to pain like this before. She looks at the door. “I don’t think I can.”

Her doctor leans closer, his eyes earnest. “Leslie, you *can*. You must. What you’re feeling is your own pain and you need to...” The cell phone rings in his pocket. He jumps. “Oh! I’m sorry. I forgot to turn it off.” He reaches in and glances at the name of the caller. Pain hovers between them, static and certain.

He pushes the mute. “Sorry. Now...”

“It’s your wife, isn’t it?” Leslie swallows, gestures at the photo on his desk, a woman with brown hair and a slight smile holding a boy, maybe two. “Or your son?”

There is another flinch or, at least, a tightening around his mouth and a hard, fast shake of his head. “Leslie.” He shuts his notebook, leans back in his seat. “My wife is fine. My son is fine. They both happen to be in Wisconsin right now, visiting my wife’s mother. Everything is fine, all right?”

Leslie nods, but the pain has started to steam and there is a wet, burning smell like rice sticking to the bottom of a pan.

“Let me be frank with you, Leslie.” The doctor crosses his legs. “This, uh, pain that you describe is actually a sophisticated defense mechanism of the trauma you experienced with Clayton’s death. It’s, uh, an anesthetizing condition, a transference, if you will, and I’m afraid that you’ve now included me in this, well, this delusion, and...”

“Bullshit,” Leslie says, and the pain lifts in surprise. “Bull *shit*.” Leslie lifts her chin, faces her doctor and shakes her head. “That is absolute, total and complete bullshit.” Three bullshits in a row. Clayton would have loved it, *just look at his face, baby, no wonder his wife left him*. Leslie begins to laugh, a huge, gulping sob of a laugh that starts at the back of her throat. She muffles her mouth with her hands, her body shakes, her shoulders heave. There is pain still, yes, but it is lighter, a bass chord to her muffled cries,

her snorts, her gasps. A draft of pain, really, not a crushing wave, Leslie thinks as she laughs, her head now on her knees. She laughs until there are no sounds left. She laughs until she is empty.

June 15, 2005

Dr. Thompson: Patient Termination

Transcription of the Treatment of Leslie Williard

- Patient's delusions have recently fixated on psychiatrist, claims sensory and physical effects of psychiatrist's proximity due to his "pain"
- Recommended medications: Thorazine (50 mg); Sertraline hydrochloride (25 mg); patient refusal of both.

July 9, 2005

Dear Clayton,

Do you remember when we read *Prozac Nation*? Well, we didn't really read it. Nobody really read it. But we scanned the beginning, all that whining and moaning, so Gen X (or is it Y, now? Z?), so open and ugly and, God, we were so smug, so sure that people just didn't have the courage to make the decision to be happy. We really said that, in front of people, too. "It's a decision to be happy, an active choice you make every day. Lots of people have shit happen to them. They *choose* to get over it, they choose happiness." We actually said that to people. Well, you said it. But I nodded.

I'm pretty sure I remember nodding.

MIDDLE GROUND

A novella

Summer, 1975

Auburn, Missouri

Weeds
Miami Morgan

When you kneel in my mama's garden, the sun stretches over you like a heavy blanket you can see right through. If you keep your back to the sky and your eyes on your hands, you'll find that the dirt is full of magic and the weeds know secrets that they won't tell, no matter how hard you pull.

Tara and I are weeding today and her curly hair is almost straight with sweat. It hangs down over her shoulders that are just a little pink and every now and then she pushes her bangs out of her eyes with the back of her hand. She straightens up, stretches her back like she's posing for a picture and she looks at the house or the barn or the road. She never looks at me. Everybody says she looks like Mama so I guess that's right, but to me she looks like a lady you'd see in a magazine at Mama's beauty shop. Those ladies look at you so hard from behind the shiny pages that you can't see their smiles unless you cover their eyes with your hand.

"God, Miami," Tara says, and I jump a little. She points to a weed with the four fingers of her digger. "You're just pulling off its head. You're nowhere near the root."

"So?" Tara might be fourteen and five years older than me, but she's not so smart. Just loud.

"So they come right back." She grabs the weed in front of me by its legs, yanks it out with a grunt and throws it into the bucket. "You want to be back out here tomorrow?"

I shrug but I don't mind. I like the dirt, the sun, the way the weeds hold on and give in, but Tara wants to go to town and she wouldn't understand anyway so I don't say

anything. I just keep pulling weeds, squatting over a green pepper I'm careful not to squish.

I like the smooth skin of the zucchini and even the smell of the tomatoes getting soft, but I wish I was working in Mama's flower garden by the house. Only Mama works in there. Every summer I can remember, Mama's slept to seven and skipped Mass, even though she goes every single school day. She prays for miracles, she always says, or, at the very least, clarity which just might be the same thing.

Mama teaches the special kids at the public school and calls them her guys even though some of them are girls. At night her bag is full of papers and pictures and pencil marks that don't have beginnings or ends, but she looks at them and smiles like somebody just gave her a present.

When I go to help Mama on Holy Days of Obligation—we get them off, but the public school still has to go because they can't talk about saints and stuff like that—I pass out papers and sharpen pencils, but mostly I just sit around and watch my mama. She looks at all of them like she's patting their arms or rubbing their shoulders, but she doesn't touch them. She just studies them like projects from art class... all of them, the ones with soft noses and smeared lips and the ones that look like us. If you ask her what's wrong with them, her voice gets stiff and she says, "Nothing at all. They just take a little more time to learn. That's all."

But in the summer, Mama skips Mass and gets up, throws on a pair of shorts and one of Daddy's old t-shirts and goes to work on the weeds before the sun gets serious. Daddy would make jokes about it. Even last summer he did. "Skipping church to play in the flowers," he'd say on his way to the barn where he parks his Chevy.

Mama just smiled and said without even looking up, “Church is where you find it, boy,” and kept pruning a cosmo or pulling crab grass.

Once a couple summers back, Daddy didn’t play with his tie or smooth out his coat when he walked by. He just stood real still and said, “You’re my church, Elizabeth.”

Mama stopped what she was doing and went over and kissed him on the mouth. Then she stuck an orange tiger lily in his pocket and I could feel her smile all the way from the porch even after she went behind the lilac bushes.

But this summer, Mama goes to Mass in the mornings, instead of her garden. She gets up and flips on the shower and doesn’t even wake us before she heads out. When we get up, there’s nothing in the house, but the smell of coffee and summer and Lemon Pledge.

Mama goes in her garden at night now, just after supper. It’s her favorite time of day when the sun’s just pretending to go to sleep and the lightning bugs are working real hard to let you know that the dark’s just another beginning. Daddy and Mama used to sit on the porch and watch us chase those firebugs. Daddy’d drink Southern Comfort with two ice cubes and Mama’d sip some lemonade and whenever we’d catch one, she’d say, “Careful now, don’t rub its wings,” and I’d stand real still and check my hands. One finger still sticky with ice cream or a cupped hand that accidentally turned into a clap and that bug wouldn’t light up the sky anymore.

But Daddy hasn’t been on the porch once yet this summer. Even before school got out, he got home later and later until he only came in when it was really night when the fried chicken was completely cold and wrapped in the fridge and I was in my pajamas

and I had to open my eyes to hear him say, “Just where are my girls?” and close them again when Mama said, “Shush, now, they’re sleeping. If you wanted to see them, you should have been home hours ago.”

A red ant crawls up my arm, but I don’t swat it away. I look around to see if more are coming, if I crushed his home and his family is mad, but I don’t see any more ants. He walks up my arm and onto my shirt and he never bites me, not once.

I finish a row and start another, and after a while the sun seems loud and I can’t hear anything but the weeds dying. So when Tara says, “What’s the deal with Mama and Daddy?” I jump and her words scatter.

Before I can put them back together, she says, “Come on. I know you know. You can hear everything in your room.” She pounds at a hard patch of Missouri mud while she watches me.

“I don’t know,” I say and move the bucket.

“Come on, Miami,” she says even louder, and for the first time I feel just how hot the sun is. It melts everything in my head.

“Fine!” Tara says, and jumps up. “Don’t tell me.”

She walks to the back wall of the garden where Daddy always hopes that the beans will climb the fence and cover up the holes, but they never do. The vines just step around those holes and the green buds sit on the top like they’re waiting for someone to come fix the fence.

I move to the tomatoes and think about what I can tell Tara. A worm sorts through the dirt like it’s also looking for the right words. It moves on, goes deeper where the sun won’t fry it and I can’t think of any sound that doesn’t mean Daddy left.

I pull a killer weed, like Mama calls them, and smile when I see the last leg of its root. I pat the tomato plant, rub its long arm. Mama would say I saved its life. Killer weeds grow right up next to you like family and take over your dirt. When nobody's looking, they wrap themselves around your legs, then your stomach, then your throat. If someone doesn't pull them out, you die. Just like that. Because only one plant can be in the same space at the same time. Everybody knows that.

Daddy left, but nobody's supposed to know. Not even me or Tara. But just Wednesday, I went out to the barn and I saw a suitcase standing where Daddy parks his car. I stayed up as late as I could, but I never heard Daddy come home and the next morning that suitcase was gone. Mama says he's real busy at work and is going to stay with Uncle Jimmy instead of driving all the way home late at night.

But sometimes in the summer, Tara and I ride our bikes out to Daddy's office. He buys us Cokes and introduces us to all the men there by saying, "Aren't I the luckiest guy in the whole world to have such beautiful daughters?"

Tara pulls her head back like she's daring them to disagree, but all they ever do is put their hand over the mouth part of their phones and say, "You sure are, Bob. You sure are."

After we finish our Cokes, we get back on our bikes. Sometimes we go down to Woolworth's and buy some candy. I like the little bottles that look like sodie pop. You bite into them, pull the top off with your teeth and drink them down in no time flat. Then you can chew on the wax bottle, if you want, even though Tara says it's disgusting. She

gets the fake cigarettes, rolls the pack in her sleeve and lets one dangle off her lip like she's Aunt Celeste.

But even when we go to Daddy's office, Woolworth's *and* the library—and take time to ride through the sprinklers—we're still home before dinner. So I think that Daddy, especially in his Chevy, could be home pretty quick, even if we do live way out here in the “boonies,” like Tara says.

I'm not going to tell Tara anything today and she's done talking to me, so I pull and pull at my weeds, and I look up and see my Aunt Mary's house under the blur of the sun. It looks back at me like it would wave if it could and I think about how there are four houses on the same farm and none of them smile the same way. I can't see the other two houses right now, but if you saw them all together Aunt Mary would tell you that they make a cross. I guess if you're looking from the highway, Aunt Mary and Uncle Carl's house is where Jesus' head would be. We're on his left hand and Uncle Pete and Aunt Kathy are on his right. Grandma used to have his feet, but she went to heaven last Christmas. Now nobody lives there, but when you go in, you can still smell cigarettes and bleach and cancer in the corners.

“Miami!” Tara hollers over from the beans. “I'm going to town with Mama. You coming or you staying with Aunt Mary?”

I shrug and look at the dirt under my fingernails. Maybe Mama will drive by Uncle Jimmy's house and Daddy's car will be right out front like it belongs there and maybe Tara and Mama will be ugly with each other and maybe all I need is to lie down on Aunt Mary's bed with my *Little House on the Prairie* book, where I know Nellie Olsen will get what she deserves and everybody will sleep in the same house tonight.

Hell and Kentucky Fried Chicken

Ms. Tara Morgan

If Sister Mary Thomas is even half right, I'm going to Hell. And if I'm not careful, maybe even jail. Or some bad reform school where girls wear even uglier uniforms than the Catholic school and try to drown you in toilets. Jesus. I'm so stupid.

I tell you one thing, though, I am not going to confession. There is no way I'm telling Father Murphy who I have known my entire life that I stole Bonnie Bell electric blue mascara. I don't care what they say about priests and privacy and how they can't reveal what you said and blah, blah, blah. Father Murphy would drag my butt to the store, make me give it back and tell Mama.

No, it's better just to keep it to myself. Hell or not. I do not need to tell Mrs. Thatcher that I took her damn mascara from her crappy little store and see her look all crinkled and old and so, "I'm disappointed in you" as if she cares. And I do not need to be stuck in the house for the entire summer. It's bad enough being there at all.

I don't know why I did it. I was just looking around while I was waiting for Mama to pick out some vitamins—that woman is always tired anymore and I finally convinced her to step into the seventies and try something. As she was looking at the medicine section, I went over to the makeup aisle and started browsing. Really. Just browsing. It was not premeditated.

Mrs. Thatcher may be one of the most uncool people you'll ever meet, but, I tell you, she has a selection. Last year, she got in Bonnie Bell and that was when we all started seeing some real improvement. Before there were pink blushes and dark green eye

shadow and press powder. Old Auburn lady stuff. Now, there's an entire aisle for "young people" as Mrs. Thatcher says. There's blue shadow with little dots of glitter in it and cherry lipstick on a string that you can wear as a necklace and little black pencils that fit in your pocket.

Anyway, I saw the same mascara that Farrah Fawcett uses. It said so right on the package and I could tell just by looking that it was what made all of her little lashes stand out and curl around. She is so beautiful. I read in *Teen* magazine that she really cares about young people and she's always trying to help. I wrote to her and asked if she could help me get a tryout on her show. I sent her a picture and everything. I think I could play her little sister. I don't have her hair—mine is curly and out of control—but I bet they know how to straighten it and feather it like hers even though nobody in this stupid town can figure out how.

Farrah never wrote me back. Daddy says he bets she doesn't even get her mail, but how would Daddy know? At least Daddy understands how cool she is. He says that *Charlie's Angels* is something he never thought he'd see on TV and shakes his head like he can't believe how lucky he is, and Mama says she wishes it was something she could stop seeing. That's just like Mama. Just the other day she said instead of wishing to be Farrah, I ought to think about really wonderful women who mean something. I said, "Like who?" and do you know who she said? Mother Teresa! Sometimes I can't believe Mama and I are even related.

So I wasn't surprised when Mama said, "Absolutely not, I am not spending \$1.95 on something that will just make you look cheap," and didn't even look at the picture of Farrah on the package.

I didn't say anything—I didn't want to give her the satisfaction—I just turned around and walked back into the beauty aisle.

But then, when I was there, I saw that I was almost completely alone. Mama was at the vitamins, some little kids were looking at candy and Mrs. Thatcher had just run into the storeroom, so I put it in my pocket. Just like that. I put the whole package of Bonnie Bell electric blue mascara in my pocket and kept my hand over it so there wouldn't be a bulge or anything. It was like I was somebody else... somebody who knew how to steal and get away with it. I just kept browsing all cool like I didn't have a care in the world.

Finally, Mama was done and we walked up to the checkout and, that's when my heart started pounding like I'd been running or something. I couldn't even talk when Mrs. Thatcher said, "Didn't you find anything, honey?"

I just shrugged and Mama said to Mrs. Thatcher, "She's just disappointed that I won't buy her any makeup," and gave me a look.

Mrs. Thatcher kind of clucked-clucked and looked at Mama as if to say, "I know how that can be" and Mama tilted her head back as if she answered, "What can you do with teenagers today?" and I just stood there like I was too stupid to get everything they didn't say. If I was going to have kids—which I'm not—I would never act like they're not there when they're standing right in front of me.

In the car, Mama backed out of the lot and said, "No matter how upset you are, when somebody asks you a question, you smile and you answer. That's called being polite, understand?"

Mama thinks I'm so stupid, but I nodded so Mama would just drive already, but she wasn't looking at me—that woman clenches on to the steering wheel like it's going

to jump out of her hands and she eyes everything like it's out to get her—and she said again, “Understand?” like I was three and I said, “Yeah” real loud.

But the whole time, I was feeling that Bonnie Bell electric blue mascara just burning in my pocket. I tell you, I was sweating so much I thought maybe the tube was leaking. I was worrying, “Now, what would Farrah say if she knew I stole her mascara?” and just as I decided that Farrah would understand what I'm dealing with here, Mama said, “How about we stop and pick up some Kentucky Fried Chicken?” and I about jumped out of my seat.

