WAYS OF PULLING A PERSON OUT OF THE WATER

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Michelle Marie Brooks, B.A., M.A.

Denton, Texas

December, 1997
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*Ways of Pulling A Person Out of the Water* contains a preface, which discusses the writing process as well as a discussion of the short story form, ten original short stories, and two chapters of a novel-in-progress. A number of the short stories explore issues such as eating disorders, sexual violence, and artistic choice in the specialized context of the dance community. The novel chapters further develop one of the short stories, "When You Are the Camera and the Camera Is You." The narrator, Diane, explores her life coping with agoraphobia and her family's car accident.
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Why write?

"Because I'm good at it." Flannery O'Connor
"to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source." James Baldwin
"because it's the only time I feel like I shouldn't be doing something else." Gloria Steinem
"I write to discover what it is I will have written." Joyce Carol Oates
"Because I want to." John Ashberry
"because I believed in what I saw" Jack Kerouac
"It passes the time." Gustave Flaubert

For me, writing is my way of continually creating a truce with reality. When I'm not writing, I feel scattered, unhappy, hyper, testy. Writing gives my life a structure. I'm trying to redeem my past, my present, my future. I don't want to use, reexperience, manipulate, or otherwise manhandle my life, although I may do all of these things. To redeem something means to regain possession, to rescue from bondage, to atone for. To have written about something is a way of gaining power over it.
When Joan Didion writes in *The White Album*: "I am a thirty-four year old woman with long straight hair and an old bikini bathing suit and bad nerves sitting on an island in the middle of the Pacific waiting for a tidal wave that will not come" (135), I sense her coming to terms (note the very expression - - coming to terms) with her situation in a way that only writing makes possible. It's not a diary, a journal, or anything that could be construed as a recording. It's a reckoning, an accounting. Writing is a hostile act, one demands meaning from experience.

In *On Boxing*, Joyce Carol Oates makes the following observation about boxing matches: "The boxers will bring everything that is themselves, and everything will be exposed - - including secrets about themselves they cannot fully realize." (9). The same can be said of writers. It's a way of knowing things that there are no other ways of knowing. Writing enables you to gain an understanding of your material that you wouldn't be able to get any other way.

A friend of mine claims to read biographies to find out "where people came from." He means this in the most literal sense. And I guess that's why I write as well. To find out where people come from.

One of the most important prerequisites for writing is not only having something to say, but having something that you must say. John Irving puts it this way: "Well you have to be passionate about something . . . something or someone must be obsession" (148).

In her short story about AIDS,"The Way We Live Now," Susan Sontag ends with the following observation:
I was thinking, Urusala said to Quentin, that the difference between a story and a painting or a photograph is that in a story you can write, He's still alive. But in a painting or a photo, you can't show "still." You can just show him being alive.

He's still alive, Stephen said.

I want to show "still." That's a big part of it. And, as Hemmingway put it, I want to last.

What Do You Write About?

In "How to Tell A True War Story" Tim O'Brien provides a number of scenes, trying to capture the essence of a "war story." In the end, he comes to the following conclusion "It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (91). If this is the definition, I guess I write war stories as much as anything else.

When I try to explain what my stories are about, I never can quite get across the sense of any story, character, or even myself as sane person. By the end of the conversation, I'm usually babbling something about "problems people have, but not in a tabloidish way, I mean I'm not trying to explain things, but just, well, you know, show them in a way that doesn't diminish or sensationalize, you know." Of course, they never know. They nod politely and don't ask me even simple questions for the rest of the night for fear that I might say things like "well, the salad dressing? You know, I wouldn't know what kind you would call it. It's sort of like a low-fat, kind of a ranch, but sort of like honey-mustard, you know. I mean, I can't really explain it..."
When asked to write an explanation of how I came to write "Ways of Pulling A Person Out of the Water," I turned in the following:

When I started writing "Ways of Pulling A Person Out of the Water," I had the idea of a woman going on a date and the way she would clean her house. The first versions rotated back and forth from Elana to Greg's point of view, but Elana's voice started to dominate. After what felt like a million drafts, I ditched everything except Elana's deep and abiding dislike for Melanie Griffith which was the first thing I knew about her.

As for the character of Elana, the story is not autobiographical in any obvious way, although it does seem to evoke the impulse in people who read it to figure out what's "true" and what's made up. The detail that bothers people the most, weirdly enough, is the toothbrush. I knew that Elana wouldn't want to scar her hands, which is one of the many hazards of having an eating disorder. The only part of the entire story to have happened in any real sense is the brother story in the middle section. My mother told me that story.

The style stemmed from Elana herself. She's incredibly self-protective and private and the first sentence came from that - "If you asked Elana, and you wouldn't because you don't know her yet, this how she would describe herself..." which set the tone for the rest of the piece by establishing the fact that no one really knows Elana and that she already has an answer to the question of identity that's evasive and yet somehow more revealing that anything more straightforward could ever be. The style lessens as the story continues, but by the end we see that we are still only on the outside, distanced by both the character and the narration. As I wrote the drafts of the story, I found myself genuinely liking Elana and wanting her to succeed. Unfortunately, her idea of success is keeping everything looking perfect on the outside, which isn't easy or particularly healthy. Despite this fact or maybe because of it, her continued perseverance in light of inevitable failure strikes me as admirable and sad, much like Elana herself.
Or in the words of Tim O'Brien, "You can tell a true war story if you just keep
telling it" (91).

The other stories in this collection had beginnings similar to "Ways of Pulling A
Person Out of the Water": an image, a certain aspect of a situation, a line of dialogue that
seemed compelling. Of course, I almost always stray from these starts eventually, but
that's how I begin. I begin with something tangible and try to work my way into the
important questions. As Margaret Atwood notes in her metafictional story "Happy
Endings" after claiming that the only "authentic ending is the one provided here: *John and
Mary die . . .

So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun. True connoisseurs,
however, are known to favor the stretch in between, since it's the hardest to do
anything with.

That's all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after
another, a what and a what and a what.

Now try How and Why. (47)

Examining the themes of this collection, certain elements tend to reoccur. Some of
the more obvious ones include eating disorders, self-mutilation, body-image, and sexual
violence. Part of this stems from the fact that a number of the stories involve dancers.
Specialized worlds interest me a great deal. I wanted to evoke the appeal of a dancer's life
while not ignoring the most unglamorous aspects of the profession.

One of the ideas that interests me most as a fiction writer is this: the very things
that hurt you also help you. It's the intimate connection of the very worst aspects of
character, personality, and luck that are in equal parts responsible for the very best aspects
of these as well. In the dance world, the connections are often very explicit. The very
exercises, shoes, and training techniques that produce "Giselle" are often responsible for starving ballerinas, deformed feet, and ruined joints. I'm interested in the price tags in life - -in how the way you live exacts its cost.

As for how these themes play out in the individual stories, it's in a number of ways, alternately positive and negative. In "When You Are the Camera and the Camera Is You," a story many a reader has pronounced grim, I have a completely different take on it. The narrator, Diane, finds herself in a hostile environment without adequate defenses and comes to one of the few psychic defenses against sexual violence available to women in this culture which is to eroticize this violence. When journals (and on occasion I've had this response) tell me that a story "isn't feminist enough," I want to throw things. What could be more feminist than being empowered against fear, against the sheer horror of what you're up against? To acknowledge the very limited options one has against this threat is merely realistic.

Many of the other stories revolve around such ideas. People are forced to make decisions, to see their lives in ways that will make them more palatable, to continue in light of very bad odds. In "Tuesday" and "The Children, the House, Everything," we see a world of diminished expectations, a place where a character realizes that she has "one night and that's got to be enough." It's these moments and there aftermaths that comprise a good portion of this collection.

I don't make the claim that my stories speak for a large part of the population. As Flannery O'Connor stated in *Mystery and Manners* "the country that the writer is concerned with in the most objective way is, of course, the region that immediately surrounds him" (28). That's not to say that I don't share many of my generation's concerns. I'd have to agree with David Leavitt when he claims to be part of a generation "determined to find in their adulthood the stability that eluded them in childhood. Homes, families, marriages claim them, and they know they must make peace with those claims,
but they also take as a given constant the possibility that everything will blow up in their faces" (Charters 825).

And as much as I am devoted to the idea of chronicling experience as it happens to the individual, I also believe in coming to a broader understanding, in the words of Susan Sontag, a picture of the way we live now. According to Sontag, "the model of writing as self-expression is much too crude. If I thought that what I'm doing when I write is expressing myself, I'd junk my typewriter" (Charters 1180). She continues by saying "artists are spokesmen of what in our sensibility is changing, and they choose among a number of possible different ways of rendering experience." (Charters 1180) Or in the words of photographer William H. Fox Talbot "Make a picture of kaleidoscope." (Sontag 207).

How?

John Irving describes his work habits as those of an athlete. "I've always gotten a lot of work done. I write as much as I can every day... Writing is like working out; you have to build up to your capacity and go beyond that. And you have to keep doing that, again and again" (144).

My work habits mirror that of an athlete more than any other model. Perhaps this is because I was an athlete for a long time. I find writing much easier when I stick to some sort of a schedule. Sometimes I write well during the allotted time; sometimes I do not. But I have found that nothing makes up for the accretion of time, the hours spent at the computer, the very act of writing. All the studying, all the reading, all the plot summaries and character sketches are useful, yes. But nothing makes writing better
except more writing. I'm convinced there's very little about writing that you can't learn through the process of writing.

I'm also a chronic reviser. It's not in my nature to let a thing alone. The revision process provides a way for me to figure out what my stories are about. It's only through revision that things become clear much the way a photograph develops. I start with an initial image, but rarely does that turn out to matter in the end. The best pictures always surprise you. Jayne Anne Phillips describes this phenomenon:

> the surprise that's within painting or composing or writing is the idea that it can go somewhere that you don't know about, that you can't expect, that you can't control, that you don't want to control (because, in fact, you can go further if you don't control it, and if you just follow it.)" (Pearlman 160).

That's not to say rewriting is a painless process. On the subject of killing your darlings, covering your tracks, and other horrors of revision, Annie Dillard writes:

> Courage utterly opposes the bold hope that this is such fine stuff the work needs it, or the world. Courage, exhausted, stands on bare reality: this writing weakens the work. You must demolish the work and start over. You can save some of the sentences, like bricks. It will be a miracle if you can save some of the paragraphs, no matter how excellent in themselves or hard-won. You can waste a year worrying about it, or you can get it over with now. (Are you a woman or a mouse?)" (The Writing Life 4).

My favorite part of the Bible is the section about faith where the man can't believe, but has faith that the Lord can instill this belief in him and cries "Lord, help my unbelief." I may not believe that I can write another page, or push myself to understand
more about a particular character, or to try again to get the effect I was going for, but I have faith that I will make this leap, somehow. I learned to swim with an adult (my mother or one of her friends) standing across the pool and gradually moving backwards as I came toward them. I'd start gasping and wheezing and saying "I can't make it anymore," but I always did. It was a matter of swimming just a little farther than I thought I could each and every time I tried it. As E.L. Doctorow says about writing a novel, "It's like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way" (Lamont 18).

When asked why he wrote the way he did, Donald Barthelme replied: "Because Samuel Beckett already wrote the way he did" (Charters 1404).

And as for the most serious reasons for writing, Dillard advises the artist to "write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case" (The Writing Life 68).

What Form?

I write fiction as opposed to memoirs or personal essays as a matter of temperament as much as anything else. I've never been able to keep a journal or daybook or diary. I find it tremendously difficult to sit down and record things as they happened. I'm usually wanting to change the details, the emotions, the setting. Fiction gives you the absolute freedom to drift as far away from the actual experience as you need to. I don't want to be bound by a certain kind of reality when I'm trying to express the truth of a situation. These, of course, are two very different things.
And there's the question of authority regarding the matter of voice. I have a control of language and voice in fiction that is entirely lacking in my non-fiction. James Baldwin, a master of both forms, discusses the differences this way:

Every form is different, no one easier than another . . . An essay is clearly an argument. The writer's point of view in an essay is always absolutely clear. The writer is trying to make the readers see something, trying to convince them of something. In a novel or play, you're trying to show them something (Charters 1399).

This explanation goes a long way in helping me understand my difficulties with the essay form. Only rarely can I articulate why I do anything; at best, I hold up the separate elements of any event and try to make sense of it that way. To make a clear, succinct analysis would require a much different sensibility and vision than I possess.

In addition to the choice between fiction and non-fiction, there's the issue of poetry and short stories. While feeling that the two forms are linked in a myriad of ways, I gravitate toward the short story because it allows me to address the concerns that I can't in a poem. I'm interested in people and their stories more than anything else; their choices, their compromises, their loves, their losses.

With this in mind, I also believe that the short story, possibly more than any other form, fits into the culture of America in the last half of the twentieth century. With rapidly shifting cultural norms, there is less and less of a stability that a novel demands. Defined by breaks and silences, a short story can illuminate a single moment in a way that a novel cannot. John Cheever explains it this way in his essay "Why I Write Short Stories":

In the short stories of my esteemed colleagues - - and in a few of my own - -
I find those rented summer houses, those one-night love affairs, and those lost key rings that confound traditional esthetics. We are not a nomadic people, but there is more than a hint of this spirit in our great country - - and the short story is the literature of the nomad. (Charters 1427).

The realities of my life have made writing short stories more possible than writing novels. I've always had short intervals to write, an ever-changing schedule, and a lot of different places to work. This type of environment tends to force you to focus on single highly condensed scenes rather than allowing a gathering of momentum that a more regulated schedule will facilitate. In addition to these factors, before my Diane character, I never felt the desire to develop the long-term relationship with a character that a novel would require. Starting a novel feels like something entirely different than a short story. Jayne Anne Phillips describes her gradual shift in forms in this way:

I started out as a poet and became a short-story writer, and I spent several years writing stories, but writing *Machine Dreams* spoiled me for short stories. I remember when I was writing poems and I discovered paragraphs, . . . I stopped writing broken lines and went on from there to writing prose poems and very, very compressed fiction, and from there to writing a novel. And now I find that I think in novels; I don't think of things in terms of short stories anymore. (Pearlman 153).

A novel is the writing equivalent of a long-term relationship. In that way, there has to be a lot more material more to work with, yet you must still maintain a consistent voice. In "When You Are the Camera and the Camera Is You," I found one line that seemed to deserve more attention: "The man I love, I feel safe in saying, never loved me." It came to me and seemed very spooky and very true for Diane. And instead of traveling forward in her life, I was more curious to see what that meant. The entire first section of the novel is
based on that one line. Who is the man? Why does she still love him? Why didn't he love her? There's probably not a straightforward answer, but I feel like I owe it to her to try to understand. In this case, only a novel will do.

But in the end, no matter what the form, it all comes down to one single issue and that's what Marjorie asks Stephen King to do at the end of Stewart O'Nan's novel *The Speed Queen* after answering all his questions about her Sonic murder spree: "Just tell a good story."

The Writing Life

The writing life is a spiritual life. It's a life that demands attention to detail. Dillard makes the following distinction between the types of lives one can lead:

There is no shortage of good days. It is good lives that are hard to come by. A life of good days lived in the senses is not enough. The life of sensation is the life of greed; it requires more and more. The life of the spirit requires less and less; time is ample and its passage sweet. Who would call a day spent reading a good day? But a life spent reading - - that is a good life." (32-33).

And I would say that the writing life is a good life as well. It's a life devoted to detail and story. It's a life where one must, in the words of Raymond Carver, "abjure carelessness."

Of course, there is the down side. Consider Lorrie Moore's description in "How to Become A Writer." "Occasionally a date with a face blank as a sheet of paper asks you whether writers often become discouraged. Say that sometimes they do and sometimes they do. Say it's a lot like having polio." (126).
In the end, it's not about choices or pleasure or discouragement. It's about desire, and sorrow, and memory. It's about the way we live now. It's about making pictures out of kaleidoscopes.
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WAYS OF PULLING A PERSON OUT OF THE WATER

If you asked Elana, and you wouldn't because you don't know her yet, this is how she would describe herself: she's money before you spend it, all possibility and no commitment. She's working hard not to reveal anything. Right now, she's Pledging her table until it gleams. This activity has been predicated by a man, of course, one Greg Rivers, whom she met in the usual way, through a co-worker. She wants everything to be perfect because that's how she is. You'll see that as we go on. Greg and Elana have gone out for two months. No sex yet and that's what tonight's about. It's been since her last boyfriend Kenneth, since she was thirty-four, that she has had to think about that type of situation. Three birthdays later, not much has changed and yet everything is different. Elana wants Greg because he's a grown-up, someone as distant and constant as the signal that radiates from the talk radio station where he's the program director.

Elana puts down the Pledge and feeds her fish. They are evil little beasts, besieged by fish diseases like ick and fin rot. Many fish have died, and Elana finds herself at the pet store frequently attempting to find something that will purify the water. The guy at the store talks to her carefully about "the perfect fish environment." She likes that he isn't cynical about perfection, that he has chemicals that measure the gradations. The fish store that she used to go to was run by someone who wore a dead scorpion encased in clear cast on his little finger. Black magic, he told her. Mr. Scorpion Ring used to say that a certain amount of bacteria provided the fish with protection and health and he didn't sell things that "clouded up the water." She didn't like the idea of all the germs that seemingly
cast on his little finger. Black magic, he told her. Mr. Scorpion Ring used to say that a certain amount of bacteria provided the fish with protection and health and he didn't sell things that "clouded up the water." She didn't like the idea of all the germs that seemingly clear water contained, healthy or not, so now she goes to the other store, the one that was in the middle instead of on the edge of town.

Leaving the Lexus dealership early, five o'clock found her in line at the Greek Garden Restaurant waiting for dinner for two. She paid for it, got home, changed into running shorts, and put the food into ivory dishes, throwing the Styrofoam containers in the outside trashcan. Elana jogged by the store after work, a little before six o'clock, moving quickly through her usual five miles. The twilight made the streets beautiful. It was April, not hot enough to be unbearable, just warm enough to remember childhood summers and feel sad. When she got home, she stripped off her clothes, showered, threw on a robe, and started to clean.

So far, the house isn't completely spotless, but she opts for getting dressed so if he's early, she's ready. Presently, her back is sore from high heels and her shoulders ache. She's spilled candle wax all over the carpet, mangled the vacuum cord. Now, she's on her knees in party clothes, cutting off carpet with a huge pair of scissors, leaving a bald spot, the wax clinging to the fibers.

The doorbell rings and she panics. Could it be Greg? He isn't supposed to be here until seven. She puts down the scissors, throws the vacuum cleaner in the closet, and runs her fingers through her hair before answering the door. It's only her neighbor asking to borrow milk. She breathes again: so do we. We know she's not ready. Elana doesn't have any milk, although she wishes she did. She feels a little pathological not having anything normal in her house. Maybe the neighbor will assume she's lactose-intolerant. An incorrect assumption, but a fashionable one. Elana begins to feel bad because she thought she had remembered all the main breakfast foods for Greg. She had cereal without milk, bread without butter or jelly, and a bag of various fruits.
"So you're expecting company," the neighbor says, scanning the newly cleaned carpet, the lit candles.

"Someone new," Elana says.

"That must be nice. I can't remember the last time I cleaned up for a dinner. Romantic."

The neighbor moves over to the aquarium and looks inside. Elana's brightly colored fish move steadily back and forth in their tank, baring their little teeth for all to see.

"Nerve-wracking is more like it." Elana needs to get moving.

"How did you meet?"

"A friend of mine at work set us up." The neighbor nods. Roger, Elana's co-worker, said, "He thought you were about twenty-five from across the lot. He wants to meet you." Roger is currently on his third wife and never ceases to believe in set-ups, meetings, true love. Roger ages well, too well (hence the constant flux of women, progressively younger), and teases Elana about settling down from what he imagines is her wild life, the life of a beautiful single blonde, something so foreign and distant that she has to laugh with him. A role to slip into when Roger's around, it's easier than reality.

Elana had been showing a Lexus when Greg saw her, something she hardly does anymore since she was promoted last year. She had started selling cars sixteen years ago and she is the only woman who had stuck it out for more than five in her dealership. Somehow this persistence matters, but not as much as she had thought it would.

"Well, I better get back. I'm sure the kids have torn the house apart," the neighbor says, taking her empty cup with her.

Now she has exactly thirty minutes to transform herself. She combs her hair, brushes and flosses her teeth. Her blouse doesn't seem to match the skirt, so she unbuttons and hangs the blouse on the towel rack. The phone rings. She doesn't want to
answer it, but it might be Greg. She runs half-dressed into her bedroom and picks up the phone. It's MCI wanting her to enroll in Friends and Family. She hangs up in the middle of Mr. MCI's spiel, right before he tells her how to join the calling circle. She runs into the closet and finds a new shirt, finishes her make-up, puts everything in the cabinet. The cabinet contains boxes and boxes of laxatives, over-the-counter speed, her special toothbrush that she uses to throw up with, bristles stained with blood from scratching her throat. She uses the make-up to hide that stuff, squishes it down into her cabinet so Greg won't notice if he goes looking for something.

Finally, she has a minute to relax and flips open a magazine. A big, full-color picture of Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith kissing stares out from the inside of the magazine covers. There's something kind of pathetic about Melanie Griffith, and Elana can't stand it when she sees pictures of her kissing Antonio. It's like looking at an accident, not entirely without its pleasures, but you don't feel very good about yourself afterward. Once, Roger made the mistake of comparing Elana's hair with Melanie's, and she changed it. She remembers reading an article in Ladies Home Journal right after Melanie left Don for all his drinking and she said that she was trying to be happy and that she could sleep without tranquilizers or someone there. Big deal, Elana thought, who, as we know, had been sleeping alone for years without so much as a cup of hot chocolate. But she was sort of proud of Melanie, the way she was trying to bear up to the reality of her life after Don. But now, Melanie's losing her shape, transforming into something that seems altogether desperate.

Elana turns on the television and finds "Wheel of Fortune." The theme music so oppressive that she feels that she has no choice but to switch it off. Even though she hasn't in years, she wants to smoke.

Here's a story Elana remembers when her mind wanders away from counting the minutes until Greg shows. It's kind of gross, and like Elana, you'll probably wish you
never heard it. Imagine this scene. Just after dinner, twilight. Two brothers are fighting in a barn, somewhere like Iowa, the Midwest. One of the brothers takes a shotgun and blows a hole into his brother's stomach. Undigested corn spills out along with some of his other vital organs. He dies before the police come.

Elana waits and waits and waits for Greg, growing more agitated with each turn of the clock. The only sounds in the house come from the aquariums, the sounds of the filters, the air pumps. He's late and there's nothing she can do but sit and wait.

When Elana turned twenty-nine, her mother died. It was expected - - Elana had taken care of her since she was fifteen and the mother's arthritis had become an increasing difficulty, a problem. Elana stayed home from college, helped her get dressed, eventually made enough money to support them both well. Her mother was kind, well-meaning. She asked Elana about boys, about going out. Elana didn't want to do anything more serious than the dinner, movie, occasional sex dates. She didn't want to get into a serious relationship when she already knew the dimensions of this relationship, the one with her mother. When her mother died, she forgot about those dimensions. The plants died. The house fell apart. Finally, Elana met Kenneth.

