Reflections on the Bottom of a Coffee Cup

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Introduction
The following collection of short stories deals primarily with women who, despite feeling like they know what is going on around them, find reality to be somehow different than they thought. That the characters are female is only of minimal importance; the most important idea is that no matter what our circumstances, there are some things which we are incapable of knowing or understanding. These same things, however, can have a tremendous effect on our lives.

I chose the title Reflections on the Bottom of a Coffee Cup because of the double meaning of the word "reflections." In one sense, the word refers to how I wrote much of the collection: reflecting on the bottom of my empty coffee cup. In another sense, the word refers to the idea of the reflections themselves; the lives of the women in my stories are distorted, much like the reflections on the bottom of a cup. The double meaning of "reflections," then, made the title appropriate for the ideas that I wanted to convey.

Finally, a word about my characters. Most of them are what my parents would refer to as "white trash." They are solidly working-class, concerned more about beer, cigarettes, and base pleasures than about philosophy or art. I chose to write about this kind of people because I think they are extremely interesting. Instead of being caught up in the race for success and fame, these people are simply looking for happiness in their modest surroundings. These people demonstrate the idea that happiness can be found in simplicity. My characters are not rich or glamorous, but I think they are real.
They are like any number of people that inhabit my small hometown. Their gritty, everyday common sense is, I believe, more valuable than a lot of theoretical ideas that have no practical application.

With these words, I would like to introduce you to my friends and my characters. I hope you find them as real and instructive as I did.
The burro from Mexico and the polar bear from Alaska sat quietly beside each other, neither seemingly aware that they did not belong together. Down from them, the painted masks of Mardi Gras looked at the scenic mountains of Colorado.

"So," Miriam asked proudly looking around her kitchen, "which will you have?"

Beth had never had coffee with Miriam before: this was her first meeting as a volunteer with the local senior citizen outreach program. The program was meant to match younger people with elders who needed companionship. Now, Beth stared in amazement at the row after row of coffee mugs that lined the walls of Miriam's tiny kitchen.

"I think I'll drink out of the Alaskan mug, if you don't mind," Beth said.

"An excellent choice," Miriam said as she took the mug from the shelf. "I'll drink out my favorite, the mug we got on our trip to Britain."

Miriam moved as a chemist in her lab, boiling and brewing, straining and pouring. Finally, she sat the cup of coffee in front of Beth. "What do you think of my mug collection?" Miriam asked.

Beth was still looking around the room. To say that she was surprised by the sheer number of mugs that lined the walls of Miriam's tiny kitchen would have been an understatement. Even more surprising, however, was the variety of the mugs: yellow one, blue one, painted ones, pottery ones, old ones, new ones, ones with pictures, ones without.
"They're amazing," Beth answered. Her first inclination had been to say that they were overwhelming, but she didn't want to hurt Miriam's feelings.

Miriam took a sip from her coffee and smiled. "Tom and I would pick one up every time we took a trip," she said. "Every mug here has a story behind it. That mug that you're drinking from, for example, Tom and I bought that when we went to Alaska in the sixties. It hadn't been a state very long then. We bought the mug at a cafe where we stopped for breakfast one morning. That polar bear there was their trademark. Tom like it so much that he asked them how much they would sell it to him for." Miriam chuckled. "I reckon they'd never had anyone ask them a question like that before because our waiter got really confused. Tom kept pestering him, though, until he went and asked the manager."

Beth looked at the British cup that Miriam had chosen. She thought that it was probably a tea cup instead of a coffee cup; it was made of delicate porcelain, and the edge was rimmed with a thin line of gold. "What about your cup?" she asked. "How did you get it?"

Miriam's usually animated face became even more lively. It was obvious that she was in her element when she was talking about her cups. "With this one," she said, running her finger around the rim, "it's not so much how we got it as it is what this trip meant to us." She settled back in her chair, blowing on her coffee as if she were lost in the dark liquid.
"Tom and I were never wealthy, mind you," Miriam said. "We were pretty good with a dollar, though, and when we set our minds to saving for something, we could usually do it. Our dream had always been to go to Europe. Of course, when we got married, that in itself took all of our money. And then before we knew it, we had two kids and another one on the way. My third pregnancy was hard. There for a while, I completely forgot about Europe. There were too many other things to be worried about."

Miriam sat the cup on the table and turned it around. Beth was amazed at how fragile it was.

"Tom hadn't forgotten though. Every month, he had been stashing a little money away without telling me. One day, I got the bank statement before he did. When I found out, I was a plenty angry at him; there were lots of time that money would have come in handy. But Tom said that we had survived without it, so obviously we didn't need it that badly.

"I was eight months along with my third one when I found out what Tom was up to, and Tom said that we would have to wait, of course, until the baby was born and grew up a bit before we could actually go, but at least now we had the money, and we weren't going to spend it on anything else."

Miriam stopped here and looked at Beth across the table. "Only we didn't have to wait as long as Tom thought we would because I lost the third baby. She was stillborn. We didn't know there was a problem until I went into labor."
Miriam was at least seventy-five now, but her face was as pained as if it had all taken place only yesterday. Beth was amazed at how vivid pain could still be after fifty years.

"It just about killed me," Miriam continued, holding the now empty cup up to the light to show Beth how thin the porcelain was. "It wasn't the physical part of it; besides the fact that the baby was already dead, I had a fine, normal labor. The part that almost got me was the emotional strain. I know that I never even held the baby, but when you carry something in your body for nine months, and you make plans for it, and you pick out names for it, and then it's snatched away from you, the emptiness is unbearable.

"I was lucky to have Tom. He held up real well. I know losing the baby bothered him, too, but he felt like he had to be strong for me. That's when he decided we should go to Europe immediately. 'To take my mind off things,' he said. So we did." Miriam picked up Beth's cup and her own and walked over to the counter. When both cups were refilled with coffee she brought them back.

"There's something about the heat of coffee that makes me feel comfortable," Miriam explained as though she were apologizing for the break in her story. "Just having a cup of it makes me feel better."

Beth smiled and patted the old, wrinkled hand. "I understand completely," she said. "Thank you."

"Anyway," Miriam said, moving her hand as if brushing away Beth's sympathy, "that trip to Europe saved my sanity, but it
took every penny we had. We didn't even have any money to buy souvenirs. None, that is, except for this cup. Tom bought it one day when I wasn't with him, and he didn't give it to me until we were back in the U.S."

"It sounds like Tom was a very special man," Beth said. Scenes involving old, painful memories always made her uncomfortable, so she felt proud that she had anything at all to say.

"Yes," Miriam said slowly, drawing the "s" out between her teeth. "Tom was a prize."

Miriam closed her eyes and floated off. Then, suddenly, her eyes snapped open and she popped up from the table. "All of that is passed though," she said. "Tom's been dead for over five years." Miriam put the cups in the sink and hurriedly wiped off the table.

"I don't want to sound like I'm trying to run you off, Beth," she said, "but I really have some things I need to do before I can go to bed. Maybe you can come back next week. You can pick another cup, and I'll tell you another story."

The abrupt cue to leave did catch Beth by surprise, but she assumed that the emotional story had tired Miriam. Beth smiled and picked up her purse. "I'd like that a lot," she said. "I'll plan on seeing you again next Wednesday, then, unless something comes up. Is that okay?"

Miriam had returned to her old self again. She smiled warmly at Beth. "That would be wonderful," she said. She reached out and squeezed Beth's hand as she walked her to the
door. "You take care of yourself, and I'll see you next week."

Miriam did see Beth next week and many weeks after that. In fact, they often saw each other more than once. Always, it was in the tiny kitchen crowded with mugs. Miriam refused to meet anywhere else. "These mugs are my friends," she told Beth. "I like having them around."

Beth accepted all of this without question; she enjoyed having the mugs around, too. Every time she had coffee with Miriam, Miriam would let her pick another mug, and then Miriam would tell her the story that went with that mug. One time, when Miriam was out of the room, Beth tried to count all of the mugs. She made it to sixty before Miriam came back.

"How many mugs do you have?" she had asked.

Miriam claimed not to know. "I quit keeping track of them a long time ago," she said. "I figure there are probably about a hundred or so."

In the months that followed that first visit, Beth heard the story behind the Mardi Gras mug (bought in New Orleans on their first trip there), the Colorado mountain mug (Tom bought it on one of their many trips there because he wanted to bring the mountains home with him), the Mexico mug (bought on a quick jaunt across the border from El Paso), and many others. Each one was the center of a story involving Miriam, Tom, their children, and various friends. Beth would sit and listen, mesmerized by the tales of adventure and misfortune that Miriam recounted. The math gave Beth a problem for a time; she would often try to figure out how a hundred mugs could be distributed
over the fifty-some-odd years that Miriam had been collecting them. That would have required the acquisition of more than one mug a year, and each mug seemed to involve not merely a trip to the next town, but significant journeys across state and national boundaries. Beth thought that Miriam must have led a very exciting life, and the lack of that very quality in her own life made Beth all the more interested.

"How did you do it?" she had asked Miriam. "How did you pack so much living into your life?"

"Well," Miriam had said, "it wasn't all my adventure. Some of it was Tom's, some was the kids', and some was our friends'. Somehow we just always ended up with a mug."

There was another significant problem that bothered Beth, too, and that was the apparent absence of Miriam's children from her present life. Tom was dead; that had been established. From all indications, however, the children were still alive. At least Miriam had never mentioned that they weren't. There were two of them, a boy and a girl. After she lost the baby, Miriam said, she never felt like trying again.

There were childhood pictures of the children framed and hung in the living room. Old, black and white ones. Beth studied the photos every time she visited, searching for a resemblance between the youthful faces in the photos and the aged face that sat across from her. Often, there were many. Sometimes, Beth could find none. Beth, having been raised in an extremely polite and correct family, waited patiently for Miriam to mention what had become of her children. Every time
Miriam would start a story that involved them, Beth would hold her breath, thinking that maybe this would be the story that would reveal where they were today. Beth would have turned blue in the face, however, if she had continued waiting. Just when Beth thought she could steer the story toward the present, Miriam would take control again, steering back to the world of the black and white photos.

Finally one day, Beth got up her courage. At this point, she felt that she and Miriam had become close enough that the normal boundaries of propriety no longer applied. After all, Beth had even heard the story behind the Las Vegas mug, and anyone close enough to hear that story was surely close enough to know what happened to Miriam's children. So Beth asked.

Miriam stood at the kitchen sink, boiling the water for their coffee. Truthfully, Beth had never really drank coffee until she had started visiting Miriam, but there was an unwillingness on Miriam's part to drink anything else out of her treasured mugs. So, while Miriam stood there straining and boiling, Beth had casually asked what ever became of the two children who played such a vital role in so many of the stories. When she asked the question, she instantly wished she could have taken it back. Perhaps she had misjudged the boundaries of their relationship. There was definitely a tightening around Miriam's shoulders, and when, after a brief pause, Miriam answered, there was tension in her voice.

"I had really rather not talk about it," she said. "Let
me just say that they have gotten on with their lives, and they
don't seem to need their mother any more."

That was a sufficient answer for Beth, even though it really
wasn't an answer at all, and she accepted the cup of coffee
that Miriam offered her. Beth would not bring the children
up again.

Looking back, Beth knew that day drastically changed the
relationship between them. The next week, for the first time
in the nearly a year that they had been having coffee together,
Miriam called to say that she would not be able to keep their
date. Beth worried about it all of that week, but forgot it
the next when Miriam seemed as cheerful as ever. Now, Beth
could see that the qualities of the stories had started sinking
at that point. Now, they were shorter, to the point, with fewer
amusing anecdotes thrown in, and, most significantly, Miriam
no longer seemed willing to volunteer the stories. Beth had
to ask for them.

This was how things stood when Beth's phone rang early
one morning. It was the director of the outreach program.

"Ms. Houston, this is Glenda Pearson from Outreach, and
I was calling to talk to you about your adopted elder. Ms.
Houston, I'm sorry, but Miriam passed away this morning." The
director's voice was distant, unreal.

Beth was silent on her end of the phone. Disbelief was
what she felt. She had seen Miriam only two days ago, in the
tiny kitchen crammed with mugs.

The director cleared her throat. "She went quietly in
her sleep. The doctor said that she didn't feel any pain.

Ms. Houston? Are you there?"

How could the doctor know if Miriam had felt pain, Beth wondered. Then: what would happen to her coffee cups? Then: had Miriam's children been notified? Beth asked the director about the children.

The director, not understanding the significance of the question answered, "Miriam had no children. The only living relative we could find was a niece in Nebraska. We've contacted her, and she is flying in to handle burial arrangements." The director scoffed. "Flying in rather reluctantly, might I add. She should be here tomorrow. If you would like to talk with her, since you were Miriam's friend, I'll leave a message for her."

"Thank you," Beth said slowly. "I would appreciate that."

Where were the two children on the wall, Beth wondered after hanging up. Surely Ms. Pearson had made a mistake. Beth had seen their pictures. She had heard their stories. If those children didn't exist, how could the stories exist?

The question gnawed at Beth's mind, and she was thinking about it the next day when the telephone rang again. Ms. Pearson. "Miriam's niece is at her apartment now, looking things over. She said you could reach her there if you wanted to."

Beth knew the number, but instead of phoning, she got in her car and drove to the apartment. A small, white rental car was parked outside, and no one came to the door when Beth knocked. "Hello," she called. No answer. Beth opened the
door and went inside.

A few cardboard boxes were scattered around the living room, and Beth could hear someone moving in the kitchen. She walked toward it. The woman stood in front of the sink, reaching up for a mug in the same way Beth had seen Miriam do so many times before. Only the woman was not making coffee. She took the mug down and examined it, a look of distaste on her face. It was Miriam's prize cup from Britain. Then she noticed Beth.

"You must be Miriam's friend," she said, her expression not changing.

"Yes," Beth said. "You're Miriam's niece?"

"Yeah, my mom and Miriam were sisters." The woman set the mug on the counter with a thud. "I don't know why Miriam insisted on keeping all of these old mugs. Something will have to be done with them."

"Listen," Beth said, "there were a few questions that I wanted to ask you about Miriam." The niece's attitude made her uncomfortable, and she didn't like the way she was eyeing Miriam's mugs. "Your aunt and I had been having coffee together for several months, and there are a few things that I'm confused about."

The niece chuckled. "I'd say you would have to be confused to have coffee with Miriam."

Beth frowned at the words, but she couldn't afford to risk insulting the niece until after she had her answers. "Did Miriam have any kids?"

The niece put her hands in her pockets and leaned against
the counter. "Do you think I would be here if she had?" she asked.

"Well, I thought maybe they had died or moved far away or something." Beth picked up a mug and cuddled it in her palm.