I love KFC, but Daddy hates it. Any other time I wouldn't even bring that up—maybe Mama forgot and then we wouldn't get any—but I was so busy worrying about shoplifting the mascara that I said, “But Daddy doesn't like it” without thinking.

Mama just pulled into the right lane and said, “Well, Daddy's not going to be home tonight,” as if it wasn't Friday night.

Nobody can go out on Friday night—unless it's something really big like a football game—but sleepovers and the skating rink have to wait until Saturday. Daddy says he likes to have happy hour with the Morgan Girls...it's just what he needs to cap off a tough week. He can be so queer, but most of the time, Family Night isn't that bad. It's the most fun when we play Scrabble. Daddy comes up with really great words like “senescence” or “zanadu” or some word that nobody's completely sure is right. Then he'll say, “Come on, come on, somebody try me,” and then he baaaack, baaaack, baaacks like a chicken all the way to the kitchen where he mixes another drink while we think about whether he's bluffing or not.

When he comes back, somebody has to say, “I challenge you,” or nothing at all. The way we play is if you’re right about a challenge, you get all the points that the challengee would have gotten if the word was real. But if you challenge and you’re wrong, you lose all the points. It’s a tough call. But with Daddy, the later in the game, the better. After a while he starts picking words that everybody knows can’t be right. Finally, Mama says, “I think that’s enough for me,” and everybody goes to bed.

So now when Mama says Daddy isn’t going to be there, I forget about stealing for a minute and I ask her, “Why not? Where’s he going?”

Mama pulls into a spot right in front of the KFC and says, “He’s working,” as if it happens all the time.

Before she can get out of the car, I say, “On Friday night?” and I know she can tell I don’t believe it for a minute.

She nods and starts to open the car door, but I don’t move. Then she sighs like she really does need those vitamins right this minute and says to her keys, “Actually, he’s very busy at work right now and he’s going to stay with Uncle Jim here in town so he can stay late and get up early.” I just look out the window and say nothing. Nothing at all.

We sit there for a minute and then she turns and says, “Do you want to come in with me?”

I don’t even shake my head and after a second, she walks into the KFC and I think about how god-awful ugly this town is with its bare lots and big signs and crappy little stores that nobody wants to shop in. We’re all just sitting here, surrounded by corn and soy beans, and we’re too stupid to get up and walk out, even though there are roads out in four different directions.

Sparkle Snow
Miami Morgan

It's church day and when we go to Mass, I sit so close to the Virgin Mary that I can see beneath the smile on her face. Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I can move inside of her and feel the world from the inside out, but today, I just wait and watch through her big red heart that glows and shines.

I pay a lot of attention when Father makes the bread into Jesus. Lots of kids in my class asked Sister Mary Thomas a bunch of questions when we got our First Communion. They wanted to know, "What do you do when it sticks to the roof of your mouth... can you use your finger then?" and "Does chewing gum count as food or is it just a drink if you don't swallow it?"

Sister explained how sacred the host is and how we have the Lord in our mouths and we shouldn't be poking at the Blessed Redeemer with our dirty fingers or thinking about gum or other monkey business. I think Communion's just Jesus' way of smiling at you and sitting next to your heart all day and whether you open your mouth or your arms, it's all going to the same place. But I don't chew gum and Jesus doesn't stick to the roof of my mouth, so maybe I don't understand how serious all that is.

After Mass, we go to Aunt Mary and Uncle Carl's house, just like every other Sunday since Grandma died. I guess we pick her place because she's the biggest sister, almost sixteen years older than my mama. Or maybe it's because there's something about Aunt Mary that makes you believe for a little bit that everything's going to be just fine. Sometimes I wonder what Aunt Mary would have been like if she and Uncle Carl had

been able to have children, if maybe having to boss around a bunch of kids would have taken some of her sugar away. Mama says the world sits down heavy on most, but there's some special people who can't be changed by whatever life hands out and Aunt Mary is one of them. And I guess Mama's right, because Aunt Mary always says she doesn't pay it any mind that she doesn't have her own children. "You put a baby in my lap and it's mine," she'll say, pulling me close. "It don't matter to me which tummy it came from."

Today, I check Aunt Mary's yard for my daddy's car. It's not there and I run ahead and open the door just to be sure, but Aunt Celeste's the only one in the living room. "Hey, Miami!" she says to me. "Where's that good-looking daddy of yours?"

Aunt Celeste only comes down from Chicago in the summer, but she stays a long time, at least a month. My daddy calls her his drinking buddy and says she's a damn good poker player and that's about the same as Mama calling somebody a sister of Mary. It's as good as a person can get. But whenever my mama or my other aunts say Aunt Celeste's name, they sigh like she's a list of stuff they have to do.

Even though it's church day, Aunt Celeste is wearing shorts that look like they've been cut off white jeans with a pair of scissors that aren't so sharp anymore. She's holding a clear drink with a little piece of lime in it and I can almost taste how cold it is. When she asks me about Daddy, I shrug and she looks around Mama and Tara like maybe he's hiding in Mama's purse or Tara's backpack.

"He's working today, Celeste," my mama says, and Aunt Mary and Aunt Kathy look up from the kitchen.

"On a Sunday?" Aunt Celeste says, like Mama said he was in jail.

But Mama says, “Yes, Celeste,” and steps around her, goes into the kitchen and sets her purse on a chair. Tara moves over to Aunt Celeste and I just know that tomorrow her white jeans are going to look like those cutoff shorts.

“Darlin’,” I hear Aunt Celeste say to Tara. “That is the perfect shade of blue eye shadow!”

Tara smiles, glances at Mama’s back and then opens her backpack and pulls out some eye shadow and a tube. “The trick,” she tells Aunt Celeste, “is to wear Bonnie Bell’s electric blue mascara with your barely blue shadow.”

Aunt Celeste nods like she’s figured it out and says, “Girl, you got to show me your stuff!” and pulls her into the bathroom.

I go sit on the davenport and wait for somebody to tell me to set the table or eat dinner. I pull out *Betty Ross’ Big Job*, but before I can start reading my cousin Scotty comes in.

“Hey, Tampa,” he says, and his words are as sweaty as his face. He’s Aunt Celeste’s only kid and you can tell he’s from Chicago just by looking at him. “Don’t be rude,” he says. “I said ‘Hey.’”

“Hey,” I say, and try to pretend like Betty Ross’ job is as interesting as Cleopatra’s. I read about her last summer.

But Scotty’s not the kind of kid you can wish away. He sits down next to me, leans over in front of my book and reads real slow, “Betty Ross’ Big Boobs,” and starts laughing hard.

I don't say anything. I keep reading and think maybe no one can see me. Maybe I'm not really here. Maybe my whole life has been a dream and I'll wake up and it'll be as cool as May and I won't be even a little tired.

"Hey, Orlando, I think I read that wrong," Scotty says and leans in again like he's Aunt Mary squinting at a crossword puzzle. "It's Betty Ross' Big BM," and then he really cracks up. He laughs for a while and I think how glad I am that I'm not a redhead like Scotty. When he laughs, his face gets bumps and turns pink like a raw turkey with skin that stopped breathing.

Mama calls out from the kitchen, "Miami, you come on in here and set the table," and then pokes her head out of the door. "Scott, you come, too."

I close Betty Ross without even marking her page and head toward the kitchen. Behind me, I hear Scotty say like he just remembered, "Ohhhhhh, it's Miami. Sorry, Cocoa Beach."

Mama named me Miami because she says she knew the minute she looked at me that my soul was deep and wide and warm and full of secrets like the ocean. Mama just knows things, like when we're sad or someone's sick, and I don't know anything about the ocean, but I know my Mama's right about Tara. She says that Tara is hot and cold and never knows where home is even when she's standing in it. Mama named her after the biggest house she's ever heard of so that wherever Tara is, she'll always be home and she'll always be standing.

After dinner, Mama, Aunt Mary and Aunt Kathy shut the door to the kitchen. Aunt Celeste and Scotty go into town and me and Tara sit around so stuffed with ham and sweet potatoes and cherry pie we can't move. Same as every time, my daddy would

say: the better halves are in the kitchen, the others are on the porch and the kids are under the rug.

My uncle Carl and his buddies are playing poker just like any Sunday. Usually my daddy does, too, and on really good days, Uncle Pete even stops by for a hand. Aunt Mary makes the men sit outside and set their card table on the porch. They smoke and they smell, she says, but I know it's because of how they talk. Every now and then one of them will say, "Goddamnit!" really loud and throw his cards in the middle. Aunt Mary will yell from the kitchen, "There are little ears in here... and it's the Lord's day!" and he'll say, "Yeah, yeah, sorry," but then somebody'll say it again the next time the cards come up wrong.

I go back to *Betty Ross' Big Job* and Tara looks like she can't find anybody to be mad at. I ask her if she wants to read one of my Nancy Drews, but she just rolls her eyes and looks up at the shelf of Aunt Mary's snow globes. She's got twenty-four of them, all lined up like small cities on a straight map, waiting for someone tall enough to reach out and wake them up.

Sometimes I think about the people who live in those snow globes. They stand with roots stuck to a glass floor, waiting to be shook and shook and shook until sparkle snow falls to the top of their sky and hangs in their thick air. They never sleep. Their faces never change, upside or down. They don't make any sound. They just keep sitting and waiting until the bubble moves to the top and the snow settles or the glass breaks.

French Kissing
Ms. Tara Morgan

Okay, so I just French Kissed Eddie Nelson. I know, I know, boys Eddie's age are so immature and if you're going to be French Kissing, you ought to be doing it with someone worthwhile. But... Eddie's kind of different than the other guys around here. He's kind of like a cousin, but not related. That would be really gross.

I think I should clarify something first. Eddie is not the first boy I've ever kissed. I mean, I am fourteen and I am tall with long hair and I have boobs. Okay, so they're not Dolly Parton boobs, but I can wear my Aunt Celeste's shirts... and they're not even that big. But Eddie is the first guy who I've French Kissed. You know, the kind of kissing when the boy puts his tongue in your mouth.

I've always known Eddie. He lives with his Grandma and Grandpa Zimmerman. Their land bumps into ours on the road where the bus comes. The Zimmermans used to farm their land, but now they just sit on a dirt patch and live out there in that old house that used to hold six kids and two canning cellars. What a waste. Why don't they move to town? What's so great about the country, anyway?

Mr. Zimmerman must think it's pretty great, because he comes and helps my uncles out during planting and harvesting times—and I don't even think he needs the money—but mostly he just sits around the house and drives Mrs. Zimmerman crazy. At least, that's what Eddie says. I told Daddy and he said that's what happens when you take away a man's farm and that it's a new time for farming and farmers and we all got to pull together or sink alone.

I don't know if that's true or not. With Daddy, truth is the second you see it... no matter how you see it. And, if you've had a few beers, it's even more up for grabs. But I do know when Daddy says that around Sunday dinner at my Aunt Mary's, nobody says boo to him. But once, at the KC Hall, a man got really mad at Daddy when he said just the same thing.

Miami and me were shooting pool, eating Doritos and drinking RC. Daddy sat at the bar and waited for Mama to get done with Saturday afternoon confession. There was an ugly man with a red beard that ran right up to his ears and even into his ear hole who said real quiet and hard, "The banker's telling the farmer how to farm," and Daddy said, "What'd you say, son?" and Miami put her cue stick down. She knows trouble when she sees it. I'll say that.

Anyway, the man looked even redder, as if that was possible, and said like he meant it, "You heard me," and Daddy said like he was trying not to punch him, "I'm no farmer, but I'm no banker either. I just pull all your crops together so you can get a better price when you go up against the big boys. That's all."

The man didn't say anything else. He just snorted a bit like his drink went up his nose and looked away. One of Daddy's friends, Mr. Hill, said to the man, "Oh, hell, Ed. Bob may have went on to school, but he doesn't do nothing but talk on the phone all day. He ain't the enemy."

Daddy threw a couple bucks down on the bar and said, "That's right. That's right," and waved for Miami and me to come on.

Outside Miami said, "Why was that man so mad?" and Daddy just said, "It's a hard time to be a farmer, honey."

Eddie Nelson, the boy I just French Kissed, says it's no fun to be at home anymore so maybe Daddy's right about farmers without farms. I guess that's why Eddie comes out to our place so much. Or at least that's why he used to. Now, I'm betting he'll be back and he won't want to do anything else—not swim in the pond or swing or even ride Uncle Pete's horse—just French Kiss. I can hear him already, “Come on, Tara, let's try it again.” God help me.

I will admit that I didn't mind the first part of the kiss. Eddie is, after all, only thirteen and a half and I am fourteen, so technically I French kissed a guy who's still in junior high. I know, I know, but it's not as bad as it sounds. He'll be a sophomore next year and I'll be a junior so we'll both be in high school in just a couple of months. See, it's not that bad.

How did it happen? Well, I got bored at Aunt Mary's, so I went out for a walk. Eddie was across the field knocking on our door. I hollered and pointed to the spot where we always go and swing. It's where Mama and Daddy and Miami and me used to have weenie roasts. The meadow, Mama calls it like we're in the French Rivera or something instead of the middle of stupid Missouri. The swing used to be on Grandma's old porch, but she's dead now and doesn't need it. So Daddy hooked it up between two big old trees and you can sit in the shade and swing and not get your shoulders sunburned if you sit toward the middle.

Anyway, Eddie and me meet down there and, without saying a word, sit on the swing and scoot to where the sun can't scorch us. After a minute, Eddie says, “Listen to this” and reads me a letter he got from his mama yesterday.

I don't usually like to talk about his mama. I think she's smart for getting out of here and going to LA, but she shouldn't have had Eddie first. That was a big mistake. Once you have kids, you're stuck. No two ways about it.

Anyway, Eddie's holding this letter real tight in his fingers and I can see some spots where the blue ink let go of the page and hung on to him. The letter goes on and on and on and I'm not really listening, it's just a bunch of questions that grownups always ask like, How's school? How's your teacher? Is math getting any easier? and Eddie stops reading real sudden and says, "Shit, it's *summer*" and wads up that letter into a little hard ball.

It is kind of weird that Eddie's mama is asking all these questions in June when everybody knows we get out of school the middle of May. Maybe they don't have summer vacation in L.A. Maybe with all the beaches and movie stars and TV shows right there, they think every day's a vacation, so why bother?

I nod to Eddie and pump my legs harder so the swing won't stop, because Eddie seems to forget all about moving and just when I'm about to say, "I could use a little help here," I look over and he's crying. Tears are just moving down his face like they can't wait to get the hell out of there. Eddie doesn't even try to wipe them or hide them like I would, he just sits there and says, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, over and over like it was the answer to something I forgot to ask.

People always cry in front of Miami. Even Mama. Even me. There's just something about Miami that lets you know you can wad your heart up like that letter from Eddie's mama and hand it over to her and you're never going to hear about it later or get it sent back to you. It's like it just goes away somehow, like she sucks all your

tears up and swallows hard so you don't have to feel all that bad stuff move around inside yourself anymore.

But nobody cries in front of me. Not Mama. Not even Miami. And definitely not fourteen-year-old boys who live next door. So I sit there and try to think, now what would Miami do? but I can't think of how to sponge up all of Eddie's tears or stop those shit, shit, shit sounds he keeps making. But then, I do what Mama does. I lean in real close and put my lips on his head, right above his eye, and I just breathe on him and don't say a word. I have no idea what to say anyway.

We sit there for a while, me breathing and Eddie crying, and suddenly he stops saying shit, shit, shit and the tears seem to move back in him. I lift my lips off his head, but before I can scoot back to my side of the swing, he leans in, closes his eyes and kisses me right on the lips. We stay that way for a while, kissing, moving our lips around and tilting our heads like Joannie and Chachi on *Happy Days* and just as I'm thinking that this is material and I'll know just how to kiss when I'm on TV, Eddie sticks his tongue right in my mouth.

I let it sit there for a minute, but it's like a warm ice cube in my mouth, moving around, looking for a place to settle until it melts. But I can't bite into Eddie's tongue to hurry it along like I would an ice cube and it's not going to melt on its own, so I jump back and move my mouth so Eddie's tongue falls out and lands back in his own damn head.