Kenneth had left his wife and daughter. Elana didn't care. She was tired of caring, tired of being responsible. When she did her make-up for the funeral, she noticed tiny lines by the corners of her eyes. At that moment in the mirror, she saw an old Elana, an Elana who dreaded birthdays, an Elana who would die. Kenneth took her mind off this, treated her with a kindness that clung to her, infected her daily life. Three years later she found herself in a canoe on a lake in the middle of March with him.

Kenneth couldn't swim very well, didn't like the water. Elana was rocking the canoe, no life jacket, no worries. Kenneth's teeth chattered from the cold air, from the
rocking. Finally, they took off from the dock and made it almost across the lake when Kenneth started rowing toward shore.

"Don't go by that brush. Snakes are in there," Elana said.

"Too cold for snakes," Kenneth said and kept rowing.

Elana didn't speak to him. She just put her oars in the water and started paddling the other way. Her motion against Greg's steady paddling made the canoe start to rock. Instead of stopping, she leaned her weight into the side of the canoe and continued pushing her oars into the water.

After the canoe capsized, Elana realized how cold the water was and how dangerous it was to be in the lake this time of year. If they had been further out, both of them might have drowned or become hypothermic. Even with the shore as close as it was, Elana felt exhausted and cold. Time seemed to stop while she watched the canoe float away. Kenneth started to scream, barely treading water.

"Conserve your energy," Elana yelled. Elana took off her jacket and threw it out to him.

"Take hold of my jacket. I'll pull you in," she said, stretching her jacket sleeve to him.

Kenneth grabbed a hold of the sleeve and Elana sidestroked with the other sleeve to the shore. She finally hit a rock and managed to drag Kenneth onto it.

"Why didn't you come get me?"

"There's lots of ways of pulling a person out of the water," Elana said, lying on the rock, trying to breathe.

"Why did you do that?" Kenneth asked.

"Because I asked you not to do something, and you did it anyway."

"There can't be any snakes. It's too fucking cold."
"That doesn't matter. What matters is that I have to explain every fucking thing about twenty hundred times. What matters is that I shouldn't have to explain anything. I want what I want. If I want to fucking starve myself to death, I'll fucking starve myself to death and you won't say a word. You know why? Because you'll be gone. Go back to your wife and kid. Just leave me alone," Elana said. For the first time since her mother died, Elana felt like going home and reorganizing and restructuring her entire life. For the first time, she realized it could be her life, just the way she wanted it. It was on that rock that Elana vowed never to put herself out again. What people can't see, they can't pick apart.

Elana tries to imagine a conversation with Greg, the one she'll have when he gets here, if he gets here. Elana is profoundly disappointed. Grown-ups are on time. He's been on time for all their other dates: the day trip to the Little Rock Aquarium where sharks and jellyfish swam over their heads in an arched tank shaped like a bridge under the ceiling, dinners, mostly formal, mostly exotic foods, and a particularly bizarre little movie about sex and death that Elana had a hard time following. Elana thought she knew Greg, maybe not a lot of personal stories, but that she had an understanding with him, and now he's violated it. We're still not sure if this an appropriate reaction. He could just be late. That might be okay, depending on how late he is.

The last word on Kenneth. People tell you things all the time, important things, Elana thinks, but you can't hear because there's always some asshole crooning heartbreak lyrics that leave you despondent and worried about being alone on Saturday night. You don't listen, her mother always said when Elana forgot something important, and at last she knew what her mother meant.

Let's backtrack. A very young Elana works the car lot. It's hot, so hot outside
that the sky blazes a white color, painful, searing. She's hot, hotter than she ever imagined she could be and it occurs to her that she doesn't have to sell cars, that she could do anything. Her uncle offered her this job not because he thought she would be good at it, but because his sister asked him to. Elana's dad, dead for seven years at this point, didn't leave behind any money for college. Now, in her sensible low heels and the back of her good white shirt sticking to her skin, she lets her mind wander to imagine a life at college, people with beautiful clothes walking on stone, ivy and green surrounding them, shafts of light glinting through that perfect world. But even with money, we know that she can't leave because of her mother. Elana thought about limits, walls, the things that she wouldn't ever be able to change, the way time stretches out and you lose yourself in it, give up and accept the endless sea of days that define and shape, just the way an aquarium holds water, keeps it contained, lets you see the edges. Then she looks at the car lot in the middle of the Arkansas, the smell of paper mills, hot air. But finally she sees a couple that looks like they might buy. She asks them "What can I do to get you into a something today?" Hours later she stands looking out of the showroom by the water cooler drinking out of a paper cup as they drive away in a new car; she sees her life stretch out before her. It's simply a matter of finding out what people want and how much they are willing to part with to get it.

Elana can't wait any longer and decides to do something. It's like the first time she realizes that she doesn't have to finish a bad book, she can just stop and place it back on the shelf. She puts down her magazine, gets her keys, and leaves. She drives to the water gardens in the middle of town without knowing why. Across the street from the dealership, the water gardens seems like an extension of work, something comforting. It's dark, and there are soft white lights that refract off the fountains, the water pouring over rocks. It's all open and quiet, the quiet of a baseball field in a park late at night, the lights
glowing overhead and the crickets and katydids in the distance. She sits down on the steps and hugs her knees to her chest. A man approaches her, and she tenses up until she realizes it's Roger. He looks like he just got off work, tie unknotted and shirt undone a few buttons. He's carrying two bottles, one glass, one plastic.

"So what's going on?" he asks.

"Your friend Greg stood me up. What are you doing here?"

"I was drinking and Stephanie kicked me out of the car. I showed up late to some damn party." Stephanie is the third wife. Elana knows all the wives. She's not close to any of them; it doesn't pay to be. Eventually, there's another one to remember, another one making a tearful scene at work, someone who packs up and leaves Roger with his new girlfriend, the next wife.

"Want some?" he says and offers her a drink out of his bottle of Scotch.

"No, but I'll take some of the water. What exactly happened?" she says and drinks off the bottle for a long time.

"Well, I figured it would be cheaper to go to a liquor store than a bar. Stephanie took my checkbook and all my credit, so I was stuck with a twenty. Went to work to pick up a cup and decided to come over here to get some air."

Elana drinks some more water, leans back on her arms, and stretches out her legs. She doesn't see any stars, just the lights from the garden.

"Elana, why is it that we've never gotten together?" Roger asks.

Elana imagines that Roger will be really sorry tomorrow, that this drunk conversation will make things awkward, but she can't find the energy to redirect. "Could it be your perpetual married state?"

"Never to the same person for very long, though. Surely that should work in my favor."
"Not really. The wives just keep getting younger and younger, Roger. I just keep getting older. I've never even been married." Her voice shakes when she says this and try as she might, she can't help it. She drinks more water.

"Oh come on. There was Kenneth. He adored you," Roger said. Kenneth was the only boyfriend of Elana's that Roger could name.

"He adored smothering me to death. Now I'm old and tired and can't deal with people at all," she says.

"You still look good," Roger says and she can see that he is already very sorry that he opened up this topic.

"That's why I'm hanging out at the water garden on a Friday night," she says, picking up her keys and brushing off her skirt. She puts down the bottle.

"Hey, I'm doing the same thing," he says. He leans his head onto her shoulder and looks up into her eyes. Elana feels him shake and can't believe how nervous he seems. He reaches out to wrap his arms around her, and she pulls away.

"I can't be what you want. You know I can't," she says. She starts to walk to her car, but not before she turns and sees him watching her through the haze of fountains, clutching his bottle.

When Elana pulls into the driveway, she looks through her big bay window and sees Greg sitting in the dark, drinking. He's tall and his legs stretch out underneath her coffee table. Greg has none of the dark intensity that Roger carries. He's tanned, a college athlete, someone contained, self-possessed. She walks in and turns on the light.

"Elana, finally," he says and pats the couch next to him, signalling for her to sit down.

"How the hell did you get in here?"

"With my key."
"That key was in case I locked myself out," Elana says, setting down her keys. She realizes that her hair is slightly wet from the air at the water gardens, and she pulls it back behind her.

"I thought we were supposed to have dinner."

"I waited as long as I was going to wait." She looks down at her polished nails and fights the urge to scratch off all the paint.

"Fair enough. We don't have to ruin the whole night over food, do we?"

"I guess not. I'm not hungry, anyway. What was the hold up?" She wants to throw a fit, make noise, but she can't. She's going to be calm.

"I had to fire someone. It wasn't any big deal, but it took longer than I thought it would."

Okay, Elana thinks, maybe he does have a legitimate excuse. Maybe she should say something nice, change the subject. He's had a bad day. Be pleasant. "It's a beautiful night," Elana says, pointing out the window. She sits down next to him.

"It won't last for long. Pretty soon it'll be hotter than hell and nobody will be able to stand it," Greg says.

He sets down his drink and motions for the bedroom. It's abrupt, but she follows him. She walks into the dim room and watches the shadows play on the wall from the candles she lit earlier. She doesn't look at Greg.

"Take your clothes off," he says, leaning up against a fluffy brown pillow with his arms above his head. He hasn't touched her yet.

Elana starts to unbutton her shirt, her head down and her hair falling from the sides of her face, covering any expression. She thinks that she wants to be sexy, but instead the only emotion she can convey feels like fear. She sets her shirt down, sits down on the side of the bed and takes off her shoes. She inches down her hose and stops.

"Finish," he says, reminding her of friends trying to get her to clean her plate.
She takes off everything else and places it all on the floor. She lifts up the comforter to cover herself, but he reaches out and grabs her wrist. He starts to kiss her, his lips chapped and rough, like her own without gloss. He jerks her arms above her head, holds her wrist in one hand, and feels her ribs with the other. Everything feels fast and jagged, her body jerky and foreign. He takes off his shirt and pants.

"Do you have anything?" he asks.

"No. I've been tested. I haven't been with anyone in a long time," she says.

"No. Are you on anything? If not, I brought something."

"That sounds fine," Elana says. She watches him retrieve his pants, pull out his wallet. She turns away and can hear the sound of the wrapper. He pulls her to him.

"Come here you," he says and buries his face in her shoulder. He pulls away and looks at her.

"Are you scared?" he asks. She doesn't say anything. She feels like she's about to jump off a high dive. It doesn't matter that she's in her own bed. She can see the water.

He kisses her over and over. She can't relax. "Maybe you need a hug," he says and holds her close. She can smell the alcohol on his breath.

"Let me," he says and she feels his arms, concentrates on his arms.

She looks up and kisses him on the mouth. "I want you so much," she says. For a minute, she believes it. When he is inside her, she thinks of herself as someone else, someone beautiful and precious. She imagines dancers underwater, synchronized swimmers that can hold their breath forever.

After Greg finishes, Elana realizes she has bled everywhere. The blood is more unexpected than anything that has happened before it. She can't even remember her last period. She waits for Greg to say something, but he doesn't. They both look at each other for what seems like a long moment, and he gets up and leaves the room. Through the wall, she hears him turning on the faucet. Elana starts to cry, wipes the tears off her face with the back of her hand. She gets up and takes the sheets off the mattress, setting
them by the bed. She walks to the closet and gets fresh sheets, focuses all her concentration on getting the corners completely tucked in. When her hair spills over her face, the dark roots are visible in the dim light.
There's a squirrel that eats away at the back of Janine's room. She can hear it gnawing, but doesn't have the heart to run it out of the house. Once a neighbor mentioned it to Janine as she was leaving for dance class.

"It's living in a hole in the wall. Pretty soon, it's going to start on the insulation," the neighbor said, pointing across the fence. He made biting motions with his teeth. When he did the thing with his mouth, Janine knew that he was the man making obscene phone calls while her parents were gone.

She nodded. "I'll tell my parents if it doesn't quit," she said. He stopped moving his mouth.

So far, she hasn't said anything. What does she care about insulation? The house is falling apart, inside and out.

Janine looks at David, her dance instructor, during class and tries to send him messages with her eyes. She can't imagine approaching him directly or giving in to a desire for confession, so these looks are the closest she gets to telling him how she feels. Despite the fact that David has a girlfriend, another student in this very class, Janine's concentration seems wholesome. Only occasionally when she realizes she's going the wrong direction in a difficult combination or has missed a step does she have the good grace to admit to herself where her real focus is, what she really wants.

Today the class rehearses *Dying Flowers*, a piece that David choreographed last year. It's one of the two main projects for this season, the other being the traditional *Nutcracker Suite* for the Christmas crowd. Janine loves *Dying Flowers*, feels lucky not to
wrong direction in a difficult combination or has missed a step does she have the good grace to admit to herself where her real focus is, what she really wants.

Today the class rehearses *Dying Flowers*, a piece that David choreographed last year. It's one of the two main projects for this season, the other being the traditional *Nutcracker Suite* for the Christmas crowd. Janine loves *Dying Flowers*, feels lucky not to have to participate in the other, although there was a time when December wasn't December without the Sugarplum Fairy. This year the coveted part of Claire went to Janine's best friend Natalie. Ever since her boyfriend Ryan left her, Natalie spends most of her time at the studio and people have noticed. Lovely Natalie has been refitted for her Claire costume three times and the season is only halfway finished. Unlike Natalie, Janine is not constantly losing. She struggles to be able to wear her pale lavender leotard, a minimal orchid with a light brown ponytail.

Not everyone likes *Dying Flowers*. For instance, Janine sees Tuesday, David's girlfriend, roll her eyes at the narrated part of the ballet. Janine hates Tuesday then, wants to see her hung up by her long red hair. How can you love a man and not love his work? Janine doesn't even try to picture David and Tuesday together or what sort of relationship they have. To do so would ruin her idea of David. If he says he loves Tuesday but leaves her, what's to say the same thing couldn't happen to her? She worries about this, but never says anything because she imagines something magical will happen between her and David, that his past will become a backdrop without anybody visible behind it.

He's a beautiful man, quiet and smart and talented. She's seen videos of him dancing with his ex-wife, Maria, another teacher at the school. Twenty years ago they danced together. All the classic ballets together. When she watches the images on screen, Janine feels physically ill. This evidence of his old life seems like graphic pictures from a crime scene.
When Janine gets home from practice, she goes to her room and listens to her Elton John tape over and over again. Elton sings, "You're a butterfly and butterflies are free to fly, fly away, fly away, bye-bye." In the other room, her parents yell and her father slams something against the table, loud. Since he's become a Promise Keeper, her father doesn't fight with Janine's mother as much, but his temper hasn't improved. Now inanimate objects bear the brunt of his aggression. "Someone Saved My Life Tonight" plays on the stereo. Yes, Janine thinks, going to sleep, imagining herself in a house with David, small children of their own, nobody upset, nobody loud.

When Janine walks into the dressing room the next day, Natalie is already on the bench, taking off her pointe shoes. Janine heads to her box, reaches in for her clothes, and a note drops out. Her face flushes, a hazard of her fair complexion. She hears Natalie speaking, but can't concentrate long enough to get any meaning. When she does manage to nod, Natalie gives her a look, concerned.

Tuesday walks into the room. Taking her note, Janine slinks into the corner.

*Janine* - *Lovely job as the orchid yesterday. So much progress in such a brief time. You're just what I envisioned for that role. David*

Janine walks back and thrusts the note at Natalie who's still on her back. After fumbling around in her bag, she finds the plastic box she keeps her retainer in.

"So what do you think?" Janine asks, as she takes the metal retainer out of her mouth. Janine knows what Natalie will say. They've discussed it a few times before, and Natalie never wavers. "It's hopeless," she has said each time. "It's going nowhere."

"I can't imagine this crush can be healthy," Natalie says, a variation on the theme. She looks over at Tuesday. Tuesday puts her long red hair up in shell clips, pinning it carefully.

Janine shakes her head. "Healthy doesn't matter. Look at catfish. They live off unhealthy. Nothing ever happens to them because of it."
"They get caught on hooks. They die. He's not interested."

"You're really encouraging." Janine yanks her tights over her right leg, causing a small run to get bigger.

"Look, I've been on the hook. It's not good," Natalie says, picking up her bag and leaving the room.

On Fridays when Janine feels sad, she goes to the Inwood to watch people fall in love in the dark. When the movie isn't about love, there are still stories going on in the theater. Tonight the movie is "Taxi Driver." She's heard people talk about it, and now that it's back in theaters, she decides that she'll try to understand what the big deal is. She doesn't. All she can tell is that Travis Bickle is really, really lonely and angry because of it. What's so new about that? She wonders about her obscene phone caller. Is he like Travis Bickle? She doesn't know much about the caller except that he has a very homely wife who gardens a lot and once told Janine's mother that she shouldn't be watering her roses at noon because it was too hot when the sun was directly overhead. "Fastest way to kill them," the neighbor said.

After a while, Janine's attention turns to the people seated around her, sharing popcorn and talking in low voices. Love seems simple until she steps out into the cold and walks to her car. That's when things get complicated. Who are these people? she wonders. Have they felt all this before? How do you know what's a rehearsal and what's going to matter? She shivers in her coat. Right now, it's almost Christmas. She drives the streets looking at decorations. It gets dark early, and red and green lights color everything. Stop and go, she thinks, stop and go.

When Janine gets home, her parents are watching television. 20/20's on; they watch it every Friday night. Tonight the anchors don't divide up the show between two or three topics. Instead, they devote the entire hour to a house for anorexics run by a woman in Canada. She claims to be able to cure anorexia by repeatedly shushing the bad voices in
the victim's head. *You deserve food,* she tells each of them, *you're a good girl.* In the meantime, she takes care of them, some of the girls as skeletal as baby birds. The girls eat baby bird servings, hand-fed by volunteers. Janine and her parents watch in silence until the commercials.

"How was the movie, honey?" Janine's mother shifts around in her ratty blue chair to look at her.

"It was okay. Scary. I didn't get why it was such a big deal," Janine says. She takes off her coat and hangs it in the hall closet.

"I saw that movie years ago. It was pretty scandalous when it came out," her mother says. She's making flash cards for herself; she takes a night class every semester at the community college. This semester it's Spanish.

"Yeah, it was one of those things that you probably had to see at the time. I can't imagine it would have the same effect these days. Now there's a bunch of pissed off quiet guys going crazy all the time," Janine's father says. He takes a long draw off his O'Douls and reaches for the Planter's container on the coffee table.

"Yeah, I guess that's what it was. It seemed, oh I don't know, fresh then. Meaningful or something." Her mother puts the cards down and picks up an ornament off the carpet to put back on the artificial Christmas tree in the corner. "Don't want anyone to get stuck," she says, hanging the red bulb by the strand of popcorn she made last week.

The commercials end and Janine's father pushes the mute button. Sound floods the small room before he has a chance to regulate the volume, parents on the television crying over children who are hooked up to tubes, unable to swallow the slightest amount of nourishment without help.

Janine remembers when her father first became a Promise Keeper. He had come home one day, early from work with a serious expression. He put down his briefcase and sat her mother down at the kitchen table. He gave her a speech about fulfilling his
obligations as man of the house. Janine watched from the living room, sitting in front of the television, stretching, trying to work out some of the soreness from her legs.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I've let God down. I've let you down. Will you forgive me?"

And, without waiting for an answer, "I'll do better in the future. I'll take over as head of this family from now on. It's my duty. It's a heavy burden, but I'm willing."

Janine's mother listened until he ran out of things to say. Then she said, "Stan, what's this about? What are you saying? Is this that thing they were talking about at church?"

"Yes," he said. "I've made up my mind. I'm going to start being a man."

"That's silly," she said. "You've always been a man." She put her hand on his shoulder.

For the first time, Janine realized how small the house was. It's a three-bedroom that should have been two.

"I want your forgiveness and support. It's part of the pact."

"I'll try to give you what you need," she said.

Janine left the living room. Everything seemed too personal, too strange. She went into the hallway bathroom. The bathroom lighting is different than anywhere else in the house, kinder, more forgiving. She likes how she looks in this mirror.

What she normally does in this lighting is not so kind or forgiving. When everything hurts from hours spent at the barre, Janine hurts herself on purpose. She makes long thin cuts on her legs with her father's razorblades. She knows how ugly these cuts look, but she can't make herself give it up. It's her secret, just like the obscene phone caller, a painful scary feeling that's always there, a space that only she occupies.

After a long day of practice, Janine sits in her room with a rose petal facial mask drying on her skin. Her parents are at a religious rally and won't be home for hours. Usually her dad goes to the rallies alone, but tonight they have invited women. Once
Janine asked her mother what went on at the rallies. She said that she had seen one from a distance, a large group of men yelling in a stadium. It reminded her, she said, of football games.

The phone rings and Janine almost lets the machine get it, but she guesses it's Natalie who will speak until someone picks up.

"Janine?" a voice asks, and Janine feels her stomach clench.

"Yes," she says, trying not to smear the mask on the receiver.

"What are you wearing?" the neighbor asks. "Wait. I'll tell you. You're in a robe, a baby blue robe," he says.

"Of course not," Janine says. She is. She pinches the tender skin under her thigh so hard that it will most certainly bruise.

"You don't know how I can see you, do you?" He breathes into the phone, a slow measured sound.

Janine's mask has started to dry and cracks when she speaks. "Don't call here again. I know who you are."

Janine hangs up the phone before the caller lets go. She turns on the television, just for noise, just so she won't have to be nervous about every little sound. The news is on. Before they break for a commercial, a man says "It's going to get mighty cold tomorrow. You'll have to bundle up. We'll have the complete weather outlook for you when we get back."

Just as predicted, the temperature drops substantially. When Janine sets the trash outside, each breath makes little puffs of smoke. Janine says "puff puff," happy in the cold air. Natalie would enjoy this too, Janine thinks, but she's probably asleep, recovering from last night's performance. Wednesday is their day off from dance, but Janine doesn't have anything to do at home so she goes to the school that afternoon. Nobody's around. She works on *Dying Flowers* for a couple of hours, then takes a break.
She gets a Diet Coke and stands in the foyer reading over old brochures for camps and workshops. Most of them advertise events that have already happened. Someone, Janine thinks, should tear these down.

David jogs up to the door with his hands buried in his coat pockets. He isn't wearing gloves. She watches him through the window, wondering what he's doing up at school today. When she sees him, she can't think of anything to say.

"Getting in a little extra practice time?" he asks, walking through the door.

"I'm still having some trouble with the ending," she says.

"It's almost there. Give it time," he says. "I think I left something important here."

She watches him walk into his office and tries to think of something to say, something that will prolong the conversation, anything. All she can do is stare at him.

"Hey, you want to go get some dinner?" he asks, from behind the glass window of his office. He's bent over a drawer, sorting through a stack of notes. "Found it. Now I can breathe." He waves the paper at her. "What about that? What do you think about that?"

She smiles. "Must have been serious," she says.

"You bet. So are you ready to go?" he asks, leading her out the door, his hand gentle against her arm.