"No," the woman answered. "Aunt Miriam never had any children."

"Well," Beth asked, trying to maintain her composure, "if you don't mind my asking, who are those children on the wall in the living room?"

"I'd have to see them to know. Where are they?"

Beth led her to the living room and pointed to the pictures. "Those are the ones."

Miriam's niece cocked her head to one side and examined the photos for a minute. Then she stepped closer and examined them some more. "Did Miriam tell you these were her children?" she asked.

Beth nodded.

"I'll tell you ... things must have been worse than we thought. I've never seen these people before in my life. Miriam probably bought these at some garage sale or something." The woman turned and looked at Beth, her hands on her hips. "Miriam was a little off," she said simply.

Beth sank to the couch; the mug that she had picked up was still in her hand. It was the mug from Colorado. "What about Tom?" she asked.

"Who?" Miriam's niece looked confused.

"Miriam's husband," Beth said, "his name was Tom."
"Ooohh . . . Maybe it was. I really don't know. He died long before I was born."

Beth's brain was whirling. "That couldn't be," she said. "Miriam told me that he had only been dead for about five years."

The woman laughed a deep, long laugh. "Listen, lady, I'm sorry, but like I said, Miriam was a little off. Tom, if that was his name, died in World War II. Miriam never remarried."

"What about this, then?" Beth thrust the mug towards the woman. "What about all of those mugs? Miriam would tell me stories about how she and Tom and the kids had gotten each of them. Where did all of those mugs come from?"

Miriam's niece took the mug and looked at it, turning it over and over in her hand. "As far as I know, Miriam never left this state. She liked garage sales; she liked flea markets. Most of those mugs probably came from there." She handed the mug back to Beth.

"But the stories . . . they were so real." Beth sat back, tears beginning to form in her eyes. "How could she have made them up?"

For the first time, Miriam's niece's face softened. "You really liked Miriam didn't you? I'm sorry that the truth is different from what you thought."

The woman turned and walked back to the kitchen, and Beth just sat there trying to understand what had happened. She thought she knew Miriam so well, and it was all an imaginary person. The real Miriam never went to Las Vegas. The real Miriam never went to Colorado. The real Miriam never lost a
baby or went to Europe.

But the stories were so real.

Beth pulled herself off the couch and went into the kitchen where Miriam's niece was packing the coffee mugs helter skelter into boxes. Beth stood watching her, a pressure swelling in her chest, pushing its way to her throat, and exploding out of her mouth.

"Your aunt was the most special person I ever met," Beth said, her voice shaking with emotion.

The niece stopped, her arm still raised to remove a mug. "What?" she asked.

"I said," Beth said, her voice growing steady, "your Aunt was the most special person I ever met."

"You mean to tell me that, after finding out the old woman had been telling you lie after lie for months, that you think she was anything short of downright insane?"

Beth looked around the room, remembering the hours she and Miriam had spent sitting at the table, their thoughts encased in the steam from their coffee mugs. "You didn't even know your aunt," she said. "What Miriam told me were not lies; the life that your aunt lived through her stories was more real than the lives you or I lead. It's not the facts that matter; it's the feelings, and Miriam certainly had feelings."

Beth took the mug that Miriam's niece was holding, wrapped it carefully in newspaper, and placed it in the box. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to finish packing the mugs."

Miriam's niece did not respond; she simply turned and left
the room.

When Beth left Miriam's apartment that day, she took with her four boxes of coffee mugs from around the world, a heart full of love, and a head full of the most beautiful stories she had ever heard.
"Memory"
There are basically two types of minds: there is the sentimental mind, and there is the bitter mind.

The sentimental mind remembers only the sweet and poignant parts of the past. This is the type of mind whose owner keeps old love letters, cries melancholy tears, and is incapable of hating anyone. For these people, anger is fleeting and grudges are hard to remember. When recalling things in their lives, the unpleasant details escape them, and what remains is a nice, pleasant glow. The sentimental mind has a warm, fuzzy image of the past; the edges are soft, and everything is bathed in light. The possessors of this sentimental grey matter are continually tormented with bothersome what-ifs, romantic attachments, and melancholy tears. They are, for the most part, incapable of hating anyone.

The second type of mind is the polar opposite of the sentimental mind. While this mind also remembers the past, the bitter mind keeps careful records of each wrong committed against it. The owner of this type of mind is frequently sharp and disgruntled, often mired deep within a bog of self-pity. Because the bitter mind is unable to forget, it is unable to truly forgive. This renders it almost totally incapable of true, selfless love. For the bitter mind, its past is a raging, threatening storm, punctuated by fierce bolts of destructive lightning.

Chloe had a sentimental mind.

Allan had a bitter mind.

That is where the story begins.
Had either Chloe or Allan been more superstitious, they surely would have realized that their love was not meant to be. Had they been wiser, they might have viewed the circumstances of their meeting as a bad omen. Instead, they would attribute it to fate. Perhaps, sometimes, there is not that much difference between the two.

They met on the first day of class during their freshman year at college. They met because of sheer coincidence. Neither of them was where they should have been. Chloe arrived at the right room at the wrong time. Allan was in the wrong building. Upon discovering their mistakes, they both left the room at the same time. That was how they met.

As they stood in the hall comparing schedules, those little chemical messages that occasionally make everyone crazy began jumping back and forth. Chloe gave Allan her phone number, not really expecting him to call. Her past experiences had led her to the conclusion that males often "lost" numbers before they could be used.

Surprisingly, however, Allan did call her.

At this point, it is necessary to insert some background information about Chloe. Having grown up as the youngest child of older-than-average parents, she was no stranger to work or responsibility. She had spent most of her previous years with her family and her education at the front of her thoughts. Joy, happiness, and pleasure had little place in her life.
Most of the enjoyment that she did derive came from within herself or from the happiness of those she served.

Chloe had spent eighteen years dividing her life into small journeys, only to find that when she reached each destination, another remained. At the age of eight, she had believed that Life would start at thirteen. At thirteen, she had thought that Life would start when she reached high school ... then when she got her driver's license ... then when she graduated ... then when she went to college ...

One day, Chloe realized that her life-clock was already running. She suddenly realized that life could not be put on hold simply because she did not have time to deal with it. Life would not begin when she went to college. It would not begin when she got married. Her life had already begun, and she was missing it

When Chloe had this revelation, she began to make some serious changes in her life. At this point, she had a boyfriend Josh. Not just a male companion or escort, but a serious Significant Other. When Chloe began cleaning up her life, Josh was one of the first things to go. When Chloe ended the relationship, Josh was more than a little upset. Chloe had been his center, his point of attachment to the world. Having lost that center, Josh went spinning aimlessly.

It wasn't that Chloe had any grudges against Josh; it wasn't that he was bad or mean or cruel. It wasn't even that Chloe didn't love him. Chloe merely needed to breathe. Had she been able to hate him, or even to dislike him severely, the end of
the relationship would have been easier. As it was, however, Chloe and Josh parted ways on uncertain terms for no definite reason. The ambiguities that remained because of the way the relationship ended would plague Chloe's warm, fuzzy, sentimental brain for the rest of her life, and the good, idealized Josh would be her constant companion. When Allan met Chloe, he did not realize that he and Chloe were not the only two people involved in the meeting. When Allan met Chloe, he was also meeting Chloe's past and all the people and events in it.

Despite the troubles in her past, Chloe was a happy person. She had an uncanny ability to turn troubles and sadness into positive, strengthening things. When adversity would come her way, she would mentally picture her moral fibers growing stronger. Chloe believed that things had a purpose and a use, and she applied this belief to everything in her life.

It was this very tactic that she was using to deal with her embarrassment on having been in the wrong class when she met Allan. When Allan actually did call, Chloe was happy, but reserved. When Allan called for a second date, Chloe was elated, but calm. After the third date, Chloe began to feel somewhat secure. When it became evident that the innocent flirtation between Allan and her was growing into a serious love relationship, Chloe threw caution to the wind and immersed herself totally in the glory of their love.

At this point, it is necessary to insert some background information about Allan. Allan was the middle child of a solidly upper-middle-class family. His life had been one of minimal
responsibility and care. Allan's parents had divorced when he was twelve, a terrible age for such a traumatic event. Living with his mother and seeing his father only occasionally, he had developed a type of maverick independence. Or at least a facade of maverick independence.

Having been raised to believe that emotions were something predominately feminine and generally unimportant, Allan had felt guilty and ashamed when tears would collect behind his clear, blue eyes or when a sentimental smile would tug at his lips. Allan acted quickly to rid himself of these emotions whenever they appeared. Allan's past was littered with almost-romances, and despite the fact that some occurred several years ago, he could recite a list of every ex-girlfriend's faults. Falling in love, particularly as a freshman in college, was not in Allan's plans.

When he first bumped into Chloe outside the classroom, he had thought that she was cute, polite, and shy. That was why he called the first time. The second time he had called because he told himself that Chloe would be insulted if he didn't. The third call came as a surprise even to him, and Allan remained surprised by the many calls that followed. Clearly, there was something about Chloe that fascinated Allan and that continually brought him back to her. He could not, however, bring himself to call it love.

Chloe was female. Females before her had caused him pain. There was no reason to doubt that she would do the same. Allan believed the clouds were already gathering on the horizon, and
he was waiting for the lightning to strike. That lightning was slow in coming, however.

Allan and Chloe got to know each other better and better. Slowly but surely, they developed the kind of knowledge about one another that can be discovered only with time. Allan could predict what Chloe would say about any given situation, and Chloe knew the story behind the tiny scar on Allan's lower back. As the year wore on, they shared everything with each other. Though Allan was, at first, not a willing participant, Chloe's honesty and her warm, fuzzy view of life caught him. After almost a year, they were thoroughly accustomed to one another.

It was about his time that two things happened. Though the events themselves were not related (one did not cause the other), their timing would provide the bolt of lightning for which Allan had almost given up hope. The two things were these: Josh broke up with his new girlfriend, and Chloe began to think.

Now, thinking in and of itself is not bad. Careful deliberation and reflective contemplation certainly have their merits. When, however, a sentimental mind becomes inclined to devote itself solely to this mental pursuit, trouble inevitably follows.

In this instance, Chloe was thinking about time. For most people, time was simply the distance between sunrise and sunset, between spring and fall. For most people, time was simply a way of marking progress between birth and death. For Chloe, time was this and much more. Time was a mystery, it had qualities like nothing else in the world. It could not be
touched, yet it had the power to touch. Time could not be stopped, nor could it be reversed. Time had the ability to make one's choices permanent. Once you had made a decision, you could never be certain that there would be time to change your mind. Even if there were, you could never be sure that time would not have moved in a direction that would make a change of decision impossible.

These were the thoughts that were in Chloe's warm, fuzzy mind as she toyed with the elusive nature of time. Quite logically, this led her to consider the choices that she herself had made in her life. Because everything in her past was so fuzzy, Chloe lived with the terrible uncertainty of never being sure that any choice was the right choice. In the warm light of her memory, all options looked inviting, and she lamented that it was impossible to live more than one life simultaneously. It was also in this frame of mind that she ran across a picture of Josh. Because his human edges had been smoothed with his retreat into Chloe's sentimental memory, she was no longer sure that her relationship with him should have been terminated.

Now, because Chloe was not too daring or too dumb, she resisted the urge to call him from the university. There was certainly no need for Allan to discover the workings of Chloe's sentimental mind. Instead, Chloe waited until summer, a three month period during which she and Allan would be separated by hundreds of miles. In the summer, the telephone call would be safe enough.
Because Josh had recently ended his relationship with his girlfriend, he was particularly happy to hear from Chloe. (Josh had warm, fuzzy tendencies himself.) The phone call soon led to lunch . . . which led to dinner . . . which led to dinner and a movie . . . etcetera. There is something strangely frightening about returning to a place where one has been previously. There is something comforting, but at the same time, disconcerting. Something familiar yet foreign. It is this tantalizing combination that proves irresistible. This was the case with Chloe and Josh, and both knew how to manipulate the strings that had never fully been cut.

Not too long after the first phone call, they had fallen back into a familiar routine of late-night movies and strolls by the lake. Because everything was so fuzzy, Chloe and Josh were unable to separate these parts of their previous relationship from the other parts of it. Soon, they had assumed the role of a couple again.

Allan guessed that the lightning had struck even before it actually had. He had been expecting it all along, so when Chloe's letter arrived, he was not surprised. Was Allan hurt? Yes, he was. Allan, however, never let anyone know. The most that he would ever admit was that his pride had been slightly bruised. Even this he admitted only on rare occasions. Was his relationship with Chloe in vain? No, it was not. It provided him with one more wrong to add to his already lengthy list.
Had Chloe done the right thing? She was not sure. In her eternal quest for Happiness (with a capital "H"), nothing was ever certain. Did Chloe love Allan? Yes, she did. And she always would. Especially when he receded into her memory and became enveloped in a warm, fuzzy light.
"The Hooper County Quilting Guild Feud"
Nothing ever disturbed life at the Hooper County Senior Recreation Center quite as much as the death of Edgar Hamilton. It wasn't that Edgar ran the Senior Center. It wasn't that Edgar even frequented the Senior Center. The disturbance happened because Edgar Hamilton was the love interest of not one, not two, but three members of the Hooper County Quilting Guild.

Practically before the ambulance even arrived at Edgar's house, news of his death had already begun to circulate. On Elm Street, word had it that old Edgar had fallen prey to a nest of nasty tempered hornets that were summering near his prize rose bushes. On McKinney Avenue, Edgar had tripped over one of the many stacks of old Readers' Digest that littered the floor of his tiny house. On Main Street, the story was that Edgar had suffered a heart attack while engaged in unmentionable activities with one of his many lady friends.

It was true that Edgar had prize rose bushes, stacks of Readers' Digest, and many lady friends, but the simple truth (which no one ever dreamed of mentioning) was just that, quite frankly, Edgar Hamilton was old. His heart had been ticking for eighty years, and it was ready for a vacation. One day in June, just as things were beginning to get hot and sweaty in Hooper County, Edgar's heart decided to take that much anticipated vacation, and Edgar went along. It was as simple as that.

What wasn't so simple was the mess that Edgar left behind. Though it was difficult for some people to understand, there
was something that women found incredibly sexy about Edgar. Maybe it was the white athletic shoes. Maybe it was the little dimple in his chin. Heck, maybe it was the prize rose bushes and Readers' Digest. Whatever it was, it was strong enough to attract not one, not two, but three members of the Hooper County Senior Quilting Guild. That's where the whole thing started: the biggest scandal to ever shake the little white frame building that was the Senior Center.