Eddie says, "Come on, Tara, it's French Kissing. Everybody does it," like I'm Miami and in second grade and care.

I don't even bother to respond. I just look out at our farm and think of the guy who named our town and how smart he was. When farmers from Illinois or Iowa or Kansas or wherever work with Daddy, they'll say, "How'd you come up with the name Auburn for a town?" and Daddy will tell them about the man who built a home and a farm and then a whole town here way back before anybody can remember. One day he got drunk and fell asleep holding his pipe. He woke up and his bed was on fire. He threw water on it and beat on it, but it just kept burning. Then it spread to his house and he kept fighting it and cursing and praying, but that fire kept growing. In just a little bit, it ate his house, his barn, his farm and then the whole damn town. Finally, when the man was out of water and one-more-tries, he said, "Aw, burn, you piece of shit town," and walked away and never came back. But the rest of us are still stuck here in Auburn, a piece of shit town that grew up out of black grass and dead dirt. And, I tell you, I am buried alive here.

Uncle Pete's Parrot
Miami Morgan

After lunch at Aunt Mary's, I went to Uncle Pete's garage. Sometimes Aunt Kathy asks me to bring him a plate of ribs and a piece of corn, that's his favorite, but lots of times, I just go over and sit with him and his parrot.

When you sit at the Honey Do table and watch Uncle Pete fix toasters or old TVs or glue the heads back on little china dogs or dolls, you can look his parrot right in the eye. It's not a real parrot. It's not even a parrot that used to be alive, but somebody thought was too pretty to live. It's a doll parrot that's plastic and hard instead of soft and cuddly. It sits on a little wooden perch and watches you whenever you go out into the garage to get your daddy another beer out of the cooler or visit Uncle Pete at his Honey Do table. It used to scare me, but that's silly. It's not a real parrot and those little plastic black eyes aren't going to see anything, no matter how hard they look.

Uncle Pete's Honey Do table isn't a real table, either. It's a long piece of thin wood that sits on two saw horses. It holds lots of dirty gray tools that pile on top of each other like little kids in a fight. Some of those tools look sharp, the others are flat like stepped on forks, but they all seem as if they know why they're here. They watch you and remind you of what Uncle Pete always says, "Mess with them and you'll end up with one less finger and one more problem."

Today, Uncle Pete's sorting through the tools like they know how to fix toasters and I sit there and look his parrot in the eye and say, "Daddy's sleeping over at Uncle Jimmy's house. He's real busy at work."

Uncle Pete's screwdriver stops and hangs in the air like it doesn't know whether to move in or fall down. He just says, "Oh, sweetie," and I feel everything soft in me start to leak.

Uncle Pete doesn't say anything else. He just watches me and I shrug a little and he sits down like he's thinking hard. After a while he rubs his knee and I wonder if it's bothering him today. It rained last night, real late like the sky was waiting for everybody to go to sleep before it started crying. This morning, the tears were gone, but the air was soggy and steamy.

Uncle Pete's knee always hurts when the sky gets sad. That's because part of his knee got shot off by one of those bombs that people hide in tall grass. Those bombs just sit there all mad and wait for somebody to hurt. It doesn't matter who, either, Uncle Pete says, could be a kid or a grandma or a mama who stopped to nurse her baby. Bombs, they don't discriminate.

Everybody but Mama says Uncle Pete was real lucky. He could have died like lots of his friends—or he could have lost his whole leg. But he just got a limp and a pass out of Vietnam. It's the kind of luck like somebody stealing your hat at school. They're throwing it around, high over your head and laughing when you jump and stretch and try to be, just once, the kind of kid who can take a joke and get the hat back. But you can't grab it, it's just a little too high and you're a little too slow, and then the teacher comes out and makes them give it back and say they're sorry, but they're not sorry and nobody really cares and when you tell somebody about it later, they say, "Well, you're lucky you got your hat back."

But Uncle Pete doesn't complain about his knee at all. He just limps around the farm all morning taking care of his horses and then he takes it easy after lunch. He does it every day, even Sundays, and he doesn't go to church, not even at Christmas or Easter or weddings. Tara asked him why he doesn't go anymore and he just said, "Some things change and you can't unchange them," and when Tara started to ask him just what he meant, Mama told her to mind her business.

I don't know why Uncle Pete doesn't go to church, but I know he stopped being mad sometime last spring. It happened real slow. When he first came home nothing made him seem like the Uncle Pete we used to know. He used to be real gentle, Mama says, the kind of boy who's careful not to touch robin eggs. Some people have thin skin, she says. Uncle Pete didn't hardly have any skin at all.

Mama cried when he joined the Army. They used to be best friends. He grew up next to Mama and her sisters and they did everything together, swim in the pond, swing, look for snakes in the grain bin. Everybody used to tease them saying they'd get married, but Mama went to college and met Daddy and Uncle Pete started seeing her baby sister Aunt Kathy and now nobody really remembers the kind of kid Uncle Pete was or how much Mama knows about his skin.

But Mama and I remember who Uncle Pete was, even though Aunt Mary says he didn't have any business signing up in the first place. He was almost thirty then, way past the draft age, and after he left Aunt Kathy stopped smiling and she never started again, even after he came home. At first, it might have been because Uncle Pete was so mad. But after a while he started to pull the ponies out a little slower and his eyes got a little softer like he stopped to think about how something swimming in blood could be so

beautiful. Then he started sitting on the porch instead of in the basement and finally, his hands stopped shaking when they held on to a lemonade glass or a supper fork.

Even though most of the mad went away, there's still more than Uncle Pete's knee that's missing. But now it seems like something else filled its space, something heavier than skin, but softer than bone. I sit in that space and listen to everything he doesn't say and sometimes I cry because it seems like somebody should.

But I don't cry today even though I'd like to. I just sit there and wish Uncle Pete's parrot was real. I wish he could talk and tell you everything he sees between the Honey Do table and the cooler. I bet he'd have a lot to say, but then maybe he'd just repeat everything he's ever heard, just like they do on TV and there wouldn't be anything smart or surprising about him. Just the same old thing, over and over.

After a bit Uncle Pete says, "Maybe staying with Jim means everything and maybe it don't," and I think about that real hard. Maybe some spaces can be filled if you listen when nobody's talking and maybe Uncle Pete is lucky. Maybe all that matters is that you do get your hat back.

Date with Daddy
Ms. Tara Morgan

Daddy calls last night like that's perfectly normal, like he's never lived here, like we haven't seen him for a week, like half his suits aren't still hanging in the closet, for God's sake, and he says in that corny, annoying way of his, "Would you care to accompany me to supper, Miss Morgan?"

I just shake my head—God, he's annoying—and when I say, "Are you serious?" Mama looks out from the fridge and Miami stops drying dishes.

Daddy says, "As a heart attack, Sweetie," and laughs a little like he's scared I won't laugh back. I don't. But before I can think of anything to say, he says, "It'll be a real date so be sure to wear your best dress."

I frown, but he can't see me over the phone. Mama starts putting stuff back in the refrigerator and Miami turns around. I can't think of anything, so I just sigh and say, "Sure, whatever. What time?"

Daddy says, "Seven sharp" and I snort, because Daddy is never sharp.

I ask Daddy if he wants to talk to Mama and I watch her real hard, but her head's still in the fridge and I can't see if she stops moving. Daddy's quiet for a minute and then he says, "I think I'll talk to Miami first and see what's she's doing Saturday night. Maybe it can be a double date."

I turn around so I'm facing the wall and my back is to Mama and Miami and I say, "Then do you want to talk to Mama?"

Daddy's quiet for a minute and then he says, "Well, now, I'm sure she's real busy."

I let him sit a minute before I say, “You all don’t fool me.” Before he can say anything back, I turn around and hand Miami the phone. Mama looks at me like she’s gearing up to “explain” the world to me, so I walk out into the living room before she can open her mouth.

The *Brady Bunch* is on. It’s the one where Greg thinks Marsha can’t drive as good as him because she’s a girl. She gets all mad and finally the whole family and even Alice make up this huge contest where Greg and Marsha have to drive around orange cones with glasses of water on their dashboards. Marsha goes first and does it perfectly, but Greg’s still all confident he can at least tie a girl. He does pretty well, but then he loses it at the end, the water spills and Marsha and all the girls are cheering and whooping, but then she comes up to Greg and tells him what a good job he did and he says, “You, too.”

It’s so stupid. Nobody talks like that after they’ve won. Or lost. It’s just TV. Here, I’d remind Greg what a chauvinist pig he was and make him admit that girls are just as good as boys and probably better, but Marsha just smiles and they all go out for ice cream.

Miami hangs up and Mama comes in the room. “What was that all about?” she asks me, and wipes her hands on her shorts.

“Daddy wants to take me and Miami on a date,” I say while Alice and Mrs. Brady talk.

Mama says, “What?”

I shrug. “You know, supper. Saturday night.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Mama says like she’s not sure what’s up.

I think maybe she's sad Daddy didn't ask her, so I say, "Maybe he wants to give us some practice for when we can finally date."

"Seems to me you've already had some practice," Mama says, and I know just what she means, but I don't give her the satisfaction of responding. I just look at the TV and wait until she gives up and goes into the kitchen.

Mama's still mad that last September I went cruising with Dwight Peterson. It wasn't a real date—he didn't even buy me a Coke—he just picked me up at the library and we went riding around. Dwight is seventeen and cute but definitely country. I mean, with the boots and the John Deere hat and the green paint on his truck, you'd almost expect a piece of straw hanging out of his mouth. If he was fourteen like me, I'd never go out with him, but this here is Missouri and you take what you can get.

Dwight and I just talked a lot and I know that *Teen* magazine said last month that a girl doesn't need to be quiet anymore when she goes out on a date. Just be yourself. But I couldn't remember who that was so I just let him talk and talk and talk and he went on about farming and his daddy's acres and that stupid club Future Farmers of America that Dwight is in and how his daddy and him want to handle hogs, but his mama can't take the smell. He told her, "Them hogs smell like money, Mama," but she wasn't having it. Cows are bad enough.

I don't plan to ever see another farm again after I turn eighteen, but I nodded because all I could think about is how Dwight didn't smell like the fields. He wore Brut and I could sniff him all the way to my toes so when he told me, "Scoot a little closer, honey, I don't bite," I did and he put his hand right on my knee. I didn't move, not even

to breathe, and I could feel my knee getting warmer and warmer like it was going to burn out of my jeans. I couldn't think of one single thing to say.

But that's the thing with boys, they don't care if you talk or not as long as you listen to them talk. So Dwight went on and on about all the colleges he was thinking about going to and how an agricultural degree was going to help him make more money than his daddy ever did. When I could get a word in, I told him, "It's after nine. I got to get back."

Daddy was supposed to pick me up by nine, but he's always late. He goes and has a few beers and then just when you're sitting on the steps and the librarian's asking you if you need to use the phone, he pulls up smelling like smoke and says, "Sorry, Sweetie. Time just slipped away from me," and snaps his fingers like Poof! time's gone and he can't be blamed.

But Daddy wasn't late that day I went out with Dwight. We pulled up and there Daddy was, just sitting in his car looking more than a little mad. I jumped out and just as I was about to slam the door, I said, "You go on, now."

But Dwight had to be a hero, so he said, "No, I best go talk to him. He looks upset," and I just knew that this was not a good idea, but Daddy was getting out of his car, too, and Dwight jumped out of the cab like a cat. I tell you, he looked good.

I didn't even have time to think of a lie—like I was studying and forgot a book at school and Dwight was there and offered to drive me—because Daddy said, "Young man, do you know this girl's just fourteen," like it wasn't a question.

Dwight said, "Yessir. She's in my sister's class."

Daddy looked at him hard and said, "Does your sister go out with your buddies?"

Dwight shook his head and said, “No, sir. She doesn’t. My daddy wouldn’t let her.”

Daddy just stood there and looked at Dwight like he couldn’t decide whether to push him or hit him, but then Daddy just said, “You think about that, son.” Then he looked at me and said, “Get in the car.”

Daddy doesn’t get mad much, but when he does Mama says it’s best to leave him alone. No need stirring up a hornet’s nest. But I was mad, too. I mean, God. He acts like I’m a baby. I’ll be fifteen this summer.

So as soon as I shut the door, I said, “I can’t believe you did that! You’d think I was five instead of almost fifteen.”

Daddy just looked at the road and said, “Little girl, you ever lie to me again and I’ll remind you just how little you are. Understand?”

I knew just what he meant. It’s been a long time, but I remember there’s nothing worse than a spanking after Daddy’s been drinking. So I just said, “Yes, sir” and looked out the window.

But all that was last fall and tonight, “Date Night,” Daddy’s his usual, good old boy self. Well, sort of. He drives up in Uncle Jimmy’s Ford and the first thing he says when I get in is, “I have never seen you look more beautiful.”

God. “Where’s your car?”

Daddy looks a little embarrassed and says, “Well, it’s in the shop, hon.”

I look him right in the eye and say, “Why?” because I can tell something more is going on than an oil change.

Daddy looks out his window and says, “I got in a fight with a tree and the car lost,” and laughs a little like maybe it is funny.

Before I can ask him if Mama knows, I see Miami standing on the porch, looking at us like she can’t remember who we are or why Daddy’s here. I roll down the window and say, “Come on, we’re hungry here.”

Miami turns around and looks at the door and then she walks down the steps like she’s wearing a pair of shorts instead of a sundress that’s too long for her and full of ugly flowers. But even though she looks all wrong, there’s something real clean about her that makes her look younger—and lots older—than ten. And suddenly, I don’t know why, I want to slap her and watch her straight brown hair swing out of her face and away from her eyes that are big and full of things she sees and never, ever says.

She opens the door and gets in the back and before Daddy puts it in drive, he says, “What were you waiting for, hon?”

Miami looks out the window and says, “Nothing. I just thought maybe you’d come in.”

Daddy laughs a little and says, “Well, now, that is what a real date would do, isn’t it?” and swings out of the yard and away from all those houses full of Morgan women.

Daddy takes us to Sam’s Steakhouse. It’s a real restaurant, one where the table has a cloth on it and the waitresses tell you the night’s specials without reading them off of the back of their notepad. Daddy and Mama come here on anniversaries and sometimes birthdays. It’s the nicest place in Auburn, but then that’s not saying much.

The waitress has long blonde hair with black roots and she looks like she smokes, but when she says, “Can I get you something from the bar?” she sounds as if she could

announce the weather on TV. She smiles at Daddy like she'd be happy to do anything for him—get him a drink, wash his car, knit him a sweater—and I can almost see her smell him. She doesn't fool me.

Daddy is a looker. Everybody says so. He is a little too tall and not quite thin with wavy black hair that he tucks behind his ears and lets grow until it gets stuck in his collar. Then he locks those blue eyes on Mama and lets his voice get long and low and says, "Love of my life, mother of children, would you be so kind as to give me a trim?"

God, he's so corny. Mama says it's the Irish thing, one too many trips to the Blarney stone, just ignore him, he's a flirt. But I see Mama watch him, her cheeks just a little red and her mouth trying not to smile even when she's tapping his shoulders with the rattail comb and saying all stern, "Sit still, now, or I'm going to cut your ear off and it'll be your own darn fault."

So this waitress Sherri, as her nametag says, isn't the first woman to stare down Daddy and she won't be the last. I look her dead in the eye and I say, "I would like a Diet Rite," just so she knows that I know you're supposed to ask the woman at the table first.

She says, "Sure, hon, and how about you?" to Miami.

"May I have a Cherry Coke, please?" Miami says like she's two.

But Sherri just smiles and says, "For you, sir?"

Daddy looks at her chest and says, "A Sherri Coke sounds good," and laughs long and loud like he's Bob Hope or some other stupid comedian.

Sherri laughs, too, like she's all embarrassed and says, "Well, now, sir, I haven't been lucky enough to have a drink named after me yet. How about a Cherry Coke?"

Daddy nods a little, looks right at her and says, “That would be wonderful, Sherri.”

As soon as Sherri slides away from the table, I say, “God, Dad. What was that?”

He looks all confused and says, “What?” like I’m supposed to believe it’s all a big joke, real funny. Right. But I don’t give him the satisfaction of responding. I just look at my menu like it’s more interesting than anything else in the world.