Over dinner at a small Chinese restaurant, David tells Janine he's leaving the school. This is after the hot and sour soup has been served and before the main course arrives. Janine looks out the window at the red lights hanging in clumps outside the door.

"I got a really great offer at this school a friend of mine is at. It's a lot more money to work with. I mean, they have this tremendous grant to produce three original works." He looks at her and stops talking for a minute. The restaurant is very quiet. Then he touches her face and says "I wanted you to know before everyone else. One of the first. You've always been one of my favorite dancers."
Janine feels like she can't breathe, so she pushes her fingernails hard into her palm and says "Where is this school?"

"San Francisco. It'll be really great, but I'll miss Dallas. The students, especially. I'll miss you," he says, smiling.

The thrill of hearing him say this tempers the sadness of his leaving. "When do you go?"

"As soon as I can get everything settled and train someone to replace Tuesday in Dying Flowers."

Janine had forgotten about Tuesday. Where is she today? At that moment, the scrim that hid David's past becomes transparent and she excuses herself to the bathroom to run the water while she cries.

When she emerges, she forces a cheerful smile. The food is already there, getting cold. She cleans her plate without tasting anything.

That evening, David takes Janine to a hotel. As she watches him register for the room, she realizes that there are compensations for getting older, a sense of ease and possession over daily life. For Janine, it's like dancing. Things usually don't start to click until the dance is almost over. She's gliding and she doesn't even realize it, it's just happening, and she's in perfect rhythm when the time's almost up. The trick, she thinks, is to start out like that. She thinks about that in relation to what she knows will happen with David. One try and it's got to be perfect, just like an opening night and the last performance combined. She's had one other attempt at sex before this with Marcus, her first boyfriend who is now with his first boyfriend. Natalie laughs about it and calls it a hazard of the profession, but Janine did not think it very funny at the time.

Sex with David reminds Janine of when she cuts herself - - painful, quick, and inevitable. After it's over, she explains that he's the first. She's thinking about the
children, the house, everything. How that's all gone and this is what's left, all she'll have, this one moment. How that's got to be enough.

"Sweet, romantic Janine," David says.

Janine does not perceive herself as romantic. If anything, she finds herself constantly coming across realities that she can't deny. When she explains this, he hugs her.

"To be romantic about something is to see it for what it is and wish for something different," David says. He covers her up while she imagines what's going to happen to her when he's gone.

Janine wants to remember everything about this night. She wants to save it for all the other nights that he won't be with her. She leaves her contacts in and watches him sleep. He doesn't move around much. He's totally out. She thinks about getting up and calling her parents. They're probably very worried, but she can't bring herself to leave David's side. She doesn't feel like this time is real, can't imagine what her house looks like or what her parents might be telling each other.

Janine mentally starts a letter to him. In her mind, it's the spring after he's gone. Even in her fantasy, she doesn't know if she'll mail it or not. It begins, *I spent the day killing dandelions. I thought of you and then, Do you ever think of me?* She ends it with *yours, although she isn't and now knows could never be, yours always.*

The next day Janine's eyes are red and burning. When David drops her off at her car at the dance school, he kisses her lightly on the cheek. She drives home and tries to think of an explanation for staying out all night.

"Where the hell have you been? We've been out half the night looking," her father says. He hasn't shaved and the stubble makes him look old and tired.

"I was with Natalie," Janine says, putting her dance bag down. "We were out at this place where I couldn't find a phone," she says. Nothing can happen to hurt her now that David is leaving. She feels completely numb.
"All night? We tried calling her. No answer. We tried calling your dance teachers," her father says. "No one had a clue where you were. That snotty Maria told us we were overreacting. I don't think she would say that if it were her kid."

"It was too late by the time I thought about it," Janine says. She knows how weak this whole scenario sounds, but doesn't have the energy to come up with anything better.

"We called the police, but they said you had to be gone longer before they could start looking," her mother says. "You had us worried."

"You could have at least left a message. You're not a child." Her father looks really old, lines creasing around his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Janine says. "I won't be going anywhere else for a while."

"That's the one true thing I've heard this morning," her dad says. "I'm going to work. You can go to dance class, the ones you teach and the ones you take. That's it. The rest of the time I expect you to be home. Do you understand?" he asks.

"Yes," Janine says, although she doesn't think she'll ever understand anything again.

David leaves the next week. The students have a party for him, but Janine can't go because it's too soon after her father's pronouncement. Also, she has an eye infection. She can't wear her contacts. Even with glasses, everything is out of focus, blurred.

The night of the party her parents go out to dinner. Janine sits around watching television, flipping through reruns of shows she never saw the first time they aired. She expects the obscene phone caller. She expects that the calm will be broken with the shrill ring of the phone and his voice on the other end telling her what she's wearing. Hours pass. Finally, the phone rings.

"Why are you crying?" the caller asks.

"I didn't know I was," Janine says.

"I can see you," he says. "You haven't stopped all night."
"Is the squirrel still there?" Janine asks.

"Go outside and look."

Janine hangs up. She checks all the locks, but realizes that if someone wants to get into the house, it won't be difficult. Putting on her nightgown, she gets into bed and tries to go to sleep. Everything is quiet except the familiar gnawing sound outside. She puts on her robe, glasses, and tennis shoes, goes to the back of her house to see if she can find the squirrel. The wind whips through the thin material, and she tightens the belt around her waist. The caller's house is dark except for a small light in the upstairs bedroom window. Janine sees his wife sitting at a desk writing something, unaware of her husband with binoculars downstairs. Janine imagines telling her about the calls, knowing that would end them. Instead, she waves at the dark front window, his window. She doesn't feel scared anymore, just tired. She can't find the squirrel. Instead, there's a big gaping hole in the house. Twigs, leaves, and other debris rattle around in the space, making it sound like something's still living there. Janine thinks about all the nights she thought she heard something alive when it was just a bunch of trash swirling around and blowing away.
WHAT TO EAT, WHAT TO WEAR

When I lost my appetite to Michael, above all else, it felt familiar. I met him waiting for the bus one foggy day, the type of day that makes you feel unreal, like you might disappear into someone else's life. I told him about how things weren't working, the way you can sometimes tell strangers personal things and they don't seem personal. If I had said something to my best friend Janine, she would have said that I needed to go back to school, get over Ryan, that my life was empty.

Instead, Michael told me a story that his grandmother told him many years ago.

"My grandmother lived in New Caledonia, a small island. There was a man who lived in a house next to hers, and he had a horrible sore on his face. The sore got worse and worse. Finally he strapped a piece of steak to his face every day, and the sore fed on it. He would take the steak off his face at night, and a big chunk of it would be gone. Eventually he died, but the steaks kept the sore happy for a while," Michael said.

I thought about that story. I started not being able to eat anything again. As soon as I looked at any food, it started to transform into a steak.

I called Michael.

"The steak story has been haunting me all week. I just wanted you to know," I said, doodling evil little flowers on a pink memo pad by the phone. They had mean eyes and smiles.

"Let me make it up to you. Dinner. No steaks."

Ever since beauty left me, I have been trying to get myself together, to get a plan.
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"Let me make it up to you. Dinner. No steaks."

Ever since beauty left me, I have been trying to get myself together, to get a plan. Beauty's other name was Ryan. When I looked at him, I saw museum gardens, chiseled statues. He looked permanent, like marble. His face was all sharp edges, his cheekbones pushing against his skin, making their presence known. I had one of those calendars with questions for each day and on the day he left, the calendar asked "What seems really important now that won't matter in ten years?" No matter how I interpreted that, it always came out the same.

I didn't have a choice the first night I met Ryan. Janine had a boyfriend and the boyfriend had a friend, an artist in town for the summer, taking a break from his MFA program in Boston. It was a rare night when Janine and I had a reprieve from our modern dance class, away from the hours spent in pain from blisters and heat. We spent the night going to stands, buying firecrackers. Then we went to Possum Kingdom Lake and tested the Sparklers.

We lit firecrackers on a rickety pier where snakes swam between the slats under our feet. Shivering when I saw the snakes, Ryan touched my shoulder and whispered "They can't get you up here." Late in the night, Janine sent Ryan and me out to get Cokes. When we got to the first store, it was closed. The temperature had just started dropping. We walked back to the car, and I walked around to let Ryan in when he pushed me up against the side of the car, took my face in his hands, and kissed me, over and over. I dropped the keys, felt them slide down my leg onto the parking lot. His hands pushed against my ribs, forcing my back into the handle of the car door. There was
a street sweeper circling the parking lot, the yellow lights blinking in the background. Neither one of us noticed the sweeper until it was almost over.

In October, I knew something was wrong when he called me to let me know he was in town. He sounded quiet, so quiet that the louder he spoke, the less I could hear. When he walked into my apartment and told me that he was sorry, that he felt like a coward, and that he wasn't lying when he told me he missed me, I couldn't do anything but look at my John Coltrane poster and think "a love supreme, a love supreme," the song running through my mind. His beautiful body moved through my furniture making it seem like art. And I thought of that body making someone else's shabby furniture glow and come alive.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked.

"I'm just all worn-out from trying to look beautiful for you," I said.

When he left, I picked two glasses out of the cupboard and threw them at the wall. The glasses left small pockmarks above my couch and my apartment was instantly ugly, the sort of ugly that won't go away.

A few minutes after I stopped crying, I called Janine, and hung up when she answered. I did this five times before I had the courage to talk. Janine told me that she thought it might be me or some other psychopath and that I or the psychopath would talk eventually. She said she knew something was wrong when I didn't show up to dance class. She came over and played my favorite tapes, even put *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* in the cassette player. She hated Dylan and this suffering on her part only made me start crying again. She tried to get me to eat all sorts of things: hashbrowns, green olives, and orange sherbet, and nothing tasted very good.

I couldn't eat for a week, then a month, then two months, and by Christmas vacation I weighed ninety pounds. At five five, this was a little low, even for a dancer. When I decided I wasn't going back to school in the spring, my parents didn't argue. They said the break would do me good. That was a year ago. It hasn't, but nobody knows that.
Janine feels it is her duty to have me over for dinner once a week and remind me that I need to go back and finish up my French degree, that I could get it in one semester. I nod. What I don't say to anyone is this: foreign languages have lost their appeal. I have a hard enough time understanding what people are saying right now, right here.

One day near Christmas, I couldn't face getting out of the car and going to ballet. Everything hurt, the bloody blisters on the sides of my toes, the irritated red lines around my ribs burning and raw underneath a thin leotard. I started to cry and saw a homely girl in earmuffs walk past. She had reddish eyes, reddish nose, and thin, pale hair. I realized that's how I looked: worn-out and sad. Not pretty, never pretty.

Once I was in Ryan's bedroom alone and found his sketchbook. Pages and pages of poses that I had been unaware of, that he had captured. The pictures were lovely, flattering, but I wasn't the girl in the pictures.

Michael and I ate dinner together on Saturday night. The restaurant we went to was almost empty. It was across the street from a public swimming pool. I kept imagining the summer, the way the lifeguards must blow their whistles at various swimming crimes, breaking up fights, keeping children from jumping on each others' heads.

"I can see the ghost of swimmers past," Michael said, motioning to the pool, when all the other mandatory first date conversation had died.

I smiled and felt like for the first time that night this might be something more than just another date. He looked a little like Rudolf Nureyev. Dark hair, thin, muscular, brooding. Attractive, but he didn't make things beautiful, not here. I asked him if he wanted to see my apartment. He didn't want to go. He insisted on driving across the street to park near the pool. We sat in his car, a champagne-colored Granada, watching the wind beat back the branches of the trees that circled the fence around the pool. I thought he might make a move, but he didn't. We sat there for about an hour, until the
only light was a sliver of the moon, orangey-yellow. He asked if he could see me again, and I said yes. I didn't have a reason to say anything else.

When I told Janine about Michael the next day, she looked happy and worried at the same time. While we both picked at our fruit salad and yogurt, she waggled her fork at me and made comments. She had circles under her green eyes and her brown hair was pulled back into a brutal ponytail.

"You could have brought Michael along tonight. If a man was here, we could eat real food. I'm sick of starving myself for the next performance," Janine said.

"Michael had to work. He's a proofreader."

"He could correct your papers when you go back to school this summer. We could still finish together, you know," she said. She had given up on her food and was sitting with one leg pulled into her chest, one leg underneath her on the hard wooden chair.

"At least I know that I'll never be material for his artistic impulses."

"I wouldn't be so sure. You might need editing," she said.

Janine left early, claiming she needed to go home and put on a facial mask before it got too late. I looked at my apartment with a critical eye, imagining what Michael might think of it, seeing him walking around, asking questions about this poster or that decoration, touching the dance costumes abandoned on the couch.

When I got up to go to the bathroom, I was bleeding. It had been about five months since the last time. This time hurt and what started out as a small ache turned into a tremendous pain under my ribs. I curled up on the couch and looked at the window. After about an hour, I heard a knock.
"I wanted to see you. I was worried," Michael said.

"Why?" I was so glad to see somebody I couldn't help but smile in spite of the pain. I felt blood rush out of my body and wondered how I could gracefully excuse myself.

"Just a feeling. Something told me I shouldn't leave you alone."

"How did you know I would be alone?"

"I knew. You look tired. I had a real bad feeling." He looked around at the apartment as if surveying for damage.

"Nothing bad. Sorry for the mess. Sit down where you can. I need to go the bathroom, but I'll be right back." As I walked, I could feel the blood run down my right leg underneath my thin cotton dress.

"Are you sure you're okay? You're not getting sick, are you?" Michael yelled, after I had been in the bathroom for a few minutes.

I walked out and sat down next to him on the couch, pushing over a green ballet skirt.

"I'm just a little dizzy. I'm glad you're here, though," and strangely enough, I was. I felt like I might faint. He could catch me. It would be okay.

"Have you been to a doctor lately?" he asked and put his arm around my shoulder.

"No. We have dance teachers to tell us everything -- what to eat, what to wear. It's just female problems. No big deal," I said, embarrassed to be reverting to euphemisms and having to talk about something that almost never happened.

"It's okay. We don't have to talk about it. Why don't I make you some tea and you can get some sleep."

"You won't leave, will you?" I asked, as he got up and started for the kitchen.

"No. I'll stay here and read your leaves and watch you sleep."

I looked at his face for traces of sarcasm, but there were none. He was as good as his word. I drank my tea, he swirled the cup on the saucer and said, "It says you need to
see a gynecologist." He undid my hair from its holder, moved his hands through it, brushing through the tangles. He laid down next to me on the couch. I felt his lips on my neck and his hands on my ribs. He kept his arms around me all night long.

That night I had a dream on my right side and this is what it said. Dead, I rested on a small table in a cold room. A medical student examined me, separated my flesh from the bone and left.

The next evening, the sun died in the window. I hadn't had time to see Michael during the day because of practice and work. His presence in my apartment seemed unreal, dreamy. "Central Park West" played on the stereo.

"Do you listen to John Coltrane often?" Michael asked, looking through my tape collection.

"Only when I think it will help." It felt strange to be talking to him. Sleeping was better. Maybe something other than sleeping would be better than that.

"Why don't I cook something for you?" Michael said.

"Aren't you tired from work? The last thing I would want to do after working all day is cook."

"Let me stay here tonight and cook. I'm sick of spending all my evenings sorting through stacks of papers making marks."

"You can stay here all weekend and make marks on me," I said.

After spending the night with Michael, dance class seemed like something from a past life, one where I slept alone. The teacher called for us to line up at the side of the room. We had to do turns across the room, one after another. When I reached the other side of the room, I leaned against the barre, watching the other dancers. The mirror covering the left side of the room made them look chopped up, distorted. But during the
performance, we would all be perfect, like those firecrackers that night on the pier, brightening the sky before burning out.

Michael's grandmother read cards, not tarot cards, but ordinary cards, the jacks and hearts becoming something beyond themselves, beyond just the ordinary images that most people play games with. The cards seemed to glow as she gave them meanings, futures, the ordinary made beautiful. That's what he told me the night he held me while I bled. Because Michael asked me to, I experienced this feeling. I went to a women's health center for an exam because of the tea leaves. Because of Michael. I felt delicate, the butcher paper gently crinkling under me, the bucket full of instruments gracefully covered with a towel. The doctor showed me a pill case before the exam, explained the cycles of the pills, when to take them. They were tiny, peach-colored, each one housed in a small clear container, each container releasing a pill with the smallest amount of pressure. The doctor seemed to speak from a distance during the exam, a quiet voice soothing me, assuring me it would be over soon. Even the scraping felt comfortable, something I was doing for love.
TUESDAY

David is my dance teacher and my boyfriend, a combination not unlike alcohol and Valium: ill-advised and common. Today's his birthday -- he turns forty-four, an age I find daunting and unimaginable at twenty-five. When I auditioned here four years ago, he was pretty tough on me. He wrote on my evaluation that I would make a better jazz dancer, though I'm not trained for jazz. I know that I have a jazz dancer's body (lean, but curvy), that my long red hair would set me apart in try-outs, and that my dramatic look that isn't an advantage as a ballerina would be stunning in that venue. But just because someone looks suited for a certain activity doesn't mean she is. I know ballet. If I'd been able to foresee as a child that I would look like this as an adult, I would have asked for tap, jazz, lessons in entertaining. Anyway, David and Maria, his ex-wife who also teaches at the school, accepted me and I work hard. David and I have been dating for almost a year, long enough not to be a scandal, I think. Long enough for people not to talk about it anymore. Long enough for me to get pregnant.

In class we're rehearsing Dying Flowers, a dance David choreographed. He got the idea from a psychic that Maria dragged him to in New York several years ago. It was a beautiful clear day, but the psychic's office was dark as winter anywhere. "Put a lot of flowers in your house," she told Maria. "When flowers die, they give off energy." Maria laughed and told the psychic, "I have enough energy for two people." The psychic said, "You're going to need it for this one. He's going to need a lot of dying flowers around him."
flowers in your house," she told Maria. "When flowers die, they give off energy." Maria laughed and told the psychic, "I have enough energy for two people." The psychic said, "You're going to need it for this one. He's going to need a lot of dying flowers around him."

Now this idea is interesting, but David's ballet included some narration that can be described only as precious, and I don't mean that as a compliment. Anyway, I survive another practice, words and all. As it stands, I'll have just enough time to make it home and figure out what to do about a cake before David drops by tonight.

When I walk into the dressing room, Janine stares at me. The way she looks at David tells me all I need to know about her. She and her friend Natalie talk in low tones, and I can't quite make out the words without getting closer so I sit there wondering. I've spent my entire life in dressing rooms just like this one, hard wood benches, partitions, boxes with clothes stuffed in them. When I think about the countless hours with all those dancers, I get this weird feeling. It's kind of like thinking about Christmas after a certain age -- there's something so sad about it that you just have to push it out of your mind. That's how I know I'm jealous of Natalie and Janine. I don't have very many close female friends, just girls from Houston I sometimes see when I go home. Most of them are caught up in getting married and having children or the country club social life, our distant girlhoods now faded into scenes involving dance recitals, beauty pageants, and other rituals requiring make-up. When I think of intimacy, I remember getting close to someone's eye and adding color.

Janine pulls street clothes from her box and a note falls out. Just like that, I recognize the script. David. He's never written me anything personal, but I've seen him sign credit slips, write out checks. His handwriting appears all over the school: lists of dancers, evaluations, stage directions. At first, I thought his handwriting was affected, but now I take comfort seeing it posted on the walls. Janine doesn't read the note right away. Instead, she buries it in her clothes and goes into a corner to change. When she comes
out, she's smiling. She stops in front of the mirror and puts her retainer in. Why would he want her? She's all longing for him, and everyone knows it. Knowing about her crush used to depress me in a way that happens if you feel superior to someone, but now I feel jaded, old, worried. I feel homesick for David. He's talked about leaving the school, going somewhere better.

I suspect something subtle is going on.

I've been pregnant once before. The first time was with my second serious boyfriend, my brother's probation officer (my brother, a lawyer caught for tax evasion, now dead, as they say, "by his own hand"). The whole relationship with the probation officer was what my godmother would call an exercise in self-discovery, a metamorphosis into self-actualization. That sort of talk irritates me more than I can say, but the discovery part is pretty right on. I always thought I would make the perfect mistress, but I can't abide competition, I really can't. I do have a mistress's name, Tuesday, after Tuesday Weld, of course. Some people like David think it's fitting, but it's also sort of burdensome. How serious can a guy be about a girl who's named after the least interesting day of the week? Anyway, this particular probation officer had a wife and children, which didn't matter in the way that it can only not matter if you're seventeen, which I was. Once it occurred to me, though, that I would never be able to go out in public with him or call him in an emergency (the fact that he was an officer of the law only served to heighten this particular irony), and that he was probably sleeping with his wife (as in having sex) and definitely not sleeping with me (as in staying over) and that this situation would not be changing, I left Houston to study dance here in Dallas. That was years ago, but I think about it sometimes. In any case, I'm not telling David about the pregnancy. I'll do exactly what I did the first time, which is have an abortion. It's enough for me to deal with the absence of my own reaction.
I had planned on buying a cake already made, but most of the ones in the bakery look dried out and the ones that look fresher are adorned with these ghastly artificial colors, florescent greens and pinks. So I think, I'll make a cake, how hard can it be? I think about what type of cake to bake David. It bothers me that I don't know what he likes. It's admitting I don't know him, which I don't, not anymore than he knows me. I settle on a mix because I don't have the slightest idea of what ingredients actually go into a cake. It would probably be really good if I could make one from scratch, but with such vague ideas about what to buy, the results would be marginal at best, inedible at worst. And there's nothing worse than feeling obligated to say something's great when you're struggling to choke it down.

Sheets of rain pour down as I step out from the store so that I can barely see anything. I hear a big crash and realize it's my car. Everything seems unreal in the weird light from the sky. I've hit the metal pole in the middle of the parking lot. My car doesn't seem too bad off, just a little dented in the front. I stand there for a minute, the rain ruining my good ivory dress. I feel colder than I ever have been. Then I get back in the car and drive away. The crash was over so fast that it doesn't seem real. By the time I get home, the dent provides the only proof that anything happened, that anything was even touched. When I begin on the cake, I open up the egg carton and half of the eggs are broken. I wonder if they came that way from the store or if they broke during the wreck. I didn't check them before I bought them and there's no telling now.

I once read in a magazine that you can tell how long a marriage will last by how the man tells the story about meeting his wife. This works for other romantic relationships as well. I started listening for these stories and so far it's held up. People are amazed that I can predict the outcomes of all sorts of arrangements, but I don't reveal that the secret came out of Cosmo, right next to the "Why Don't You" column. When I tell people how David and I got together, I tell them about our car wreck. We ran into each other in the
parking lot of the dance school. In one version, I'm waving at him and he turns and hits the side of my car. In another, it's me who does the hitting. I've told it so many different ways that now I can't remember who really was at fault.

Once I pull the cake out of the oven, I try to ice it right away because I'm worried that he'll get here before I finish. This isn't working, but I don't stop. Since the cake isn't cool, it peels away layer by layer, until there are crumbs everywhere. Each hole in the cake becomes bigger when I try to fill it up and make it blend with the rest of the surface. I'm making a mess because I want everything to be ready before David arrives.