The three ladies in question (and, mind you, they were ladies) were respected members of the community. Lily Skidmore had run the local department store for twenty years before it was put out of business by a discount chain that was long on discount but short on old fashioned service. Since then, Lily had busied herself by doing volunteer work and by harassing the employees of the new discount store. Small and frail with a head of fluffy fleece and dressed in dresses that reminded one of fresh apple pies, Lily looked helpless. It was that look of helplessness which provided her with a perfect disguise. Lily Skidmore was not helpless, and she felt that, as a former businesswoman herself, it was her duty to test the new crop of pimply-faced adolescent clerks at the discount store. That's where Lily was when she first heard about Edgar Hamilton's death. That Lily learned about Edgar's death at the discount store was appropriate: she had met him there. Edgar had jumped to her defense when one of the stock boys showed signs of rejecting Lily's advice on how to arrange the clothes racks.
Maybe the clerk did it accidentally. Maybe he didn't know about Lily's personal life. Maybe it was a devious type of revenge. Whatever the case, just as Lily sat her case of cola on the counter, the clerk began relating the details of the death (slipped in the shower) to the clerk in the line next door. The manager had to bring a chair over for Lily, who turned white as a sheet. The clerk, recognizing that Lily was upset, apologized profusely, and ended up driving Lily home, muttering apologies all the way.

Like any good member of a small community, Lily immediately headed for the phone. Her intention was to call Ethel Lewis, but she was too late. There were three beeps on her answering machine, all from Ethel. Ethel was the second of Edgar's quilting women. Ethel had met Edgar because of their shared love of gardening. One day, she had been at the nursery, trying to decide whether she wanted to try irises or tulips while Edgar was discussing roses with the owner. Edgar immediately felt the need to share advice with Ethel, and Ethel had been all too happy to accept it. And so their acquaintance began.

Compared to Lily, Ethel was much more down to earth. She had spent her prime years teaching English at the local high school, trying to convince tenth graders that Shakespeare was not some goofy guy in tights who couldn't speak clear English. Now, she was president of the Retired Teachers' Club. Ethel found out about the accident from her postman. "It was a sad thing," Mr. Adkins said as he handed her the electric bill. "The poor guy fell off his ladder."
The only one of Edgar's women who did not know about his death was Ruth Morrison. When dear Edgar departed from this earth, Ruth was thirty miles away at the Cadillac dealer having her El Dorado fixed. She was having trouble with the air conditioning, and as she told the mechanic, no lady should have to go without air conditioning in Texas in the middle of summer. The mechanic was only half listening. He was used to the little old lady with the dyed red hair; she was in at least once a month with some new problem, which she usually tried to persuade him to fix at no charge. It wasn't that she liked to complain, she told the mechanic, but her late husband had taught her that nothing short of the best would do.

Ruth's husband was also the reason that she knew Edgar. When her husband died, Edgar came to the funeral. At first, Ruth felt guilty because she didn't recognize him, and she thought that he was one of her dear Ralph's old friends. When she finally mustered enough courage to ask him who he was, Edgar told her. Ruth was still embarrassed because she didn't recognize the name either. Lily walked over after Edgar excused himself, and seeing the confused look on Ruth's face, asked her what was wrong. When Ruth told Lily about Edgar, Lily laughed. Edgar, Lily told Ruth, went to all the funerals in Hooper County; it was something of a hobby with him. While a habit like that might have disgusted many women, it intrigued Ruth, and she started frequenting the local funeral parlors, too.
It was through this hobby that Ruth learned of Edgar's death. Every afternoon at five o'clock, the local radio station listed that day's deaths and the funeral times. Ruth listened so that she would know where the best funerals were happening. That day, as she drove back to Hooper County with her air conditioning purring quietly, the radio announcer listed Edgar among the deceased. Ruth pulled off the road so abruptly that she almost ran into the city limits sign.

And so, the three Quilting Guild members learned of the death of Edgar Hamilton. And so began what would be referred to for years afterward as the great Hooper County Quilting Guild feud.

It just so happened that the Quilting Guild meeting was that night. Now, that presented an etiquette problem that challenged even the extremely etiquette wise Lily. The three quilters had an unspoken agreement: Nothing was to be said about Edgar when they were at the Quilting Guild. Indeed, as little as possible should be said about Edgar ever. Though all three women knew what was going on, they felt that it was not polite to discuss such a delicate situation. Besides, they also felt that keeping silent about their relationships with Edgar gave them the strategic advantage of surprise over the others. If, for example, Edgar came over to Ethel's to show her how to fertilize her roses, she would never dream of mentioning it to Ruth, lest Ruth decide she needed to fertilize her roses, too. Ruth, Ethel, and Lily were competitors, and they never
forgot that fact for a minute. They just kept competition sneaky.

Edgar's death, however, presented the trio with a unique problem. The unspoken agreement was not to speak of Edgar in each other's company, but, in this case, to not speak of his death seemed even worse. Skipping the meeting was not an option because each of the three wanted to see if any of the others would talk.

Lily was the first to arrive at the Senior Center. This was a bad tactical move on her part because it made her eagerness evident; Lily was never early. Gladys White, president of the Guild, met her at the door, telling her that Edgar's funeral was going to be tomorrow at Restland Funeral Home. Lily motioned Gladys away. "I really don't want to talk about it," Lily said dramatically sweeping past her.

Ruth arrived next. Because Lily was already there and because everyone honored the agreement, Gladys simply patted Ruth on the back and said she was sorry. Ruth dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her lace handkerchief. "He was a good man," she said, "and a good friend."

Ruth though she detected a "Hmph" from Lily, but she couldn't be sure. Ruth took the seat beside Lily. Now, she would be sure to hear whatever Lily said.

The last to arrive was Ethel. Gladys didn't say anything to Ethel. As a matter of fact, everyone in the room stopped talking when Ethel entered. Ethel's eyes were red and her hair was wild, flying all around her head. Usually dressed in
matching knit pantsuits, there was something about her violet blouse and olive pants that just wasn't quite right. Even Lily and Ruth felt a reluctant stab of pity. Gladys went over and put her arm around Ethel and led her to a chair. After she was seated, Gladys stepped back and looked at her. Everyone else looked, too. Finally, Mabel Matthews, a new member of the Hooper County Quilting Guild, spoke.

"Well, are we going to work on the log cabin quilt tonight?"

A roomful of eyes tore themselves reluctantly from Ethel and swung around the room to glare at Mabel. Realizing that there were obviously things she did not understand, Mabel slid down in her chair and began fiddling with her quilting bag. The eyes swung back to Ethel. Gladys was still standing in front of her, and Ethel was still sitting there as though she had inhaled too much rose fertilizer. Suddenly, she realized that she was the center of attention.

"What is everyone staring at?" she snapped, straightening up and trying to smooth her hair.

Immediately, things started moving. Gladys went to get the refreshments, Mabel quietly left her chair to get the log cabin quilt, and Lily, Ruth, and Ethel locked gazes for the first time.

Gladys came back carrying a tray of coffee and sugar cookies. Lily took one cookie, placing it daintily on her knee. Ruth declined, citing her cholesterol level. Ethel took five, viciously taking a bite out of the first while still staring at Lily and Ethel. "Ethel," Gladys said cautiously, "are you
sure you should be having those cookies? What about your sugar
level?"

Ethel moved her steel stare to Gladys. "Mind your own
business, woman," she said. "Life's too short to pass up
cookies."

Now, it's important to note that Ethel was not typically
so outspoken. In fact, the Quilting Guild rather regarded her
as their peacemaker. When Opal and Abigail, for example, had
gotten miffed at each other because they both entered the same
pattern in the county fair, Ethel was the one sent to patch
things up. When Ruth accused Gladys of trying to become a
dictator, Ethel had calmed her down. To hear the resident
peacemaker snapping at everyone in the room was more than a
little surprising. Whispers began.

Too many people think that older people automatically lose
their hearing, even when they are older themselves. The members
of the Hooper County Quilting Guild made that mistake. Ethel's
hearing was pretty good for a woman of seventy-eight years,
and it was even better than that when she had her all-in-the-
ear hearing aid turned on, which she did that night.

Lily, sitting a few seats away from Ethel, leaned towards
Ruth and, being the first to break the agreement, said, "Isn't
Ethel making a spectacle of herself? Pretending that she and
Edgar were that close. Hmph!"

Ruth, not taking her attention away from her coffee replied,
"Disgraceful."
Ethel was well into her second cookie now, and she almost choked when she heard them. "You wouldn't know what closeness is, you hussy," she said, cookie crumbs spraying from her mouth. "Hussy" was probably the harshest word Ethel had ever muttered, and so it carried all the weight of the most potent obscenity. Poor Mabel dropped her needle, and Gladys clasped her hands over her mouth.

The agreement was openly void.

Ruth's face reddened, seeming to pick up the reflection from her red hair. "What did you say?" she asked, her coffee cup raised in midair.

"I said, 'You don't know anything about closeness, you hussy'," Ethel repeated.

"You can't talk to Ruth like that," Lily said, feeling that half of the insult had been aimed at her.

"Birds of a feather flock together," Ethel said, taking another bite of her cookie.

"Here, here," interjected Mabel, "you musn't talk like that to each other."

"You stay out of this, Mabel," Lily said. "This has been brewing for a long time."

Ethel dusted the crumbs from her lap. "I'd say it's been brewing since the day you asked Edgar to be your partner in the 42 tournament."

"I had every right to ask him; it's not my fault I was faster than you," Lily sneered.
"I'll say you're faster than I am; I never would have let a single man stay over at my house until the wee hours of the morning," Ethel said.

Lily's eyes narrowed. "How did you know that Edgar was at my house? Were you spying on me?"

Ethel realized her mistake too late. "It was on my way home," she said, stirring her coffee furiously.

Ruth had recovered from being called a "hussy" now, and she spoke next. "I can't believe that you would spy on your friend."

Ethel chuckled. "Let's talk about friends, why don't we. Have you told Lily where Edgar was the afternoon he was supposed to go to lunch at Bernard's with her?"

Lily's head clicked, shifting from Ethel to Ruth. "Edgar was at the hospital, seeing an old friend," Lily said.

Ethel chuckled again. "Sure, that's what he told you, but he was really at Ruth's house."

Ruth's face changed from crimson to white. "He was just helping me with my taxes," she said weakly.

"Dressed in a suit and tie?" Ethel asked.

"How did you know that? Don't tell me you were watching me, too," Ruth said.

"All's fair in love and war," Ethel said, scooping another cookie from the tray as Gladys passed.

"Ruth, how could you? You knew Edgar was going with me to Bernard's." Lily looked with distrust at her former comrade.
"Well," Ruth said, waving her coffee cup wildly in the air, "it's not like I was the only one. Ethel over there has planted enough roses to sponsor the entire Rose Bowl Parade."

Music swelled from the adjoining recreation room, and Gladys came back, wringing her hands. "Why don't we start work now?" she asked.

"That's okay," Ethel said. "I think it's time for me to go." She got up and left the room, eating the last of the last sugar cookies as she went.

"I'm going, too," Ruth said. "I don't have to take this kind of treatment."

Just Lily was left now, and Mabel and Gladys stood staring at her. "Oh, for Pete's sake," Lily said, "I'm leaving, too."

And then they were gone.

The trio didn't talk again before the funeral the next day. Considering the circumstances, it would have been nice to have had someone to ride to the funeral with, but, also considering the circumstances, there was no choice but for each of them to go alone. One by one, they pulled up at the funeral home. One by one, they stepped out of their cars and went inside. Thee funeral home was half full. There were workers from the nursery, a few distant relatives, a few old lady friends, and several people who had come simply to make sure that old Edgar was really gone. Ruth, Ethel, and Lily each sat on a different pew, and none of them looked at the others. Finally, after a good fifteen minutes of studious indifference, the service began.
After Edgar's niece sang a tearful "Amazing Grace," the minister took the pulpit. "We are here today to honor Edgar Hamilton, a fine and upstanding man." There was a slight whimper from Lily's pew.

"Edgar lived a long and fruitful life," the minister continued, "but a life too short for those of us left behind." A sob came from Lily's row.

"Edgar is survived by one sister, Katharine Holmes, three nieces and two nephews. Edgar's dear wife Margaret preceded him in death in 1985; they had no children. Our thoughts are with the family at this time of grief." Lily's sob became a wail.

The choir launched into "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and Lily stood up. She swayed back and forth, and those sitting behind her watched as she grasped the pew in front of her with both hands. For a few minutes, she just swayed with the music. Then, suddenly, she shouted "Edgar!" and slumped to the floor.

The choir broke off in mid-chorus, and a wave rippled through the crowd as everyone turned to see what was causing the commotion. One of the pall bearers rushed to help Lily out of the service.

Ethel scoffed, and Ruth shook her head sadly. Still, they admired Lily for her show and felt somehow cheated that they had not thought of it first. When the audience settled down again, the minister continued with the service. Lily slipped back in and sat at the back, fanning herself as if she might melt at any moment.
When the minister was finished, the niece sang another song, and then the procession past the coffin began. Ruth was the first to go by. Everything seemed to be going smoothly when, all of a sudden, Ruth froze in front of the coffin. She began shaking her head violently. "No, no, no . . ." she repeated loudly between sobs. "It can't be true."

Funerals are funny things, and the vast majority of people have no idea how to deal with them. Ruth's outburst caused the crowd discomfort, but they felt that it would be impolite to stifle such a passionate expression of grief, so everyone stopped and waited for her to move on.

Only Ruth didn't move on; she was firmly planted in front of the coffin and showed no signs of going anywhere. "No, no, no," she kept repeating.

"Good grief," Ethel said to the woman beside her. "She's trying to outdo Lily."

The woman scowled at Ethel, taking her comment as blatant disregard for Ruth's feelings. "Well, it's true," Ethel said. "Someone should put a stop to this. I'd do it myself, but I'm not speaking to her."

The minister, who had walked over to the family corner, was now making his way back toward Ruth and the coffin. Ruth saw him, and her volume increased. Just as he reached her, she spread her arms and threw herself on the coffin. Ethel rolled her eyes. After a few minutes of negotiation, the minister managed to drag her off and steer her out the door. After two outbursts, the crowd was nervous. Several members
seemed to be scanning the people, looking for other possible troublemakers.

When Ethel got outside, after being stopped by several people who wanted to discuss how natural Edgar looked, Lily and Ruth already had their cars started and were jockeying for position in the procession to the cemetery. Ethel shook her head.

The drive to the cemetery was short. It was an old cemetery, and Edgar's new grave stuck out like a sore thumb. Lily had worn heels and was having difficulty wobbling over the uneven ground. Ruth and Ethel had worn sensible, orthopedic shoes, and they beat Lily to the gravesite. Ruth and Ethel arrived at the same time, and when they realized they were standing by each other, it was too late to do anything about it; people were pushing in, trying to get under the canopy and out of the sun. Besides, they had front row spots close to the coffin, and neither was going to give hers up.