After supper—I got the spaghetti with a giant meatball, Daddy got steak (of course) and Miami got the fried chicken for twelve and under—we were sitting around just stuffed to the seams and Daddy said, “Well, now, girls, how’s your Mama getting along?”

I said, “Fine!” real fast, because the May issue of *Teen Beat* had Shaun Cassidy in it and he said that he’s more interested in girls that aren’t interested in him. He used some French words that mean the thrill of the chase or something. I can’t remember what they were, but I think he’s right. The boys I can’t stand always like me.

Daddy nods a little like he’s thinking about what “Fine” means and coming up with nothing.

Then Miami comes right out and says, “When are you coming home, Daddy?” That girl does not know how to play hard to get.

Daddy unfolds his hands and reaches for ours. Miami puts hers right in his, but I let him fish mine out from under the table. Then he says, “Girls, I know you all know that I’m not staying at Uncle Jimmy’s just because I’m busy at work.” He stops for a minute like he’s looking for someone to confirm that.

I roll my eyes and say, “Well, yeah.”

Then he squeezes our hands a little and says, “Your Mama and I have some things to work out.”

Before he goes on to tell us absolutely nothing, I say, “Are you getting divorced?”

Daddy flinches a little and says, “No, no, of course not, nobody’s said anything about that.”

Miami looks hard at him like she’s trying to find out what’s hiding behind those words. He looks back at her, right in her eye, “Really, sweetie. Really, I promise.” For the first time I realize he hasn’t been drinking, not even a little, and here it is Saturday night at a nice restaurant with about a million bottles just sitting there looking at us from behind the bar.

I don’t know what to say so I start kicking the leg of my chair. I chip, chip, chip away at it as we all sit there and say nothing. Finally, Daddy says, “I best get you girls home,” and everybody gets up at the same time.

When Daddy pulls into the yard, Miami says real quiet, “Are you coming in?”

Daddy says, “I think maybe it’d be better if I didn’t.”

Miami wants to say something, I can tell, but she can’t find the words. After a few seconds, she shuts the door real soft and walks up to the porch without looking back.

I lean in Daddy’s window and I think about hugging him, but I just can’t so I say, “Go on, get on out of here,” like I’m as tough as a Charlie’s Angel.

Daddy reaches out and rubs my head with his knuckles and says, “I’m going, I’m going,” but before he puts Uncle Jimmy’s truck into drive, he looks at the steering wheel and says, “You might want to mention to Mama that we all had Cherry Cokes tonight.”

I don't bother to remind him that I do not drink Cherry Coke. I just say, "Sure, Daddy," and step away from the truck.

Daddy Comes Over

Miami Morgan

I found a feather in the fried chicken I ate last night. It was under the breaded part that's hard and crunchy, but poking out of the skin like it wanted to be remembered. I pulled it out and set it under my plate. I don't know why. It just seemed like something that held on for so long shouldn't be stuck under the butter knife or laughed about over supper.

When we left Sam's Steakhouse, I put the feather in the pocket of my dress. It's a hidden pocket, just a little space where the seams don't meet and the cloth waits for hands or quarters. I rubbed it in the truck and held on tight when Daddy dropped us off.

I held the feather in my hand when I went to bed. I petted it real soft and slow like I was worried the chicken might be scared if I moved too fast or cried too loud. But I must have dropped it when I fell asleep, because I just woke up and my hand is empty and the house is loud.

All I can hear from my room is the sound of something wrong. A banging, like a fist that promises you're going to hear it, but you're not going to stop it.

I go to the hall and wonder if it's Sunday morning yet. The noise is coming from down the stairs where its deep-sleep dark, but I can see Mama at the bottom and she's asking the back door in a low, mad whisper, "What are you doing?" and then I see Daddy on the other side of the glass and he's banging and yelling and his words are hard bites.

"You locked the goddamn door and I can't find my goddamn keys," he tells the glass.

Mama flicks on the porch light and hisses back, “You have your keys. You drove here, for God’s sake,” but she doesn’t turn the lock.

I move to the second step, the one that creaks at the corner. Daddy keeps banging and swearing and Mama finally opens it as quick as a slap. Daddy’s been leaning on the door, pulling and pushing it and when it finally opens, he falls on the porch and I think somebody should yell “Timber!” he falls that hard.

But Mama doesn’t go over to him like she used to. She doesn’t help him up or tell him, “Shush now, the girls are sleeping, come to bed.” She stands over him and says, “What in God’s name are you doing here at this hour and in this condition?” and I can tell no answer that Daddy’s going to come up with is going to make a bit of difference.

Daddy tries to stand, but it’s like he forgot how. He keeps trying, one leg bends, then the other, and he keeps falling like a new colt. After a couple of tries, he scoots out of the doorway and crawls over to the porch swing. I walk down two more steps so I can see him out the front window. He reaches up to the swing and tries to grab it, but it keeps moving and he can’t catch it. Finally, Mama says, “Bob, I swear to God, I could just...” but then her voice forgets where it’s going and she walks over to him and tries to pull him onto the swing. But Mama’s little and Daddy’s not and each time she hauls him up, he falls again. After a couple of tries, he starts laughing like when he used to leave a party and everybody said, “You know how Bob is” like it was a good thing and Mama would smile and Daddy would hang on tight to all of us and sing too loud, “I’ve got the whole world in my hands.”

But Mama’s not laughing and she’s still pulling on his arm and, anyway, Daddy hasn’t called us the whole world in a long time and right then I see Tara come out of the

kitchen and onto the porch. Mama looks at her and I know she's going to say, "Tara, what are you doing in the kitchen this time of night?" or "Go on to bed, now, hon," but Mama just drops Daddy's arm, sinks onto the porch swing and looks out into the black.

Daddy keeps sitting on the porch in front of the swing and says something that sounds like, "There's my big girl," as if Tara was missing and goes on laughing. Tara doesn't say anything back. She walks over and grabs his arm and pulls like he's a stubborn weed. She pulls and pulls until he starts to stand up and just as she's about to drop him, Mama gets up and puts her shoulder under his arm and Tara and her push him onto the swing.

Daddy lets out a big puff of air like everything he meant to do was done right, but then he starts to laugh again. He laughs so hard the swing moves back and forth, and Tara and Mama stand there and look at him.

Just when I think maybe they'll sit on that porch swing, too, and everything will be kind of funny in the morning, Tara says, "God, you make me sick, you really do."

I go down to the fifth step. I think maybe I'll make it down all fourteen. I think maybe I'll walk across the porch and I'll say just the right thing. "You all sure do know how to throw a party," I'll say, just like Aunt Celeste. Or maybe even, I'll be Aunt Mary, and say, "Come on, now, there's nothing broken here that can't be mended."

But then I see Daddy's not laughing anymore. He's crying and moaning and his sounds come from down deep, past his belly. Those noises rush up and out of Daddy. They don't stop or slow down and they swerve right by that place that always believes everything will turn out all right.

After a bit, Daddy's moans move into words that sound like "sorry" and "hurt" or "her" and "won't," and, finally, Mama sighs and sits down on the swing next to him, but she doesn't touch him. She leans back and says to Tara, "You go on to bed now, hon, everything will be all right."

Tara looks at her and says, "If this is all right, I want to be the one who gets to move out," and she turns around, walks into the house and slams the door.

I move up to the top of the stairs just as Tara starts the steps. She smacks each one with her bare feet and she says to herself, like she's somebody I don't know, "Guess, you should have stuck with Sherri cokes, *asshole*," and she kicks the top step just as I slide into the dark of the hall. I scoot away and pretend I'm a ghost. I close my eyes and back into the wall. Maybe I'll disappear for a minute, I think, but Tara walks by me and says, "Jesus!" just before she grabs my arm.

I don't say anything. I keep my eyes closed and Tara drops my arm and pats my shoulder like Mama would.

"Go to bed," Tara tells me as soft as she can, but I shake my head and she says, "You know, I can see you even when your eyes are closed."

I don't open my eyes. I know she can see me, but I don't want to see her hate up close and have it stick to me next to Daddy's moans and Mama's sighs, so I wait while Tara smooths my hair and rubs my arms. Then her hands leave and her door shuts and I open my eyes and go to the top of the stairs.

I move down to the second step and half-wish the front door was still open. Through the window, I see Daddy start to rock and rock with his hands over his eyes. Then he pulls his hair. He tugs and tugs at it like he needs more space on the top of his

head to breathe. Mama looks at the moon and she tells it something that Daddy should know. She talks to the moon like she means it, but I can't hear her and Daddy's not listening.

The next morning, the sun acts like nothing ever happened. Mama makes us oatmeal, slices real-ripe peaches and puts them on top like they're flowers. Then she pours a little milk on them and we watch it swim around before it sinks in.

We pick up spoons and Mama tells us she's going for a walk. Tara asks, "Where?" like Mama's lost her mind, because it's already about a hundred degrees, but Mama says, "I'll know when I get there," and shuts the door behind her.

Tara dumps her oatmeal in the sink and I go to the window and watch Mama walk down the steps of the porch and head toward the woods and away from the half-grown fields. Soon it'll be fall and the corn will be tall and my uncles will make everybody help harvest, because if you don't get that crop in at just the right time, you might as well have been goofing off the whole year. All my aunts and my mama and maybe even my daddy will go out in the fields then. They'll work all day and into the night, driving straight lines behind bright lights that stare out from behind the crop. They won't blink. They won't slow down. They'll crush everything that comes in front of them, leaving just the brown feet of the corn and the shadow of the stalk.

Today Mama's heading away from the fields and the houses on our farm that make a cross. She stays in the middle ground we all share, but then she turns past Aunt Mary's house, where Jesus's head would be, and walks over his right shoulder into the woods. I watch Mama from his left hand, but she doesn't look back. I knock on the

window, but I know she can't hear me. She gets smaller and smaller and smaller until I can't see her and Jesus's shoulder starts to melt into the sun.

Aunt Celeste and Daddy's Beer
Tara Morgan Telluride, my stage name!

Aunt Celeste just frosted her hair. It looks so cool. There are little blond streaks all around her face and then some more on the sides. She also got it cut. It's really short now and when you look at her fast all you can see are earrings and lip gloss and light bouncing off her red head. I know I would look really stupid with short hair—and Daddy would have a fit if I chopped it all off—but she looks really good... like she's someone you might see on TV.

As soon as she walked in, I told her, "God, you look great!"

She laughed and ran her hand through her hair and said, "I just went on up to St. Louis, walked into the most expensive shop I could find and said, 'Help!' and this is what he came up with. Tell me, girl, does it work?"

I said, "Absolutely!" and she put her purse on the chair and looked at Mama.

"What do *you* think?" she asked her and Mama said, "I think you always look beautiful," and then after a second said, "What will David think?" and Celeste just waved a hand full of pink nails and said, "Who knows?" like it didn't matter a bit.

Uncle David is Aunt Celeste's husband and nobody knows him real well. He stays up in Chicago when she comes to visit and the only time we see him is if somebody gets married or dies. Then he shows up dressed to kill, looking kind of like Lee Majors only lots shorter. I tell you, when my cousin Freddy got married, Uncle David looked so *good* that everybody noticed, even Aunt Mary who thinks pretty is as pretty does. She said to Celeste, "Now tell me, hon, why would you leave a man like that for a month every summer?"

He does stand out in a crowd. Or at least in Auburn. Most men around here are farmers and one thing that doesn't go together is farmers and suits. Most of them only have one and when they drag it out you can tell that they don't know what to do with their hands... stick them in a pocket, cross them in front. They don't have a clue. So they stand there like they're scared to sit down while Uncle David just moves around the room like his suit is part of his skin.

One thing about Uncle David, though, is that he doesn't say much. He's a city guy, Aunt Celeste says, he doesn't know how to make chit-chat, just wham-bam-make-a-sale-ma'am. When he comes, Aunt Celeste isn't any fun. She sits next to him and doesn't drink or dance or tell any jokes. The only time she gets up is to get him a drink or another plate of food or his coat. So nobody really knows if Uncle David likes short hair or not or even if he's like Uncle Carl who Aunt Mary says is the best kind of big-hearted fool, one who wouldn't notice if you gained fifty pounds or the roof came off the house.

Mama picks up her purse and says, "Thanks for staying with the girls, Celeste," and tells her Miami's already in bed with a book. "Just check in later, if you don't mind, and turn the light off."

Aunt Celeste says, "Go on now, scoot, and don't come back too soon," and winks at her and just then I know that Mama's going to town to see Daddy.

After Mama leaves, Aunt Celeste gets up and looks in our fridge. She moves around the lemonade pitcher and the iced tea and says, "Damn, there's nothing to drink in here."

I tell her Daddy's stuff is out in the china cabinet. She goes out and I hear her poke around the doors and say, "Dry as a bone in here, hon. Your mama must have

cleaned house.” Then she walks back into the kitchen and says, “Maybe I could call Scotty and have him bring my gin.” She looks out the kitchen window toward Aunt Mary’s house where she and Scotty always stay when they visit. All the lights are out except for the TV room and we both know that Aunt Mary’s sitting there watching her programs and playing solitaire while Uncle Carl snores in his crappy old plaid recliner.

Aunt Celeste sighs. “There’s sure to be something in Pete’s cooler, but damn if I want to get around Kathy for it.”

It’s hard to believe that Aunt Kathy and Aunt Celeste are sisters. I said that to Mama once and she said, “They’re both hungry, hon, but just for different things.” I asked her what she meant, but she just shrugged and said some typical what-the-hell-does-that-mean? Mama thing. “Everybody hides things differently, Tara, and sometimes life’s not kind.”

Just then I remembered Daddy hides beer out in the shed in his fishing cooler. He doesn’t like Mama to know he has a beer before dawn on the days he goes fishing, so he keeps a 12-pack out by his tackle box. I don’t say anything, I just run out the back door, zip into the shed, grab a couple of cans and bring them right in.

“Ta-daa!” I say and hold them up high and Aunt Celeste says, “Girl, you are a life savior!” The beer’s hot, so Aunt Celeste pulls out a lemonade glass and fills it with ice. She opens one of the cans over the sink and we watch the foam flying out of the top.

I think about how I always bring Daddy a beer when we hang out at Aunt Kathy’s house on Saturday nights. I go out into Uncle Pete’s garage and grab a can out of the cooler, pop it open and take a long, hard drink before I walk back into the house. I don’t think about getting caught or beer breath or even how many trips I’ve taken to the cooler,

I just think about how the beer tastes like cold corn and lights a little fire in my belly. I smile when I imagine my daddy saying, like he always does, “Look at that, boys. She even opened it for me!”

Aunt Celeste puts the glass up to her cheek and says, “Lord, it’s hot in here,” opens the back door and looks up at the moon. “Come on, girl, let’s sit out here until the mosquitoes eat us alive.” We walk out onto the porch and sit on the steps. Aunt Celeste sips her beer and keeps looking up. “You know,” she says, “I miss all the stars here. In Chicago, you can’t see anything at night. Just a bunch of lights and noise and blinking signs telling you where to go to have a good time.” She sighs a little like she really does miss it here and I say, “God, Aunt Celeste. You can’t miss Auburn,” and she laughs a little and says, “Well, maybe *miss* isn’t the right word.” Then she looks at me and says, “You’ll see what I mean when you leave town.”

I can’t wait. Just four more years and I’m out of here. I’m going to California and get a job and go to every audition I can think of. I think about being on *Happy Days* and starting out as Fonzie’s girlfriend and then getting called back for more and more shows until finally I’m Joannie’s best friend and Fonzie’s fiancée. But that’s just TV. In real life, I’m never getting married.

Aunt Celeste pulls a packet of cigarettes out of her pocket and says, “Girl, you’re about as far away as the stars. Where you at?”

“I was just thinking about how I’m going to go to California, be on TV and never get married.”

Aunt Celeste laughs a little, flicks her Bic, breathes in and says, “Well, good for you,” like she means it. She smokes and sips for a while and then she says, “What you

got against marriage, honey?” and I just shrug and say, “I’m going to concentrate on my career.”