Now that I'm done ruining the cake, I'm trying the oldest experiment in the whole world. Can sheer will make a phone ring? I can't imagine what the hold up might be. I try calling him, but he doesn't pick up. It's getting late. Finally, I give up and the phone rings. There's a bunch of static on the line, but I hear David's voice somewhere in the noise.

"David, where are you calling from? I can barely hear you," I say.

"I'm at a restaurant. Some old friends I haven't seen in fifteen years showed up today and took me and Maria out to dinner. I know I said I would stop by, but the time just got away from us. You're probably in bed, huh?"

"I made you a cake."

"Oh, Tuesday. I didn't know you were doing anything special."

"You can have it later. I'll just wrap it up." He doesn't say anything, so I continue. "You know, this must be a bad connection. Why don't you call later when there's not so much going on behind you?" I don't say anything else. I put the phone back where it belongs.

Some people like to hear music when they wake up. I prefer the hard beep beep of the alarm setting. On days, and there are days, when I accidentally
put it to the radio setting, I find myself disoriented, groggy. Sometimes the voices on the radio become the voices of my dreams. Sometimes I don't wake up for hours. The night before the clinic, I make sure it's on the beep. By the time I fall asleep, I'm so tired that I'm starting to see things move.

When I leave the house, the morning air is cold against my eyes. Everything froze last night and the streets are slick. The filthy sky begins to lighten. The lamps on the street go out. I pass a Wendy's where a heavy teenager in a fast food uniform unlocks the door, getting ready for the first shift. The whole world seems to be opening up even though nobody will be out on a day like today. It's just like people, I think, always ready at the wrong times, the times when nobody is around to take advantage.

Driving to the clinic, I think *this is my second abortion*. Like the second time my mother got divorced, the second abortion seems paradoxically more and less serious. More because you realize it's not just a one-time fluke, it's the way things happen. Less because you know you'll live through it. You know what to expect, the way the protocol works. In a way this knowledge works against you, though. Without the complete engagement in learning how to maneuver through the procedures, you have more time to think. You're not so concerned with the minute to minute. It's how you'll get through the next months that you think about. It's the next day and the next day and the next day that worries you.

I kill the engine of my car in the parking lot. For a while, I look at the sky and there's nothing I wouldn't give to be somewhere else looking at this same sky. For a minute I wish I could talk to David. It's Wednesday, our day off, and we usually spend it together. It's sort of a set thing even if we don't have any plans, something I didn't know I depended on until one Wednesday we couldn't get together because he was out of town and I spent the day not being able to concentrate on anything for very long.

The first time I had an abortion in Houston, there were protestors, but this clinic looks quiet. Maybe the ice has kept people away. Somehow the stillness unnerves me.
The calm outside takes on sinister proportions. Pushing open the door, I imagine dying in a clinic bombing.

It's the same day, the same place where other people are doing things they do every day. A day like every other day, but not for me. I try to get it in my mind. I'm a person who will have had two abortions. But I feel like the girl who cried every time she broke the rearview mirror on her bicycle by running into the same tree over and over. After seven mirrors, my dad stopped buying them, worried something serious would happen, thinking he'd already ruined my luck.

I focus on the doctor, trying to make conversation before starting the procedure. I'm clutching the table, and he taps on my hand, motioning for me to release.

"What's the scar on your leg from?" he asks.

It's the sort of question a lover asks. I almost lie, but then I think, what have I got to lose from the truth? The truth isn't valuable in this situation.

"A friend took a car lighter and burned me."

"Is this the same friend that got you pregnant?" He looks at me, mentally going through battered women's shelters, I guess.

"No. This was a girl I knew when I was eight. She didn't think the lighter worked so she stuck it on my leg. The burn didn't go away for a long time and the scar has gotten bigger over the years."

"I see," he says and begins.

The nurse at the clinic doesn't want me to drive myself home. Isn't there someone you can call, she asks, and I think about David, but then he'd know. Then I get a little scared remembering the time when I was nine and the glass lining in my thermos broke and mixed with my Dr Pepper and crushed ice. I thought the glass was ice and drank a cup before I realized the difference. I thought as long as I didn't say anything, it didn't happen. The glass started to cut up my insides, and I ended up in the hospital with an infection. Lots of complications. So I ask for the phone, set it on my lap, and dial. No
one answers. I hit the redial over and over. Eventually, I put the phone by the bed, pick up my coat, and check out.

I go to class the next day, but I don't dance. I sit and watch the rest of the students, mentally marking the steps in my head. Everyone is tired because of the brutal winter performance schedule so it's not like there's as much notice as if this all had happened at some other time. I tell Maria that I've been to the doctor and won't be able to dance for a couple of days. The best lies are the ones that are the closest to the truth.

"Are you in a lot of pain? Your knee? Is that the problem?" Maria asks.

"No. Nothing that hasn't been a problem before. I just hate missing the practice time."

"I've sat out before, Tuesday. You won't get too far behind if you pay attention," she says. She sits down next to me, puts her hand on my shoulder. I try not to flinch, even though her touching me makes me nervous.

"I'll pay really close attention then," I say. "I won't miss a thing."

Maria gets up and leaves me to observe the class. Janine seems more strung-out than usual. Watching her and David, I can make some pretty good guesses about where he was last night when I tried calling. I can wait this out, I think. This is a phase, an ego trip. Janine isn't competition. Halfway through practice, I go to the dressing room and look in Janine's box. There aren't any notes. When class ends, she looks in and there's nothing that she hasn't put in there herself.

That night David brings over *Sweet Charity*. I'm surprised to see him at my door, but that's like him. He shows up with something you want when you're not expecting it. That's such a male quality, I can't help but smile. I love the movie -- nonetheless, I fall asleep halfway through. David picks me up and puts me in my bed. When I wake up, he's putting the phone down.

"Do you want something to eat?" he asks.
"Nothing sounds good." For some reason that I don't want to think about, I don't want him to look around in my refrigerator. I want to keep him out of that cold space.

"Isn't there anything you want?"

"You pick," I say.

He brings me yogurt, the kind with the fruit. I take my spoon and try to bring all the fruit from bottom to the top, stir it around until it colors everything around it. But I lose interest, because I start thinking about what I should say. I won't say anything about Janine if it kills me. I don't want to know about last night. I consider telling him about the abortion. If he'd been home, he'd know. It's strange to understand how timing changes everything.

"Why have you been wearing your glasses lately?" David asks. The strangeness of that question makes it impossible for me to blurt out what I'm thinking. I'm getting distracted and tired. For the first time I start to dwell on the pain from the abortion, the exact location of the hurt.

"I like wearing my glasses because I can take them off when I feel like it without worrying about a case and solution. I'm sick of carrying all that stuff around with me."

He nods. "I have some news. We're leaving the school. I got an offer at a school in San Francisco. I want to take it. What do you think?"

My heart jumps when he says we. Which we does he mean? "I've never been to San Francisco. I don't know what it's like." I'm trying to think of neutral statements so that I don't have to be embarrassed if he doesn't mean me as part of the we. If nobody knows what you want, you can pretend you never wanted it. Some part of me feels like crying, but I get tired just imagining the effort, the sheer physical act.

"That's what I was doing on the phone. We're scheduled to fly out there next week and look for a place. I know this is fast, but the last time we talked about the possibility, you seemed okay with it. You haven't changed your mind, have you?"
Okay, it's clear now. I'm going if I want. I'm trying to pay attention, but I can't figure out what to do. I imagine myself sitting at a table with David in a restaurant in San Francisco, the fog outside making everything hazy and unreal. I've seen pictures of the city. It's not much to go by, but I fill in the blanks.

"I hate to fly. I sit there the entire time waiting for the landing. It feels like you're going to be in the air forever," I say. I'm relieved, but I can't explain why.

"It's the landing that's difficult. It's the landing that's the hardest part."

"Take-offs are tricky, too. I've heard that. Why can't we just drive out there?"

"I already have reservations," he says. He looks at his hands, at the walls, everything but me.

Our plane leaves at nine tomorrow morning. David's supposed to be here an hour early, which means that I have to be completely ready by eight. I try to go to bed early, but I can't fall asleep even though everything is packed. The light I always keep turned on in the living room goes out with a strange hissing sound. Since I'm out of light bulbs, I take a bulb from the kitchen and replace it. For the next few hours, I watch its too-bright wattage glow in the next room.

When I finally drift off, I know that I'll be able to sleep only an hour before the alarm sounds. When it does, I'm so tired that the noise hurts. There's too much light in the room, sunlight flooding in from the windows, light from the living room. I can see everything. My suitcases sit in the corner. For the first time I realize how little I'm taking with me. I reach over and knock the clock to the floor, but the alarm keeps beeping.
"Ordinary People" was the only movie on television that night and nobody felt like leaving the house to get anything better. It was early May, a week from high school graduation for Tuesday's boyfriend Lance and her brother Richard. Tuesday lay on the floor, half-heartedly stretching, depressed because she knew it was only a matter of months before Richard and Lance would leave for college and she would be stuck with three more years of high school before she could dance with the company full-time. Furthermore, Tuesday didn't think the movie was very good, but didn't say anything because she didn't know what was wrong with it, what was making the scenes so flat and uninteresting. She knew it was a sad story, that she should be sad, but she wasn't. Richard appeared to be enjoying the show, and Tuesday suspected she was missing something. When Judd Hirsch, Timothy Hutton's psychiatrist said: "The thing about feeling, kiddo, is that it doesn't always tickle," Tuesday started to laugh and couldn't stop. Lance joined in and Richard stared at them, then got mad. "I don't see what's so funny about that," he said. That made them laugh harder. "You two," he said, shaking his head, and turning back to the story, a tragedy she and Lance couldn't take seriously.

A week before Richard and Lance left for college, Tuesday's parents had going-away party. It was a beautiful outdoor affair, all Japanese lanterns and torches lining the sidewalk up to the two-story house, candles in bags outlining the pool. The tables had huge glass centerpieces with floating candles and white lilies. Tuesday sat in her upstairs
A week before Richard and Lance left for college, Tuesday's parents had going-away party. It was a beautiful outdoor affair, all Japanese lanterns and torches lining the sidewalk up to the two-story house, candles in bags outlining the pool. The tables had huge glass centerpieces with floating candles and white lilies. Tuesday sat in her upstairs bathroom watching people arrive. She picked out a white silk halter dress with an open back and put her long red hair up, but thought better of it and combed it out straight.

Tuesday didn't want a party. What she wanted was to sit in her bathroom all night and cry. She hadn't cried at all about Lance's leaving and it made her wonder what was wrong with her. When she finally worked up the energy to leave the bathroom and walk into the backyard, the first person she saw was Lance's mother, Helen. Helen had been on Valium for almost twenty years and every movement was slow, all her responses off. Every time she saw Tuesday, she would ask her what she was doing with herself, unable to remember much from one moment to the next.

"Doesn't she look exactly the same as she did when she was a little girl? With those same serious eyes, those big eyes that see everything," Helen said to Tuesday's mother who had joined them in the yard.

"Where's Lance?" Tuesday asked. She hadn't seen him all day.

"I think he's in the house. Why don't you go find him so I can take a picture. I have to have proof that this much time has passed," Helen said, moving her hand slowly through her big blond hair.

As Tuesday walked up to the house, she saw Lance and Richard drinking and talking on the porch. Looking at them, Tuesday felt a wave of sadness wash over her. She dug her nails into her hands. "Your mother wants a picture," she said, smiling at Lance.

By this time, both mothers were waving all of them over to the gazebo. Richard and Lance set down their drinks and walked back over with Tuesday.
"Why don't I get a shot of all of you? Tuesday, you get in the middle, put your arms around them," Helen said. She focused and snapped a few times.

"That's enough for now," Tuesday said, pulling away.

Tuesday steps out of the Texas-shaped hot tub and wraps a towel around her hair. She's been sitting in the Panhandle for about half an hour and her hands feel wrinkly. She and Lance are spending part of the evening at his parents' house. The parents aren't due back for hours. Lance and Tuesday go there when Lance can get away from his wife, a woman named Deborah that he met in law school. Lance and Deborah moved back to Houston six months ago; Tuesday and Lance have been seeing each other for five of those six months. Some weeks Tuesday and Lance spend every day together and some weeks pass without so much as a phone call. Tuesday feels transported in time, like nothing happened since Lance left years ago. She imagines him as her real life, always waiting for her. Everything else - - dance class, dates, friends - - is an illusion.

Seven o'clock and the sun fades through filmy brown curtains in the den, casting eerie shadows against wood panelling. Changing from her swimsuit into a t-shirt, Tuesday lies down on the couch next to Lance who's flipping through channels on the big-screen television. After a few minutes she starts to get up. He's going to have to leave soon to meet his wife for dinner. Lance puts down the remote and takes Tuesday's hand.

"Feel this," Lance says, leading her hand to his waist, pushing Tuesday's fingers into a rough patch of skin. "If the light was on, you'd be able to see the scars."

"What happened?"

"Don't jump when I tell you this," he says. "It's from shingles. A few years ago, I came down with this horrible rash. In a few weeks it was gone. Then when I was taking the bar, it came back worse than before." Lance moves her hand from the scars and places it on his chest. "I wonder if it's always going to show up when I'm under stress."
Tuesday thinks about how strange it is that he's had this whole other life without her. She wonders what else she might have missed. "Dance injuries are like that. You never know when they're going to flare up." She can think of lots of examples, people losing parts at the last minute because they couldn't perform. It's never happened to her, but every time she feels a twinge in her right knee, she considers how easy it would be to damage something permanently.

Lance sits up, runs his fingers through his sandy blond hair, buttons his shirt. He's changing into a different role; she's already lost him. She hates this part of the evening, every evening they spend together, the part where she realizes what she's doing and how much it costs when you want something you shouldn't have and you take it anyway.

When Tuesday dove into the clear dark water, she felt dizzy. It was the middle of the night, a perfect August night in Houston with the smell of honeysuckle in the air. Lance was home for a week, two years of college finished. Behind the pool, her parents' house stood white against the black sky. Her dive was shallow since the pool was only five feet deep and she was seven inches taller than that, but despite the shallowness, the top of the water seemed a long way off. She couldn't surface and kept going around in circles. When the swirling got faster, she panicked. Lance pulled her out of the water and led her to the side of the underground pool, where she leaned against the warm rock-lined edge and tried to breathe evenly. She pushed her hair out of her face and wrapped it into a ponytail.

"You okay?" Lance asked.

"I'll live," she said, the weird spinning sensation fading. She suspected she had an ear infection. The air felt heavy against her face.

Lance touched her back and she flinched without understanding why. He lifted himself out of the kidney-shaped pool with his arms.

"Do you want to get out?" he asked, offering her a thick white towel.
"I think I'm going to float for awhile."

"What happened?"

"I lost sight of the surface, that's all." She was seventeen, but her eyes looked older, their green color murky.

Edging toward the ladder, she adjusted the strap of her swimsuit and looked toward the house. "I'm really tired. I've been putting in a lot of hours at dance school," Tuesday said as she clutched her knees to her chest and covered her shoulders with the towel.

"Sweetheart, we need to clear some things up," he said. He put his arms around her and she rested her head on his shoulder, but the position was uncomfortable.

"I know what you're going to say. You've met somebody at college." Mosquitos were out and she felt one land on her leg.

He nodded. "You have to know how much I hate this," Lance said. He shivered a little in the night air.

She looked down and saw another mosquito biting her thigh.

"Let's go inside. I'm getting eaten alive," she said, standing up.

On Tuesday's eighteenth birthday, her parents threw a huge party with a *Jaws* motif to cheer her up after the breakup. It involved a pool and a huge television set on the deck with a videotape of *Jaws* running. The party started at eight and Tuesday's friends and family floated around the pool on multi-colored rafts of every make and model while a few underwater pool lights glowed. Citronella candles burned everywhere.

Tuesday was resting her head and chest on a round-shaped floaty, her legs dangling off into the water. Right after the movie started, Richard grabbed her ankle and pulled her underwater. She kicked hard and got away, but he came after her again and pulled her under. Everyone laughed and did imitations of the *Jaws* music as they watched. When he tried to get Tuesday the third time, Richard's girlfriend Monica looked at him
and said "You've had your fun. It's time to quit," and Richard looked at Monica and smiled. Then he dove underwater and went after her.

All of the parties have faded into one another, Tuesday thinks, as she drives over to Richard's house. She thinks about how the parties are supposed to make events significant, but they end up causing everything to seem the same. Sifting through the various ones, she can't think of anything but fragments of conversations, seasons, whether there was swimming or not -- all the details that don't seem important. In high school, Tuesday's senior English teacher handed back an essay and said: "It's not enough to describe things, you have to give them meaning." Tuesday wondered how to do that. Now she wonders why someone would want to.

She pulls into the Richard's driveway and kills the engine. She gives him the routine she uses with her parents -- late practice, rehearsal, audition, etc. She doesn't think Richard suspects that she's resumed her relationship with Lance. She's nervous all the time, trying to remember what she's said to whom. Her nails are bitten to the quick.

Richard sits on the couch reading Schopenhaur when Tuesday arrives. He has done this almost every night since Monica left him. Tuesday notices how dark the circles around his eyes have become, wonders if he's sleeping at all. She comments on him being one of the few people inside when the weather is beautiful, when everyone else is out.

Because of the weather, they decide to go to the park and swing. The sound of crickets fills the air. No one is at the park, just the two of them in twilight.

"Remember when we were fooling around on that little kid swing set at home? You were way too old to be in the swing," Tuesday says. By this time, she and Richard are swinging together in perfect synchronicity.
"Yeah, Dad started yelling 'Richard, you asshole. I don't know if I'll ever be able to fix that swing so it works right.' Richard slows down by scraping the ground with his foot.

"I remember going into hysterics and Dad yells 'Tuesday, damn it, you may think it's funny now, but you don't appreciate things until they're gone. When you miss swinging on a swing that works, you're going to be mad.' Tuesday stops moving her legs. The swing slows to a gentle rocking.

"And are you?" He rubs his loafer into the ground, ruining his expensive pair of shoes.

"No. It was an accident. These things," Tuesday says, shrugging. Crossing the chains of the swing set in front of her, she looks at Richard, then at the ground.

"Let's get some food. I'm starving to death," Richard jumps off the swing into the dirt.

Tuesday doesn't move.

"Come on. There's not much light left." He reaches out for Tuesday. She lets go of the chains, takes his hand, and they walk that way toward the car.

The next day, Tuesday oversleeps. Her parents won't return from Europe until next week, and she wakes up late in their huge house alone, the sun streaming through the windows, unusually bright. Tuesday had set her alarm for six at night instead of six in the morning. She dresses for dance class in a frenzy, throwing leotards around, trying to find something that will work. She calls time and temperature: sixty-eight degrees. Not hot, not cold. She had hoped for something less vague. Extremes make Tuesday comfortable. When it's too cold or too hot, you know you're going to be miserable no matter what you wear. There's nothing you can do to make it any better.
After practice, Tuesday waits at the Blade and Wing for Lance. She and Lance meet here regularly since no one they know would ever spot them. Mostly the place is frequented by working-class Hispanic people and the regulars have grown accustomed to Tuesday waiting alone in the corner.

Tuesday always gets her first drink free because of her red hair, something about it being good luck. She sits at a table in the back and orders a Coke. She takes tiny sips, watching the door. Sitting at tables in run-down restaurants seemed glamorous before she had to do it. Now it reminds her of waiting during auditions: tedious and nerve-racking. Even eavesdropping won't help kill time because she doesn't understand much Spanish. After awhile, everything sounds like the same conversation. A small woman wearing a dark brown dress discusses praying to St. Jude for her brother who's in jail. Even Tuesday knows who St. Jude is. Lost causes. She walks out of the bar.

Sitting on the curb, her head resting on her shoulder, hair obscuring her face, Tuesday scrambles around in her purse, finds a Lifesaver. Recently compulsive about spearmint Lifesavers, she sometimes finishes an entire roll in one sitting, putting one after another in her mouth, hardly waiting for the first one to dissolve before getting another, the mint equivalent of chain-smoking. Her mouth blooms ulcers from stomach acid. The mints help her forget about the sores, dry out her throat, make her thirsty.

Lights glow on the end of the street and everything looks clearer in the strange color. People mill around the outside grocery store on the corner, picking through fruits and vegetables. Across the street on the sidewalk, Tuesday sees two used condoms. Urban jellyfish, she thinks, full of fluid and dangerous to step on.

Finally, she spies Lance walking up the sidewalk.

"What are you doing outside? I thought you were going to wait for me in the Blade."

Despite her resolve to be stand-offish, she smiles. Attraction doesn't care about the past or the future. When she sees him, she remembers the young Lance, the one she
thinks about at night while she sleeps in her childhood bed, the Lance that keeps her safe until the sun bleeds through the windows.

They walk inside and order. Lance gets tamales and Tuesday orders a small bowl of tortilla soup.

"Sorry I was late getting here," Lance says.

"I'll survive." He touches her hand across the table, smiles at her.

When the food comes out, Tuesday's bowl looks small compared to the order of tamales.

"Is that enough?" Lance asks.

"I don't need all that," she says, motioning at his plate.

"You're not on a diet, are you? Deborah is always on a diet." Lance doesn't mention his wife often and when he does, Tuesday always feels surprised. She has trouble imagining him with a wife, with anybody else.

"Does she exercise?"

"No, she just eats fruit. She's not trying to firm up, she's just trying to lose."

"Losing's easy at first. The hard thing is to keep losing for a long time," Tuesday says.

When Tuesday was ten years old, her parents had a bicentennial party. From all over Houston, people came to the event. Tuesday couldn't remember ever seeing so many people in one place, so much noise and music and food. As the night wore on, Tuesday drank from various people's glasses while they weren't watching. One of her father's friends saw her sipping a daiquiri.

"Be careful, little girl. That'll knock you out before you even know what happened."
Tuesday giggled. She felt fine. She skipped over to a plate of stuffed mushrooms and gobbled one. She spun herself around, trying to keep her eyes focused on one thing like she learned in dance class, but everything blurred together. After a while, she sat down in the grass and watched little fireflies buzz past while citronella torches burned beside the pool in the distance.

After a few minutes, Tuesday got up and walked to the bathroom. She could hear people outside and it hurt her head, so she turned on the fan. Before she could understand what happened, Richard came into the bathroom. She tried to make him leave, but he wouldn't. He wouldn't leave her alone. After a few minutes, someone started knocking on the door.

"Let me in," Lance yelled. "I've had too much." He pounded on the door.

"Go away," Richard said. He threw Tuesday's clothes at her and told her to get dressed.

"I'm not going to make it. I'm going to throw up all over your parents' white carpet," Lance said.

"Go somewhere else. I'm already here," Richard said. He pulled up his jeans.

Lance finally managed to open the door. Tuesday crouched in the corner putting on her shorts. She was having a hard time with the buttons.