The crowd was keeping an eye on Lily and Ruth, talking in whispers and wondering if there were going to be more hysterics. If there were, the crowd would be ready.

Unfortunately, no one was watching Ethel. She had made it a point to be very reserved during the whole process, but after both Lily and Ruth had acted up, she didn't feel like she could let it go by. It wasn't that she was jealous of the attention that they were getting. No, actually, Ethel thought they had made total fools of themselves. Still, though, something about their outbursts made their grief seem more real
than hers. That was why Ethel did what she did.

The minister had just finished the prayer and the coffin was being lowered into the ground. Ethel stood and watched until it had sunk a foot below the ground, then, in a flash of sensible, orthopedic shoes, she jumped into the grave after it.

Ruth stepped forward to look at Ethel sprawled on top of the coffin, red carnations sprayed out below her. Realizing that she had been upstaged, Ruth jumped in on top of Ethel.

"Ouch!" Ethel said.

"Oomph!" Ruth said.

Half the crowd was looking at Ethel and Ruth, and the other half had its attention focused on Lily, who had pushed her way to the front just in time to see Ruth jump. Surely, they thought, she wouldn't let Ethel and Ruth get away with this. Surely she would react.

They were right, of course. Lily, after hesitating only briefly, jumped in, too.

Now, as it's already been pointed out, funerals are funny things even when they go smoothly. When things get out of control, however, funeral are absolutely bizarre, and even though, by the best of his calculations, this was the minister's 153rd funeral, he had never been faced with a problem quite like this. There, in the grave before him, was a dead, eighty year-old man and three virtually insane eighty year-old women. Suddenly, his stiff, white collar was a bit too tight.

The reaction of the crowd was mixed. At first, they were
concerned because it didn't seem like a good idea for eighty year-old women to go around jumping into a grave after their dead eighty year-old boyfriend. Next, they were amused because it was pretty funny for three eighty year-old women to jump into a grave after their dead eighty year-old boyfriend. Finally, they were concerned again because they realized that getting three eighty year-old women out of a six foot grave was not an easy task. Now, the crowd was standing around, peering into the hole. Ethel, Ruth, and Lily had straightened out their arthritic limbs and were sitting on top of the coffin, peering back up at them.

Suddenly, Lily broke into a deep, hearty laugh. Ruth looked at her and then joined in. Ethel tried not to laugh, but even she had to admit that the whole thing suddenly seemed very absurd. Ethel started laughing, too. Then, she took a red carnation from the coffin, placed it between her teeth, and began rocking back and forth, swinging her feet and kicking the sides of the coffin.

Ruth, laughing even louder at Ethel's antics, followed suite, swinging her feet and laughing. Lily wanted to join in the fun, but she was pondering what to do about those darn high heels. Finally, she took them off and began beating the coffin with her heels, howling at the top of her lungs.

This latest development greatly amused the crowd. Several people were tittering and trying to hide it by holding their handbags and hats in front of their faces. A few of the less considerate ones were openly laughing. When the minister, who
still felt responsible for letting the situation get out of hand, saw that the crowd thought the whole thing was humorous, he breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe, he thought, the crowd would just remember the sight of three elderly ladies sitting on a coffin and would forget that he was even here.

The minister had no reason to worry; the sight of Ethel, Lily, and Ruth sitting on Edgar Hamilton's coffin was what people would remember. And it was what people would talk about for years. When the grandkids came to visit and wanted to hear stories, the grandfathers and grandmothers of Hooper County would take them on their knee and tell them of how Ethel, Lily, and Ruth resolved their differences sitting on top of a coffin in a six foot grave. And, the grandfathers and grandmothers would say, the wiser folks in the crowd did not miss the significance of the fact that the differences were solved and the friendship saved as the three elderly women sat kicking the coffin of the man that had caused so much tension in their friendship. The moral of the story, the grandfathers and grandmothers would say as they patted the grandkids on their heads, was never to let something petty overshadow what was really important. Ethel, Lily, and Ruth had learned that lesson.

And so ended the Hooper County Quilting Guild feud.
"Life, Death, and Black and White Movies"
Joyce put her Oldsmobile in park and sighed. She looked around the dark parking lot. There was something clandestine and disgraceful about being here. She swung her purse over her arm and hoisted her substantial body out of the car. The shame that she felt did little to temper her eagerness. She looked forward to what waited behind the door in front of her. Behind that door waited one of her lovers. Maybe tonight it would be Cary Grant. Or Humphrey Bogart. Maybe even Jimmy Stewart. Joyce never knew. She was having affairs with every man in the classics section at the local video store. At least four nights a week, she stood in front of the rows of black and white movies, longing for companionship and excitement.

The clerk's gaze followed her as she walked in. Joyce reddened. She knew the clerks made fun of her; she had heard them snicker as she walked by. Sometimes she could ignore them, sometimes she couldn't. Tonight was a couldn't night. Joyce wished she hadn't worn her tropical floral tunic. Self consciously, she tugged at the snug sides. The clerk smirked.

The classics were in the back of the store. Joyce waddled past the current releases. She didn't watch recent movies; they were either too silly or too realistic. Besides, Joyce thought, they left nothing to the imagination, and Joyce needed to exercise her imagination. That was where she spent most of her time, lost in her dream world. In the dream world, it was okay not to be a size eight. In the dream world, you could eat desert without feeling like you should immediately excuse yourself to throw up. In Joyce's imaginary world, clerks did
not snicker.

The downside of watching the classics was the limited supply, and Joyce was fast approaching the end of that supply. There was another person in the classics section that night, and Joyce frowned. The intruder bothered her. She liked to browse with no one around her, and for months, it hadn't been a problem. No one else in her small town was interested in anything but the action thrillers. Now, there was a stranger in her spot.

The man saw Joyce glaring at him, and he tipped his ball cap slightly and smiled. "Excuse me," he said. He picked up a copy of The Maltese Falcon and walked away.

Joyce followed him with her eyes. If there were going to be intruders, she supposed the fact that they were polite was good. She stood a moment before selecting one of the few Jimmy Stewart movies she hadn't seen. The intruder man was still at the counter. He seemed to be having a problem.

"I know that I have another dollar here somewhere," he was saying. "Just one minute."

Joyce got in line behind him. The clerk was obviously irritated. "Listen, mister. You're holding the line up. If you don't have the money, I'm going to have to ask you to step out of line."

The intruder man looked up. Joyce was the only other person in the line. The man looked puzzled. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said to Joyce. "I can't seem to find the bill that I thought was in my wallet."
The clerk gave the man the same look of contempt that he often gave Joyce, and she felt a connection with the man. "That's okay," she said. "I'm not in any hurry."

The man smiled gratefully and continued shuffling through his wallet. Joyce looked him over good. He was about forty, a slight paunch, thinning hair. He was attractive enough to make Joyce look at his ring finger; it was bare.

The clerk cleared his throat. "I'm going to have to ask you step out of line. If you don't have the money, you can't have the movie."

The intruder man looked up, and seeing no sign of compromise in the clerk's face, shut his wallet. Joyce noted that he didn't get angry. He simply stepped out of line. Joyce laid her movie on the counter, and the clerk rang it up. She handed him a five, and he gave her the change. The intruder man was still standing there; he was going through his pockets now. Joyce smiled. "You must really need to see that movie," she said. "Here, why don't you let me loan you a dollar?" She poked one out to him.

The clerk rolled his eyes.

"I couldn't let you do that," the intruder man said, not looking quite convinced.

"Sure you can. I'm always willing to loan a dollar to any one who knows quality movies."

"Well, I guess it's okay, but I can't pay you back right now. I don't seem to have any money with me." The man pointed at his inside out pocket.
"Don't worry about it," Joyce said. "Maybe we'll bump into each other again, and you can do me a favor then."

She poked the money towards him again. This time, he took it. "Thank you," he said.

Joyce flashed a big grin at the clerk. Somehow, she felt that she ruined his fun.

The wind was blowing outside the video store, and Joyce's tunic blew up slightly. She imagined that the intruder man, still inside the video store, was watching her. She imagined that her shapely leg was not crisscrossed with varicose veins.

The Oldsmobile coughed a few times before it started, but Joyce didn't mind. The car's hesitation allowed her to watch the intruder man for a little longer. He and the clerk had apparently resolved their differences, and he was leaving the store. When he saw Joyce sitting in her car, he held the movie up in a sign of victory and walked around the corner of the building. Joyce was disappointed; she wanted to see the car he drove. Oh, well, maybe she would bump into him again. She turned the ignition, and this time, the car started.

Poindexter, her dog, greeted her as she walked through the door. Usually, Poindexter's company was all Joyce required, but tonight, she felt lonely. The brief social interaction with the intruder man reminded her of what was missing from her life. Her job as a telemarketer wasn't exactly exciting. Granted, she did get to talk to people, but they usually weren't excited to hear from her. The continual click of hang-ups made her averse to calling anyone when she wasn't at work, and so
she lived her life with Celluloid images.

Joyce patted Poindexter on the head and plopped her purse down on the sofa. Anyone entering Joyce's house for the first time would have no problem discerning her interests. The house was sparsely furnished with simple, sturdy items. Everything was neat and functional. And then there was the television. The television was a monster sitting threateningly in the corner, its huge screen an eerie grey. Beneath it sat not one but two state of the art VCRs, their green lights blinking warning. On a shelf next to these machines were dozens of video tapes filled with classic movies, copies made from the tapes that Joyce rented.

When she first started making copies of the movies, she felt guilty. Joyce knew that it was against the law, and she was not exactly a hardened criminal. No one ever came to the house, however, so the feeling of guilt went away. No one else was benefiting from the pirated copies.

Poindexter was not pleased with the lukewarm greeting he received, and he followed Joyce around the house, his wet, sloppy tongue hanging from his mouth. Joyce sighed heavily. This was why she doubted that she could ever be a mother. Impatiently, she brushed the dog away and went to the kitchen. There was a ritual to Joyce's movie watching which began with the making of a pot of coffee and the popping of popcorn. While the popcorn was popping, Joyce would go to the bedroom and put on her big, fluffy, white robe. In the robe, Joyce felt almost normal. The robe hid the cellulite of her body, and sometimes
she would stand in front of her full length mirror, pull the sides of the robe up, and look at her ankles. Joyce, despite the fact that her legs were chubby, had nice ankles, and the robe made it easy for her to pretend that the rest of her body matched her ankles. After she changed clothes, she would return to the kitchen, put the popcorn in a big, green bowl, and pour herself a cup of coffee. Then Joyce would put the movie in, settle into the couch, and refuse to leave until the movie was over. Indeed, the few times someone had stopped by to visit, they had left irritated because Joyce refused to pause the movie. Tonight was no different. Joyce started the coffee and the popcorn. She went to her bedroom and tugged the tunic over her head. She had made the tunic herself; she had several by the same pattern. Joyce fingered the material. She hadn't always worn tunics. She tried to remember when she began. Certainly, it had been about the same time she had started gaining weight.

The divorce had done it to her. Well, actually, there hadn't really been a divorce; it was really just a nasty breakup. Joyce told herself and anyone else who cared to listen that it was just like a divorce. She and Steve dated for two years and then - Kaput! - it was over. He up and left her for some older woman who wanted a "no strings" kind of relationship. Joyce never realized that Steve wanted a no strings relationship. He seemed perfectly happy in the little web that she had woven around him. She supposed he suddenly felt the need to escape from the circling spider.
Anyway, Joyce thought, that was when she started gaining her weight. At first, it had just been a little bulge around the middle. Then there was a little extra flesh on her arms. Before she knew it, her slim legs had vanished. Now, ten years later, she was twice the woman she had been at the breakup.

Before Joyce gained weight, she wore mostly solid colors, a lot of neutrals and darker colors. When she started gaining weight, it never occurred to her to change the way she dressed. Sure, she couldn't wear the form fitting clothes that she once did, but there was no need to change her color scheme. But, the more she gained, the less she wanted to wear the neutral colors. She started by wearing colors like purple and red, quite a change from her previous navy and brown. From there, it was a natural progression from the tropical colors to the tropical prints which she wore now. Joyce absent mindedly brushed her hand through her hair, jingling her long earring. The earrings, too, she thought, happened at the same time.

Her mother commented on the drastic change that she saw in Joyce's wardrobe. "What," her mother asked, "are you thinking? You know that you look best in darker colors."

Joyce sighed. She couldn't remember what she looked best in; it had been so long since she had really looked at herself at all. Somehow, she didn't feel like she could ever look her "best," or even "good" for that matter. She felt as though she were trapped in a body that wasn't her own. Joyce wanted to wear a sign that read: "The person you see is not real. The real person is underneath. For more information inquire
Because, in reality, Joyce knew that the bright colors and prints had nothing to do with her own personal tastes. Joyce wore bright colors because they made people notice her. The cycle was vicious. The more of her there was, the more people ignored her. The more people ignored her, the more she felt the need to force them not ignore her. Thus, the bright colors. Joyce thought that if she wore the bright colors, people couldn't ignore her. By the time she realized she was wrong, her closet was full of a rainbow of tunics.

Joyce looped the robe's belt around her and went to settle into the couch. Poindexter sidled up and lay down on Joyce's feet. Joyce patted him absently on the head. That was the nice thing about Poindexter: he was always there, and he didn't care what she looked like. The previews ended, and Joyce's movie began. She shifted her feet and pushed Poindexter to the side. James Stewart, she felt sure, would never ignore her.

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There are moments in everyone's life that seem as if they should be acted out with a musical score. Joyce had experienced fewer of these moments than most, and if someone directly asked her, she would have denied that she had ever experienced such a moment. Now, in the classics section again, she felt as close as she ever had. Standing not five feet from her was the mystery intruder. Joyce waited almost breathlessly to see if he would recognize her. She was beginning to doubt that he would.
Suddenly, he stepped in front of her and muttered "excuse me." Then, he noticed who she was.

"Well, hello," he said. "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this on a Friday night?"

Joyce blushed. "The same thing a nice man like you is, no doubt." Her cheeks were hot, and she was suddenly aware of sweat on her palms.

The intruder patted his hip pocket. "I have money tonight." He smiled.

Joyce smiled back.

"Say, why don't you let me pick up your movie ... as repayment for your help last time?"

"I can't let you do that," Joyce said. "I only loaned you a dollar."

"Consider the rest of it interest," the intruder insisted. "What are you thinking about renting?"

Joyce thought for a minute. A woman's choice of a movie could go a long way in shaping a man's opinion of her. She pondered her options. Then, she took a long shot. "Tonight," she said, "I think I'll try Sergeant York." There, Joyce thought, a nice, masculine type of movie.

"You know," the intruder man said, "I've never seen that. You'll have to let me know how it is."