She nods and says through her smoke, “I was, too, hon. I was, too.” I feel bad, because I remember how Aunt Celeste used to work for a big ad agency, but then she got married and Uncle David didn’t want her to work.

“Do you miss working?”

She puffs in deep and then blows the smoke at the stars. “I was nothing but an assistant, but yeah I do sometimes.” She looks at me and laughs a little. “You know me. I like to be where the action’s at.”

Aunt Celeste likes to *be* the action so I say, “Why don’t you go back?”

She shrugs and says, “Oh, Scotty... and David,” and throws her cigarette butt out in the yard. I nod, but I don’t really understand. My mama works and my daddy would never tell her what to do. I must look confused, because she says, “Oh, hon, you’ll see, sometimes it’s just best to get along.”

We sit there for a while and I think about Mama and Daddy and try to remember when it seemed like they stopped getting along. I can’t remember what changed or when. It just seemed like one day Daddy getting silly wasn’t funny. Not even a little. And silly started sooner, like Monday and Tuesday. I don’t know. I guess silly becomes serious when people stop laughing. And God knows, Mama’s right about one thing: everybody hides something.

Mama's Sick
Miami Morgan

It's too soon to tell if Mama will lose both of her breasts or just the one over her heart. The doctors don't know, Mama says, and cancer's a funny thing. It's like a potato that sits in warm water and grows stems and each time a new bud forms so does a root. We'll all just have to wait and see.

I didn't cry when Mama told Tara and me. It was after my bath but before bedtime and Mama made us hot chocolate even though it's too late for sugar and too hot for steam.

Mama put the cups in front of us and sat down hard, like all the heat from that hot chocolate was leaking out of her instead of her Blue Willow cup. I waited and tried not to breathe.

"Well, girls," Mama said and just when I knew she was going to tell us that Daddy wasn't going to live with us anymore, not ever, she said, "I have breast cancer just like your Aunt Mary did when you all were small."

Tara blinked and put her hand over her chest and said, "Oh, Mama," and started crying even before Mama told us they were going to have to take it off on Friday. I didn't cry, but all I could think about was a sharp knife cutting into Mama's soft skin and her breast sliding onto the floor and melting like butter.

Nobody said anything, but Grandma moved into the room with us and I could almost see her sitting next to Mama. It wasn't the Grandma we knew, the one who carried candy in her pockets and stood on her head every morning to wake up her brain. It was

the one who the cancer ate and ate, gnawing away at her until she got smaller and smaller and smaller and you could only see the skin on her hands.

Tara said, “But how? How did it happen? How do you know?” like those answers would make that lump go away and we’d go back to having hot chocolate in the middle of summer.

Mama looked at her hands and said, “I found a lump last week and I went to Dr. Green.”

Tara’s hand was still over her chest and she was pressing it hard like remembering it was there would make it safe and whole like something hidden. “So you went to one doctor,” Tara said and she was all Tara now, all sure and sassy, except her cheeks were wet and her voice acted like it couldn’t find the floor. “What does one lousy Missouri born-and-bred doctor know?”

Mama’s eyes went right to Tara like they could hug her hard and she said, “Sweetie, I spent all day last Friday at the hospital. They poked me and zapped me and studied me under a microscope. They know, honey. They know.”

We sat there for a while, me thinking and Tara crying, and then I said, “Are you scared?” and Mama nodded a little but didn’t look at me. “Sure, hon,” she said, “but I’m going to be fine, just like Aunt Mary” and started rubbing the table as if she was brushing off the crumbs even though the table was already clean.

I didn’t cry. I watched Mama’s hands, her long, full fingers with those short, serious nails, and I listened to the click, click of her gold ring rubbing the table.

“Mama,” Tara said and she was really crying now. “But what if you’re wrong? What if you’re like Grandma, instead? What if you *die*?”

Mama said, “There is no way the Blessed Mother is going to take me away from my children,” and stood up and walked to the sink.

Tara and I watched her shoulders sag and then Tara said, “God, I can’t do this,” and ran out of the room, knocking her chair on its back. I didn’t cry. I just walked behind Mama and put my arms around her waist and my forehead into her back. She didn’t turn around, just moved her hands over my arms like she was looking for something. Then those hands got real still like they remembered where they were and Mama and I held on tight and I didn’t cry.

The next day, Tara and I walk into Mama’s room and there she is on a ladder, one foot three steps up, the other four, and when Tara says, “Mama, what are you *doing*?” she says “Painting!” like it’s a song.

There are old sheets all over Mama and Daddy’s bed and the carpet and even the dresser where the Virgin Mary usually sits and watches. It’s sunny, but the room is full of shadows the sheets try to hide.

I look for the hope chest, but I can’t find it so I just sit on the floor and look up at Mama. I am wet from swimming in the pond. My hair smells like quiet fish and my skin looks almost blue. Tara’s still at the door, the curls in her hair almost straight with the wet. She has grass stains on her knees and they look at us like they can’t decide whether to come in or go on. Finally, Tara says, “I can *see* you’re painting, Mama, but *why*?” Mama just shrugs and smiles and some pink paint splatters on the sheet as she reaches higher and higher until only her toes touch the steps.

Mama and Daddy's room is the prettiest in the whole house. It is long and wide like the brim of a straw summer hat. There are three windows that sit together as if they were friends, one in the middle reaching its arm up and out to the two that curve around it, smiling hard. The curtains are white, too white for a farm, my Aunt Kathy says, but they sparkle and shine and wave like they know what the sun's thinking.

In the middle of the room is their bed, drifting out from the wall it used to anchor. Underneath those sheets is Mama's bedspread, which is white with little yellow roses that forgot to grow thorns. But I can't see it now and I don't remember if there are stems those roses can hold on to or if they're just flowers out on their own.

Tara and I aren't allowed in Mama and Daddy's room when they're not there. I need something of my own, just one little thing, my mama always says, but one Saturday last spring when it was raining and Mama was shopping, Tara and me snuck in and read all the letters that Daddy wrote Mama when he was in Korea.

The letters sat up straight in the drawer, hugged together with a blue bow. Their envelopes were slit open and the rough edges worn down and when Tara said, "We got to remember... they're lined up by their dates," I looked at the postmarks and it was true.

Most of the letters talked about the rain and the boys in the bunks and how all the food tasted the same, even potatoes and beans. But at the end, Daddy always wrote about how the sun looked different there and how he couldn't think of anything but the fish fry at the KC Hall and Mama and her blue dress and white hat and nights without noise.

I don't know what Mama wrote to him, but I can imagine her sitting at the kitchen table at Grandma and Grandpa's old place and thinking real hard like she does when you ask her a question about God or why kids call you weird or how come black people and white people aren't friends even on TV. Then I can see her eyebrow lift a little, like the answer just came to her from somewhere far away and then writing and writing and writing and not even noticing when her hand started to hurt.

I can't see the nightstand now where all those letters are and I don't know why the walls have to be pink instead of the blue Mama always wanted. I try to think about cancer and color, but all I can remember is when Daddy painted that room just a couple of years ago. "Robin Egg Blue to match your Mama's eyes," he said and Mama swatted at him with the little paint swatches. But then, those yellow walls were born-again blue like the sun had just set and the sky was showing off.

Now, half the room is Perfectly Pink. It sits next to the Robin Egg Blue like it means business. Tara says, "But I thought you liked the blue," and Mama just keeps painting long strokes with a wide roller and the pink keeps crying on the white sheets wherever she goes. I don't say anything, but I keep thinking, "But Daddy doesn't like pink." I say it over and over to myself like it's a prayer and I think maybe Mama will hear my head and she'll rinse out the roller, close up the can and the room will become blue again, the cancer will be gone, and the pink will just be something that happened one Thursday last summer.

Daddy Comes to the Hospital

Tara Morgan

“What are you doing here?” I say, and I look my daddy right in the eye and smell him hard. He looks right back and bends down to hug me. I step to the side and just watch him so he knows I can’t be fooled. I am not my mother.

His hands drop and he says, “Well, hon, I’m here for you and Miami and your Mama.” I want to tell him we don’t need him here, not now, go to work, go to a bar, go anywhere, we don’t need you and it’s clear as hell that the only talking he and Mama did on their “date” was about this, about goddamn cancer, and, sure, now, he cares, sure, now he’s here, sure, *now*, he smells like coffee. But he just stands there waiting for me to kick him or cry or make him feel a little better by needing him, so I just watch him and he looks scared and sad and I think, well, good, you goddamn well should.

Daddy nods like he heard everything I didn’t say and he sits down on the plastic seat next to Miami and rubs her head. She keeps kicking her chair and looking at her lap, but she leans toward him a little.

Aunt Mary and Aunt Kathy look at him almost as hard as I do, but Aunt Celeste gets up and hands him her coffee. “It’s straight up,” she tells him, “but I’m bouncing too much to take another sip.”

Daddy drinks it down hard and fast like the cup’s on fire and finally Aunt Mary says, “How are you holding up, Bob?” like she can’t help herself. Aunt Katherine snorts like she can’t help it, either, but then Daddy makes one of his own noises and just as I think, *God, he’s going to cry*, he swallows hard and says, “As well as I can, Mary, as well

as I can,” and Aunt Kathy looks at him like maybe she doesn’t hate him as much as she thought. It’s hard to imagine that Aunt Kathy was ever pretty, that she ever wore a flower in her hair, red lipstick, or a tight dress. It’s like every photo I’ve seen is a lie, but I can hear Mama even though she’s never said it, “No, *now* is the lie.”

Miami stops kicking the chair and pulls Daddy's hand into her lap. She says, “Everything will be all right,” so soft and sure that at first I think I imagined it, but then Aunt Celeste pulls a Kleenex out of her purse and dabs at her nose while Aunt Mary’s fingers keep going over her rosary.

In the corner, *All My Children* is on and I can see Erica Kane in the swimming pool. She’s wearing a little bikini and when her Mama says, “Don’t you think that’s a little revealing?” she says, “Oh, Mother!” like she could just throw up.

I know exactly how she feels, but I don’t nod along with Erica today. Right now, they are cutting my Mama with a long sharp knife or maybe just a short razor blade and being mad about bikinis seems stupid.

We sit there awhile. Erica swims and Aunt Celeste smokes and nobody says anything. After a bit, Uncle Pete walks in wearing his work boots, dragging his bad leg behind him. Aunt Kathy says, “What are you doing here?” almost the same way I asked Daddy, but Uncle Pete just heaves himself into a chair and looks straight at her.

Aunt Kathy roots around in her purse and says to her lap, “I told him we’d call.” Then she snaps her purse shut and Uncle Pete says, “Now you won’t have to” like he comes to the hospital every day.

Daddy doesn’t look at Uncle Pete. He just starts fanning himself with a newspaper. I pretend we’re at Mama’s funeral. I’m wearing a new black dress and hose.

I'm standing by Mama's casket and everybody says, "My, you look so pretty," and "Your Mama sure was proud of you," and tells me how well I'm holding up. I nod, but I don't smile. I just tilt my chin a little and look determined like Scarlett O'Hara does when they tell her she can't go home.

At school, I'm the only kid in my class who's a half-orphan. Well, except for Eddie who's practically an orphan with no real daddy and a mama out in LA. There's also Bruce. His daddy fell in a grain bin two summers ago, but he's not in my grade, so it doesn't count.

Erica gets out of the pool and starts drinking champagne even though she's not close to 21. Her mama heads over to her in two seconds flat and all of a sudden I'm crying. I'm crying so hard that I can't even cover it. I slide onto the floor and I cry and cry and somebody, maybe Aunt Celeste or Aunt Mary, pats me and says, "Honey, honey" over and over again, but I keep crying and I think maybe if I cry enough Mama's cancer will dry up and Daddy will be somebody we want him to be and just when I think there are no tears left, Miami says, "Tara, it's okay," and I wipe my face and nod.

Mama Moans
Miami Morgan

Mama's suitcase sits next to her bed like it's waiting for her to wake up. It's a rectangle, as solid and red as a fire Jolly Rancher and it looks surprised like it can't remember how it got here.

Aunt Kathy sits in a chair and looks out the hospital's window. Her eyes are flat and heavy and she sees through the sunset and settles on the parking lot.

Mama moans a little and Aunt Mary leans in. She is so close to Mama that the bed doesn't even creak. I watch their hands with their long fingers and wide palms and pretend I'm playing Concentration and found a match.

When Aunt Mary lost her breasts, Mama sat in that same spot. She brushed Aunt Mary's hair with her fingers and sang songs without words. I was little then and Daddy carried me to the car on his shoulders, bumping my head when we stepped into the elevator. When I cried, Daddy said, "It's okay, Pumpkin, hardly a bump at all," and I nodded because it was true. But I cried because I couldn't remember who was sick and there wasn't enough air.

I sit on the floor next to the suitcase and try not to look at Mama's closed eyes. If I look at her nose, her chin, her hair, her eyebrows, even the tubes in her nose and in her arms, maybe she'll stretch and smile and say with eyes open wide, "Sugar, what are you doing down there on the floor?"

But the room is as quiet as it is white and I jump a little when the phone rings. Aunt Mary doesn't look up from Mama's hands, but Aunt Kathy sighs, stands and picks it up on the second ring.

"Hello?" she says, like it's a question she knows the answer to and doesn't want to be bothered with.

"Oh, everything's fine, as far as we know," she says, and puts a hand on her hip. "The doctor said she flew right through it... we're just waiting on her to wake up before we call it a night."

Aunt Kathy nods, frowns a little and studies Mama as if she's hiding something. "Well, time will tell. They think they got it all and then, of course, there's the chemotherapy. We'll all just have to wait and see."

I put my head down on Mama's suitcase and listen to Aunt Kathy's voice that always sounds like it's turned a corner too fast and gone off the road and into the gravel. It kicks up rocks and hurries along, but it's too close to the edge. Mama says she wishes I knew Aunt Kathy when she was young. "She was my baby sister. I packed her around everywhere. You never saw a happier child."

It's hard to imagine Mama ever carrying Aunt Kathy around. She's shorter than my Mama, but much heavier and she seems to like her feet right on the ground.

"Shoot, there's nothing you can do," Aunt Kathy says, and I look up because her voice is softer now. "Just say your prayers and bring the girls one of your pies sometime." She winks at me and says, "Make it an apple one," and for a minute I see my Mama behind Aunt Kathy's eyes and I close my own.

Mama's losing her smell. At first I thought maybe cutting off Mama's breast was like snipping the head off a flower, all the smell and softness gone just like that. But she's been home for a week now and every day she smells less and less like earth and sun and more like the smell that hangs around hospitals looking for someone to choke.

Just three days after she got home from the hospital, Mama had to go to the doctor and start chemo. Daddy came in and helped her onto the bed and he didn't even mention the pink walls. "It's not as bad as it looks," he said, but that was hours before she started moaning in the bathroom, "Oh, God, Oh, God, sweet Jesus, just let me die," and I ran and got Aunt Mary.

Aunt Mary stayed for two days. Aunt Celeste had to go back to Chicago and Aunt Kathy sends Uncle Pete over with round dishes with noodles and cheese covered in foil. Tara rolls her eyes after Uncle Pete leaves. "Gross," she says, and shoves it in the fridge.

Like Mama's smell, my sounds have wandered away and I'm too tired to look for them. Everything I hear is underwater and I can't even mouth words, not even for Uncle Pete who looks at me like he can see the stillness all around me. He wants to pull me out. He wants to take my hand, but I like the quiet. It's as heavy as a winter coat and it shushes everything... our steps, our breaths, even the phone seems to hum, instead of ring. "What's the matter with you?" Tara whispers, but I don't know.

Daddy doesn't know what to say, either. He calls on the phone and Tara hisses, "Why don't you say what you mean? You don't want to know if she's up for company. You want to know if she wants to see you. *Company*. Jesus." Then she sets the phone on

the table, walks up the steps and stands outside the door. Aunt Mary shakes her head, her face as white as her housecoat. No, she whispers. Not yet.

Most of the day, I sit on the floor by Mama's bed and I wait until she starts moaning again and reaches for Aunt Mary to help her to the bathroom. Then, with one arm around my mama's waist, my aunt waves me out of the room. "Child, go on now. I'll take good care of her. I promise."