"I'm going to be sick." Lance ran to the toilet. He put his head down, but nothing happened.

"Let's leave Lance alone," Richard said. He put his hand out for Tuesday, but she didn't take it. She started crying, then reciting a nursery rhyme her mother used to read.

"Monday's child is fair of face, Tuesday's child is full of grace, Wednesday's child is full of woe, Thursday's child has far to go..." She stopped. She didn't remember all the words. Outside, she could hear the sound of firecrackers. In her mind she imagined the whole sky lit up with beautiful colors that came from explosions that sounded like gunshots. Her mother found her crying on the porch during the display. Assuming she
was frightened by the noise, her mother stroked her hair and told her: "Don't worry, baby. It won't last forever."

Richard pulls the insides out of a pumpkin, tearing thin fibers from the shell, placing each handful of mush on the sports section of last Sunday's paper. He carved the top off the pumpkin and it fits smartly, like a little cap. From a distance the pumpkin looks whole, untouched.

Richard and Tuesday are doing Halloween decorating, a ritual started by their mother when they were children. Richard always loved Halloween more than anyone else in the family, always came up with the scariest costumes. He insisted on jack-o-lanterns, even with their mother away. He looks strangely at ease in the house even though he doesn't visit much anymore.

Tuesday is supposed to meet Lance at the dance school in an hour. She has a key to one of the practice rooms and he managed to cancel his appointments that afternoon. She wishes that she hadn't promise Richard she would help him this afternoon.

"I don't see why we couldn't have painted on a face. It would have been a lot less mess," Tuesday says. She's sitting at the kitchen table with scissors, cutting out a pattern for the mouth and eyes.

"You have to carve. That's the point."
"I thought the point was to have a face on the pumpkin to scare away evil spirits."
"The point is to do it the traditional way."
"Should I bake the seeds?" Tuesday asks. She looks at her watch.
Richard nods.
Tuesday turns the oven on high. She picks seeds out of the pumpkin mush and places them flat on a metal sheet. She salts and butters.
The seeds burn. They char on the bottom; they are not delicious to anyone.
"Toss those," Tuesday says.
"Maybe something can be saved." Richard examines both sides of a seed.

"They're pretty much ruined. Besides, I need to leave." She picks up her satchel and starts for the door.

"We haven't even carved out the eyes."

"I have to go."

"I guess it's up to me to finish what we started," Richard says, turning back to the knife.

Dead leaves rustle around Tuesday's feet as she walks up the path to the dance school. It's a brilliant Indian summer day, unnaturally beautiful. There's something creepy about a warm day in late fall. She looks around for Lance. He's sitting in his car that's parked under a tree. He doesn't notice her.

She taps on his window, startling him.

"I can't stay too long," he says. He gets out of the car and locks his door.

"I didn't ask you to," she says. She knows it's just a matter of time before this ends for good, before he says he can't see her anymore. Everybody has a past and a future, something they want to forget and something they feel nostalgic about before it happens. She realizes that for him she is slipping from nostalgia to forgetting, the way ice-cubes melt in a drink on any summer day.

Underneath Lance on the hard wooden floor, Tuesday looks up at the window and sees Richard. He looks like a younger Richard in his casual clothes, his hair a little grown out from its usual short cut. Richard meets her eyes, something Lance never does during sex. They stay like that for a moment, Richard and Tuesday looking at each other, Lance oblivious to anything being awry, his face buried in Tuesday's shoulder. Eventually, Richard walks away.
There are no lights when Tuesday lets herself in the house. She immediately switches on the big lamp in the den, flooding the room with brightness. When her eyes adjust, she sees Richard dangling from the lowest rafter of the ceiling, a chair kicked out from beneath him. She goes to him and checks for a pulse but feels nothing. Setting the chair upright, she unties him, losing her balance from the weight of his body. When Richard falls to the floor, Tuesday jumps off the chair that's slipping out from beneath her. She trips and lands on her knee. Limping to the phone, she calls the police, her parents, and Lance. When Lance picks up the phone, he pretends she's a wrong number. Tuesday pictures Lance in bed with Deborah, a petite blonde woman who's probably saying *Who's calling this late?* and Lance saying *It's okay, it's no one, go back to sleep.* Tuesday, who by her nature is not easily reassured, would never buy it, would never turn over into the softness of the sheets and allow her eyes to close, Tuesday, who will remember the last words Lance will ever say to her, *I'm sorry, this isn't who you think it is* and then the sound of the dial tone. Tuesday sits alone by Richard, imagining someone official will tell her what she already knows, the flashing red lights of the ambulance streaming in through the front window with the emergency already over, when there's nothing left to do except wait for her parents' flight, for morning.
Patti thought I was the one. The other woman. All that. She was only sixteen, the pregnant-girlfriend-turned-wife of my friend Nick. Even though I was only a couple years older, I could only long for such exotic titles, spinning my longish hair into a twist, dreaming of being someone's mistress. I was flattered and sad about the whole thing.

She was right on one account. Nick did have another woman.

One afternoon in senior newspaper class (the place for hanging out, working on homework, pretending to think about articles), I noticed Nick moping around. He hadn't even finished writing his column "Heavy Metal Hotline," an in-depth look at such talents as Motley Crue, Megadeth, and Metallica. The column was generally well-received by the student body garnering more attention than the news, the advice column, and the horoscopes all put together.

"What's wrong with you?"

"The best part of the day is already over," he said. He had been working at his co-op job at the hospital. It never occurred to me that giving shots and taking blood could be considered the best part of the day.

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't want to say."

"Say it." I started biting off part of my thumbnail.

"You have to swear to secrecy. You must."

"I'm not going to have to give blood, am I?"
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"Say it." I started biting off part of my thumbnail.

"You have to swear to secrecy. You must."

"I'm not going to have to give blood, am I?"

He smiled. He had a wicked smile and he used it on me now. "Maybe." He looked at the teacher who was grading papers on the other side of the room. He motioned for me to move behind one of the huge lay-out tables covered with newspaper.

"This is probably really good then. Say it and we'll work out the conditions later."

He looked around and twisted a hatchet earring. "Okay. I'm having an affair with someone."

"Who?" His brown hair was in his face. I stared at his Dead Kennedy's shirt.

"You'd never guess. She's got blonde hair."

"That narrows it down. Real or fake?"

"Real." He smiled again.

"I didn't mean it that way. You have a filthy mind, Nick. Now who the hell is it?"

"Chrysta Anderson."

"You've got to be kidding." Chrysta was one of those girls who always knew what to wear. I looked down at the hole in my tennis shoe.

"It's been going on since October."

"Shit," I said. "You've been committing adultery since the month you were married? Does Patti suspect?"

"No. Actually, it's you she doesn't like."

There was a silence for a minute.
"So how is the best part of the day over?"

"I do it with Chrysta every morning before work when her parents leave the house."

"And what does Patti think you're doing?"

"Carpooling."

Patti never found out either. She made it to her ninth month without suspecting a thing. She was like that. Things just seemed to slide off her. Nick said when he told her that she was pregnant, she didn't even stop eating her french fries. He did the pregnancy test at the hospital because it was his policy after his last girlfriend tried a pregnancy scam on him. Patti was the type to do the same thing.

Nick always had an attraction for what I would call trashy or trampy or otherwise undesirable women. That's why I was so surprised about Chrysta. She was the daughter of a Lutheran minister. The most scandalous thing about Chrysta was her Mexican boyfriend. This was only scandalous to her parents and to Nick, who was in no position to say much of anything about Nick's love life because every time I did, he would start giving me hell about Andrew or "the college man" as Nick called him. I started dating Andrew as soon as he left for college and it was a good relationship, if not an exciting one. Unlike Nick and Patti, there wasn't any spontaneous sex, or sex without protection, or any sex at all. We had the requisite relationship requirement (a lot in common), but not much else. I stayed with him because he understood me, because he liked Joan Baez better than Bob Dylan, and because his being in college gave me some prestige. I remember when Nick told me he was getting married. We were in homeroom filling out papers for the first of the year type stuff. Since it was senior year, we had been in there quite a while filling out these dumbass forms and it was getting boring. I started to tell him a joke until he passed out a note.

*I'm going to be a father.*
I looked over at him. He was drawing anarchy symbols on the desk. He pulled out his pocket knife and started to trace one of them. His hair hung down over his eyes.

"Quit that shit. Mr. Monday is going to come over here and catch you," I said, beginning to realize that was probably the least of his worries, the father part sinking in.

What kind of father is still interested in anarchy?

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to get married."

"No fing way. You can't."

"Why not? Aren't you and the college man planning on getting married? It'll hit you, too, soon enough. Besides, there's not a lot of choice."

"Sure there are. There are lots of choices."

"I don't believe in abortion. Nothing political, really. Just the way it is. Women get pregnant and that's that."

"That's it? Can't you see that she's done this on purpose?"

"Takes two to tango."

They got married on his birthday, lucky day, October 13. Not that I was there. I didn't even remember where it was. I bought Nick a birthday present, a Sex Pistols poster. I wrote on the back: "Something for the fort, no? Happy Eighteenth." I wasn't sure when to give it to him, though.

Nick's fort had always been a place of myth in our junior high days. It was high up in a tree and covered with pictures from Playboy, Penthouse, and a less sophisticated journal, Spanking Lesbians. I knew this because once in the seventh grade, Jane Jackson (his then sleazy girlfriend) and I snuck in there and looked around. His house was about a mile from mine. It was surrounded by a bunch of trees and bushes. The house seemed deserted because his dad had left years ago and his mother was always at work. Nick caught us up there and fired some warning shots from his b.b. gun to send us running. I hadn't been there since.
The Monday after the wedding, he had a wedding ring on but not much else had changed. Patti, only in her second month, had taken to wearing huge pink maternity rompers so that everyone could see that she was about to deliver. In class, I decided to see if the fort was still standing.

"Is the fort still around?"

"Yeah, it's pretty wrecked. Why?"

"Just wondering." I shrugged. It was hard to explain exactly what the fort meant to me.

"You and Andrew thinking about doing the nasty and you need a place to hide out, right? I can tell you're a virgin by the way you walk. Those college men can't hold out forever."

I was afraid that Andrew could. "You're perverted. My sexual status is none of your business. If I was thinking of doing the nasty deed, I wouldn't pick your disgusting fort for atmosphere."

"And where would you pick?"

"That's none of your business either." I hit him on the arm.

"You're such a reactionary. Definitely a screamer."

"I most certainly am not."

"Stand up and walk around. Maybe I was wrong."

"I can't win."

"Nope."

When Patti delivered the baby, she was in labor five hours, three of which she slept. Nick came to school and announced the news. He gave out cigars, but I didn't get one because I don't smoke. I wanted one just to keep, but Nick was adamant on his stance that they should be used for utilitarian purposes, not just collecting.
The next day we took a field trip to the hospital to see the baby. Our journalism teacher justified it by saying that we could learn to write a birth announcement. It was an unannounced visit, but we didn't think Patti would mind. We looked in at Patti and waved, and she waved back. She looked wretched. I thought of her in her jaunty pink maternity rompers and felt depressed. Her hair was matted and she was holding her side.

Nobody except Nick went inside the room. We all stood outside, feeling a little strange. Nick was talking to Patti, pushing her hair out of her eyes, handing her a glass of water. I wanted to cry, but I went over to water fountain. Chrysta walked by. I turned and watched her walk down the hall, her pace speeding up when she passed Patti's room and then returning to normal.

The class walked over to the maternity ward. The baby was beautiful. I thought she even looked like Nick with her black hair and blue eyes. I could see her in a few years, dressing in fishnet stockings and drawing anarchy symbols.

One week before graduation, I started feeling desperate. I still had the Sex Pistols poster. Nick was leaving for the army. I was going to be lifeguarding at the swimming pool and then going off to college, where he should be going. He wanted to be a doctor, a gynecologist. We could be sharing philosophical insights about the state of the world when we came home from our respective universities. He could be cooler than the average freshman. The time we were in newspaper class was the worst. I wanted to ask him to the graduation party my best friend Elaine was having but I couldn't work up my courage.

"So. What are you doing graduation night?" Lame, lame, lame.

"I don't know."

My mind kept saying ask him about the party, but it was no use.

"Sign my yearbook. I know you think it's queer, but sign it," I said.

"I do think it's queer."
"You'll never have to do it again," I said.

"Hand it over."

"Write something memorable."

He looked at me. "I can't write if you keep talking."

"Okay. I get the point. I'll just be a mouse. I'll go sit in the corner."

"Fine. You do that."

I walked off and started talking to a friend all the while looking over my shoulder, trying to see what he was thinking. Finally, I walked over to him.

"All finished," he said.

"Thanks. Do you have one?" I didn't want to open the book and read what he wrote right away. I put the book in my bag and tried to play it cool.

"No. Patti got one this year. That's enough."

"I guess so." I was disappointed. Not that I knew what I wanted to write.

"Hey, you still planning on writing that book about me?"

I had almost forgotten about it. The book I was supposed to write about all of Nick's adventures. We had started this joke years ago, when he lost his virginity to the housesitter his mother had hired for a weekend. I told him that it was good enough for a story.

"You bet."

"Well, if you ever do, call me Shane. I always did like that name."

"Shane, huh? That suits you. I'll call you Shane."

"Everything's gotten so cliche now. Maybe that book isn't such a good idea," he said.

I didn't want to go to college without saying goodbye to Nick. I kept telling myself not to be a wimp. I worked at the pool and sometimes I would see his red car drive by on the highway. Each time I saw it, I would resolve to call him up. Each night
that resolve faded in the face of Andrew. He was home for the summer and things were going okay.

One week before I left, I started packing up all my stuff and I reread what Nick wrote in my yearbook: *It's been cool knowing you. Have a cool summer. That's lame, okay, I admit it. I'm just not very good at writing these things. What I want to say is that I'll be looking for your books when I get out of the army. Don't let College Man treat you bad. Seize the day, babe, Nick.* I didn't want Nick to got to the army. I didn't care about evil College Man.

I wrote all the stuff I wanted to say on a piece of paper and called the hospital.

"Nick. It's me. You know, Holly. I was wondering if you would meet me somewhere before the end of the week. I'm leaving for school and I have something to give you," I said, spitting out all the words at once.

"Something to give me?"

"A gift." Already he was off the potential responses I had written for him on my piece of paper. I was getting nervous about what to say next.

"Beware of Greeks bearing gifts."

"I'm not Greek."

"When do you want to meet?"

"The pool closes at seven."

"How about tomorrow? Patti visits her family on Tuesday nights."

"That's cool. I'll come by your house about eight."

I spent the rest of the day wondering what to wear. I wouldn't have much time to get ready so I decided to wear white shorts to play up my tan. The next day went by slowly and I set a record for leaving the pool. I told my parents I was going to see Andrew and took off for Nick's house.

I got to the house and Nick was outside, smoking.

"Park behind those trees," he said, as I was getting out of the car.
I pulled the car behind the trees and tried to get out gracefully, but got my shorts caught in the door and tore them.

"Nice rip. Let's go to the fort. My mom stayed home tonight and I don't want her around while we're talking." I saw one of the dogs, a huge Doberman, in the window. He was growling.

We walked to the fort, which seemed small.

"Here," I said, handing him the poster.

"Cool." He placed it next to a tree.

"So how's everything?"

"I go into the army in two weeks. San Antonio."

"You'll like it there. Lots to do," I said. "Let's go up into the fort."

"No. You don't want to go up there," he said.

"Come on. I haven't seen it in years."

"It's nasty up there." He'd lost weight and I could see his muscles move through his thin, white t-shirt.

He sat down underneath the tree. I decided to sit down even though I was wearing white.

"Are you still with Andrew?"

"You still with Chrysta?"

"Does it matter?" He put out his cigarette.

"A little." He looked at me. "You really are a virgin, aren't you?"

"Do you have to say it so loud?"

He moved closer to me. "Why haven't you and Andrew done anything?"

"He's not interested."

"I doubt that's true."

"Don't. It is." I was starting to feel pathetic. I didn't want to start crying. He put his arm around me.
"Hey, it's going to get better."

"How? I expected something different."

"Like what?" He pulled his arm away and lit another cigarette. I didn't know how he could smoke, as hot as it was outside.

"Like passion, romance. I don't know. At this point I'd settle for just plain sex." I hoped he would get the hint.

"Passion and romance are overrated. Hell, just plain sex is overrated."

"Not if you're me. I had great hopes for Andrew. I thought if I could seduce him, everything would work out." I slapped a mosquito on my arm.

"You'll find someone better. I know these things."

"You know these things?"

"I do."

It began to rain. I thought about sex in the rain, the romance of it.

"I like you, Holly, but I'm not going to sit out here in the rain. My cigarettes are getting wet. I'll walk you to your car."

He hugged me and thanked me for the poster. I didn't say anything. Patti would be back, Nick would be in the army, and I was leaving.

"Goodbye. Good luck with everything," he said. I watched him run into the house, covering his head with the Sex Pistols poster.

I didn't hear about him for a long time. When I came back home for the summer, Andrew and I had parted, slow and painful, way too dramatically. Nick was right — romance was overrated and sex with Andrew was really overrated. The only thing that stood out from the first time was the scraping sound the bed made against the floor and a dirty, half-filled glass of Dr. Pepper.

That summer I got a job at the local newspaper. I covered the county beat, which included marriages and divorces. I went to the courthouse every week and recorded the
divorces from the records. One week I saw Nick's name. I read though his entire divorce papers, shivering from the air conditioning. I closed the book and walked outside. It had to be at least a hundred degrees, I thought, pulling out my cigarettes.
Anderson was up to his neck in hot water when his daughter Valerie walked into the bathroom.

"I'm getting a brush. I'll be out of here in a second," she said. Valerie was sixteen years old, tall and thin, with large hands that seemed to belong to someone else's body.

"It's okay. I'm not going anywhere." Anderson was also tall. His knees poked out of the water.

"What's wrong?" Valerie asked. She had found the brush and was putting her dark brown hair up in a ponytail.

"Long night," Anderson said. He was thinking about the party at which he had spent the better part of the evening. He made a "huff" noise and sank further into the water. The bathtub was one of the old-fashioned kind with clawed feet.

"What happened?"

"Jenny came to the party dressed as Jackie Kennedy. More exactly, Jackie in Dallas." Jenny was Anderson's girlfriend of two months, a new paralegal at his law firm, one in a string of women he'd dated since his wife Terry had moved in with a younger man exactly one year ago.

"Oh, that's been done. Two girls from school went as that last Halloween. Did she have a fake brain?"

"Yes," Anderson said and sighed. "Why aren't you still at your party?"
"Yes," Anderson said and sighed. "Why aren't you still at your party?"

"That party was the work of a first class harelip. No one good showed up and those that did were too out of it to be any fun," Valerie said. She made a kissy face at herself in the mirror and tightened her ponytail.

"I hope you weren't doing any of that." Anderson imagined Valerie with a bottle pressed to her lips, some horrible alcohol-induced coma sure to follow.

"Please. With my stomach? I'm not drinking anything. Plus, I have my lifeguarding test tomorrow." Ever since her mother had left, Valerie had been taking a lot of over-the-counter medicines for burning stomach sensations. Anderson suspected she might have an ulcer, but Valerie refused to see a doctor. She was stubborn. She started to walk out of the bathroom.

"You ready for it?"

"I have everything down except the one save where you have to bring two people in at the same time." Valerie put her hands in the pockets of her loose, sleeveless dress and leaned against the vanity.

"What's so hard about that?" Anderson asked. He couldn't swim at all. As a child he'd almost drowned, terrified of deep water ever since.

"In theory they're clutching at each other. You have to separate them, get one to the side, then the other."

"Say they were really far out and you couldn't bring them in one at a time. Isn't there any way you could carry both of them at once?"

"I guess, but you'd have to be a lot bigger than I am," she said, turning the knob to get out.

As soon as she opened the door of her run-down duplex, Anderson regretted asking Jenny to the Jordan's Halloween party, regretted that such a holiday ever existed. At first he'd felt awkward about bringing his girlfriends around people who knew his wife,
but he had bigger worries now. People would see Jenny and wonder if Anderson had lost all sense. There was no mistaking the costume: blood-spattered pink dress, pillbox hat, and if there were any remaining questions, she had tied a plastic brain to a string around her neck. Jenny, twenty-eight years old, strained against the tight pink suit, her long reddish-brown hair falling down her back, her brown eyes tinted with blue contacts.

"Who are you?" Jenny asked, squinting at him, anxious to get going.

"Race Horse Haynes." Anderson hadn't felt like going to the trouble of wearing a costume so he had put on a Brooks Brothers suit.

"Who's that?"

"The Texas lawyer who defended Cullen Davis when he killed his wife. Remember?" Anderson suspected she might well not remember. She would have been thirteen when it happened.

"No one's going to get that." She grabbed a coat from the hall closet. "You'll have to spend all night explaining."

What Anderson missed most about Terry was something that had irritated him during the early years of their marriage. At the beginning of their relationship, Terry would keep the conversation going at all costs, talking about anything and everything. Anderson, who listened to people talk all day, never understood the point. Eventually she started reading all the time instead of talking and he would see her scan her bookshelves for things to read every time she had to go on a long car trip with him or go to his parents' house.

She favored poetry books, sometimes reading particular passages aloud, over and over. Her favorite was Wallace Stevens, especially some poem about blackbirds that seemed unusually difficult to Anderson. Also, she had memorized all of "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock," claiming she liked the way the words went together and even some of "The Wasteland," despite not understanding it. Even now, Anderson could hear that
wistful way Terry would say *mixing memory with desire*. Sometimes, Terry said, a person just likes to hear things because they sound good, not because they mean anything.

When Jenny and Anderson got to the party, he was relieved to see people wearing costumes in as much poor taste as Jenny's. One woman had come as Nicole Simpson, complete with a slash mark painted across her throat and a black eye that looked frighteningly real. Anderson knew her, but couldn't remember her name; she worked for the local rape-crisis center. After a woman was sexually assaulted, she was the one who explained what sort of legal action was possible. Anderson wondered if the costume was supposed to be funny or disturbing or neither. He wanted to ask her what it meant, but he didn't want to offend her and couldn't think of a way of asking that wouldn't.

Jenny talked to people she knew from work while Anderson sat on the sofa and drank one Tom Collins after another while the party swirled around him. For the next couple of hours, Anderson kept flashing back to other Halloween parties in this very same house when Valerie was just a baby. Terry liked Halloween, but she usually didn't dress up, a relief now that he thought about it. Their first she went as Wonder Woman, and people talked about it for years, how great she looked in the red, white, and blue leotard with the knee-high white boots. He remembered the year the new lawyer at the firm (now dead from a broken neck caused by diving into the shallow end of a pool) caused a tremendous scandal by dressing up as Jesus Christ carrying a large wooden cross and wearing a crown of thorns.