Joyce's heart beat fast in her chest. This was her chance, her opportunity. She had never before seen a more beautiful lead in to asking a man to come over. All she had to do was open her mouth and say the words. She wet her lips. Her vocal
chords felt ready. The words were on her lips. They were almost out.

Then, she walked up. The words stumbled upon one another right behind Joyce's teeth. A virtual traffic jam. A small woman with tightly curled brown hair and brown eyes, dressed in a sporty pants suit stood beside the intruder man. Joyce was aware of ever flower on her own dress. The woman was about Joyce's age, and Joyce instantly decided she didn't like her. The intruder man obviously did, however. He put his arm around the newcomer.

"This is my wife Mary. Mary, this is . . . ." Suddenly he realized that he didn't know Joyce's name. He looked at her questioningly.

Joyce cleared her throat. "Joyce," she supplied.

"Joyce," the man repeated.

Mary extended her hand, and Joyce shook it limply, keenly aware of the beads of sweat that dotted it. Those beads had a new meaning now.

"Are you ready, honey?" Mary asked, looking up at the intruder, whose name Joyce still didn't know.

"Yes," he said, "I am." He looked at Joyce again. "It was nice seeing you again," he said, and then he and his wife turned around and walked out.

Joyce was frozen. She stood there, the copy of Sergeant York still in her hand. Tears filled her eyes. It didn't matter how many flowers she wore, Joyce thought, she was still invisible. She placed the movie back on the shelf. For the
first time she could remember, she didn't feel like watching a movie.

The clerk smirked as she left. Which was worse, Joyce wondered, invisibility or ridicule? She didn't know.

The house was quiet when she got home. Poindexter was asleep in the kitchen, and he didn't greet her as usual. The TV was there, ready to go. The couch was empty, waiting for her. There wasn't a movie, though. No black and white movie tonight. No, tonight Joyce was living life in technicolor, and her eyes weren't strong enough to take it.

Joyce walked to the kitchen. Normally she would have put the popcorn in the microwave and turned on the coffee, but tonight she walked directly to the liquor cabinet. The choices were few, but Joyce didn't care; blindly she grabbed a bottle. She sat down at the dining table. She had seen Katharine Hepburn drink herself silly before, and Katharine somehow made it seem attractive. Now, as Joyce tipped the bottle to her lips, it didn't feel attractive. It felt lonely, and foolish, and desperate.

An inch of the liquor was gone, and Joyce felt no better. In her mind, she kept seeing the intruder man, his arm looped around Mary. When two inches of the liquor were gone, the image became fuzzy, the intruder man's face distorted in a grotesque way. Then she noticed the pills.

The bottle was sitting on the table by her elbow. A prescription for a toothache she had last month. Joyce never took the painkillers because she didn't like them. Tonight,
the word painkiller stuck in her mind, and she turned it over and over. Now, the idea of a painkiller was incredibly attractive. Killing the pain was a good idea. Joyce fumbled with the top for quite a while before she was able to remove the top. She shook the pills out onto the table. "Here's to you, Mr. Intruder Man." The pills slipped easily down her throat. Through the haze she got up and walked to her couch. She felt attractive now. She felt visible. Maybe there would be a good movie on TV since she hadn't rented one, she thought. Joyce gripped the remote control in her hand, flipping channels slowly. She found a black and white movie and laid the remote control to the side. Black and white. Life and death. Then, just black.
"Fair Meadow"
It all began in the little grocery store. With a pack of cigarettes. A pack of cigarettes that I put in my purse. Before I paid for them. They weren't the first cigarettes that I had lifted from the grocery. Smoking was an expensive habit, hard to support when you were chronically unemployed. My personal belief was that the government should subsidize cigarettes for societal rejects like me. If smoking was as awful as everyone claimed it was, the government would save a fortune in welfare and unemployment benefits by encouraging it in select parts of the population.

That was what I told the police officer when she handcuffed me. She didn't seem to think it was as funny as I did. Maybe she was right. Cigarettes seem to warp your sense of humor, too.

The positive side of the incident was that the judge was a middle-aged guy who sympathized with the difficult childhood I invented for myself. I told him that I got my name, Henrietta Josephine Jackson, because my mom wasn't sure whether Henry or Jo was my father. I also told him that my mom, my brother, and I had bounced around between relatives, living with them until my mom's alcoholism got on their nerves. Absolutely none of this was true (except that my name is Henrietta Josephine Jackson), but the judge either believed me or admired my story-telling ability so much that he said he would make a deal with me. Because there wasn't any blood involved (and because the jails were already too full and I didn't have the money to pay a fine), he decided that rehabilitation might
be the best course of action. That was how I ended up at Fair Meadow Retirement Home.

When the judge announced his decision, I thought he was joking. I thought that volunteer work was something the legal system assigned to rich people to let them know how fortunate they were and how the other half lived, a type of devious threat. I guess the threat for me was that I, too, would one day end up pushed in some corner of Fair Meadow. Chain smoking, junk food, and my appetite for sex made that unlikely. I would be dead well before it was time to retire me. I thought the only thing that the judge was taking from me was my time.

The "deal" that the judge made with me worked something like this: I would move to Fair Meadow, live there, work there, and generally do what they told me to do. The director, Ms. Caldwell, would work out most of the details with my probation officer. My sentence was a month. On Saturday, I could go home from ten until eight. Any other trips had to be approved by the director. Things weren't going to be quite as easy as I had hoped they would be.

The judge wasn't sure if I would be washing dishes, making beds, or working with the patients; that part really didn't seem to matter to him. He was convinced that he was doing me a big favor. "You realize," he said in his deep, official voice, "that we don't give these opportunities to everyone. It's only because I have personally recommended you that you are getting this chance. You have a rather lengthy record" (Oh, yeah. I forgot to mention that the cigarettes weren't the only times
I had seen the inside of a police car.), 'but I think that there could be hope for you. I just want you to think about what I'm doing for you.'

The last statement was made with a look that I had seen many times before. It's the look that people in power give those who aren't in power when they think they are being extra benevolent. My father used to look at me and my mom like that when he thought we had messed up. "I hope you understand that what you have done is very serious," Dad had said when I broke curfew, when I dented the car, when I failed algebra, "but I'm going to go easy on you this time." Dad and I always had different definitions of "easy."

Rosie met me outside the courtroom when the judge was finished with me. I had lived with Rosie for a little over a year. I moved in with her when she got so big with her son Wayne that she had to quit her job. Now it was just the three of us. Wayne's father had left Rosie the minute he found out she was pregnant. I took care of Wayne while she worked. She couldn't afford to pay me, but she let me sleep on her couch. Sometimes it was nice to have someone to hang out with.

"So? What happened, Jo? Did he let you off?" Little Wayne was slung on her hip. Already, he had developed the look of all kids in his situation: his eyes were blank, his nose was runny.

"Come on; let's go." The judge was coming out now, and I didn't want him listening to what Rosie and I were saying. The sun was shining when we stepped outside, so we rolled the
windows down on Rosie's '67 Plymouth. It was a huge, ugly car, but the upholstery was new. Rosie's old boyfriend had tried to set it on fire once because he thought that Rosie could collect insurance on it. Unfortunately, Rosie didn't have insurance, and he and Rosie had saved for six months before they had enough money to recover the seats.

"You're not going to believe what happened," I said. "The judge made me a 'deal'."

Little Wayne began to cry, and Rosie dug a pacifier out of his bag and placed it in his mouth without ever taking her eyes from the road. "Yeah," she said, "So what do you have to do? Sleep with him?" Rosie had dealt with the legal system before.

"If only it were that simple," I said, flicking my ashes out the window. Rosie always had cigarettes. "That would be a lot quicker. I have to go work at Fair Meadow for a month."

"Fair Meadow? What are you talking about? Isn't that the old folks home over by the ice cream store?"

I told Rosie about the deal that the judge had made me. Little Wayne gurgled approval from his carseat. Rosie was frowning. I knew that Rosie was concerned about me, but I also knew that a lot of the frown was because she would have to find somebody to keep Wayne. I couldn't hold it against her; when you lived the way Rosie and I did, you had to think about yourself first. The meadows, you see, are not so fair everywhere.

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There are a few things that must be pointed out about Fair Meadow. First of all, it's not your upper-middle-class nursing home with organized museum trips or anything. As a matter of fact, very little seems to be organized there. Second, despite the name, it's not a place where people willingly retire. Most of the people there were admitted by fifty year-old sons and daughters too busy with their own lives to take time out for dear old Mom and Dad. Finally, there is no "fair meadow" at Fair Meadow. In reality, there is no meadow at all. What there is is a large concrete parking lot and a narrow porch, so narrow, in fact, that when it rains, the entire porch gets wet. So much for outdoor recreation.

As I walked up to the door carrying my bags, I pondered the silliness of it all. I guess they couldn't really name it something like Nice Concrete Slab, but Fair Meadow was so totally inappropriate. Maybe it was all an effort to soothe the minds of the sons and daughters. For the short time that they were there getting Mom settled in, they would have to face the ugliness. Once they were safely back in their carpeted homes, it would be much easier to imagine that the meadow did exist. When a little time had passed, the lucky ones would even be able to convince themselves.

I pushed open the front door and stepped into a sparsely furnished lobby. There were industrial tiles on the floor, the grey kind with speckles. The furniture was all in shades of the '70's: avocado, yellow, and orange. There were a few patients milling around. Two old men were playing dominoes
at a table, and an old woman was looking through the stack of *People* magazines. All of them were either wearing pajamas or some variation of pajamas; no one appeared to be fully dressed. No one, that is, except for the middle-aged woman stepping forward to meet me. She had on sensible shoes and a sensible dress. This was Ms. Caldwell.

"You must be Jo," she said. She was looking me over, and I could tell she didn't like what she saw. My holey jeans, my t-shirt, my frizzy, long, dark hair, my sneakers: I didn't match her idea of what a nice twenty year-old girl should look like. She wasn't really sure how to handle me. Should she be friendly? Should she be authoritative? In the end, she decided to be sensible. "Follow me. I'll show you to your room. Then I have some paperwork that you need to fill out."

I smiled shyly in return. Not that I am shy. I'm not. I am, however, fairly good at determining the best angle to take with someone. I decided that meek and compliant might be the best method for dealing with Caldwell, at least to begin with.

I followed her through the lobby, past the front desk with its artificial palm tree, around a corner, and down a long hallway. The hallway was lit by rows of fluorescent lights. I have always hated fluorescent light. Rosie told me once that fluorescent light was the best light to put your make-up on with because it was a lot like the light of the sun. I had laughed. As far as I could see, the only thing that the sun and the fluorescent light had in common was the fact that they
were both lights. Now, walking down the hall with the director, I could feel the light sucking the energy out of my body. By the time we reached my room, I felt as white as the walls around me.

"This is it," Caldwell said. "It's not much."

She was right about that. My room was just like a patient's room. There was a metal hospital bed with a white bedspread on it. There was a faux wood nightstand and dresser. That was it.

"The bath is here." Caldwell opened the door to what I thought was a closet. The bath was small, white, and sterile. Why was everything in places like this white? Was there something about white that made it naturally cleaner than other colors? I doubted it. I had always thought that it was probably a conspiracy on the part of the institutions. If they surrounded you with all of that white, lit the place with the unearthly fluorescent light, they could keep you feeling so dismal that you would never get well.

"It's very homey," I said, my voice tinged with sarcasm.

Old lady Caldwell was not amused. Her nose tipped slightly in the air. "For most of the people here, it is home," she said.

I knew that "home" and "homey" were not the same thing. I think Caldwell knew it, too. She had to work at Fair Meadow, however, and she had to live with herself. Sometimes, life requires a temporary suspension of reality. It helps us all sleep better at night.
The first night was the worst. I called Rosie to tell her what the place was like. Little Wayne was crying, and I could hear the TV in the background. Rosie sounded frazzled. "So, Rosie, how are you coping without me so far?" I asked.

"Things are pretty much falling apart here," she said. "About the same as always. Just give me time, though, you've only been gone a few hours."

"What are you watching," I asked, concentrating on the staticy applause coming from TV.

"What? Oh, that's the World Series. Hey, don't tell me you aren't watching it!" Rosie and I were baseball freaks.

"I planned on it," I said, "but I don't have a TV in my room, and the residents are watching Perry Mason in the lobby."

There was the sound of suppressed laughter on the other end of the line. "Hey, what's so funny?" I asked.

"Nothing," Rosie answered. "It's just that a month might be a lot longer than you think."

"Yeah, well, you haven't heard anything yet. Perry Mason is the least of my worries. I had a meeting with Ms. Caldwell, the director, today, and she gave me a list of 'duties and expectations.' Rosie, I'm going to be living in a prison full of old people!"

There was a bang and a lot of cussing on the other end of the phone, and I waited until Rosie picked back up. "Sorry, Jo," she said. "Wayne was getting ready to plug his finger into the wall socket. I just can't seem to keep up with him
since he became mobile. Now, what were you saying?"

"Old lady Caldwell gave me a list of what she called duties and expectations. The good news is that I am allowed to go to the bathroom by myself. The bad news is that's about it."

"That does seem pretty gruesome. What are your duties? Do you have to scrub the toilets?" Rosie considered toilet scrubbing the ultimate torture.

"Worse," I said. "I have to work with the residents. Caldwell and my probation officer didn't think that manual labor would be a 'productive and beneficial' experience for me."

The crowd on Rosie's TV went wild right then. "Hey, I'm sorry, Jo, but I have to go. Someone just hit a home run. Listen, I'll talk to you tomorrow." With that Rosie's end went dead.

I started putting my stuff away. There really wasn't that much: jeans, t-shirts, my harmonica, and a new carton of cigarettes. The cigarettes were a going-away present from Rosie. This was the first time I had ever had a whole carton of cigarettes, and I knew what Rosie had paid for them. When I had protested, she had pretended not to care that I was touched. "Don't go making a big deal out of it, Jo," she had said. "Cigarettes were what landed you in Fair Meadow to begin with. I just need my babysitter back, and I'm not going to take any chances on you getting into more trouble anytime soon."

That night, I went to bed at nine o'clock. I couldn't remember ever going to bed that early before. The sheets were cold and stiff, and I felt like I was in the hospital. I closed
my eyes and tried to go to sleep, but there was a horror movie showing inside my head. All that I could see were scenes out of my next four weeks. I saw myself at seven o'clock every morning, delivering breakfast to the bedridden residents. I saw myself at nine helping out with the morning chores: changing linens, bathing patients, wheeling wheelchairs down the hall. At noon, I saw myself helping out in the cafeteria. At three, I was helping with the afternoon craft class. At seven, I saw myself sitting in the lobby in my pajamas watching reruns of *Perry Mason*. The whole thing seemed like a nightmare as I lay there in bed. Unfortunately, I knew it wasn't; the movie that was going inside my head was the schedule that old lady Caldwell had outlined for me earlier that day.