I wait in the hall while Mama's sick in the bathroom. I look into her bedroom and out the bay window. Mama's making noises that would make me cry if I could hear them, but I'm in a pond and the water is warm and above my head. Through the pale green, I can see the Virgin Mary just above the surface. She rises and floats above Mama's bed, taking all the cancer and the pink paint away and when the Blessed Mother slips out of the window, those white lace curtains flutter just a little as Mama's smell sneaks past them and settles back into her skin.

Family Decisions

Tara Morgan

This family takes about six years to decide to drive into the city and go to the mall. Seriously, nobody here rushes into anything. My grandmother's been dead for two years and her house is sitting there waiting for somebody to decide what to do with it. Her underwear is still in the drawer, for God's sake. The only reason her pantry and canning cellar is empty is because nobody can stand the thought of something like sweet potatoes or turnips going to waste. This is not a family that leaves you guessing.

But last night, Aunt Mary found a pile of Mama's hair under Miami's pillow and tomorrow we're taking the train to Chicago. Just like that. Two rounds of chemo down and three to go, the next one starts tomorrow, and Miami has lost her mind—or at least her words—and everybody thinks we need to be in Chicago with Aunt Celeste, so we don't have to watch Mama puke her brains out. Change of scenery and all of that stupid stuff adults say when they've already made up their minds.

Eddie thinks I shouldn't go and it's not just because of the French Kissing, although I meet him out back four, five times a day. He hangs out behind the barn and he waits and when my mama pukes and prays to God to die, I go out back and I let him put his tongue in my mouth and, twice, his hand up my shirt and over my bra. Once, under it. Sometimes, I even moan, but I don't really mean it.

Eddie says if it was his mama—he acts as if she has cancer, instead of a tan and a boyfriend in L.A.—nothing would get him to go. “Bullshit,” I tell him. “Sometimes, people really can just be in the way.” I know that for a fact.

I want to go to Chicago. I want to sit on the fire escape of Aunt Celeste's high-rise condo and watch all the people walk down the street. I want to hear how they talk, their hard consonants, and study their perfect clothes. I want to see people I don't know everywhere I look. I want to wash the cancer out of my own hair. I know my mama wants that, too.

"Take care of Miami," she told me this morning. Mama whispers now, just like all of us. It's like she doesn't know we're being quiet for her. "Be kind."

But can anyone really promise to be kind? I do it, anyway. And I tell her she looks pretty, that shaving her head was a good idea, that her blue scarf matches her eyes. I tell her no one can notice her eyebrows are gone and her eyelashes, too. I tell her she will be fine. I tell her Miami will be fine. I tell Eddie that everything is fine. You're my boyfriend, yeah, I'm sure, and going to Chicago can't change that. That's what I tell him. I *can* be kind.

But when Daddy asks me if he can drive us to the train station, I say no. Just like that. I'm as serious as a heart attack. I'm as cold as cancer.

Leaving Mama
Miami Morgan

Mama's scarf is blue and it shines a little when the sun catches it and you forget for a minute that it's covering all the little bones in her head. Then it's just pretty silk with a big bow at the back of her neck that doesn't even try to say it's sorry.

I like Mama's scarf best when she fans it out flat and puts it to sleep on the nightstand next to her bed. Then, it's just something pretty to look at. It doesn't have anything to hide. This morning, before she put it on, I lifted the sheets and slid in next to her while she slept. I didn't think about what happens tomorrow, when more long tubes of poison get pumped into my mama and Aunt Mary has to come back over and bring her clean washcloths and chips of ice while Mama moans. I didn't think about Daddy and all of his phone calls where he sits in town and waits to be needed. I didn't think about the last time I heard Tara tell him, "God, Dad, if we could trust that you could be here, really be here, you know, sober, then, God, I don't know, yeah, well, I guess then..." and later, harder, "You're right, Dad. I *don't* know."

Today, I just listened to my mama breathe, her tilted chest moving up and down, over and over again like a song you can't stop singing. When she woke up, I kissed her shoulder real soft and she said, "Good morning, sweetie," and didn't wait for me not to answer.

She got out of bed, one arm on her nightgown, the other reaching out for her scarf, lifting it off the table, one smooth swish, like she's grabbing onto the hand of someone who is walking ahead of her and going way too fast.

Mama isn't going with us to the train station. She feels better—"It's a good day, sweetie," she tells me—but it's best not to push it. She'll just sit for a spell in the sun and watch her flowers from the porch swing. I sit next to her, but I don't move the swing. I don't want to make her stomach hurt and I don't want the swing to squeak.

Uncle Pete pulls up in his truck and studies her a minute before he gets out. She waves at him and points at our bags on the porch and nudges me with her shoulder. "Go on now, honey. Have fun and don't worry." I get up and hug her hard and she pats me on the back like she's congratulating me for something. "Go on now," she says. I nod, and walk to the truck.

Uncle Pete walks right past our suitcases and comes over to Mama. He kneels on his good knee in front of the swing. He leans in and talks to my mama, his words a low hum that I can't hear. Mama looks out at her garden and Uncle Pete looks at her. Every now and then, she nods, but she doesn't look at him. Her eyes are on the cosmos, the irises, the penny bushes who lay their heavy heads in the dirt. *They need to be staked*, I can almost hear her think.

I get in the truck and shut the door as soft as I can. Tara comes out from behind the barn and stops when she sees Uncle Pete. His forehead is on Mama's knee, her hand on his hair. Mama is looking at him now, the top of his head, and I think of my Daddy

and the last time he was here, at my mama's feet, at the exact same spot, right by that swing, but this time, Mama's not mad and there's no moon.

Tara looks at me, but I can't read what she's not saying. She stomps over to the porch and drags her suitcase to the edge. Mama looks up and calls out, "Tara, darling, tell your old uncle Pete here, I've got no intention of dying. He's getting all soft on me."

Before Tara can say anything, Uncle Pete snaps his head back and pulls himself up. "I know that," he says to Tara who blinks back. "Lord knows she'll outlive us all. Just wish she didn't have to suffer so damn much."

Mama waves him away. "Oh, go on, now, all of you. You'll miss that train." She gets up and walks over to Tara at the edge of the porch and pulls her close. She whispers something in Tara's ear and then she tucks a piece of Tara's hair behind her ear. Tara nods and I look out over at the fields. Eddie's walking right down the middle ground toward his grandparents' house. He's passing through the heart of Jesus on that cross. Eddie's almost to the center part that connects our houses. In a minute, he'll be smack dab in the middle of Jesus.

Daddy's Back

Tara Morgan

Just as Uncle Pete throws our suitcases in the back of his truck—smashing all of my makeup, I'm sure—we see Daddy pull into the farm. Uncle Pete steps around to his door, but he doesn't get in. He looks over at Mama who is still standing by the stairs, watching Daddy's Chevy which looks like it never had a fight with a tree.

Miami starts to climb over me to get out, but I tell her, "Just wait a minute, God," and I open the door and slide out first. I step out, but I don't move past the door and I don't shut it, either. Miami's running across the lawn and she's at Daddy's car before it stops. He shuts off the car and gets out slow and Miami hugs him before he can even get up. He hugs her back, but his eyes are on Mama. Knowing Daddy, he doesn't even notice that Miami's not saying a word.

Daddy walks toward the porch where Mama's standing and Uncle Pete moves to the front of his truck and Miami comes over and stands next to him. Mama tugs on her scarf and pulls it down in the back. She calls out, "You're just in time to say good-bye to the girls," and Daddy stops and looks over at me. I get back in the truck and slam the door. I'd roll up my window if it wasn't so damn hot. He waves, but I look out the other window at Uncle Pete with his arm around Miami. God, get in and drive already.

I don't look up, but I can hear Daddy mumble something to Mama and then Mama raises her voice and says to Uncle Pete, "You better get those girls to the station, Pete."

Uncle Pete nods once and says, "Bob, you coming," like it isn't a question.

Daddy turns around and looks right at him. “No, Pete. I’m staying right here with my own wife in my own house. I’ll be taking care of her from here on out.”

Uncle Pete rubs Miami’s arm and nudges her into the truck. He looks at Mama. “Seems to me her sister’s been doing that real well.”

Daddy moves down a step, but he doesn’t leave the porch. “Be that as it may, I’m staying.” Leave it to Daddy, the minute he shows up, all the quiet that’s been hanging around for the last few weeks is gone. Just like that.

Uncle Pete takes a step closer to the porch, but he stops as soon as Mama says, “Go on now, Pete. Those girls are going to miss that train.”

Uncle Pete nods once and then, finally, gets in, slams the door, and starts up the truck. I don’t look at the porch where Mama stands and waves or where Daddy stands next to her looking like some kind of pathetic hungover hero.

I just close my eyes and I think about Miami. Maybe she’s not messed up. Maybe she’s got it all figured out. Maybe there’s nothing left to say.

Train Ride
Miami Morgan

I think it was a grandma, someone who used to wear big summer hats with brims as wide as a smile. Or it was a grandpa, some nice old guy who sat in the coffee shop every day and always asked the waitress, “Hot enough for you?” I guess it could even be a mama, somebody who lived on a farm and died of cancer.

But I think whoever is in here was kind, because I don’t feel anything on this train but summer and space and even the dust that floats around in the sun doesn’t seem to mind. I don’t mind, either. I don’t care that there’s a dead person somewhere in the back. Uncle Pete said, “It’s just a body going home to be laid to rest. Nothing scary about it,” but that was after I heard him say, “I’ll be good and goddammed” when we saw the long black car pull up.

Tara said, “Oh, God, gross,” and looked like she might cry, but then the whistle blew and we had to hurry up and get on.

Now Tara sits across from me, going backwards all the way to Chicago and I’m glad I got to sit on this side. I can watch what’s coming and Tara doesn’t seem to mind that when she does look up from her *Tiger Beat* magazine, she can only see where we’ve been.

We drive and drive and I watch the hot fields spread out like pancake batter in a pan. It seems if I look hard enough, I could see where it all ends and I try to picture that place where the sun stretches out and sleeps. I wonder what it would be like to be that

sun, seeing everything down deep, through caskets and hospital gowns and train windows.

But maybe that sun gets tired of seeing everything. I think about how tired my daddy looked on the porch today. He reminded me of that Christmas tree we kept up until February one year. The needles were falling off, but the lights were still blinking and the ornaments hung on. It was trying real hard not to die.

Aunt Celeste and Chicago

Tara Morgan

Uncle David is out of town on business and Scotty's at camp, so we have Aunt Celeste all to ourselves. Actually, since Miami still won't talk, it's almost as if it's just me and Aunt Celeste and some weird little ghost who sits on the fire escape and reads all the time.

Aunt Celeste and I stay up real late. She drinks gin and tonics and tells me about all the people she's seen walk down the street in front of her apartment. Once she saw Bob Hope. He's a lot smaller than you would think, but he said, "How are you, hon?" right back to Aunt Celeste when she said hello. He doesn't think he's too good for anyone. That's exactly the same kind of star I'll be, except to all those girls I go to school with who pretend to be your friend, but secretly think they're too good for you, just because they live in town. "I'm sorry. Have we met?" is the only answer they're getting from me when I leave that piece of shit town. I'm going to ride into town in a limousine for the reunions and I won't give autographs. Don't even ask.

Aunt Celeste takes us everywhere during the day, the Sears Tower, Michigan Avenue, the zoo, the art museum, Chinatown, the sidewalk around the lake. Everywhere you look there's somebody who's done something you've never even thought of yet. There are guys with guitars and open cases, business women with suits and white tennis shoes, men with uniforms, and tons of hippies who wear braids and vests and sit right down on the sidewalks. It's hot—the pavement steams and the whole town smells—but everybody pretends not to notice. If they're mad—or happy—it doesn't have anything to

do with how it feels outside. They don't let it. They've got better things to do with their time than notice the weather.

I talk all the time when we walk around Chicago. "What's that?" "Can we go there?" "Why is he talking to himself?" but Miami never says a word. Aunt Celeste tells me at night, after a couple of drinks, that it's sort of creepy how quiet Miami's become. But during the day, when Miami won't talk and I tell her, "God, would you give it up, already?" Aunt Celeste always says, "Hush, now. Miami doesn't have to talk until she's good and ready. Chicago is a place where you can get lost if you want to, and Miami's welcome to do the same."

Tonight, after Miami's gone to bed, Aunt Celeste and I sit out on the fire escape and talk. It's hot and the air is heavy, but Aunt Celeste can smoke out here without Uncle David knowing she's still lighting up. He's due home after midnight tonight and she says she can't take the risk that there's smoke hanging around the apartment. I wish Uncle David didn't mind the smoke, because everything's cool and clean in there. There are glass tops on the tables, shiny wood floors, and a huge sofa that wraps around the whole room. It looks like it could be in a magazine.

Aunt Celeste breathes out and studies the stars and I ask her if she's ever gotten lost in Chicago. "Oh, shoot," she tells me and takes a sip of her drink. "All the time."

I don't mean on the El, I tell her. I mean, lost lost. Like the kind of lost where you search for a new beginning.

Aunt Celeste sighs. "Getting lost isn't the problem. It's knowing where you want to end up at is what's tricky as hell."

I know where I want to end up: Los Angeles. Hollywood. And when I tell Aunt Celeste that she just laughs. “You’re sure like your Mama, honey.”

I am nothing like Mama. I am not ending up at some crappy public school in the middle of absolutely nowhere, surrounded by people I’d never talk to if I wasn’t related to them. And I would never put up with anybody like Daddy who thinks he can make up the rules as he goes along. “You’re kidding, right?”

Aunt Celeste leans her chin back and blows smoke at the stars. “You think your Mama never had any dreams? You think you’re the first person to want something else than those fields that have everybody coming and going all year long?”

I hate it when adults talk like that, even Aunt Celeste. “Well, why didn’t she leave, then?”

Aunt Celeste sighs and tells the stars, “In every family, there’s somebody who does more than the rest. Somebody who’s responsible for everybody. In this family, it’s your mama.” I look at the same spot Aunt Celeste is talking to, but I don’t nod. “She went on to school and she got that degree and joined that sorority and married some man that never got his hands dirty, but then, well, our daddy had the stroke and Mama needed help and Kathy had just lost the first baby.”

I think about Daddy and his clean hands and his starched shirts on the way out to the barn. How did he end up in Auburn?

“Your mama is the kind of person who does what she needs to,” Aunt Celeste tells the stars. “She helped Mary take care of Daddy until he died and then, well, you came along... Sugar, what can I tell you? Life’s what happens when you’re not looking.”

I don't want to be that needed. I don't want to be stuck someplace where I can't breathe. I don't want to be the one who is so sad she can't speak or the one who smokes to the stars.

I just fall asleep on this crappy pullout couch and I hear breaking glass, like a whiskey bottle or a lamp or maybe something in between. I get up—I think it's Miami stumbling around in the dark again—and I hear Uncle David say, "Look what you made me do, Celeste, just look," and even though I can't see anything and his voice is soft and smooth, there's something sitting under those words. Something a little slurred and a lot meaner than a beer buzz that started at noon.

I go to the door, but I don't go out. I'm in my pajamas, but I listen hard while all the hairs on my body stand straight out. Aunt Celeste is saying real nice, "Please come to bed, Dave, please, the girls are here," but that's not the right answer, because Uncle David says, "I don't give a good goddamn, Celeste, not in my own goddamn house," and then wood cracks. I wait a second, I don't even breathe, and then Aunt Celeste says like she's underwater, "Please, Dave, let's just go to bed."

I can't move. I can't run down the hall to Scotty's room where Miami is sleeping. I can't jump in her bed or pull her to the door. I just stand there, stuck.

Uncle David starts talking low and soft again. "Are you telling me what to do, Celeste? Are you? Are you?" and she's saying, "No, no, of course not, no, but it's late, please, just come to bed," and then a table's turned over like somebody tripped and fell hard and Uncle David's still saying like some creepy Halloween toy with a stuck string,

“Are you telling me what to do? Are you? Are you?” And Aunt Celeste is so quiet, I think, “He's killed her. The son of a bitch has killed her.”