It didn't seem possible that all that time should have passed, that Anderson should suddenly be left without anyone who understood his history. He felt very alone even though he had known many people at the party for years, even though this was his life now. Standing up to find the rest room, he felt dizzy and decided not to drink anymore tonight.
When Anderson came out of the rest room, Jenny was talking to his friend Philip about her ex-husband. Jenny had married young. Anderson had never been able to figure out why since she seemed so wholly unsuited for it. That was one of the main things that had attracted Anderson to her, the recklessness, her saying what she wanted, when she wanted. Unfortunately, Anderson's grandmother always told him that every virtue came with a price and Anderson suspected tonight would prove his grandmother correct. Jenny was talking and moving her hands when Anderson sat down.

"First off, he never wrote 'you.' It was always 'ya.' He even said 'ya.' 'See ya, love ya.' There's a big difference between you and 'ya,' don't you think?"

"It would seem that way," Philip said. He smiled at Anderson in a way that meant he thought Anderson had really done it this time. He had liked none of Anderson's girlfriends. A big Terry advocate, Philip tried to help Anderson devise schemes to get her back, although Anderson was, for the most part, not optimistic. He had known Philip since law school; they had met on the first day when Philip started humming "Surfer Girl" during a particularly tedious part of the lecture.

Philip had never married, and Terry was forever trying to figure out why none of his relationships worked out. Terry eventually contended that Philip was too romantic. People like Philip, Terry said, don't marry because they don't think it's a big deal; for them, it's too big of a deal. The usual theory people had about Philip was that he was evading responsibility and commitment, but Terry's reasoning struck Anderson as profoundly true.

Jenny continued much to Anderson's horror. "Second, he took me ice-skating and I broke my kneecap. My knee hurts all the time." She took another drink of her Zombie. Anderson sat next to Jenny and drained the rest of his Tom Collins.

"See," Jenny said, raising her skirt up to her thighs. "You can see how it doesn't look like the other one anymore."

Anderson set his glass down on a marble coaster. "It's time to go, Jenny," he said, taking hold of her arm.
"I'm not finished." Jenny made a pouty face and turned toward Philip.

"Yes, you are."

"But I haven't even told the part about how the emergency room doctor made me take off all my clothes for a knee x-ray. The nurses couldn't believe it." She fixed Philip with a stare. "For a knee x-ray."

Anderson stood her up and grabbed both their coats off the bed in the guest room. He put her coat on her, pulled her hair out of her collar, and said good night to the hostess. Jenny didn't say anything until they were almost at her place. She sat with her hands in her lap and Anderson noticed that her knuckles were scarred and her nails were ragged. For a minute, he felt sorry for her, then nothing at all.

"I don't know why we had to leave so early." Jenny fiddled with the knob on the glove compartment, accidentally opening it and spilling maps and pens all over the floor.

She picked up most of the stuff and tried to jam it back in, but the glove compartment wouldn't shut. She slammed it hard a couple of times before Anderson told her to leave it, he would deal with it in the morning.

"Why don't you stay with me tonight?" she asked, as he walked her to the door. She leaned into him and kissed his neck.

"I need to go," he said, pulling himself away and standing on the edge of the porch. The wind had picked up and it looked like it would storm.

"Does my age bother you?" She bounced up and down on her toes. "Why don't you like me anymore?" The porch light flickered, threatening to go out before coming back on again, and Anderson marvelled at how young Jenny's skin looked in contrast to the duplex with its peeling paint.

"It's your personality." Once Anderson saw a woman in a particular way, he had a difficult time getting that picture out of his mind. He kept thinking about the way she lifted up her skirt, how drunk she was. He knew on some level that it shouldn't matter, but it did. It mattered a lot.
"That's a joke, right?" She seemed to sober up a little.

"Look, maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Let's talk in the morning,"

"I want you here now."

It seemed to Anderson that Jenny was younger than Valerie, younger than anyone he'd ever know or would know. Where was it written that anyone ever got what she wanted?

"If you leave, don't come back," she said. She stood outside the door crying as Anderson drove away, which had the eerie effect of making her look even more like a grieving Jackie Kennedy.

Terry left Anderson for a kindergarten teacher at the elementary school where Valerie had attended so many years ago. Terry told Anderson, "I'm more Terry when I'm around Mike." Anderson had felt like asking what "more" meant, but he suspected there wasn't an answer. She told him that she wanted him to understand why she was leaving, but, of course, he didn't understand. All he could think of was how much better she looked recently and how much happier she'd been. It made the last few months feel like one big hoax, like in college when MADD would stage auto accidents to create a stir on campus intended to scare people out of driving drunk. Instead of feeling relieved that no one had been hurt, Anderson was always upset at having been tricked.

When Terry told him about Mike, Anderson wanted to get angry, but nothing came out. Anderson was not the type of man to convince people that they wanted things they clearly did not. As a lawyer, he knew when he was fighting a losing battle, when the best arguments in the world wouldn't help. Instead, he paced around the bedroom as Terry carefully folded her clothes into a small suitcase. Anderson watched his footprints disappear in the off-white carpet as he kept covering the same space over and over. The room was large and drafty with a sky-light that cast shadows everywhere.

To make matters worse, Mike had a severe case of thyroid cancer and the doctor's
were unsure of how long he would last. "You're leaving me for someone who might not
even be around next year?" was all Anderson could say. Somehow this made her actions
worse. He imagined Terry taking care of this guy on his deathbed. Would she come back
when it was all over? Would he want her? After his date with Jenny, he suspected he
would. He was tired of trying to find someone who understood him, his values, his ideas.
If he concentrated, he could hear Terry's voice. *I have heard the mermaids singing, each
to each. I do not think they will sing to me.*

Still in the tub, Anderson heard Valerie turn on the television. A few minutes
earlier he'd heard her making popcorn. He stepped out and dried himself off. He looked
in the mirror and tried parting his hair a different way to make it look fuller. He couldn't
get it to stay; it just kept falling back to its usual part. Eventually, he gave up, put on
jeans and a t-shirt, and went to the living room.

"Anything good?" he asked, sitting down in the recliner.

"Slasher movie."

"Did you ever get your mother?" he asked. Valerie had been trying to reach Terry
for a few days without success. Anderson wondered what Terry might be doing tonight.

"I tried, but the line was tied up." Valerie took the popcorn out of the microwave
and wrinkled up her nose. "This stuff doesn't pop," she said, examining the kernels. "I
don't like this brand."

"So you gave up on her after one try?" he asked.

"I did try more than once, but I wasn't going to spend all night listening to a busy
signal."

"Wonder who she was talking to," he said.

Valerie shrugged. The phone rang, and she picked up and proceeded to wrap the
cord around her waist. She stepped into the kitchen stretching the phone cord as far as it
would go. Anderson tried to figure out who was on the other end of the line, hoping it wasn't Jenny. After a couple of minutes, Valerie hung up and sat down on the couch.

"Who was that?"

"Roger." Roger was one of Valerie's friends. He'd been over to the house almost every weekend for a few months. He was shy boy, but brutally funny. Anderson liked him very much.

"That's getting serious, huh?"

"Hardly. We just hang out together."

"Boys your age never just hang out with girls they're not interested in," he said and smiled. He decided that was the case with boys of any age. He did not like to think of Valerie dating, but he supposed nothing could be done. He only hoped that Valerie would get what she wanted and that it would be enough.

Valerie smirked. "Roger's gay."

"Did he tell you that?"

"I doubt he knows himself."

"So how do you know?" Anderson marvelled at how much more sophisticated Valerie's generation was than his own. It was uncanny how accurately she could predict how long Anderson's relationships with his various girlfriends would last.

"It's not rocket science." Valerie stood by the refrigerator with the door open for what seemed like a long time.

"What do you need?" Anderson asked. He decided not to ask any more questions about Roger. Anderson didn't care if the boy was gay, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know about it either.

"Nothing," Valerie said.

"Then shut the door. You're letting all the cold out," he said.
Anderson stood by the window and parted the drapes. "Looks nasty out there," he said. The small tree he and Terry had planted for shade years ago was bent over by the weight of the wind.

"Lucky my test's in an indoor pool." She shut the refrigerator and sat down on the couch with her lifeguarding books.

"So is Roger coming over?" Anderson arranged himself on the sofa and leafed through the TV Guide.

"Yeah, his parents don't get cable."

"Maybe we should order a pizza or something," Anderson said. He felt depressed, but not at all tired. The thought of going to bed alone was too much to consider.

Valerie kept flipping through the pages of her first aid handbook without stopping on any of them.

"I'm calling. What do you want on it? What does Roger like?" Anderson asked, looking through the yellow pages.

"Pizzas all taste the same to me." She stopped on a page about CPR and was underlining something.

He called and ordered a large Supreme pizza and a bottle of Pepsi.

"How long?" Valerie asked, nibbling at the popcorn.

"Forty-five minutes." He took a bag of individually-wrapped baby Snicker bars out of the cabinet. "I'm breaking into these. Want some?"

"Don't eat all those. They're for trick-or-treaters." She grabbed at the bag, but he lifted it above her reach.

"I'll buy more later. I just need something to tide me over."

Anderson saved Valeriee once. It was before he had stopped smoking, January 1978. Valerie had jumped into a pond at a friend's house, fully clothed in a little fur coat and mittens, and he had forgotten that he was scared of the water and jumped in and
pulled her out. Valerie had never yelled, never said one word, just went to the side of the pond and jumped. Terry, an excellent swimmer, watched from the side, stunned into immobility. Anderson forgot to take the cigarette out of his mouth and watched it float on top of the water for a second before he took Valerie back inside. After that, he never touched another cigarette again, even though it was difficult and he craved them for a very long time. For years after quitting, he smoked in his dreams, the ritual comforting and dangerous in that peculiar way that only something so ordinary and everyday can be.

Roger arrived half an hour later, leaves trailing off his coat and shoes. Valerie picked up the check thinking it was the pizza delivery person early and answered the door. She let Roger inside the house and led him into the sunken living room. He was wearing jeans and his face was scrubbed except for a trace of glitter underneath his right eye. She set the check on top of the television.

"What were you tonight?" Anderson asked.

"Ziggy Stardust, but nobody could figure it out. People kept saying 'are you an alien or something?'" Roger said, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "To top it off, the party just sucked." Roger had black hair that looked like it was always growing out from a bad haircut. It made Anderson sad for some reason.

"So did the one over at Tony's. I'm glad I didn't do anything for it," Valerie said. Anderson nodded. He thought about the Jackie outfit and shuddered.

"I ordered pizza. Do you like pizza?"

"Who doesn't?" Roger asked.

"Another movie's about to start in a minute," Anderson said. Roger sat next to Valerie on the couch, her lifeguarding books between them.

"When do you have to get back?" Valerie asked.

"My parents aren't expecting me." Roger rubbed his bloodshot eyes.
"Let's turn down the sound," she said. "You can do the voices." One of Roger's specialties was making up dialogue for the characters in any number of movies. He and Valerie did this often, and Anderson enjoyed hearing what they said. It was almost always more interesting than anything else in the films these days.

"Let's wait until the next one starts," Roger said. He took a baby Snicker bar. Valerie said, "Remind me to get more. Actual Halloween is still two days away." She looked at Anderson.

Anderson turned to the television where the one girl who escaped from Jason looked at the camera like she'd seen everything, all the horror of the past two hours plastered on her face. In a few minutes, there was another movie, only the traces of the last story apparent, enough to make the teenagers nervous, but not enough to stop them from going out and seeing the camp themselves.

Valerie and Roger left to get ice cream around one o'clock. They debated which grocery stores were open all-night.

"Kroger?" Roger asked.

"I'm not positive, but I think," Valerie said.

"If you leave now, you're going to miss everything," Anderson said. "It's only got a few more minutes to go." Anderson enjoyed having them around, enjoyed the easy coded way they talked, the sense of various pieces of information being passed back and forth without having to be fully explained. Sometimes they would even slip into voices of people they knew. "Media!" Valerie would say and Roger would respond "Caramba" and they would both laugh. Who knew what it meant?

"What else can happen that we haven't already seen?" Valerie asked. She picked up her car keys. Roger followed her through the kitchen into the dark garage.

Anderson heard the garage door go up and listened to make sure they remembered to shut it. The storm had picked up and the wind howled against the side of the house.
Anderson stretched out in his chair. The phone rang and the machine picked up. He heard the muffled sound of a woman crying and guessed it was Jenny, but couldn't make out the voice and didn't want to go to the kitchen and listen. Then he was struck by the idea that it might be Terry, upset over Mike. He picked up the extension, but it was too late. The woman had already hung up.

Anderson settled back into his chair. Valerie and Roger had not turned the sound back up on the television so he sat in the quiet, the rain tapping against the window. On screen, there was a girl crying and a man comforting her. Trying hard, Anderson couldn't think of one thing he might be saying.
ENTRY

When he gets off the plane, you don't recognize him. You forgot to wear your glasses, and your friend taps you on the shoulder and whispers "Watch out." You had given up looking after mistaking any number of people who looked nothing like him for him.

There are lots of people around making you feel claustrophobic. Usually you like the airport, but today it is hot and muggy. You are more tired than you've ever been in, oh say, maybe your entire life. You feel your stomach clench, a slow forced smile come over your face, and your friend, the one who agreed to do this with you, pats you on the shoulder.

He's been gone for two weeks, the last week calling and offering to fly you up to see him. You snapped at him about work, about how behind you were. You said you couldn't just go like that, without any notice. In actuality, you've been seeing someone new for almost the entire two weeks, someone you suspect is trouble, someone who told a friend that for Lent you'd given up liking. You suspect this new person is your Waterloo, the one who will keep you up nights crying.

And so for the past two weeks, you've been in a state of constant distraction and fear, so much so that you're keeping a journal. You hate journals. A record of need and depression laid bare is more than you can stand. You've lived the unexamined life if there ever was one. No more. You decide to record your dreams, get some insight into your
depression laid bare is more than you can stand. You've lived the unexamined life if there ever was one. No more. You decide to record your dreams, get some insight into your semi-conscious. What a mistake. The nighttime images leak to the day, a wasteland of chopped-up body parts, unlikely situations, snakes, murders.

He walks up to you and your friend, surprise registering on his face. Your friend makes to hug him, saying "We thought two beautiful women at the airport were better than one." Sometimes you think she's too demonstrative and effortlessly beautiful, but for now, you love this quality in her more than anything else. She puts her arm around him, and he looks at you the entire time. You touch his hand briefly, nothing more.

"How was your trip?" you ask, trying to seem jovial.

"Okay." He sets down his carry-on bag and rearranges. "My stepmother is acting weird. She's won't sleep in her bed anymore. Just the couch," he says. "She misses my dad."

His father died five years ago, but when he mentioned it on your first date, you had thought it was much more recent. To hear him tell it, you might guess it'd been a year at the most.

"You look great. All tan," your friend says to him when you all start walking again.

"I feel burnt."

The suitcases go round and round the baggage claim machine, and you remember the old Samsonite commercials with the gorilla throwing bags around in the back. After what feels like forever, his luggage slowly makes its way to you.

On the way to his place, your friend drives. You insist on sitting in the back. He tries to pat you, but you back into the seat. Courage, you tell yourself, courage. You force yourself to sit up straight. You feel like some bratty child, some ingrate, some social retard who doesn't have good sense. You wish that you were anywhere else but you are in the back seat of your friend's car, the wind whipping against the sides. Your mother
rode in this car once and declared it as safe as riding around in an aluminum can. You think about wrecks.

Your friend continues to keep things light, make polite conversation about the beach, about Florida, about what's been going on with people you all know. You try to add comments, but you feel sick to your stomach every time you speak. You shouldn't have had the drink earlier.

"What's my girl been doing?" he asks your friend. You catch her eyes in the rearview mirror. She smiles at you; it is the equivalent of giving you a bag to breathe in. You calm down a little.

"She's been working a lot. Look how pale she is." She reaches back and touches your knee. "I've been trying to get her to go eat with me, but she's stuck to that computer screen."

The guy you are seeing is leaving in three weeks, driving two thousand miles to stay with his parents for two months. You wonder why you are doing this, what this could possibly mean, where it will lead. You see yourself in front of the television every night, eating reduced-fat Pringles, wondering what to do. You think about how the hours will loom. This is Texas, and it doesn't get dark until nine and it's not even the longest day of the year yet. All that oppressive daylight. All those blank minutes.

"Are you sure this is the shortest way?" your friend asks, startling you. He shrugs. He is, without a doubt, the worst person with directions. Your friend, without a doubt, is the least tolerant person of such roundabout routes. You sigh.

"You look tired," he says, turning to face you. He's been trying to keep conversation going and you almost feel sorry enough to help him.

You finally reach his place, a huge apartment complex where all the apartments look the same. It's tremendous, and you remember the first time you drove here. He was sitting out in the parking lot waiting, smoking a cigarette. He was worried, he claimed,
not knowing if you would be able to find him. You marvel at how you feel nothing at this moment. Now.

"I'll help you with your bags," you say. You watch him unload the trunk, dropping the two big suitcases on the cement.

You lean into the still-running car. "I won't be long."

"Fifteen minutes. Tell him we have to meet someone."

"No longer," you say, flashing three fives with your hand.

You walk up the stairs, unbalanced by the weight in your right hand. You set down the bag in front of the door and rub your shoulder.

"When do I get to see you again?" he asks. Stupid songs float through your head. Dimly, you hear circus music. This seems to be one of the least appropriate responses on the earth.

"We need to talk," you say as he's putting the key in the door.

"Somebody's been in here," he says. "The place is clean." He picks up stuff and puts it down.

A note is taped to the television. "My mother," he says, scanning the lines.

You perch on the edge of his couch, look around the apartment. It looks like an office that's trying to be friendly, neutral, not offensive. It succeeds. You have never seen your current boyfriend's room all the way. Once, you peeked through the door and there were bags of stuff thrown haphazardly around the room as well as clothes, books, and postcards everywhere. He described it as "found art."

"I'm seeing someone else," you blurt out, unable to find any kind of transition.

"I could tell when I talked to you on the phone last." He sits down on his couch, still looking around.

"I would have told you, but I thought I'd wait since you were almost back."

"Who is it?" he asks.
You tell him. He doesn't know anything about this person so he tries to put it into a manageable context, find something tangible that your present boyfriend has that he doesn't. He's an engineer. This is how his mind works.

You try to explain and can't. This person is someone you had talked yourself out of, someone who you thought you should avoid. You remember when a friend of yours found a letter in the computer lab where you all work from this person to an ex-girlfriend. It wasn't signed, but as she was reading it out loud over the phone, you both realized who it was and fell quiet. You didn't want to have to give up on him, but this letter told you more than you wanted to know about his state of mind. Is it an old letter, you ask? She read the date, entirely too recent to provide any consolation. Pain is information, and lately you've had too much of both. You're thinking about this as he lights up a cigarette. You don't smoke, but you begin to see why people do. A comfort, a charm against loneliness.

"Can't we still see each other?"

"I don't think so." You shake your head.

You feel yourself slipping into mime mode, so you ask him if there's anything he needs to know. You feel bad because you've been dumped exactly like this: just there's somebody else, etc. You find out later that this somebody had been around for a while, that the dumper had tried to give you subtle clues, all of which you ignored. You weren't looking for trouble. The only thing the dumper said by way of explanation is "I can't do two things at once, I guess," and that was that. You want to provide more in this situation, but you don't know how much more is possible. Would more have mattered to you?

He thinks about this offer for a minute and then starts to talk.

"Once, when I was a little boy, I used to run by this box every day. And every day I would wonder what was underneath it, but I was always too busy playing to stop and look. One day I stopped, turned the box over and got bit by a snake."
"So that's a no, I guess." You are brilliant. You stun yourself with the amazing amount of stupid comments you can make, given a willing audience. His not wanting to know makes you feel strange. You think that if you can explain it to him, you might be able to make sense of it for yourself.

"I have to go. If you want to talk more," you say, trailing off.

He hugs you. "I'll miss you."

You look at your watch as you run down the stairs. Seventeen minutes.

"Are you okay? I saw you up there," she says. "Or at least I think it was you."

She changes the station. "I didn't want to pull up too close."

"It's over. And I owe you for doing this," you say, thinking about how nice she's been to come out here all this way.

It starts to rain, light at first, then heavy beyond anything you've seen. The rain is coming down so hard the car can barely stay in its lane. Your friend starts laughing.

"Hell of a night for this," she says. She turns up the radio and sings along.

After a few minutes, you quit pushing your nails into your hands. The nails have made bloody half-moons on your palms. You trace the heart line, the head line, the life line, all intersected with these little self-inflicted marks. You laugh for real for the first time the entire night and start to sing along as well. You're scared, but there aren't that many cars out on the road. If you slide around, there isn't that much to run into. The lightening makes the sky look like noon and you're cold in your thin cotton dress. You wished you had listened to the weather and brought something warmer.

"I've screwed my karma," you say. You're Catholic, but you still believe in karma and its prices. You put something on your plate that you couldn't finish. "I dated someone I didn't like."

"You never lied to him about it," she says, mirroring your own frantic rationalization process that has been going on for hours.

"That's what he said. He even thanked me for being so sweet."
"You are sweet."

You feel anything but that. You feel like a breaker of hearts, a homewrecker, a harlot. You are Bathsheba. You see yourself in a naughty little outfit and somehow this image is more depressing than funny.

When you get home, there's a message. "If you haven't run off," your present boyfriend says, "call me." You look at the clock. It's too late to call. He goes to bed early.

You get into your bed and wonder what you've done. You hope it's okay. You wrap yourself up tightly in the blanket. Before falling asleep, you remember standing in the airport terminal as people exited the plane, looking around at the people waiting. There was a skinny young man in a suit with a Snoopy balloon that said "Welcome home," holding a dozen slightly wilted red roses. He was so earnest. You almost cried when you saw him, that wave of sadness the only time you felt anything but sick the entire night.
Jacy sat in a lawn chair tracing her lifeline, waiting for Mark to bring her a Coke. It was late in the evening, and the heat was starting to let up a little bit. There was a portable phone beside her chair and a copy of Cosmo that she'd been through a couple of times. She'd even taken the quiz "How Assertive Are You?" She was right in the middle.

"You don't need it," Mark said as he placed a can of Coke in front of her. "You've already had one today."

"One more isn't going to do anything." Before Jacy got pregnant, she would drink Coke after Coke without much thought, but now with Mark nagging her, she was trying to cut back. She was wearing a blue-checked bikini top and cut-off shorts and brown sandals. The toenails on her left foot were bright red. Her other toenails were not. She sipped her Coke and put her feet up on the white porch table.

"You'll leave marks," he said, pointing to her feet.

"Lay off. You sound like Mother." Their parents had just left for England, a month-long business trip for their father.

"I just get tired of trying to keep everything up around here and having someone come in and make a mess."

This week was the first time Mark and Jacy had been alone together in two years, and she still marvelled at how worked up Mark could get over nothing. Once in high school she had dawdled for a while over her dinner. Mark had cleared the table and washed the dishes and kept coming back in the dining room, saying "Finished? I want to get this done." Eventually, she started playing with her food to irritate him, and he jerked the plate out of her hand, spilling green beans all over the carpet.
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Mark continued to glare at her. "If I get any dirt on the table, I’ll hose it off."