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I awoke the next morning tired and disoriented. I had ended up getting very little sleep the night before. All I could think about was how long a month was. I had divided that month into weeks. I had divided the weeks into days. I had even tried to divide the days into hours, but the numbers got too big for me to do in my head. Each division had made me a little sadder.

Luckily, I'm a fairly resilient person. When I have trouble coping with something, I turn it into a game. That was what I tried to do with my stay at Fair Meadow. I didn't like old people; I had never liked old people. They depressed me. The thought of spending a month with people I didn't like was unbearable. I decided to make a game out of watching the
residents.

The first thing I had to do was to help deliver breakfast trays to the residents unable to make the trip to the cafeteria. Nurse Hernandez was my partner. She was a cheerful woman, a cross between a grizzly bear and a wolverine. I assume she had a first name, but I can't be sure. Nurse Hernandez rarely felt inspired to talk to me.

The first morning that I was on rounds with Nurse Hernandez, a frail, blue-haired lady approached me. An afghan was draped around her shoulders, and she held a basket of needlework in her hands. "Excuse me, Miss," she said. "Could you do me a favor?"

Nurse Hernandez was working with a patient in one of the rooms, so I was alone in the hall. "I don't know," I said. "What do you need?"

"My roommate Mrs. Avery in room 122 is cold, and she needs another blanket. Could you tell someone to bring her one? She can't get out of bed by herself."

I had no idea what was going on at Fair Meadow; an introduction to operations and procedures had not been included in my meeting with Caldwell. One of the few things I knew was that my position at Fair Meadow was rather limited. The home let me deliver breakfast. They let me clean up. They let me help with the recreational activities. That was about it. I didn't know if they would let me give out blankets. "I don't really work here," I said, "but I'll see what I can do."

The little blue-haired lady reached out and touched my
arm. She felt as if she could use a blanket herself; her hands were like ice. "I would appreciate it so much," she said. "We've already complained once, but no one ever came."

I tried to smile. Something about the touch of her hand really got to me. It was almost as if I could feel the beginning of death in it. Nurse Hernandez was coming out of the room now, and when the old lady saw her, she began walking away.

"What was Mrs. Prescott bothering you about?" Nurse Hernandez asked as we both watched the stooped figure move down the hall.

"She said that her roommate was cold and needed a blanket. She asked me if I would get her one."

"That's not our job," Nurse Hernandez said as she began pushing her cart down the hall.

"Yeah, I know," I said, "but we haven't been by 122 yet, so I thought maybe we could take one in when we delivered her breakfast."

Nurse Hernandez took a tray from her cart. "Don't worry about it. Mrs. Avery is all right. She's always complaining about something."

"Mrs. Prescott's hands were so cold, though," I said.

Nurse Hernandez turned and looked me in the eye. "You haven't been around old people very much, have you? When you get so old, your circulation stops. It doesn't matter how many blankets they have, they'll still be cold. Complaining is a way for them to get attention. You haven't been here long enough to understand that yet, but just wait. Before you leave here, you'll see what I mean."
I have a natural hatred for any system and a natural sympathy for its victims. Too many people I knew had dealt with the legal system, the welfare system, the education system; none of the systems worked. They were all the same, at least as far as I could tell. Suddenly, I felt empathy for Mrs. Prescott and Mrs. Avery. "I don't think that's a very good attitude," I said.

"Luckily for us, you aren't here to think. We can mention the complaint when we go by the nurse's station." I could tell by the look on her face that the conversation was over.

We finished our rounds in silence. When we reached room 122, Nurse Hernandez made sure that she was the one who took the tray in. I tried to look in the door, but Mrs. Avery was on the far side of the room, behind the dividing curtain.

When we passed the nurses' station, I waited for Nurse Hernandez to say something. She didn't. I stopped and told the nurse myself. She looked up from the piles of paper that covered the desk and gave me a tight smile. "I'll see what we can do," she said. Then she resumed her work.

A feeling of anger was growing inside me. I didn't have an emotional attachment to Mrs. Avery or Mrs. Prescott, but I'd be damned if they were going to ignore me. I thought that someone could have at least checked on it. Like Nurse Hernandez had pointed out, though, I wasn't there to think.

I managed to put the blanket out of my mind for a while; there was never a shortage of things for me to do. I didn't think about it again until I had to go to room 124 later that
day. One of the residents had lost control of his bodily functions, and lucky me was picked to clean it up. As I donned my rubber gloves, I pondered the way life seemed to go in a complete circle. We all started out and ended up at the same place. Little Wayne and the man in room 124 had a lot in common. They were both dependent on someone else for the things that most of us took for granted.

I had finished cleaning up and was on my way back to the nurses' station when I remembered Mrs. Prescott and Mrs. Avery. I wondered if Mrs. Avery had ever gotten her blanket. Room 122 was next door, so I stopped by and checked. Mrs. Prescott wasn't in, so I quietly crossed over to Mrs. Avery's side of the room. Mrs. Avery had gotten her blanket: the afghan from Mrs. Prescott's shoulders was spread across her bed.

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I called Rosie again that night. I really missed the cramped little apartment with its constant smell of grease and baby powder. I actually slept on a real bed at Fair Meadow instead of a scratchy couch, but that was no compensation for the loss of Rosie's companionship.

"Hey," Rosie said when she answered the phone.

"Hey, Rosie. It's Jo. How are things going?" It was strangely quiet in the background; Little Wayne wasn't crying.

"Pretty well," she answered. "I was looking for the receipt from last month's electric bill. I don't guess you know where it is, do you?" I could hear Rosie shuffling the pile of bills and notices that was constantly beside the phone.
"No," I said, "I don't think I was the one that paid it last month. Didn't we send it with Mr. Bradford?" Mr. Bradford was our beer-bellied neighbor.

"Yeah, that's right. We sure did." There was a touch of suspicion in her voice. "That bastard better have paid it."

Rosie was only half paying attention to me; this was not what I had called for. "Are they trying to cut off the electricity?" I asked.

"They're threatening to, but I told 'em it would be over my dead body. So, how's it going with you?"

"Okay, I guess." I told her about Mrs. Prescott and the blanket.

"You're not going soft on me, are you, Jo?" Rosie asked, a teasing tone in her voice.

"Of course not. I don't really care if the old lady gets her blanket or not. It's just that these people here are not going to ignore me," I said, picking at a loose thread on the white bedspread. "They're going to know that Josephine Jackson is here."

"Whatever you say, babe," Rosie said. "You just make sure that you don't forget that."

I asked Rosie where Little Wayne was; it was strange for him to be so quiet. "My sister came to visit yesterday. She doesn't have any kids, you know, so she thinks they're kind of fun. She offered to keep Wayne for a few days," Rosie sounded relieved.

"Rosie?" I said, suddenly feeling sad.
"Yeah, what is it?" she said.

I couldn't think of what to say next. "Check your canceled checks for the electricity payment."

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Nurse Hernandez was with me the next time I saw Mrs. Prescott, too. It was the morning after she had asked me to help her get a blanket. Mrs. Prescott was going in to someone else's room. She had her knitting basket in one hand, and a newspaper under her arm. Nurse Hernandez and I had to deliver a tray to the room, so I took it in. I was still feeling guilty about Mrs. Avery and her blanket, and I wanted to let Mrs. Prescott know that it wasn't my fault.

The dividing curtain was pulled, and the first half of the room was empty. I had just stepped in when I heard Mrs. Prescott's voice coming from the other side. I paused and listened. She was reading the newspaper out loud.

I backed up to the door and coughed loudly. Mrs. Prescott's voice stopped, and she popped her head around the curtain. "Hi," I said. "I was just delivering breakfast."

Mrs. Prescott smiled. "Albert is ready for it. Aren't you, dear?" The man in the bed was pale and fragile. He nodded in agreement. Wires ran from his body in every direction, and the lights on the monitors beside his bed blinked like a high-tech Christmas tree.

I placed the tray on his table. "Thank you," he said, his voice thick and raspy with mucus. I felt uncomfortable.

"Listen, Mrs. Prescott," I said, "I just wanted to let
you know that I did tell a nurse about Mrs. Avery yesterday.
I'm sorry if no one ever came to check on her."

"That's okay, honey," she said. "There's only so much
you can do. Thank you for trying."

I heard the wheels on Nurse Hernandez's cart start to turn,
and I hurried back to the hall. "I have a question for you,
I said when I caught her. "Who is that man that Mrs. Prescott
was visiting?"

Nurse Hernandez didn't mind answering questions about the
patients. She could tell me about the patients all day long
without ever really having to talk to me. It let her keep a
comfortable emotional distance.

"That man is Mr. Prescott," she said.

"Is he her brother-in-law?" I asked.

"No, he's her husband."

"Why don't they have a room together if they are married?"
I asked.

I could tell by the look on Nurse Hernandez's face that
I had just asked a really stupid question. "It's against policy
for a male and a female to live in the same room," she said.

Yeah, I know," I said, "but they're married. Isn't that
different?"

"Policy is policy. You can't make exceptions for certain
people. That undermines the purpose of having policies in the
first place," she said, taking another tray from the cart.

Mr. and Mrs. Prescott stayed in the back of my mind for
the rest of the day. It was like when you wear a wool sweater
without a shirt underneath; scratchy and annoying in a subtle kind of way. About eight o'clock, I couldn't take it anymore. The walls of the home were pressing in on me. I went out on the porch to smoke.

Usually, the narrow porch was full of residents. Tonight, however, it was too late. Most of the residents were already stored safely in their rooms. Those who were still moving around were in the lobby watching television. I lit my cigarette and took a long drag. It was a brisk autumn night, and the fresh air felt great. Inside, the air was stale and reeked of disinfectant. Thick and piney, the odor would envelope you. Like an invisible embalming fluid, it would numb your senses until you became so accustomed to it that you stopped noticing it. Only when you actually breathed fresh air could you tell a difference.

I propped myself against a post and looked up at the sky. The moon was hidden behind big, fluffy clouds. The light from it shone around the edges, rimming the clouds in silver. When I was little, my dad always told me that every cloud had a silver lining. I thought about Mr. and Mrs. Prescott and wondered if they would agree with my dad.

The judge had sent me here thinking he was doing me a big favor, thinking that I would prefer living in Fair Meadow instead of going to jail. Fair Meadow and jail had a lot in common as far as I was concerned. The only difference was that I had done something to deserve to go to jail. All these people had done to deserve a sentence at Fair Meadow was to get old.
"Reflections on the Bottom of a Coffee Cup"
How do you tell someone you've made a mistake? Not an oops-I-spilled-the-milk-on-the-counter mistake, but a big, hairy, my-life-will-never-be-the-same-again mistake?

The question gnawed at Maggie's brain. It was dreadfully clear now. The evidence was in the kitchen sink, in the greasy dinner dishes. She walked to the sink and ran her finger around the rim of a glass. A smudge of her pink lipstick, smudged fingerprints.

The house was still. The coffee maker bubbling on the counter was the only noise. Everything was new. Something old, something new . . . Maggie felt old. A new feeling of being old. She pulled the curtain back from the window. The world outside looked the same. The birdfeeder was busy. The old oak tree still stood. Even the sun seemed stubbornly cheerful. The change was somewhere else.

Maggie frowned. No one understood why she wasn't happy, why too many choices could be just as devastating as too few.

She poured a cup of coffee. The cream disappeared as she stirred. Light into dark. Sweet into bitter. The spoon was silver, real silver. A wedding gift.

Marriage was one of those choices. For Maggie, it was not so much a case of deciding who to marry, but when to marry. She had lost any sentimental feelings she had about the institution. One after the other, her friends' marriages had crumbled. Maggie's friends all tried the supermarket approach to marriage. They sampled a little of this, a little of that. If you didn't like something, take it back. Comparison shopping.
Sometimes express lane, eight items or less. Sometimes, a shopping cart full. Thinking they had caviar, ending up with tuna. Read your labels carefully.

Maggie had always believed that there was no one true love for her, or for anyone else for that matter. Love was a state of mind. There came a time when a person was ready to get married. The other party involved in the marriage was of minimal importance. Marriage occurred when two people both reached the point of readiness at the same time. Or when one party reached the point of readiness with such intensity that he or she forcibly pulled the other person along. It was as simple as that.

Except for Maggie things had not been that simple. In her life, there had been a terrible confusion of readiness points. He was ready; she wasn't. He was ready, and he was ready; she was confused. He was tired of waiting; she was alone. By the time she was nineteen, Maggie had decided how she would make her decision. One day, when she was ready, she would simply look around to see who needed her most and settle down. Settle. Old houses settle. Settle into the ground. Settle for less. Compromise.

Any counselor could have told Maggie that this was not the most intelligent approach to take, but Maggie didn't believe in counselors. Maggie believed only in herself.

Now, she couldn't breathe.

Maggie first noticed the breathing problem the day after Jesse proposed. There was something so final about marriage.
It ended years of fanciful speculation. Somehow, everything seemed different. It wasn't the difference that she expected, however. Instead of seeing a new world of possibilities, she saw only those possibilities that were now closed to her. Whether it was imagined or real, Maggie felt that people's expectations of her had changed. Pressure to settle down, to become domesticated. Maggie smirked as she thought about domestication. Domesticated dogs were not as smart as wild dogs; their survival skills were drastically reduced.

That was when the breathing trouble began.

Hints of trouble to come: the engagement photo. Maggie knew something was wrong when she could not force herself to have her picture made with him. Put it off as long as she could. There was something so permanent about a picture. Could never really be sure what went on in those photo labs, how many copies might be floating around.

Maggie looked at the ring on her finger. A simple, gold band, no stone. Her choice.

Everything had moved so quickly, speeded along by Maggie's overzealous mother. No time to tell anyone. No time to feel. Not that it would have done any good; people would simply have chalked it up to wedding jitters. People were all too happy to offer advice anyway.

No, Maggie never told anyone. Instead, wheezing along. Smothering. And then it was too late.

Her Aunt Julia, was the only one that Maggie thought even half understood what she was feeling. Aunt Julia had Uncle
Walter. Uncle Walter was no fun. Uncle Walter was no good. Good for nothing. Good at nothing. Poor Aunt Julia. Aunt Julia told Maggie that it was never too late. The week before the wedding when the flowers were ordered, the tuxes fitted, the dresses made. "Never too late to change your mind," Aunt Julia said, patting Maggie's hand. "Don't let someone push you into something you're not ready for."