I'm not stuck anymore. I walk out into the hall and I stand behind the door of the living room and I look out under a hinge, just like Policewoman. God, I wish I had a gun. Uncle David is pulling Aunt Celeste to her feet and when he gets her up, he squeezes her arms real hard like he's trying to make his muscles pop out and she's crying without a sound. Her tears just run down her face and hang on her chin like they're stuck and I think, “I'm going to call the police—I'm going to do it now,” but then Miami sneaks up behind me and I scream a little when I feel her hand on my arm.

Aunt Celeste and Uncle David look at the door and before I can think of something to do, Uncle David says real loud, “Well, look here, Celeste, we got us a couple of spies,” and lets go of her arms.

Aunt Celeste stops crying, but she doesn't wipe her face. She just rubs her hands on her jeans and says, “Now go on to bed, girls, please, everything's all right,” like *we're* the ones who had a bad dream and Uncle David walks over to the end table that's upside down and kicks it real hard. I scream like I'm someone else, someone I don't know, someone who's not scared of anything. I scream and scream like I can make a curse and make it stick, “I hate you, you goddamn asshole. I hate you. I hope you break your toe. I hope you get cancer. I hope you die. I hope you get sick and sicker and sicker until you die, you goddamn son of a bitch,” while Miami pulls me into the bedroom and shuts the door and shakes her head, stop, stop, please, stop, but I'm not saying anything now. I'm just looking around the room for something heavy and hard. Something a Charlie's Angel

would use to crack a skull in half. Something I could use if I had to. Something that would break a man's head into two.

Aunt Celeste's Bathroom

Miami Morgan

In Aunt Celeste's bathroom, there are tubes and tubes and tubes of Red Kiss lipstick. They sit next to Bravely Blue eye shadow and Plum Blush powder and two curling irons. On one shelf, in the middle, is Uncle David's razor and a black comb with small teeth. One shelf up and the cabinet gets serious. Orange bottles with white labels look out at you when you open the door. Some are almost full, others practically empty, but each bottle has Aunt Celeste's name stamped on it like she's to blame for something,

I don't pick them up, but I can tell they're different than my Mama's cancer pills. Aunt Celeste's are Tic Tac tiny and white, while Mama's are as big and brown as a beetle. Her pills say, "Take with food" and "May cause stomach upset," but Aunt Celeste's just say, "Take two when needed."

I shut the door and turn on the faucet. I think about drowning all those little white pills and letting them slide down the pipes, how they'd sneak through the neighbor's apartments and land somewhere under the street. It seems like just that one thing, the turn of a lid, could change everything and Mama would be well and Aunt Celeste would be happy and we'd all be home getting ready for Christmas. But it's only July and those pills might know everything, but they change nothing so I turn off the faucet, dry my hands on my shorts and open the door.

Tara's waiting for me outside the door, holding her toothbrush and her Bonnie Bell bag. "God! It's about time!" she whispers and nods toward Aunt Celeste's and Uncle David's door. I get out of the way and Tara slides in and shuts the bathroom door.

I walk into the living room, where everything is right-side up. The sun comes into the window like it doesn't remember how dark it was last night and except for the end table that's gone, there's no sign anything happened here last night.

The phone sits on the floor and I look at the clock and see it's 6:05 a.m. and I don't even think about it. I just pick up the phone and I call Uncle Pete. I know he'll be sitting on the porch, barely moving his rocking chair while he sips his coffee and says good morning to the day. I know Aunt Kathy will be taking her shower, combing out her curlers before she comes down to start frying bacon. I know Uncle Pete will be thinking about how little Mama's gotten or how his new colt's leg hadn't quite straightened out yet or why the sun coming up still makes him kind of sad or other stuff he can't do anything about.

He answers on the first ring and I try to put all my words together, but nothing comes out except a little sound in the back of my throat. "Miami?" he says, and I try not to cry. "Girl, if it's you, I want you to know that your Mama's doing fine, getting stronger every day."

Just then, I can see my Mama. I can see her and she looks just like she did last summer, standing in her garden, her legs hard and brown, her fingernails cracked and rough with a thin line of dirt, her big white hat covering her eyes, her nose a little pink, her hair all the way down her back. I can smell her, soil and sun and something like fresh green peppers. She smiles at me like I'm a purple Cosmo, and I close my eyes and I want to say real soft, so I won't scare her away, "Come get me," but I can't speak.

Uncle Pete's chair squeaks and I can tell he's stopped rocking. "Is there trouble up there?" and I just nod and let my tears run into the phone. I hear him set his coffee cup down. "I'll be there by suppertime." I open my eyes. Mama's gone.

Later at breakfast, Tara works real hard to let Uncle David know that she's not a banged-up end table who'll just sit out by the curb or the sun who forgives and forgets. When he walks into the kitchen for breakfast, her back gets stiff and she tries to look taller, even though she's sitting down. Uncle David doesn't seem to notice. He just picks up the newspaper like nobody else is in the room. But then, he did that before Tara hated him, back when her eyes followed him around as if he was something behind a glass case, something like a diamond or a short red dress, something that would only fit when she gets older.

I want to hate Uncle David, too, but something stops me right at the edge. I don't know what it is, exactly, but he's like a bull gone mean. Something in him is foamy and wild and more than just a little scary and even though he's banging in doors and leaving crescent moon marks on Aunt Celeste's arms, it wouldn't be right to kill him or even shoot him. It's like something else made Uncle David mean and you can't undo it. Even though sometimes, when he stretches, you can tell he wants you to. But you just got to lock him up and hope nobody ever leaves the gate open.

Mama says that love melts the hardest heart, it's like a light in a black room... one candle and it's not dark anymore. But I don't think somebody else can light the match. I think you have to hold the sticks that made you mean in your own hands and rub, rub, rub them until all the mad goes away and something warm and sorry and ready

sparks. Then your room's got a little of your own light and when anybody else brings in a candle, you don't try to blow it out.

I don't tell Tara that, but maybe I should. Last night, after her tears stopped, her face got as hard as Grandma's old china doll, except Tara didn't have a crack down the middle. I sat down next to her, but I couldn't see in. I could feel all her words in the room, but it was quiet. I just watched her and she put her head on my pillow and looked at the ceiling. I knew better than to touch her, but when I laid down next to her, she scooted over and pulled the covers under my chin.

Leaving Chicago

Tara Telluride

I cannot understand the women in this family. Today, after Uncle David left for work, I thought Aunt Celeste would start packing her suitcase, and then jump in her car and drive up to camp to get Scotty. I thought we'd head up to Michigan maybe, all four of us, and find a cottage in the woods, like those kids in *Escape to Witch Mountain*, and make a plan for getting back at Uncle David once and for all.

But Aunt Celeste just cleaned the kitchen and made another pot of coffee. "It's going to be a hot one today, girls," she said, and looked out the window over the sink like she does every morning.

"That's it?" I couldn't stop myself. "That's all you have to say this morning? God, Aunt Celeste."

Aunt Celeste turned around and leaned her back against the sink. "What do you want me to say, Tara?"

"I don't know, but what *was* that last night? I mean, does that like happen all the time?"

Aunt Celeste looked at me hard. It was a face she's never made to me before. It was like she was talking to Grandma when she was still alive. "There are things that happen in a marriage that you don't understand, Tara, and you might just spare us all a little of your self-righteousness today."

I opened my mouth—there is a difference between being right and being self-righteous and I think a person who is going to be a sophomore in the fall just might know

the difference and, besides, everyone knows that's it not right for a man to hurt a woman—but Aunt Celeste had already turned around and looked back out the window before I could decide what to say.

Miami just stirs her cereal, even though there's nothing left in it except for milk, and I think maybe I can take the El by myself today, go to Wrigley Field maybe or back to the Sears Tower. I've got the map. Maybe I can leave Aunt Celeste a note. I don't want to talk to her again today. Maybe Miami's onto something.

Aunt Celeste's red kitchen phone rings and she sighs and walks to the wall. She says, "Hello?" like there's nothing wrong here, nothing at all, and I think how good she is at pretending. She could have been an actress, too. Maybe she would go to Hollywood with me in few years. Scotty would be older then and maybe she could leave him, too. I know we could make a lot of money. Maybe that's why Aunt Celeste stays with that asshole, maybe she doesn't have any money and...

"What? Why?" Aunt Celeste looks at us and then turns her back and walks into the hall as far as she can stretch the cord. "What's happened, Pete? Is it Elizabeth?"

Aunt Celeste is quiet and then, "What? I don't understand. Who called you?"

I look over at Miami who's stopped stirring her milk. Aunt Celeste turns back into the room. "Miami? Honey, did you call Uncle Pete this morning?"

Miami nods at her milk. I kick her under the table. "So you're talking now? What did you tell him?"

Aunt Celeste looks at Miami like she wants the answer, too, but Uncle Pete's still talking. "Hold on a minute, Pete," Aunt Celeste says, and then she pulls the receiver away from her ear and buries it into her stomach so Uncle Pete can't hear her. "Miami, I

got your Uncle Pete here on the phone and he's at a truck stop outside of St. Louis. He's on his way up here. He thinks you want to come home. I don't know how he got that since he said you didn't say a word on the phone, but is he right, honey?"

Miami nods at her milk and I don't know what I want. I can't stand Uncle David, but he works a lot and the only thing there is to do back home is watch Mama puke and Daddy act like some helpless idiot. Of course, there's Eddie, but...

"Are you sure, honey? Because your ticket back is still two weeks away and Scotty comes home in a few days and I thought we'd do all sorts of fun stuff. Are you sure you won't change your mind?"

Miami looks up at Aunt Celeste then and shakes her head. She's sorry I can tell, but she needs Uncle Pete and Mama more than she needs me and Aunt Celeste. Even I can tell that.

Aunt Celeste looks at Miami like there are a million things she'd like to say, but then she just nods once and puts the phone back up to her ear. "Well, Pete, are you sure, you know, with Elizabeth... Really? Bob's back home? How's he doing with the, you know, the... Well, that's good news. Right. Okay, I'll have Miami packed and ready. When do you think you'll make it on up?"

"I'm going, too," I say real fast. Aunt Celeste looks at me and I can tell the way her eyes shift from surprise to hurt to "okay, fine, have it your way" that she and I will never be the same again.

I get up and grab Miami's bowl and my own. I dump them both in the sink and I look out the window just like Aunt Celeste does every morning. But I don't see anything, just sun and steam and a broken coffee table down by the curb.

Uncle Pete wants to get right back on the road and I can see why. There's nothing in this apartment—or even this entire city—that fits him at all. He looks like a bull in a china cabinet around all this glass and fancy art, but Aunt Celeste thinks he should stay the night. “But it's a ten-hour drive,” she keeps saying, as she offers iced tea, some dinner, the empty study. “The girls can bunk together in Scotty's room and we'll put you right in there.”

Uncle Pete keeps shaking his head. “I got the horses, you know, Celeste, and I got a colt that needs checking on. Don't trust Carl to know what to look for.” He puts his hands on her shoulders. “It's going to be all right. I'll pull over at a motel, if I get too beat to keep moving. I promise you that.”

Aunt Celeste nods then and walks over to Miami. She whispers into her ear, but I can't hear what she says. Miami hugs Aunt Celeste hard and nods into her shoulder. When Aunt Celeste hugs me, she whispers, “Keep your heart open, honey,” but she doesn't pull me as close as she used to. I think about saying, “If you'd close your heart to Uncle David you wouldn't have to wear long sleeves in the middle of summer,” but I just hug her back with one arm. I'm ready to go home. Or at least, I'm ready to leave here.

The Ride Home

Miami Morgan

The pond is the right kind of warm, the bottom cool and clean, the waters golden, instead of green. I am swimming underwater, but I can see and hear and sing. My sounds are clear and I know all the words. I swim and swim and I never need air. I could fly, if I could make it to the surface, if I could stretch above these waters, if I could fill my lungs with blue, I could...

The truck stops and my head slips off Uncle Pete's shoulder. It is dark, dark with red lights circling the skies. The night is wailing. Tara shifts beside me in the truck, her head against the window. She's still sleeping, but I'm awake now and I see those lights are police cars, the sounds sirens. I look up at Uncle Pete and he shrugs back at me. "Somebody must have had an accident, honey. Or maybe the train broke down."

We are behind three cars, all of them parked and waiting. Up ahead, in the dark, you can see a train, sitting still on the tracks. A police officer stands in the middle of the barricade and talks into a little radio. We are just outside of Auburn. I see the sign that says, "Come back soon!" that lets you know you've just left the city and you're heading into farm country. We are close to home, next to the Wilderman's farm. They grow corn on both sides of the track and Daddy always smiles when he drives past. "Good for you, Wilderman," he says to the corn. "The government might make you sell it to them, but you can still call it yours. Stick it to 'em right in the eye!"

Tara stretches next to me. "What's going on?" She blinks out at the night. "Where are we?"

“We’re just about home,” Uncle Pete tells her. “I’m not sure what happened up ahead, but I think I’ll go find out. You girls sit tight.”

Uncle Pete gets out of the truck and shuts the door as soft as he can. There’s a man standing next to his car ahead of us and Uncle Pete walks over. We can’t hear them, but the man shrugs and points at the train.

Just then, a tow truck comes up from behind and the police officer waves it past. Uncle Pete nods at the man and walks back to the truck. “I don’t know, girls,” he says to the windshield. “I guess somebody got in a race with that train and lost.”

An ambulance comes now, but it’s quiet. It scoots by us like it doesn’t want to disturb anyone and just then I know that it’s my mama and daddy in the accident. Mama got worse and Daddy had to take her to the hospital, he was in hurry, and he was driving too fast and Mama was too sick to remind him to slow down and then Daddy thought that the train wasn’t going to get the best of him, not when Mama needed him and then...

I reach across Tara and I fling open the door before anyone knows what’s happening. I’m over her and down the road, past the car where Uncle Pete is standing, right up by the police officer. “Miami, wait!” Uncle Pete yells after me, but I can’t wait. If I run fast enough, I can make it yesterday morning, I can stop a train, I can stop cancer.

“Miami!” Uncle Pete yells, and I turn to look at him and the police officer grabs the back of my shirt.

“Hold up, little girl,” he says, but I can’t hold up. I can’t wait. I point at the train. I squint into the black. I can’t see anything, but I know it’s my daddy’s Chevy. I know it is. The tow truck lights shine on the front of the train and it’s a green car, crumpled into the grass. It is my daddy’s.

“Jesus Christ.” Uncle Pete passes me and the police officer. “Don’t let her move,” he yells over his shoulder and he hobbles into the dark, limping over the gravel.

I pull my shirt free, but the officer grabs both of my arms, pulls me into his chest. “It’s all right, darlin’. Hold up a bit. Your daddy’ll be right back.”

But that is not my daddy. My daddy is in that green car. My mama’s there, too. I don’t have any words, but a moan starts up in my center and leaks through my body and into the black. It grows and grows, and when I look up, I see Tara, her face white, her hand over her mouth, her eyes on my daddy’s green Chevy being hooked up to the tow truck. My moans are covered in blue and red and when the police officer loosens his hands, I fall into the gravel and put my forehead into the stones. I squeeze my eyes shut and I pray and pray and pray. I ask the Blessed Mother to look after my own mama. I ask Jesus not to take my Daddy. I pray when I hear Uncle Pete, dragging his left leg, stop beside my sister. I pray when I hear, “Honey, that accident, I’m sorry, well, it’s your daddy, and, oh, honey...” I pray and pray until I lose my words, until the air around me starts to fill my lungs with black and I can’t breathe. I pray until Tara starts to scream.

25 Years Later

St. Louis, Missouri

A New Millennium

Tara Johnston

January 1, 2000

My father had a lot of friends. He never knew a stranger. It was the Irish in him, that's what my mother often said. I try to explain this to my ten-year-old twin daughters, sometimes, when they ask about him or need the names of those who came before them for family tree homework assignments at the earnest private school my husband and I send them to. "You should have seen the line at my father's wake," I'll begin and sometimes they nod, a gift to me that they're willing to listen to stories that need to be retold. "It went clear around the corner, past the drug store, all the way to the KC Hall. They waited in that line for hours, lots of them farmers in suits, and it was over 100 degrees that day."