Using paper towels and Windex, Mark squatted down to wipe away smudges from the door where the cat, Eggroll, had touched her nose and breathed.

"What's the phone doing outside?" Mark asked. He'd finished wiping the door and was pointing the Windex nozzle at the phone.

"I'm waiting to talk to Stephen."

Mark looked at the phone, then Jacy.

"He'll call," Jacy said.

Mark snorted. A tarantula crawled off the roof onto the side of the house. "Look at that evil little beast." He leaned forward to get a closer look, his hand resting on the door handle. The tarantula was large, probably a female.

Jacy made a shivering motion and picked up all her stuff. "I'm going in. I know they're not poisonous, but still," she said, pointing at the tarantula as it dropped to the ground.

The first time Jacy brought Stephen home to her parents, it was already too late for him to make any kind of impression except bad. It was two weeks ago, right after she had gone to the doctor and found out she was pregnant. She had told Stephen as soon as it had been confirmed. He had risen to the occasion, been kind, cooperative up to the
point that he had gone out and found a wedding band the very same day. None of this made any difference, though. Nobody had liked him.

In addition, the very fact of Stephen being in her parents' house made her feel strange. She'd never thought there was anything odd about the house, but with him there, it seemed to take on a creepy aura. Her father collected snakes and spiders and put them in clear casts, and these casts lay about all over the house. She never thought anything of it until Stephen saw the one with the baby rattlesnake and asked questions. Who caught it? How do you kill the snake and get it to stay perfectly intact? You put it in the freezer, Jacy had said. When she was growing up, jars of tarantulas, snakes, scorpions, and brown recluses lined the freezer in the house and the deep freeze in the garage. Stephen looked to Mark for support of how weird that was, but Mark had only shrugged. Stephen had pressed.

"But didn't you think that was strange?" he'd asked.

"It doesn't seem that strange to me," Mark answered and looked at Jacy. After Stephen had excused himself to the bathroom, Mark leaned over to Jacy and whispered in her ear: "You've really done it this time. You've brought home Mr. Green Jeans." Mr. Green Jeans was a particularly wholesome character on "Captain Kangaroo," a show they watched as children. Jacy giggled. Stephen sort of was Mr. Green Jeans, once she thought about it.

"Let's do something tonight. I'm bored," Jacy said. She was sitting in the living room without any lights, braiding her hair. Mark was looking in the refrigerator.

"What's wrong with being here?"

"You're not any fun. Let's go to a movie. Please? I just want to get out." She dropped the braid without putting a rubber band around it.

"There's nothing good. It's summer."
"You never do anything with me. We used to be friends." She placed her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm not walking around with you looking like that." He moved away and pointed to her bathing suit.

"You didn't think I was going to go topless, did you?"

"I have no idea what you might do," Mark said, opening the refrigerator again.

They decided to go to Braums, because they were too late for any of the movies. Jacy felt very hungry even though she'd been eating all day. "You know what I want - - some ice cream with little bits of bubble gum in it." Jacy frowned. "I don't see it."

"Sounds disgusting." Mark wasn't looking at the ice cream anymore. He was scanning the food menu.

"You used to eat that stuff all the time, remember?"

"I didn't know any better," he said. "Everything here is bad for you." Mark ordered a glass of water and went to sit down.

"Do you think Stephen really wants to get married?" Jacy asked, licking off a drip from the side of her cone and arranging herself into the booth. Since they didn't have what she wanted, she'd ended up with a double-scoop of Rocky Road.

"I don't know. You're the one who's with him, not me," he said. He picked at a nail that was chewed below the quick.

"But you're a guy. Would you?"

"Andrea doesn't want to get married." Mark scraped wax shavings off his paper cup.

"What if she did? I'm talking hypodermic, dumb-dumb."

"Hypothetical."

"Yeah, that. So, hypothetically?" Jacy enunciated the world clearly.

"I don't see why not, especially if I wanted a kid, which I don't."
"It's weird to actually imagine happening." Jacy didn't know why it was so hard
for him to make conversation.

"It'll be like some kind of made-for-tv movie. You'll be coming down the aisle in
white, and Stephen will be standing there as if he's been waiting for you all his life." He
was moving the wax shavings in patterns on the table. "I don't see what you're so worried
about."

Jacy sighed.

"I think you should call Stephen and have him calm you down."

"It doesn't mean the same thing if I call him. He should call me."

"What does it matter who calls who?"

Jacy wondered how Mark could be so dense. "It makes all the difference," she
said, biting into the cone.

Mark had cut off his finger once. A night shortly after Jacy's high school
graduation, her parents had gone out to dinner. Mark took a rubber band and wrapped it
tightly around his right index finger. Jacy saw him with the rubber band, but she didn't
think anything about it. He often wore rubber bands around his wrist and was forever
snapping them, a way to keep from falling asleep when he worked as a night clerk at his
college. The snapping became habit. He wore the rubber bands and nobody thought
much of it. He had many strange habits when he was a child and Jacy had taken notice.
She had seen the suicide notes in Crayola, the letters from teachers that he'd hidden.

Late that night he took a knife from the kitchen and, with one cut, left his finger
hanging. When Jacy went to get a Coke, she saw a bunch of blood-soaked paper towels,
and her skin felt clammy. She found him in the den, passed out. Without discussing it,
both of them claimed it was an accident. The only thing Jacy asked about was the rubber
band. "I was trying to cut off my circulation," he said. "I didn't want to make a mess."
Mark checked the mail the next day while Jacy was inside watching "All My Children." Erica Kane was talking to a new character who was asking her if she was surprised at how wonderful her life had turned out, and Erica was saying, "I always knew I would lead an extraordinary life." Jacy wished she felt that way. She wanted a Coke, but she was trying to save it for later.

"Anything for me?" she asked, when Mark walked into the house shuffling envelopes.

"You don't live here anymore."

"Stephen knew I was going to be here for a couple of weeks," she said. "I just thought."

Mark started smiling.

"Something good?" Jacy asked. She was not used to seeing Mark happy.

He stopped smiling. "Andrea," he said, then started smiling again. "It feels heavy." It was a brown package that looked like it might be a book.

"It looks heavy." Jacy wondered if Stephen would be anywhere near that excited to get something from her. Probably not, she thought. He wasn't the romantic type. After they had sex, he wouldn't talk about how beautiful she was or how much she meant to him. Instead he would say "thank you" and pat her on the hand, which struck her as oddly formal. She wasn't counting on that changing. All the wedding books said that you couldn't expect your future husband to behave differently after the ceremony.

"You miss her," Jacy said, glad that Mark was talking to her, trying to keep the conversation going. Jacy was jealous of Andrea, of the affection with which Mark regarded her, of the public position she had in Mark's life, the way he didn't have to hide how he felt about her.

"I'll see her soon. Next week."

Mark walked to his room, and Jacy stretched on the couch with her hands laced over her stomach. She didn't look any different, but her breasts felt sore and she was
queasy sometimes late at night. She couldn't even get morning sickness straight. She
looked at her tan lines and thought about sitting out in the sun this afternoon with the
lightest oil possible to improve the situation. She didn't particularly like laying out,
especially without a pool, so she would pick the brightest hours to get the most effect with
the least effort. She put on her flip flops to go to Piggly Wiggly and get a new magazine.
She grabbed her purse, counted the few dollars she had, and yelled to Mark.

"Do you want anything?" she said, pausing at his door.

He didn't answer.

"I'm going to the Pig."

Still no answer. She swiped her keys off the kitchen table and walked out of the
house.

It was another brutally hot day. The sun reflected off the white driveway as she
fished some old sunglasses out of her purse, ones trimmed with florescent green plastic.
She'd sat on her new ones last week. They didn't look too damaged, but they fell apart
when she put them back on and she hadn't figured out a way to keep them together.

She took her dad's truck because her car was almost out of gas. His radio wasn't
very good and would only get AM stations. Jacy found a broadcast featuring Dr. Warren
Martin called "To Your Health!" where people called with medical questions. A woman
was talking about fever sores. "I heard on the news that they think fever sores cause
lesions on the brain, and I've got a mouth full of them," the woman said, getting more
agitated with each word. "I can see them and I've got cream on them, but my lips are
swollen and they hurt and now I'm worried about what's going on inside. I won't even
know what the damage is for years. I can't sleep because of this," she said angrily, as
though the sores were Dr. Warren Martin's fault and she expected him to fix her problems.

Jacy pulled in next to a big white car with a group of mentally-challenged
teenagers in it and parked near the door. One kid pressed his face up against the window
and looked at her. The others were hitting each other and talking while a woman sat in
the driver's seat reading a book. The windows of the car were open and one kid stuck his hand out and touched her truck. The woman smiled at Jacy and told the boy "Don't."

Jacy got out and walked into the store. She looked at the magazine rack to find something she hadn't already been through. She had Modern Bride, so she bought a Mademoiselle, which had a lengthy section on end-of-the-summer grooming. There was also an autumn fashion forecast, full of short plaid skirts on skinny girls posed next to trees. She wondered what she would look like this autumn. She had a hard time seeing herself visibly pregnant, someone's wife. She guessed it would happen like the seasons changing - - each day seemed a little different until one day you woke up and realized the weather was nothing like it had been. But for now, she couldn't imagine it.

When she got back from the store, she went to her old room and put on her two-piece and got a towel. Mark was still in his room with the door closed, and she could hear the soft drone of the television that she forgot to turn off.

"What are you doing in there?" she yelled. She wanted him to come out. She felt like talking to someone, and she didn't want to call Stephen. Mark didn't answer. Jacy assumed he was reading and rereading the letter from Andrea. Andrea was the only girl Mark had ever liked as far as Jacy knew. An intense, small woman who wore a lot of eye shadow, Andrea didn't look like Mark's type at all. Jacy always imagined Mark with what she and her friend Sheila used to call "granola girls," women who didn't use much make-up, wore their hair straight or in braids, women who looked wholesome and wore khaki shorts. Jacy had met Andrea a couple of times and she seemed like she was from somewhere else, high cheekbones and not a pair of khaki shorts in her closet. Jacy found her hard to talk to, much more like a guy than the girls she hung out with at school. Still, Andrea managed to be very female in a way that Jacy couldn't exactly describe.

Jacy rubbed Banana Boat on her shoulders and went outside. Before she was pregnant, she always used Coppertone, but now the smell of it made her sick. She read somewhere that pregnant women were often repulsed by fragrances they used to love. She
put her sunglasses on, the phone beside her, her towel on the lounge. She tried to imagine what Stephen was doing. Right now she felt like she had never known him, that there was no possible way that they would have a child together. She hoped this feeling was only the product of not seeing each other for a while. He had worked as a camp counsellor this summer, but he was back in Dallas now working at a electronics parts store. She visited him once at the camp, early in June. They had sex three times without using anything because both of them thought the other one would have brought protection. It was not the most romantic of circumstances, having to sneak around when the campers were sleeping, having sex in his small, cramped car, nervous about each sound, worried about getting caught.

She met Stephen taking a beginning modern dance class at school. Neither of them had wanted to be in the class, but it was the only physical education course that wasn't completely full. During finals week Stephen had asked her out. Even though they didn't have much in common, she liked the way he talked. He'd kind of reminded her of Mark, the way his voice sounded saying certain words. How arbitrary it all seemed now. If she had only thought to bring something to the camp, there would be no wedding, no child, no anything. Her entire life had been altered by something that lasted a little under ten minutes. Of course, this was not the first time such a thing had happened, but this was the first time that the changes would be visible to everyone.

The phone rang and Jacy jumped up, knocking the washcloth off her head. She waited exactly three rings to catch her breath, then picked up.

"Are you the person responsible for the long distance service at your house?" a woman asked.

Jacy was so disappointed that she didn't even answer the question, but hit the talk button and hung up. She saw the little sparkles of sunlight dancing off her legs, and she lifted the side of her bikini bottom to see how much sun she had gotten.
Falling asleep for a while, she woke in a small pool of sweat with her nose burnt. She went inside and took off her swimsuit. Her closet doors were mirrors, and she looked at herself before throwing on a light pink cover-up. For a moment her body felt separate from her, something she once had that had gotten lost.

Pushing this thought aside, Jacy got an orange and tore it into sections, placing them onto a paper towel. After eating a few bites, she decided to work on her book. It was the one thing besides getting a tan that made her feel productive. She had been cutting pictures out of magazines and catalogs and pasting them on thick blank pages. The outside of her book had a picture of a little girl and little boy holding hands. She had written "Baby Book of Days: 1986" on the first page with the pen from her calligraphy set. The book was almost half-way finished, but she wasn't rushing, wanting to make sure that all the pictures were pasted without any air bubbles or edges sticking up. There were pictures of clothes and movies and television shows, plus she made her own notes in the margins. Also, she had pictures of her and Stephen, notes about the courtship, wedding, etc.

She'd started the baby book right before she took the home pregnancy test. Somehow making a book made her feel more prepared for whatever was going to happen. When she went to the doctor to get the test confirmed, she had brought the book, writing notes about how the doctor's office looked, wanting to get it all down, though she wasn't sure why. It seemed like a good idea to give someone a start, set the baby on the right path. Jacy got the idea from a friend who kept journals and yearbooks and diaries all his life. They were beautiful and artistic, each a masterpiece in a strange, pop culture way, encompassing everything he wasn't and could never be. When he was a teenager, he began to take catalogs and burn the eyes out of the models with a magnifying glass instead. Jacy couldn't pinpoint when things had changed for him.

She flipped open to where she had stopped yesterday and tried to think of something else to paste. With over half the book left to fill up, she couldn't think of one
more thing to put in it. Somehow being at her parents' house made it hard for her to concentrate. She thought about what she'd heard on the radio earlier about fever sores causing lesions on the brain and how that could lead to Alzheimer's. She'd never had a fever sore. In careful script she made note of the risk and the fact that she had not had fever sores and sincerely hoped the baby was not prone to them either. She didn't want to scare the baby, but it seemed important to relate potential dangers. She closed the book and wondered why she'd never made any books for herself.

Jacy decided to call Stephen because he wouldn't call her. She imagined him at the electronic parts company, hunched over his computer. Jacy wondered if she would ever learn to trust him. She didn't yet because when they had sex, he wouldn't look at her. He avoided her eyes the entire time, burying his head in her shoulder. No matter what Stephen said, she never entirely believed it. The body doesn't lie. When Jacy was with Stephen, she often longed to talk to Mark, with whom she had shared any number of endless, scary hours. She remembered waiting in an abortion clinic with Mark, miles away from their hometown, their parents unaware, Mark and Jacy both knowing only that there were no other choices, that no one must know what had happened or why. What had seemed like a strange game to them had turned into something real and disturbing. She knew that they had gone too far, and now everything would end.

When she thought about that day, it didn't feel like a memory of something that had actually happened. Even the sounds in the room felt faraway. The entire experience had the quality of a baby picture in that you had so little recollection of the moment that the photograph was more real than the actual event, so much so that the picture became memory itself. Afterward, Mark and Jacy never spoke of the occasion, and she would go days before remembering why they didn't stay up late and talk all night, why there was so much silence between them. Even so, she knew there was value in that time, despite the fact that she couldn't figure out what it might be.
Jacy dialed almost all of Stephen's number four times before she had the nerve to hit the last digit and listen to the phone ring. The phone rang for a long time, and she hung up when he answered. She realized that she didn't want to talk to him. Instead, she imagined she was talking to him. In her mind, she conjured up the worst possible scenario, much the same way she would sometimes envision herself in the hospital after some attempted rape, eyes swollen, arms bruised. She would think of this happening to herself as she walked home late at night, the horror of her imagination keeping her from concentrating on where she was going.

In Jacy's imagined phone scene, Stephen broke up with her. He tells her that he's gone back to his ex-girlfriend, that he never really loved Jacy. This manufactured scenario seemed at once extremely plausible and unreal even though she is carrying his child. Surely a pregnancy must count for more, but she knows it doesn't. She could have a baby with anyone.

After she put the phone down, Jacy laid on the sofa and devoured an entire can of Sour Cream and Onion Pringles, tears spilling down her face. She played with the remote, unable to stand any channel for more than a couple of minutes. For the first time she felt real panic at the prospect of having a baby. She didn't know what she was thinking, only that when she had taken the home pregnancy test she hadn't felt frightened at all, only stunned that something had actually happened, something that could ruin her life in a dramatic way, a way she welcomed. Now she was getting more of an emotional response from fantasizing about a break-up that wasn't going to happen than she did planning for a wedding that was.

It occurred to her that this situation wasn't just an aberration, but more likely how life really was: a series of ill-thought out actions, followed by consequences. She remembered spending the night with friends at the lake in high school and feeling all this
possibility in the summer air, but now it seemed like each year her life became narrower and narrower.

Jacy was surprised when she reached for another chip and touched the bottom of the cannister. She felt greasy and went to take a shower and put on clean clothes. Afterwards, she still didn't feel clean, just bloated and tired. She wanted her old body back.

Mark was still in his room. She hadn't heard anything all day. It wasn't too weird for him to get caught up in his work, but he would usually come out and pace.

"Mark, what are you doing?" she yelled. She wanted to walk into his room, but she knew he would get mad and probably throw something and tell her to go away.

"I called Stephen," she said. "There's something I need to tell you." Even though the conversation hadn't happened, it seemed to encompass all the sadness of things that had happened and were never mentioned again. She started to cry, feeling worse than ever.

"Come out and talk to me." Jacy pounded on his door. "Come on."

Mark stepped out of his room. For a minute, Jacy couldn't figure out what was different. He'd taken a razor and outlined another mouth below his real one. The cuts formed a bloody smile underneath his lower lip, curving up to his cheekbones. The carving didn't look too deep, but it was distinct and more horrible than anything Jacy had ever seen before. She felt a wave of nausea hit her and ran to the bathroom. She threw up all her Pringles. After she finished she rested her head down on the cool tile. She was having a hard time breathing.

When she stepped out of the bathroom, Mark was sitting in the living room.

"It's over with me and Andrea," he said, his finger tracing the cuts.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. She just decided to move on."

"What did you do to yourself?"
He didn't say anything, just stretched out in the love seat in a way that was at once suggestive and distancing.

Jacy couldn't stand to see his face so she looked out the window at the sun setting. The sky was completely pink. "What was in the package?"

"A book of poems. She underlined some stuff."

Jacy still had a bad taste in her mouth from throwing up even though she had rinsed. She went to get some orange juice.

"So what about Stephen? You guys decide on a place for the wedding?"

"Maybe I shouldn't have this baby either," she said. Jacy didn't know she was going to say that until she said it.

"I don't understand. What's going on?"

Jacy felt like it was already too late to do anything. Her baby book sat on the couch. Jacy and Mark stared out the window as the sky darkened.

"I never thought it would happen again. You with a baby." Mark sounded wistful: Jacy looked over at Mark and felt all the sadness she had about him well up. "You should clean those cuts. They could get infected."

"Now you sound like Mother. Already took some alcohol to them."

"Hydrogen peroxide would have hurt less," Jacy says. She couldn't imagine what he was thinking. "You probably need stitches. We should get someone to look at it."

He shrugged and shook his head.

"That's going to be really hard to hide," she said. She pulled a stray hair out of her eyelashes.

"Who said anything about hiding?" He pulled his legs to him and sat up straight in his chair. "I'll say it was a shaving accident." A real smile appeared above the fake one.

"You want to sit outside and talk? It's probably cooler out there than it is in here."

Jacy was feeling claustrophobic. She knew if she didn't get out, she would be sick again.
"It hurts to talk," he said, motioning at the lines on his face, each movement making the cuts bleed more.
A small boy came to my door and told me that he'd seen a man looking inside my house. In the bedroom I had heard noises, seen shadows. Of course, I live around trees and small animals and children. I blame these things.

"I live in this neighborhood. I've seen some man around lately." He made peering motions with his face, his hands framing his eyes. November and the heat had not broken. Sweat collected on the boy's face.

"Thanks. I'll take care of it," I said, watching him walk away. I feel a surge of anger at the boy, irrational but definitely there. He doesn't have any evidence. Sick to my stomach, I still don't believe there's been anyone watching. Then, after a while, I feel nothing at all, just a nervous shaking that I can't quite control.

When any of the staff turns on the treadmill, Tran, a large Vietnamese girl, hisses and spits at it. Once I got a picture of her hissing, lips slightly parted, eyes focused on the motion, the rubber walkway swallowing itself. That picture might go in the show. I've been thinking about what to put in ever since my photography professor told me that I was selected for the MFA student exhibition this semester. There's one student show every semester. Last year my boyfriend Ryan got the show and everyone looked at him instead of his paintings. Fuck that. Conspiracies of the body don't interest me. I comb my hair in the most efficient manner, quickly after washing, without concern for breaking off the ends.
instead of his paintings. Fuck that. Conspiracies of the body don't interest me. I comb my hair in the most efficient manner, quickly after washing, without concern for breaking off the ends.

I've made myself uncomfortable for men. It's easy. The first time I spent an entire night with someone, my arm was in an awkward position, the room too cold. I didn't want to move; it would have been admitting something, somehow. Sometimes what you don't do matters. That's not to say that I'm perfectly efficient. Occasionally, I spend a great deal of time and effort making myself uncomfortable for any number of reasons. That's probably the story with Ryan if I think about it, which I don't.

It's election day and the streets are full of signs. I'm driving in the early morning back from work. My job is to sit up late and eat the bread of sorrow. I'm employed at Mental Health/ Mental Retardation, working graves, staying awake and making sure that the girls in the home are not hurting themselves or anyone else. It's not as bad as it might sound; I work my midnight shift with a voodoo priestess named Rebea, the blackest person I've ever seen. She dresses completely in white, smokes cigars, and talks to the moon. She's also very nervous about fingernails. If a nail breaks off, she won't stop until she finds it. I like that. If you're going to believe something, best to believe all the way, good and bad. She's one of the few people I've met who understands consequences. Even though I've taken pictures of everyone else there, I don't aim my camera at her.

A photograph I keep: not the famous *Hustler* cover with the woman whose bare legs rise out of a meat-grinder, but a picture of a woman holding that cover in front of her face. I have a copy of that print in a box. Every year I notice something different, a nuance, a change. Life is so very interesting if you pay attention. My photography
instructor has a sign hanging in his office — "you can only see what you're ready to see." I don't think all the students understand what this means.

After finishing up the grave, I want nothing more than to go to bed, but my temperament makes it nearly impossible to fall asleep just after work. Instead, I look through yesterday's mail. Nothing for me, but a few envelopes for people who lived here before. I start to write "not at this address" on all of them, but my pen won't work. When a pen really finally runs out of ink, all the shaking in the world won't bring it back. All the little tactics meant to make it last -- dipping the tip in water, manically scribbling in circles -- fail. I look through the mail anyway. A Jenny Craig ad. An envelope marked child support information enclosed. A mailer stamped sexually explicit material inside addressed to one J. Lonnie Smith. I'm wondering what old J. Lonnie was into, but there are no hints on the outside and I don't feel like opening it. I've always lived in rented places and inevitably a fair amount of pornography finds its way to my door. I used to feel compelled to open everything, see what was what. After a little of that, all you know is that people pretty much like the same things in different wrappings. Not a surprising lesson, but still. When you're expecting variety and thrills and perversion, finding comfort and sameness can be pretty disturbing.