The truth was, no one had pushed Maggie into anything. At least not at first. She had jumped in wholeheartedly. She had tossed her head, and Jesse was hers. She knew what she was doing, and she knew how to undo it just as quickly. But she didn't. It was time, Maggie had thought to herself. And so, a marriage had occurred. Now, it was too late.

The wedding was beautiful. The presents were extravagant. The honeymoon was wonderful.

A stream of hot liquid slid down her throat temporarily taking the chill from her body. Maggie sighed. It hadn't been time. She simply got carried away with the idea of marriage. The problem wasn't Jesse. He was a fine catch. He was tall and strong, gentle but firm. He was handsome and successful. Jesse loved her so much that she didn't feel any need to try. Maybe that was part of the problem. Too damn comfortable.

Maggie, trying to warn him once. "I'm afraid I'm too much for you," she said.

"Nonsense," he, smiling slyly. "I'm sure my stamina will increase with practice."

Maggie, irritated then, "I'm not talking about that. I'm
talking about in every way. I'm afraid I'll swallow you, consume you, make you disappear and become a part of me."

Jesse, tenderly, "That's what I want, Maggie, to become a part of you. For us to become a unit."

Maggie, to herself, "But what if that's not what I want?"

What did it mean to want, anyway?

Did anyone ever really know what they wanted? More importantly, did it matter?

When she was six, Maggie had wanted the shiny, red bicycle at the hardware store. Wanted it more than she had ever wanted anything. On Christmas morning, it was propped under the tree. There was nothing more to want. Maggie had taken it out on the street and promptly tore holes in the knees of her pants, taking most of her skin with it. That wasn't what she had wanted.

Then, when she was thirteen, Maggie had desperately wanted to get her period. Her girlfriends had gotten theirs, and Maggie had so wanted to fit in. To be a "woman." Her period came. A flood of blood and tears and pain. Nothing like she had expected. No magical transformation. That wasn't what Maggie had wanted.

Eighteen. Wanted: a date with Josh McKenzie, the back row of algebra class. Every girl wanted to go out with him. But then, the backseat of his Buick. The vinyl seat sticking to her thighs. The smell of stale cigarettes. The feel of sweaty palms. A sharp jab of pain. Maggie had never wanted that.
Nothing like she had expected.

Her whole life had not been what she had expected. Why should marriage be any different?

Another conversation with Jesse. Trying desperately to make him see. Only he wouldn't. He loved her. Love is blind. Love is blinders.

"You don't know me," Maggie, her back to Jesse.

"Of course I do, babe," Jesse, laying his hand on her shoulder.

Maggie, through tears, "I'm going to hurt you one day."

Jesse, believing it was Maggie's humility, "Don't be ridiculous. Nothing you do can make me stop loving you."

"If you knew me as well as I know me, you wouldn't love me in the first place. You love the me you think you know."

Silence. Hopeless silence. And then a kiss. Hopelessly blind kiss.

You can't make people see what they are determined to ignore. Waste of time and energy.

The show was grand. Weddings were shows. There was no practical purpose for them. The deed could be done just as easily in a small room behind closed doors. Better suited, actually, to such a clandestine setting. No one but the justice of the peace and a witness. Only decoration, a picture of the JP's wife on his desk. Wonder he could keep it there. Sentencing people in front of his own judge. How ironic. Perhaps the JP didn't feel it. Perhaps it was not that way for him. Maybe his wife felt it, maybe she didn't. Maybe it
wasn't that way for her either. Perhaps it didn't have to be that way for Maggie.

Instead of a secret, clandestine location, Maggie and Jesse had chosen to pledge their lives in front of a multitude of delighted guests. Row upon row of pearls and lace and ties and tails. Row upon row of shiny shoes, shiny smiles, all wreathed in a halo of ivy and roses. Lit by unearthly candlelight.

Bride and groom. Husband and wife. Once it was man and wife. Things change. Obey was missing. Why lie? People had laughed when Maggie said it. It was no joke. Jesse knew. He laughed anyway, still believing that everything would be okay.

After the show, the ride to the reception. It was a small town. Things had to double in their uses. For example, the limo that Maggie and Jesse rode in. Owned by the local funeral home. On the way to the reception, stray, withered flower petals left over from earlier in the day. A very different kind of ride. Or was it? Maggie wondered.

At the country club, entertainment, tastefully provided by a live band. Classy, thanks to Maggie’s mom. Talk. Smile. Circulate. Circulating like a giant oscillating fan. Only humans weren't designed to be fans; humans get dizzy. Have trouble breathing.

Oops! Time to go. Throw the bouquet to a crowd of eagerly waiting girls. Poisoned petals among the sweet. Maggie wanted to hide a warning. "Choose the time carefully," it would read.
"It's never too late."

The honeymoon. A brief dip into non-reality. Too brief. Maggie needed to make her life a series of consecutive honeymoons. First, the beach. Then, a cabin. Next, a cruise.

There were no greasy dinner dishes smudged with pink lipstick on cruises. At least not that Maggie would have to deal with. Someone else would be there to take care of the reality. Sweep up the mess. All Maggie would have to do was enjoy. She could do that.

Maggie's coffee cup was empty. Another dish to add to the pile. The light shined on the moist bottom of her cup. Reflections on the bottom of a coffee cup. A tired face. Caught up in a dream that was never hers to begin with. Smothering beneath the weight of words and their connotations. "Wife." "Mrs." Reflections of someone who had ceased to exist. Reflections. Images. Thoughts.

How did you tell someone you had made a mistake? How did you tell someone that you had accidentally married them?

A hand on Maggie's shoulder. Jesse. "Good morning."

He sat down at the kitchen table and opened the morning paper.

"Jesse," Maggie said as she handed him his morning coffee, "I've made a terrible mistake."

Without looking up from his paper, Jesse said, "I know. So have I."
"No One to See"
The moon was a large, orange ball that sat unmoved by the gentle autumn breeze. The leaves in the trees stirred, whispering softly. I pulled my sweater closer.

The campus was dimly lit, lights strategically placed to illuminate the dangerous corners. The illumination made no difference, I thought when there is no one there to see. Earlier, there had been people sitting in front of the library, talking, laughing. Now there was no one. I glanced around, my eyes darting back and forth across the landscape ahead. All I wanted was to see another person, but there was no one in sight. The whisper of the leaves took on an ominous tone, and the footsteps behind me provided a steady rhythm. As the footsteps quickened so did the beat of my heart. My mind raced.

The beautiful weather that I had sought to enjoy on my walk had become heavy and thick with fear. The footsteps were closer now. I fought the urge to turn around and look at the person behind me. The footsteps were those of a man; that much I could tell. He had been following me for almost a block now, and I could have sworn that his pace adjusted with mine. I tried to remember what I was supposed to do in situations like this: walk confidently, don't stop, cross the street... Damn, I couldn't remember if I was supposed to make eye contact.

The footsteps were upon me now. I could see the figure that accompanied them out of the corner of my eye; it was large and bulky. I wished that I had worn jeans. I wished that I had tucked my hair under a baseball cap. Why, I asked myself, had I been stupid enough to go walking alone? I held my breath.
The figure was walking alongside me now. I was glad that I had worn shoes with soft soles; they moved noiselessly on the pavement. I pulled my sweater tighter still, its wool biting into my skin. I tried to steady the tremors that had started in my legs. I glanced at the figure again; he nodded acknowledgment as he passed.

I listened as his footsteps faded into the distance. My breathing eased and the tremors stopped. There had been nothing to worry about this time; the man was simply out enjoying the weather like I was.

The wind whispered softly through the leaves. I realized I was perspiring and let my sweater fall open. There were lights to illuminate the dangerous corners, but lights don't matter when there's no one there to see. My eyes darted back and forth across the landscape ahead of me, and I realized what it meant to be a woman.
"Life through a Rearview Mirror"
I have always dreamed of being chased. Of looking up in the rearview mirror of my 1976 Monte Carlo and seeing the object of my affections chasing me down, begging me not to leave him. I have visions of him kneeling by the side of the highway as cars flash by us staring. I see him declaring his eternal love for me as the loose gravel bites into his knees.

Often, I have this dream as I am zipping down the road. Alone. In my car. With no one following me. Today, was different: someone was chasing me. Unfortunately, it was a state trooper. Groaning, I pulled to the side of the highway. Today was not a banner day for Lucy Stoddard.

It all began that morning. Halley's Ice Cream cut my hours. Then, I stubbed my toe as I stomped my foot in protest of the cut. Finally, I saw THEM. TOGETHER. IN PUBLIC. Had I lived in New York City, maybe I could have chalked the sighting up to simple, stupid coincidence. Laramie Heights, however, was not New York City. There was no explanation for their appearance together in public except plain brazenness. That was why I let the air out of his tires. No boyfriend of mine was going to just forget to tell me that he was through with me. No sir, I would see to that.

So, I let the air out of his tires, and then I confronted them. Right there in front of Murphy's Hardware. Then I sped out of town, leaving Halley's Ice Cream Shop and Murphy's Hardware far behind. Only they weren't really that far away. Yet. The state trooper pulled me over about three miles out of town. Now, he was walking up to my car.
His large, round hat was perched crookedly on his head, hiding his eyes. Only they didn't need hiding; the sunglasses already concealed them. "Good day, ma'am. Did you know that you were speeding?" he asked.

"No," I said. Yes, I thought, speeding away from my old life, and you are slowing me down.

"Is there some reason you were speeding?" he asked.

Yes, I thought, I was pretending that you were my lover trying to catch me and bring me back. "No, sir," I answered.

"I'll need to see your driver's license."

I pulled my purse from the floor and started rummaging through it. The trooper watched silently, his eyes hidden behind the dark glasses. My purse served as my filing cabinet, my trashcan, my make-up case, my medicine cabinet ... Finally, I turned it upside down and emptied it on the seat. I glanced at the trooper, trying to pierce his glasses and judge what he thought about me.

He looked amused.

I handed him the license, not looking up.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll be right back." He walked to his car, and I could see him in my rearview mirror, talking on his radio. I began picking up the items that were scattered across the seat, stuffing them back into my purse. A tube of lipstick rolled into the floor, and I bent down to retrieve it. When I came back up, the trooper was watching.

"Ma'am," he said, "I clocked you at eighty in a fifty-five. I'm going to have to give you a ticket."
The trooper removed his sunglasses now, and I thought I detected a look of pity. "You know," I said, "you don't have to give me a ticket."

The trooper ignored me and kept writing.

I cleared my throat. "You know," I repeated, "you don't have to give me a ticket. You want to give me a ticket."

The trooper's brow crinkled, and he pushed his hat back. "Listen, lady, I'm sorry, but you were going twenty-five miles over the speed limit. I do have to give you a ticket." He kept writing.

"You know what I was thinking about just now, when you stopped me?"

"No, ma'am, I don't." He didn't look up.

"I was thinking about being chased," I said. "I was wishing that someone would chase me down, stop me, and tell me to go back to town."

"Mmmhmmm . . . " he said, stepping around to the front of my car to copy my tag number.

"Will you tell me to turn around and go back to town?"

The trooper scratched his head and studied me a minute. "You know, ma'am, this has been one of the more interesting stops I've made in a while. Sure, turn around and go back to town. Just do it slowly." He tore the ticket off and handed it to me.

"Thank you, officer," I said. He walked back to his car, shaking his head and smiling. I put my Monte Carlo in gear and started down the road. At the next driveway, I turned around
and headed back to town. When I passed the trooper still sitting on the side of the road, I honked my horn and waved.

What my motives were, I don't know. The drive back into town was short. In fact, no one even had time to notice that I was gone. I wondered how long it would have been before someone missed me. Maybe I wouldn't have been missed. It didn't do a lot of good to run away if no one knew I was gone.

I pulled into the Dairy Stop and ordered a malt. The woman behind the counter was about forty, her hair tucked sloppily under a ball cap. Middle-aged family-types with minimum wage jobs, I thought, one sure way to tell you're in a small town.

I watched the woman pour the milk into the shiny, silver cup. She placed in on the shake machine and disappeared into the back. I heard the sound of hot grease spattering up; a basket of fries had been dropped in. I looked around. The Dairy Stop was mostly empty at two o'clock in the afternoon. The kids weren't out of school yet, lunch was over, and the only people in the place besides me were a group of old men playing dominoes and talking about mud tires.

I wondered if I would have kept going if the state trooper hadn't stopped me. I doubted it. I left town without quitting my job at Halley's (about which I was now very glad), without packing all of my things (few as they were), without putting gas in my car, and without telling anyone where I was going. The last decision was the only one that I thought I might not have regretted. I would have needed references, I didn't have money to buy new clothes, and my '76 Monte Carlo used a lot
of gas. There were, however, advantages to not leaving a forwarding address.

The woman came back now and took the malt off the machine, pouring it into a paper cup. I took the malt from her and handed her two crumpled bills. She muttered under her breath as she straightened them out. She pushed my change across the counter towards me, right through a blob of ketchup. I sighed and left the change.

Outside, the weather was hot for an October day, so I sat on the back of my car and drank the malt, pondering my next move. There are a few rules about living in a small town; rules that I should have known by then. One of them was: never plan on doing any thinking as long as there is a chance that someone can see you. Nine times out of ten, someone will, and they will want to talk. Then your thinking is over. Sitting on the back of my car, Bill Underwood, an elderly man from church, spotted me.

He came towards me, a wide grin spreading across his face. "Say, Lucy, I haven't seen you in a while. Where have you been hidin' out?"

I looked straight ahead. "I've been out of town for a while," I said. A very short while, I thought.

"Well, we all missed you at church last Sunday."

I didn't answer.

Bill continued. "Yeah, we were all talking about Tom and his new girl. We figured maybe you stayed away on account of that. You know, with his whole family there and everything."
"No," I said, "I reckon I didn't stay away because of Tom."

"Yeah, well, that new girl of his sure is a pretty, little thing. Course, she's nothing beside you; can't figure out what went wrong."

Well, Bill, I thought, I'll tell you what went wrong. They say the pen is mightier than the sword, but let me tell you, when you're dealing with men, the mascara wand is more powerful than both. That little hussy batted her eyelashes and played stupid, and I wouldn't. That little wench wiped his boots and brought him beer, and I didn't. That, Bill, I thought, is what went wrong.

"Strange things happen sometimes," I said, getting down off my car.

"Yeah, I reckon they do." Bill patted me on the shoulder.

"You just buck up there, Lucy. Hope to see you in church on Sunday." With that, Bill waddled off.

The inside of my car had gotten hot while I was out of it. I rolled the window down, and backed out of the Dairy Stop.

"Where to now?" I asked myself in the rearview mirror.

"Good question," I answered.

I like talking to myself; myself and I can have some pretty deep conversations.