My girls know about the accident, of course, but I don't mention that my father was drunk, that my mother never even knew he had left the house that night. She thought he'd gone to sleep in Miami's room, because Mama had been so ill and Daddy needed to sleep. He had been sober for thirty-seven days. That is my mother's story, the one she often needs to retell. Bob tried, God knows he did. No one talks about where he might have been after the bars had closed, how he ended up in front of a train at four a.m. "Be kind," my mother said to me that summer before I left for Chicago, and I've come to believe that most of what we suspect should remain unsaid. It is my certainty that I most regret.

The death of a parent removes whatever sureness you had in the world. After my father died, I lost my anger. I suppose it could have gathered strength and whirled into something larger than myself, but at the time, we could only think of Miami. Mama was shattered, of course, but she was still Mama, doing what needed to be done. And she had Aunt Mary and Uncle Pete and there were places for her to rest and be heard.

But Miami became lost. The pain was so heavy around her, it covered the walls. She sleepwalked through the house, wandered over the fields of the farm. Her eyes were empty. She failed at school the next year. She wouldn't take a test, open her book. The kids called her names on the bus, but she couldn't hear them. My mother took a leave of absence from work and pulled Miami out of school in January. She took her to doctors, considered medication. Aunt Kathy mentioned a state hospital in Illinois, one that was good for mentally ill children. Only Aunt Mary said, "Let her be," and so we did. We couldn't lose her, too, even though a part of her seemed too far gone to find. Even I, at fifteen, could see that.

But then, the next spring, Miami came back to us just as the snow was melting. One day, she began to write and she never stopped. Something shifted in her eyes, a tiny window opened and we could see the barest flicker of a light. Within a month, her words came back.

Jimmy Delaney was driving me home from school when we pulled up to the farm. My lips were still tender from all that kissing, those hours of sitting in the back of a car, hands all over each other, the wanting, the needing, a foreshadow of the girl I was fast becoming, one who was searching in all the wrong ways for some boy to fill the spot her father had left. I often found moments of forgiveness—an absolution of sorts—in those

back seats when I gave freely what little there was of me to give. I fed a kind of hunger with those boys. It was years before I realized I was still starving.

But that day, with Jimmy's hand on my knee, we pulled next to the barn and Miami rounded the corner, sitting on one of Pete's horses. It was Gimp, I still remember, Uncle Pete's colt who had been born with a bad leg and he had nursed back.

Miami waved and said, "Hi, Tara." I think she may have even smiled.

Mama was on the porch, nodding at me and weeping. "That's right, Tara, Miami just said 'hi,' to you."

Miami grinned.

I am not the writer Miami is, but there is something about a new millennium that turns one introspective. It's a need to record the past, even if you can't solve all its mysteries. I don't know why Miami chose that day to speak, but I will admit to this: I felt as much joy then as I did the day my girls were born.

Miami has kept writing. She just finished her third novel and she teaches would-be writers around the world, a fellowship in London, one in Africa, next year it might be Prague. She has lived the life of travel and solitude that I once dreamed of, and yet I worry about her. A stillness remains within her that seems too deep, too wide to me.

"Oh, leave her be," I can almost hear Aunt Mary saying, although she's been dead for almost five years now, Uncle Carl not even a month later. Aunt Kathy's gone, too. She died of breast cancer eleven years after my mother lost her breast. I don't know how cancer chooses the women in my family, who survives, who dies. I stand in the shower and study my own breasts. I watch the water run off them and I wonder.

Today I will make cabbage and potatoes like my mother always does on New Year's Day. She's sold most of the farm now, but she and Uncle Pete have kept their homes, the barn and his horses, of course. It's a new year, a new millennium... and the wife of every Irishman knows, good health and fortune are found in the bottom of a boiling pot. And so I will make this meal that no one will eat and I will pass it around my own table, put my hand over my husband's, a good man, imperfect in all the best ways, and I will say the Irish Blessing that promises us that those we love who have gone before us watch and wait.

An Excerpt from “Words out of a Wasteland: A Memoir”

Miami Morgan

2007

In Missouri, the air is heavy, full of sun and soil, damp with sweat. In the summers, you can drown in its heat. You can pull its covers over your head and pretend not to breathe. Your heartbeat slows, idles. The days wander on. You sleep, even as you wake. You wait for a Northern breeze to place its mouth over your own, whispering you awake.

In the summer of 1975, my mother lost her breast. My father lost his life. The sun watched and tried not to judge. I sat in the space it left behind and drowned in its silence. I couldn't awaken, even after the leaves changed and the crops were cut. I couldn't hear, even after the snow fell and suffocated the fields.

A girl on a farm knows how life works. Colts die in childbirth and pull their mothers along with them. Snakes shred in combines and farmers fall in grain bins. Dogs wander too close to the highway. Boys sink into ponds. Life and death and the need, the crushing need, for it all to begin again is imprinted into the land. It's as clear as a boot print on the dirt floor of a barn. It's as alive, as aware, as a prayer in the back of an eight year old's throat.

So when my mother lost her breast and choked on the chemicals they pumped through her body—while my father waited, just minutes away, choking on his own poisons—I felt that farmer's need to begin again. I wanted to clear a space around my parents that they could fill with each other. Or, at least, I wanted to step aside, to bend so that I would not block the breeze they needed to come.

I didn't know that at the time, of course. I was silent at first, because no words were required of me. And then, when questions came, like they do—"What would you like for breakfast?" "What are doing there in the hallway?" "What is the *matter* with you?"—the answers wandered away. I was too tired to go look for them. I was bending, even though there was no breeze.

Only writers, perhaps, truly understand how words do more than fill spaces. They transform them, just as they destroy them. They create realities solely by being spoken, by dragging despair out into the sun where it has no choice but to become noticed. To become alive. The words we keep within us, my eight-year-old self hoped, would wither without light and anything, yes, anything, could have happened then. There is a small part of me that still believes this today.

It seems odd to have hope in times like these. We have given up our beliefs in so many things. We no longer believe we'll find Jesus outside of the tomb. We're not even surprised when wars begin over weapons that disappear. We expect nothing to be truly found, not even our faith in one another. And yet, that crushing need to begin again and again lingers long after we've buried those we thought we could not live without.

My uncle Pete taught me we can go on when the love we feel is stuck in our throats, strangling us with its longing for something that no breeze can bring. And it is his willingness to get up in the morning, to make coffee, to study the palm of the land and find beauty in its cracks that saved me the year my father died and my mother lived.

I was in the barn, behind the stall, where a pile of hay kept the colts warm. I went out there often, because there were no colts that spring and I liked how something else

had stopped—or, at least, refused to be consoled—that first thaw after my father’s death. Life did not have to go on. In that stall, I had proof.

I must have fallen asleep under the hay. I often buried myself in it and pretended I was in the ground next to my father. I didn’t really want to die. I just wanted to be near him, to share something he was experiencing, even though I knew as much as I stilled my heart, my body would hum and his would not.

I awoke to the sound of my mother pleading in a tone I hadn’t heard from her before. “Please, Pete, please...” and I wondered what he could have that she would want, what he was withholding that she would beg for. I couldn’t think of anything.

“God damn it, Elizabeth,” he said and there was something raw and broken in his voice and I thought, it’s Tara. She’s dead, too. Or Aunt Mary. “Just let me say it. Just once. Once every twenty years, I’ve got to be able to say.”

“Pete, please,” my mother said again, but it was the sound of a small surrender.

“I love you, Elizabeth. I’ve always loved you. You know that.” His voice cracked, faltered, and then, louder. “You *know* that.”

My mother must have shaken her head or moved toward the door of the barn or perhaps she just placed her palms over her eyes as she often did during those early days of my father’s death, because the space between them shifted. “Don’t pretend with me, Elizabeth. Not now. I married Kathy to... God, I don’t know. I didn’t even let myself know it, but, Elizabeth, *you* must have seen it. You must have known. And then when we lost the babies, four babies, Elizabeth, Jesus Christ.” My mother choked then, a hard sound caught at the back of her throat. “Hell, I signed up for goddamn Vietnam just to get away from what my life had become. Just watching you and Bob live the life I wanted for

us and all that time, he was too goddamn stupid to know what he had... and you had to know what kind of a man he was. He was..."

"Weak," my mother answered, and I could feel her strength then, her certainty that marks my childhood as clearly as the fields I called my own. "He was weak, Pete. And I knew that. There is nothing you can tell me about my husband that I don't know."

It was quiet for a moment and I thought perhaps my mother had left, her last words an exit. I imagined my Uncle Pete watching her walk away, the back of his right hand rubbing his jaw. But then, "The women, Elizabeth," he said, and his voice was quiet and level. "It killed me to watch it. It killed me to watch you pretend."

"We all pretend, Pete," my mother said, angry now. "We pretend we want coffee when someone hands us a cup. We pretend that cancer is just inconvenient, that we'll live if we take our vitamins and vomit up our chemo. We pretend our children are perfectly fine, even when they are drowning in misery and we are powerless to do anything but watch and judge ourselves for mistakes we've made. We have to pretend, Pete, or we couldn't get up in the morning."

"I don't want to pretend any longer, Elizabeth," Uncle Pete said, his voice quiet. "I want you. I want..."

My mother sighed then, interrupting him. "It was always Bob, Pete," she said, and she was gentle again, the mother I knew. "From the moment I met him, it was Bob. You had to have known it, Pete. Anyone could have seen it, especially in the beginning."

My mother must have left then. Moments passed and I thought perhaps they were both gone and it was safe to stir beneath the hay. Then, glass crashed into the wall, shattered onto the floor. Later, I saw it was beer bottle, the kind my father often kept in

his fishing cooler. Uncle Pete started to walk away—I could hear his bad leg sliding behind him—and then a broken sound split the space between us. It was round and large and swollen with rage and pain. It was the sound my silence longed to make.

I started to write that afternoon. I needed to tell the story and my words had wandered too far for me to find them. I finished that story and the next. With each word, I sought its power. On the page—for that solid moment where a word stood up, its back tall, its voice loud—I could make my mother well. I could make Uncle Pete love Aunt Kathy. I could make my father faithful and sober. I could stop a train.

I tell my students all fiction is a truth and all memoir a fiction of sorts. They nod, but I'm not sure they understand. Those endings, hundreds of them that spring, became my idea of faith. Writing became my church. And, in time, stories became my sound, my salvation.

They're still saving me today.

WRITING LIFE

When I began writing fiction—I was eight and often crouched in my closet—I had a “flair for the dramatic,” as my mother might put it. I preferred the big finish... the panting gun, the hopeless wound, the gas explosion that spread to the water tower and flooded my small town. I spent little time considering the characters. They were walking—occasionally, talking—plot devices. If you read carefully, you might notice the blue-gray hair of the crying grandmother at the funeral, but she never lurked behind the casket or smiled beneath her hankie. She was exactly what she seemed. And she was completely unnecessary.

You could blame poor Nancy Drew in her fitted red coat and smart black cap for these sad little stories. I read every single one of her books (most of them twice) and they were, perhaps, the source of my first call to write. It seemed so easy. And, of course, writing my version of Nancy Drew stories *was* easy and fulfilling in a way to me that writing no longer is. I was completely satisfied as my character simultaneously solved the murder, found the dog, and prevented the robbery in a way that I can never be satisfied with any of my “finished” work now.

I might have kept writing this way indefinitely—reading my way through the entire juvenile biography section of our small town library, waiting each Christmas for another *Little House on the Prairie* book—but then, one year, my mother handed me Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and I have never considered writing—or reading—in the same way since.

I met Francie, the first character I wanted to be real. I wanted to sit beside her on the fire escape. I wanted to walk with her to school. I wanted to tell her about the weak men that surrounded my family, the drunk uncles, the lost farms, their defeated wives, my aunts who tilted their chins and put on fresh coats of lipstick. I wanted her to tell me it was all right to love all of them.

My writing changed then. Characters took the place of plots and I still have those middle-school notebooks with pages and pages of people doing, well, *nothing*. You could argue—and some have—that my writing hasn't evolved much since. My greatest challenge is to reveal characterization through action and dialogue, to sift in interiority and sweep out its crumbs. My greatest challenge is to actually tell a story.

My most treasured authors—those I view as unmet mentors—are those who satisfy my character-driven need to know “why,” while they keep my right brain busy with the “what.” Joyce Carol Oates brilliantly succeeds in her short stories—“Four Summers,” “You,” and, of course, “Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?”—but I find many of her novels too removed. I'm not always sure she cares for her characters and I need her to love them... even if I can't.

Other authors form stronger—if more silent—attachments to their characters. Alice McDermott, Kaye Gibbons, Elizabeth Berg, Bret Lott, Alice Adams, Sue Miller, and Jane Hamilton are quiet writers—particularly Lott and Berg—and their plots murmur while their characters speak. These authors console me in matters of characterization and its primacy within fiction. In their pages, I see it can be done and done well.

Raymond Carver, William Trevor, Flannery O'Connor, Tim O'Brien, Richard Russo, and sometimes Alice Munro are authors I turn to for inspiration when my

characters, fully formed and ready to speak, find no response is required of them yet. I've read the entirety of many of these authors' work as well and each time I marvel at how I can feel a character's familiarity and yet still be surprised at the choices she makes. And yet, I never feel cheated or tricked as the final layer is pulled off at the climax of the plot (and I frequently have "plausibility issues" with much of the contemporary fiction I read). A character's resolution of success or failure—as well as that enviable, muddy landscape in between—is always earned by these authors, and I read their work over and over for clues on how I might do the same.

Perhaps this concern with plausibility—and this connection with characterization—is what troubles me about creating a sense of place. I often struggle with incorporating the place into its people. How much setting is needed? How little? Who is seeing it? Better yet, who should? With the exception, perhaps, of my novella, setting is often secondary for me. I tend to create characters, ink on tattoos, pick out their earrings, and get them drunk before I decide where they live or why it matters. And yet, I recognize the power of setting when it is done well... when the characters inhabit a place instead of just walking through it.

William Trevor's setting sticks to the feet of his fiction, leaving its tracks over the page. His rich character descriptions simultaneously introduce character personalities *and* the setting without straightforward narrative descriptions. Most of the observations his characters make about their lives and the lives of those who surround them—from occupations to pastimes—are tied to place. It's impossible to separate who they are and where they're from. I envy that skill and, unsuccessfully, try to mimic its strategy.

Perhaps, ultimately, the end result of *all* my writing is my unsuccessful attempt to mimic the work of those I admire. It's a depressing thought and, yet, with the longing to create another Betty Smith's Francie, to place her in my own childhood with its flat fields and fallen farms, I met Miami who would not stop whispering her story. Tim O'Brien led to James, the angry trucker who was, yeah, a Vietnam vet who just might cut a hooker on a highway. Ron Hansen created Leslie who could "feel" pain in the same way that Mariette could "feel" Jesus. Norma Klein is the spirit behind Amanda and Caroline and every bored woman who traded dreams for domesticity. Often-removed Raymond Carver resulted in *Say What You Mean to Say*, a story so distant from humanity that the character's name is as absent as the antagonist's compassion. And Susan Hubbard's dark side—*Walking on Ice*, *Blue Money*—and her encouragement to "let it all get ugly," resulted in the bulk of this collection, especially Mandy, the little poet, and Isaac, the husband who proves that cancer doesn't bring out the best in everyone. Before Susan's workshop, my main characters tended to "play by the rules" while those around them acted in opposition. Now, my protagonists bite, cut, curse, lie, bleed, cry, steal, hitchhike, drink too much, and hide a plastic eye behind perfectly-straight teeth. They *live* in a way that my earlier characters did not.

This drive to create flawed characters is not as easy—or as fulfilling—as my early "Nancy Drew" work. There are few real answers, I've found, and my characters' decisions often sadden me. But now I'm willing to let them fail, to let their stories speak, to ask the questions without the satisfying answers. I think that's why I kill so few of my characters, why towns don't flood or hotels burn. These characters still have something to teach me and I'm still learning how to listen.

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