I headed the car toward my apartment. As I got closer to it, the absurdity of the whole running away plan became clear. Mr. Perkins, the apartment manager would have freaked when he found out that I had skipped town. Not necessarily because he was worried about me, but because I owed him a month's rent.
He probably would have sold off my stuff to raise it. At that thought, I laughed. I certainly would have gotten the better end of that deal.

My usual parking place was open, and I parked the Monte Carlo. I walked up the steps to my apartment and opened the door. The living room was bare, except for a bean bag and end table that I bought at a garage sale. I tossed my purse on the table and sank into the bean bag. I had no television, no stereo, no major electronics of any kind. I had no couch, no dining table, no bed. I had a mattress and an old bureau that had been left in the apartment by the people before me. And I had an answering machine and a small radio. That was about it.

I moved to Laramie Heights about seven years ago with my parents. Since then, my parents had moved back to Vermont. The temperate climate of Texas was finally too much for them. They were offended that I didn't want to return with them, and a big disagreement followed. My parents simply couldn't understand how their child could function outside a hundred mile radius of them. After they settled down a little, they offered to help me get situated on my own. Unfortunately, I didn't forget as easily as they did, and I refused. Now, looking at the sparse furnishings of my apartment (which I had had for almost a year and a half), I wished that my head wasn't quite so hard.
"Lucy Stoddard," I asked out loud, "what are you going to do with yourself? Twenty-three, single, working at Halley's Ice Cream... where do you think you're going?"

The truth was that Lucy Stoddard had never known where she was going.

Tom Moore was one of the many side streets I had taken in my rather short life. Of course, when I took that route, I thought it was a freeway. Unfortunately, Tom took a detour. A detour with Cindy. A detour that apparently included many rest stops at scenic motels across a tri-county area. Oh, well, I thought, live and learn.

Actually, what I thought at the time is not polite to repeat, so I'll leave that to the imagination. The point is that Tom forgot to tell me that our relationship had reached a dead end before he went public with Cindy. Until today, I had managed to avoid seeing them together in person. Of course there were plenty of reported sightings. I received reports of Tom's and Cindy's meals at the cafe, reports of Cindy's fashion choices at the movie theater, and reports of reports of their antics in the park.

Seeing them together in person, however, was somehow different from receiving secondhand reports. I wanted to vomit. Actually, I tried to vomit, but I couldn't. Looking back now, I thought it was a good thing I didn't; it would have been undignified to vomit in front of your ex's new girlfriend on a public sidewalk.
My hand stuck to the bean bag chair where I had spilled a soda. Stuck. Just like me, I thought.

The ice cream shop was unchanged when I went in the next morning. Everyone treated me as if nothing had happened. Of course, that was because no one knew that anything had happened. I put on my apron and started serving ice cream.

I read once where it was possible to reach a state of spiritual ecstasy from the repeated performance of any job; the important thing wasn't so much what you were doing, but how you did it. That was what I concentrated on, and let me tell you, that day, dipping scoop after scoop of ice cream, I reached a new spiritual state. I watched the muscles in my arm flex as they cut through the frozen cream, and I felt strong, powerful. The secret to happiness, I decided, was to step back from the situation, to look at it, and to re-orient yourself.

I have to admit that when I stepped back from the Tom situation, the whole mess seemed ludicrous. There was no good reason I should let a man ruin my life. Whenever I saw Tom and Cindy, I would just remember the most ridiculous picture of Tom that I could. I rifled through my memory looking for the picture. I decided on the one of Tom after he drank too much at his nephew's Little League game. He had taken out across the field chasing the poor umpire. The umpire had no idea that he had just called Tom's nephew out on third and that, in Tom's slightly blurred vision, his nephew had looked perfectly safe. So, that was the picture that I decided to remember of Tom, of a drunk man running across a Little League field screaming
obscenities at a very confused umpire. The picture helped me get perspective on the whole thing: Tom was a goofball, and I had to remember that.

The hard part of putting things into perspective is that one little tweak, and everything goes fuzzy. I, for example, thought that I had overcome a need for revenge, that I could accept the state of affairs calmly without concerning myself with petty personal vendettas. I was wrong. Later that week the report came in that Tom and Cindy had been seen in what seemed like a rather heated discussion on the produce aisle at the grocery store. From all accounts, the disagreement seemed to concern more than a choice of lettuce. Now, I wanted revenge desperately. Accepting rejection is easier if you are rejected for someone that your ex really loves. Being rejected because your ex simply lusts after someone else is not as easy to take. Now, I wanted Tom to want me back, and I wanted to leave him. Without Cindy. Without me. Without anyone.

Two weeks after the spat in the grocery store, I must admit that my spiritual condition fluctuated between ecstasy, contentment, and utter despair. I had almost given up any hope for revenge when the moment that I had been waiting for arrived. Tom walked through the doors of Halley's Ice Cream Shop.

His arrival did not come as a complete surprise; I watched his car drive by twice before it stopped. Even before that, I knew that he would come to the shop and that he would come while I was there. Watching him walk through the doors, I even felt sure that I could predict what he would order. Somehow,
things always seem to have a way of returning to their point of departure.

I turned all of my energy toward the job at hand. I felt like a girl from an advertisement. My long, blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and my skin was smooth and clear. Smooth just like the vanilla ice cream, I thought, don't you want to eat lots and lots of vanilla ice cream, Tom?

Tom was almost to the front of the line. I looked at him, summoning all of my charm to the surface. I scooped a double dip for the man in front of him, watching my arm drive the metal scoop through the ice cream. Powerful.

Tom stood with both hands in his pockets, looking through the glass as if he had never seen ice cream before. "May I help you?" I asked, making my voice distant.

"Can we talk sometime?" Tom asked, his eyes barely meeting mine.

I pretended not to hear. "Buttered pecan is our featured flavor today, and we sell a lot of banana nut."

"Listen, Lucy, I need to talk to you." Tom seemed unconscious of the line behind him. Silently I laughed. I wanted to make sure that he repeated himself clearly so that those behind him could hear. A big audience sweetens revenge.

"Tom, I'm working," I said. "I don't think this is a good place."

"Well," he said, shifting his feet nervously, "what about dinner tonight? Would you have dinner with me at my place?"
I scooped a double dip of vanilla and handed it to him. Plain on plain, I thought. Creamy and smooth. "I don't think that's a good idea," I said.

That was true. I didn't think it was a good idea. Here in public, wielding my power scoop, I was strong. Alone in his apartment, however, was a different story.

"Really, Tom," I said, "I'm working now."

"Please, Lucy, can't we talk somewhere?" His voice was laced with strain and desperation. I liked that.

"Tom, you'll have to talk to me later. I'm busy right now." With that, I turned my attention to the elderly woman behind him. Tom walked out the door, his head lowered.

"You know, honey," the elderly woman said, "they're really not worth all the trouble they cause." She reached across the counter and patted my hand knowingly. "Trust me; I caught one of 'em." She tipped her head towards an elderly man sitting at a table behind her. "You've got plenty of time to be married."

"Thank you," I said, for lack of anything better. I guess there was something comforting in knowing that the decision to postpone marriage wasn't simply a "crazy notion" that young women got from "feminist propaganda," as my mother claimed. This slight, elderly woman certainly didn't look like a radical.

Well, Tom's first visit to Halley's Ice Cream Shop was quickly followed by his second. That night when I got off work, he was waiting by my car. "Hi," he said, flashing me a sheepish grin. "I remembered that you usually got off work at seven."
I put my keys into the door lock without hesitating. "It's pretty amazing that you can remember that," I said, "considering you couldn't remember that I was your girlfriend when Cindy started making her move."

"Lucy, that was all a big mistake. I just panicked because I was beginning to fall in love with you."

Now, mind you, I am an avid reader of pulpy romance novels, the kind they keep by the checkout at the grocery store. Tom always made fun of these books. "Do you really believe that people say all that stupid stuff?" he would ask as he flipped through looking for the next sex scene. Now, however, he began spouting "stupid stuff" so well that I was convinced he must have spent hours camped at the library studying the things.

"Lucy, I want to try again. I love you; I need you. I didn't realize how much I needed you until you were gone . . ." Blah, blah, blah.

I stopped and looked at him. "Cindy dropped you, huh?"

"Well, not exactly," he said, running the toe of his boot across the pavement. "It was kind of mutual."

"Listen," I said, "it may have been a big mistake for you to leave me, but it was an even bigger mistake if you think I'll come back to you this easily." I got in my car and started the engine.

"I'm not going to quit trying," Tom yelled after me. "You can't forget me that easily."

Nope, I thought, I don't want to forget you. Once you've driven off a cliff, you try to remember not to do it again.
I have to give Tom credit for one thing: after Cindy dumped him, he put more energy into winning me back than he put into our entire relationship before. There were calls, there were flowers, there were "special" songs left on my answering machine. Tom ate so much ice cream in the next month that I expected to notice a weight gain. Unfortunately, Tom was from a family of high metabolisms, and he stayed as slim as always.

I also have to admit that Tom's methods were at times quite persuasive, and I was beginning to enjoy all of the attention. There is something incredibly gratifying about being pursued by a man, and I think I might have been beginning to fall for it. Then, Bill Underwood, the man from church, walked into Halley's.

"Hey, Lucy," he said, "what have you been up to lately?"
"Not much," I replied, "just working and sleeping."

He propped his arms on the glass counter and leaned toward me. "Thelma said she saw Tom's car parked at your apartment the other day. I'm so glad you two young 'uns are trying to work it out."

Momentarily, I lost all of my strength, and the scoop stopped its route through the butter brickle. Then, I regained control. "Really?" I smiled, "Did she happen to mention what day it was?"

Bill pushed his cap back on his head and thought for a minute. "I guess it would have been Saturday around two o'clock. Yeah, that would have been it because Thelma was going to the grocery store when she saw him."
I handed him his cone. "Well," I said, "tell Thelma not to get too excited yet. Tom and I aren't back together."

Bill winked at me. "You just take your time, honey, it's good for him to wait."

I doubted Bill realized that his short visit shook me so. This was why: I wasn't home on Saturday at two; I went shopping with a girl from Halley's. The funny thing was that when we got home at four, I thought I saw Tom's car turn onto the highway from the other entrance. When I got to my apartment, there was no note to show that he had been there not once, but apparently twice. Because I knew Tom, that led me to one conclusion: he was watching me, watching my apartment, waiting to see who I was with. Tom knew I was with someone because my Monte Carlo was parked in its usual place.

Admittedly, at this point, it was all just a guess. Actually, it was a little bit more than a guess; it was an educated guess. Tom was a jealous guy. He always had been. I knew that he had watched me before. Before he and Cindy detoured, I found him driving by my apartment often, and once I even found him sitting in the parking lot across the street from my apartment, waiting for me to come home. I didn't doubt he would do it again. I decided to confront him; I invited him out for dinner.

It is a point often ignored by people today, but subtlety is the most effective tool for digging out the truth. Especially when subtly is served with soft perfume, dim lights, and plenty
of sugar. Tom didn't know what was happening until it was too late.

It was the first time that Tom and I had been out since he and Cindy broke up, and I knew what he was expecting. Dinner went well, and over desert, I brought up last Saturday.

"Thelma Underwood said she saw your car parked outside my apartment last Saturday," I said, running my tongue around the edge of my coffee cup and looking up through my eyelashes. I tried to sound unconcerned.

"Yeah," Tom said slowly, "I wanted to borrow your typewriter."

"What were you going to do with my typewriter?" I asked, sliding a bite of cheesecake off my fork.

Tom shifted in his chair. "I needed to type a report for work," he said.

"Couldn't you have used the office typewriter?" I asked as I slid another bite of cheesecake off my fork into his mouth.

"I wanted to get it done during the weekend," he said, sliding his hand over my knee.

"I thought I saw you drive by around four, too." I watched him through the steam from my coffee.

"Just checking to see if you were home yet." He gave my knee a squeeze, a signal that it was time to go to a more private place.

"Why didn't you leave a note," I asked, stroking his hand encouragingly, "or mention it to me when you called Saturday night?"
Tom smiled and said, "I guess I had forgotten about it by then. Why are you making such a big deal about it?"

I thought back to the drama class that I took as a freshman in high school, and I prayed that Ms. Boatwright's instructions wouldn't fail me now. I began to cry. At first, it was a single, gentle teardrop that slid delicately from my eye down the bridge of my nose, down along my lips, and came to rest on my chin. Steadily, I increased the intensity. Soon, there was a steady flow, a veritable flood. Ms. Boatwright would have been proud.

Tom, like most men I knew, was extremely upset by the sight of female tears. Especially when he suspected that he might somehow be to blame for those tears. This concern, of course, did not stem from any responsibility or regret that he felt about causing a woman to cry; this concern came from the fear that somehow he would be punished for these tears.

"What's wrong," he asked, trying to pull my head onto his shoulder.

"You were watching me," I cried.

"Don't be silly. Why would I be watching you?"

"Because . . . you . . . don't . . . trust . . . me," I said between sniffles.

"Now, Lucy, of course I trust you," he said in his masculine, this-shoulder-was-made-for-crying-on voice.

"No," I shook my head vigorously, "no, you don't, and I just can't take it anymore."
I really do hate to create scenes, but Ms. Boatwright said that the show must go on regardless. So, with that, I got up and rushed out of the restaurant.

I could hear Tom coming behind me, and I could hear the murmur of voices as I rushed past. I kept my head low, and didn't look at anyone. When I got outside, I jumped in my car and sped away.

At this point, the role became real for me; I discovered that I really did feel like crying. So I did. I cried and drove, and never once thought about looking in my rearview mirror to see if anyone were chasing me.

I guess I was so caught up in the emotions of the scene that it took me a while to notice that someone was following me. It was Tom. The scene was very familiar; I had no idea how many times it had played in my head: me, chased down by my love.

Only Tom wasn't my love. I realized that he never had been really. Still, the dream dictated that I pull over. If I didn't, the dream would never complete itself.

I pulled over. So did Tom. He walked up to the side of my car. I knew before he got there that he would kneel down by the door. Of course, with Tom, it wouldn't out of respect or submission, it would simply so he could be on eye level with me. He knelt.

"Lucy," he said, "let me explain. Please."

Cars were zipping by us; I hoped they were looking, and I hoped they gave reports.
"Lucy, I love you," Tom said, his hands resting on my door.
I hoped the loose gravel was biting into his knees.
"Please can't we try again?" His voice was pleading.
I was living my dream, but somehow, it wasn't like I had planned. I knew the real ending would be different from the fantasy ending. But I also realized that different didn't mean bad. Tom and I would not ride into the sunset together, and I didn't need for it to happen that way.
"Tom," I said, patting his hand sympathetically, "Eat dirt."
And I drove away into the sunset by myself, imagining the gravel spewing in his face and knowing that I was finished viewing my life through a rearview mirror.