When I wake up, I go to school to help clean after the annual art student Halloween party. I don't feel rested; I kept waking up feeling panicky. I haven't told anyone about what the boy told me. I'm thinking that he probably saw my neighbor, a guy who keeps to himself in the other side of the duplex. He's been working on his motorcycle lately; that's how I account for any strange noise outside.

Nobody's around when I arrive. The room is littered with empty beer bottles, empty wine bottles, empty liquor bottles, a cauldron filled with red water, black velvet spiders, and a number of cobwebs draped haphazardly around the furniture. I throw away
All the obvious trash. Delicate dead tree limbs hang over one corner of the scene, each one loaded up with nooses. Ryan walks up behind me as I reach for the first noose. He puts his hands on my shoulders which tense up before I realize who it is. Even after I know, I can't relax my muscles.

"Are you okay?" Without waiting for an answer, Ryan continues. "This place is a mess."

"It was a bigger mess before I got here. I've actually made some progress."

"Why hasn't anyone gotten around to cleaning up before now? The party was three days ago." He's brushing his hair out of his eyes and looking around the room. I have to admit he's quite lovely, even though I'm losing respect for his work. He's going through some weird phase where he's tearing up all his paintings, then sticking new, smaller canvases imbued with monochromatic colors on them. Frankly, it's not very interesting.

"Nobody has the energy." All the first year students are getting ready for their big review. The rest of us are trying to finish projects before leaving for break. I have a huge sty on my left eye. It hurts. It is ugly. I try not to think about it.

"So, you got the show. Congratulations," he says. I smile and keep working to undo the noose. I consider telling him about the alleged peeping tom, but any comfort he might try to offer wouldn't be enough. Sometimes it's easier to be alone with something like that, not to get your hopes up about how much someone can do to keep you safe. Once a friend of mine and I were playing volleyball with a bunch of guys. We took off our shoes and threw them to the side, not realizing the grass had stickers. As soon as I hit the ball once, I had a bunch of them stuck in me. My friend ran toward her shoes, saying "if you go fast, the stickers can't get you." I couldn't move, every step more painful than the last. One of the guys came over and carried me out of the field. I ended up dating him for six months during which time he broke into my house and pretended to be a rapist using a pair of my pantyhose for a mask. I would have been better off running.
"What's going in it? I could help you pick out stuff," Ryan says.

I don't even want him thinking in those terms. I'm remembering a time at work when this girl, Heidi, went off. She's a tiny thing, barely a hundred pounds and kind of beautiful. She's not even a little retarded, just very, very upset and prone to fits of all kinds. Also, she has this strange walk where she slinks around on her tiptoes. Once she grabbed me around the neck and said "I'm going to drink your blood. What do you think about that?" Rebea walked up and pulled her off me. After sitting her down, Rebea looked at her for a long minute and said "Your teeny white ass don't know the first thing about drinking blood." I'm thinking Ryan would do best to stay out of my business.

You can tell how much people want something by how hard they try to talk themselves out of it. For a long time I tried to talk myself out of Ryan. He looked like he took a lot of attention. He looked like work. At any rate, he had a girlfriend. But none of that mattered when we walked through dead leaves together, talking about different types of fish. We were in a huge Japanese garden with ponds of big orange and black Khoi so thick they piled on each other swimming to other destinations. We walked over bridges, fish swarming in the river below. There were machines that had fish food and we bought big handfuls of it. We fed them for a long time before I reached down and touched one of them. I yelled and laughed when I felt its slimy skin underneath the water. Night came quickly. I didn't know then how easy it is for him to fall in love with a setting, a scene, a rendering.

As for me, I know I don't love Ryan. Unlike him, I don't feel the need to convince myself that I do. I like what I see in him; it's not the same thing. The man I love, I feel safe in saying, never loved me. I don't know where he is anymore or what he might be doing. Once I cried in his presence. He held me until I stopped. This was as close to love as he got. Of course, it would have sufficed. I could have scraped by on it. In math classes I always got the right answers, but never the ways the teachers wanted. "There are easier methods to solve this problem," they would each say in turn, show your work being
the order of the day. I still contend that it's not what you start with that counts or how you get the figures. After all the subtracting and dividing, it's what you have left that matters.

The next day I get called in to work the second shift, and we have a Hepatitis B scare. One of the girls named Caroline has it, and she's a biter. She's been transferred to our home for said biting, having broken skin twice at her previous dwelling. Hepatitis B is, of course, very contagious. The staff draws straws to see who gets to tend Caroline. It's me. One of the other workers tells me what the deal is with Caroline. She's prone to getting up at night and she must be given her meds before bedtime, which is no easy feat according to those who have done it. It's going to be a very long shift trying to stay away from her biting range and being extra-careful to sanitize everything she touches. I have faith that I can come to an understanding with Caroline, but I'm still nervous. I tell her up front: "Don't try to bite me with those pointy teeth of yours and everything will be okay." She doesn't do anything but blink.

I let my guard down when I'm putting her to bed. She strikes, biting me hard on the shoulder when I'm turned around. Once a biter, always a biter. I'd do best not to forget that. Now I'm stuck hoping I can get into see a doctor tomorrow even though I know they won't find out anything right away.

The whole encounter reminds me of when a friend of mine set me up with a guy named Phil who had a miniature pit bull named Homey. The aforementioned Homey had bulging eyes and strained against the leash Phil had on him. I knew that a date with a guy with a miniature pit bull was, in the scheme of things, not one of my better ideas. I thought about yanking the friend who set me up by her long black hair until she explained what she was thinking, but this was not productive. Instead, I tried to figure out a reason to leave. Phil began talking to Homey in a low voice, reminiscent of some Mafia don culled straight from viewing "The Godfather" one too many times. Without thinking, I
started laughing which upset Phil and he said: "Be careful around Homey. I never can predict what he's going to do. You might not want to pet him." Up to that point, I had made no move to touch Homey, but then I got down on my knees and got up in Homey's ugly, fierce little face. "You'll be a good boy for me," I said. Homey, true to his nature, bit me right on the hand. It hurt, but it was a good excuse to go home.

Sitting in the doctor's office the next morning, I'm burning up and I'm wondering I've caught a strange fever from Caroline or if something's wrong with the temperature control in the office. I suspect it is not me. The others in the room, most of them elderly, have a languid look about them. Furthermore, I have a direct view of a retarded teenage boy sprawled on the only couch in the room. The boy puts his hand down the front of his jogging pants and complains about the heat. From the side of the room, his grandmother grunts, says "Nothing for it," and returns to her magazine. I have a bad feeling that might be what the doctor tells me.

When I get home from the appointment, I see my neighbor from a couple of houses down cleaning out her car. She looks rough in her worn t-shirt and overprocessed hair. I grab my purse and head for the door, but she yells "hey" and I stop in my tracks.

"Our cars got vandalized last night," she says, motioning to another girl pulling garbage out of her glove box. "We both forgot to lock."

Somebody had keyed my car down both sides about a month ago, but I never reported it. The insurance premium was too high and it seemed beyond me to care enough to do anything.

"I guess it's just kids, but I don't know. I do know there's been some whacko looking in windows recently. I didn't actually see someone, but I saw a shadow and I went out to look and heard someone in the trees," she says.
"Sounds like a Friday the 13th movie to me." Shaking my head, I feel my grip on my Hepatitis B fact sheet get tighter. My finger hurts from where the nurse drew blood.

"Hardly," she says and looks at me like I'm just another wise-ass, someone who's been coddled all my life, someone who doesn't know shit about anything outside my own protected little world. It's the same attitude I take with some of the students at the school. "I know he was watching me shower. Hope he got a thrill. I'm not anything to look at," she says, hands on her hips.

She has the appearance of poverty, desperation. One look and you know what her life's been and what it's going to be. I want to reassure her that she's attractive, but I can't. She knows what she looks like. Anything I might say would be patronizing.

"I'll be careful." I'm trying to get in my house to rest. I feel incredibly tired all of a sudden.

"You better," she says. "You should park behind, instead of in front. A person isn't as likely to mess with what's not right there in his face."

That night Ryan calls, but I don't pick up. I listen to him on the machine, talking about his day, asking me to "Please answer this damn thing because I know you're home. I saw your car and I'm sick of having a girlfriend who works weird hours and never wants to go out, and I'm going to hang up right now if you don't pick up," but he doesn't, he just continues to ramble about how he left someone who really liked him for him for me, which is all fine and good, because I feel like hearing someone talk. I just don't want to answer back.

Getting ready for the exhibition, I pick up the newspaper in my front lawn. I don't subscribe, but they deliver for free once a week, a way, I suppose, of convincing you that you can't live without it. Usually, I let the paper stay in my lawn until it yellows and
eventually throw it out with the rest of the trash, but today I decide that I'm going to pay more attention and try to keep things up.

It doesn't take me long to get ready and I've got time to kill before I leave, so I look at the paper because I'm too anxious to concentrate on anything else. I read the police report because it's weirdly reassuring. Crimes that happen in this town, as a rule, aren't that bad. Most of the time, it's nothing more serious than trespassing, vandalism, the occasional shoplifting charge.

Scanning the blurbs, I see that my neighbor has been attacked. It's listed as an assault and battery. The details aren't there and I try not to imagine them. I think about how careful she was and how hard she looked and how none of it protected her. I wonder why I didn't know before now. I hear sirens all the time, but it never occurs to me to look to see what's going on.

As I drive to the exhibition, the weather breaks. It's sudden and I'm caught in thin clothes, unprepared. Shivering, people take in the work, drink wine. I feel like I'm not there. I keep thinking about the newspaper, how the whole night would be different if it were still outside my house, how once you know something, you can never not know it again.

I don't talk to many people. Everything I want to say is on the walls. I did manage to overhear a conversation that matched my state of mind, the way that you can learn a new word and suddenly it seems like everyone is using it. A woman dressed in a plaid ensemble spoke to one of my friends, a guy in my photojournalism class. She was talking about the death penalty. "In fifth grade social studies," she said, "we had to memorize all the state capitals. For extra credit, we could memorize what form of death penalty the state utilized. You can tell a lot about a state by the way they choose to execute prisoners." By this time, my friend's eyes had glazed over in a way that I recognized from the mercifully few class lectures we were forced to attend. "In Texas, lethal injection is the preferred way. Texas does more executions than any other state. In
Utah, blood must be spilled on the ground. Florida has the electric chair. Some states still use hanging." During the course of her speech, I realize that most of her information is outdated. People usually don't forget what they first learn, no matter how useless.

I ask my friend what set her off.

"One of your pictures," he says.

"You must like that," Ryan says, walking up with a glass of wine. "Upsetting people."

I know Ryan's mad because I was supposed to call him before the show started so we could have dinner together. Surprised that he showed up at all, I shrug and take a sip from my glass. What's to say?

"What I want to know," Ryan says "is what scares Diane. What keeps her up at night. I'm sure that everyone who thinks you're so brilliant would love to know."

"Nothing," I say and then, "Everything. I guess. I just try not to think about it."

Sometimes you can't ignore everything, though. Sometimes you can't think about anything else. I contemplate saying something about my neighbor, but I don't.

"Are you finished?" Ryan asks, motioning at my cup.

"Yes, I suppose I am." I hand over my glass and he walks to the trashcan near the table and dumps everything he's carrying in it.

After the exhibition, Ryan doesn't talk to me. We walk out together. I'm wondering if he's going to come home with me, but I have my answer as soon as we reach our cars. He doesn't even mention the possibility. This is my last chance to tell him about the attack. If I don't say something now, I'll have to go home alone. Even so, I watch him drive away without saying a word. I stand outside until I lose sight of his lights in the traffic. Pretty soon, I can't tell which car is his.

When I get home, I pull into the driveway at the back of the house. Now that the weather's changed, there isn't anyone out on the streets at night. The lights in my house leak through the windows. I notice something that makes me regret being able to see; a
small wooden chair leans against the bedroom window, intimate, like a lover straining to hear, waiting for the next word, another image to filter through the blinds.
CHAPTER ONE

I have dreams of diving and pulling up body parts. The water is dark, turbulent, and I don't want to go in, but I force myself. Sometimes I can't, though; I just shake my head and cling to the shore. When I wake up from those dreams, the dreams where I don't do anything, I can hardly stand myself.

I take pictures of accidents. Before I got this job, I worked at Edgemeade, a state care facility for adolescents classified as disturbed. Not slow, not mentally-challenged, not orphaned, but disturbed. I worked graves because I was scared to be in my apartment at night. I was seeing someone at the time, and I could sleep at his place, and I could sleep when he was with me at my place, but I could no longer sleep alone without panic attacks.

There was very little I could count on in this situation, but there were certain givens. For instance, on any night shift at Edgemeade, you might find yourself chasing a certain pre-pubescent male dressed in nothing more than a sheet. One particularly rainy evening, Winding Sheet Boy escaped and ran for two miles through the deserted army base that surrounded the place. As I followed him, I started to question whether or not the boyfriend was worth all this. He wasn't. Ours was also the only facility in the tri-state area that would take arsonists. This caused the obvious problems in a rickety, mostly wooden structure at the edge of west Texas.

Three fires into the Edgemeade job, desperate to leave, I dropped off my resume to the Mineral Wells Index, made my few college journalism classes seem like something substantial, and said that I could work a camera. Nobody suspected otherwise. After getting the job, I spent every night that first week at home loading and reloading the
substantial, and said that I could work a camera. Nobody suspected otherwise. After getting the job, I spent every night that first week at home loading and reloading the newspaper camera. After a few days, I could load a camera in the dark. I read everything I could on photography, developing, technique, the practical issues. I wasn't worried about writing articles -- I could fake my way through sentence after sentence, nobody the wiser. But something told me that the camera was my future, the way you can see a man for the first time and instinctively know he will become your lover, your enemy, and perhaps, finally, a friend.

Outside this windowless central room, the temperature rises, and I fan myself thinking about it. It's been at least a 100 degrees for twenty-eight days now. Who knows when this will break? I sit down at my desk, turn on my computer, and call the Brazos River Authority. It's July fifth; there were accidents last night. Someone has been hurt; someone is probably dead. That's the July fourth rule. Before I get a chance to finish dialing, the general editor walks over to my desk. Editor Tim. He's a seminary student, a young man with two small children. He doesn't like working for the paper and if he were a different sort of person he might discuss how he hates what keeps him away from the service of God, but as is he just looks tired and distracted most of the time. I like him despite his backward politics and conservative newspaper strategies. He's basically a nice person, someone you can see as a youth minister, someone who will make people feel better.

Editor Tim tells me that Theresa won't be in today, and I'm the one he wants to call the funeral homes. Theresa has done the obituaries and various clerical duties since she graduated from high school. Twenty-three, with scraggly blonde hair, Theresa is just heavy enough that she has to walk on the sides of her feet in sort of a modified limp. Sometimes I sit at my desk and watch her move, an amble that is disturbing and mesmerizing all at once.
Here's the story Tim tells. Theresa's brother, fifteen years old, ended up stabbing Stacye Burkhalter, a girl he knew from school, forty-four times last night as she baby-sat. The child was sleeping and Stacye was resting on the couch watching a "Different Strokes" rerun. Theresa's brother, John, crept into the house through a window and stabbed her face and upper torso over and over again until she stopped moving. She managed to crawl next door before passing out. When she woke up, she was in the hospital. She remembered everything. When the police arrived at John's house, they found all sorts of bizarre paraphernalia strewn about his room, mostly stuff from Friday the Thirteenth movies: a Jason mask, posters, knives. Next to the one very bloody knife in the room was a blown-up picture of the girl clipped from the school newspaper with what appeared to be thousands of pinpricks in it. Underneath her picture, he'd written in a small tight hand: I love you, you bitch. I love you. In the picture, she is smiling, dressed in a short cheerleader skirt, pom-poms waving high above her head, the football field dark behind her.

A photograph I keep: not the famous Hustler cover with the woman whose bare legs rise out of a meat-grinder, but a picture of a woman holding that cover in front of her face. I have a copy of that print in a box. Every year I notice something different, a nuance, a change. Life is so very interesting if you pay attention.

I used to think Friday was the best day of the weekend because it's all expectation and no rush. You don't feel like you have to do anything because there's time on Saturday and Sunday. Those two days are always more pressure-filled, more exhausting.

Everyone's at their terminals, and the central phone line rings. Jackson picks up.

Jackson is the sports editor, replacing the last one who got fired a few years ago. That took some effort on former sports editor's part; it's almost impossible to get fired from a place like this. There's some long complicated story about how Jackson ended up
here; he used to work for a big city paper where he made a lot of money covering big games, but now he's here writing about high school football. He lives alone in a house his recently divorced friend Marshall owns. Marshall lives in another city now, but he doesn't want to give up his house. It's a strange situation all around. I try not to pry. There are stories around the office that imply that the woman Jackson loved died of a drug overdose, but there's no tactful way of asking, so I don't.

I know who is on the other end of the line from the expression on Jackson's face: the weirdo who keeps calling the office claiming to have secret information on "crimes in your area." We call him Lizard King because he got really drunk one night, showed up at the local Sonic, stood on the hood of his car, and yelled "I am the Lizard King" over and over until one of the Sonic waitstaff called the police.

Jackson looks at me and says "And would that be city, county, or state secret crime information?" He nods.

"Lizard King on the blower with secret county information," he says, trying to pass the phone to me. He smiles at me. He just misses being handsome, but he has the most beautiful smile.

I shake my head and make motions with my hands.

"She'll be right with you. She's eager to talk to you."

To me, he says "Come on, Diane. You want to talk to him." He's thrusting the phone at me and giving me a pleading look. He brushes his brownish-blonde hair out of his face and puts the phone back to his ear.

"I'll have to have someone get back to you. Yes, I know it's important. Thanks," he says. "You owe me for getting Lizard King off your case."

I smile at him and start to dial the River Authority again. Scott, one of the lay-out workers comes out from the back and asks Jackson a question about the arrangement of the sports page. As a child, Scott burned his arms in a bathtub full of hot water. He has scars from his elbows to his hands. I'd like to take a picture of him, but it doesn't seem
like a good idea to ask so instead I watch him with my peripheral vision trying to figure out how it must be to live with a reminder of something so painful.

Lunch hour and I drive on the main street past Poston's Dry Goods, (out of business), JC Penney's (also out of business), and my old gymnastics school. Little girls in leotards stream out of the building and hop around on the hot cement, trying to stay in the shadows. In my rearview mirror I see Curtis. Curtis and I are estranged now, but when we were children, we knew everything about each other. It's a curious feeling to see him drive by in his robin-egg blue Cadillac, his evil black hair fluffed into a pompadour. He is the past come to life, an omen of all that has been. He drives poorly without concern for others. I do not wave when I see him; I do not do anything at all.

After lunch, a man brings a dead copperhead to the office. He killed it with a hoe in his yard. It's the largest snake I've ever seen, and I take a picture of it while the man strains to hold it with one hand. His arm muscles quiver. It's strange, but snakes have a weight that you might not attribute to them. Like my own black and white pictures, they have a way of imposing a certain vision that, as you might imagine, is not for everyone.

"Found it in the garden," the man says. "My wife was working out there, and she stepped on something and thought it was the garden hose, but then it started to move and she screamed like I'd never heard her scream before. I came running out of the garage and there that huge s.o.b. was, trying to slither away."

This guy looks like Garland, the son of one of my mother's friends. Garland was 6'3 and probably 250 pounds, and he once brought my mother a rattlesnake on a string leash in an box with no lid because he thought she might be able to do something with it. That evil beast crawled around in our deep freeze in its box for weeks before it stopped moving completely.
"I finally killed the thing before it got the chance to escape. Never seen one in the garden like that. Right around the tomato plants." He has a thin white t-shirt on and beer gut and it makes me unbearably sad to take his picture with the snake. I wish he'd worn something else, was somebody else, anything.

After we're done, he puts the body in the back of his beat-to-hell red pickup truck and pulls out of the parking lots, leaving clouds of dust behind him.

Snakes interest me. I've done some reading and I know that when people handle snakes in church, they enter a trance-like state where the snake becomes a part of them. Of course, the problem with this is that the snake can turn back into a snake at any moment. To note, almost all serious handlers have been bitten, most several times. Despite the obvious dangers, they act as though by following certain rules they might avoid this inevitable fate not unlike people who get involved with the same person over and over despite the past hurts. People who handle give the following caution. Be careful who you take a rattlesnake from. Like all advice that seems obvious, it's never that simple.

At the end of the day, I sit in the break room and drink a Coke. I do this almost every day before getting in my car and driving home. Most people clear out of the newspaper as quickly as possible - - they want be somewhere else, with their families, doing evening activities, all the things that constitute life in small-town America. I don't have anywhere to go or anyone waiting on me. My entire family died in a car wreck almost three years ago. I was in college at the time, and they were on their way to a restaurant one Friday night when an eighteen-wheeler edged them off the road into a lake.

"Still here?" Jackson asks as he puts his money in the machine. His quarters don't catch at first, and he has to try a couple of times before he gets what he wants. He's a little later than usual getting away from his computer, and I found myself stalling so I
wouldn't miss talking to him. Almost every evening, Jackson sits in the break room with me. He asks me about the MFA programs I'm applying to, what photographers I like. He asks me all sorts of questions, and I find myself wishing I knew more, could answer better. One day he was sick from work, and I was surprised at how much I missed him. It occurs to me that absence in a picture can be instructive.

"Twinkie, little girl?" he asks, picking one up from the display. There's an old man that works in printing who buys boxes of Twinkies, Ho Ho's, Ding Dongs, what have you and sells them individually for profit on the honor system. He takes in about two dollars a week after expenses. He doesn't mind telling you about it. "My treat."

"I'll pass." I put my hand up like I'm one of the Supremes doing "Stop in the Name of Love." I take a sip of Coke.

"Come on. You might not get an offer this good again." He brushes his hand through his hair and opens his Dr. Pepper. The man can drink an astonishing amount of Dr. Pepper. He claims he's hydrating. He's a runner, and this is how he talks.

I have to meet Aneka soon, but I don't feel like getting out into the heat again. I pick up my book and put it in front of me. I keep a book at work to read during breaks, and this week it's The Strongest Poison, a fairly didactic look at the Jonestown mass suicide. The writer takes a hard-core political position that most of the Jonestown literature lacks. I'm not sure what I think about it.

Jackson picks it up and looks at it. "I didn't know Mark Lane had a Jonestown book. I wrote that guy once during the Kennedy stuff. He was Oswald's lawyer. I have a letter from him somewhere."

"I had no idea. You're pretty cool," I say. He smiles.

"For an old guy." He puts down my book and looks at his watch. He has a huge scar that cuts across the top of his hand. I wonder what it's from.

"For any guy." I check the time. "I've got to get going. I'm meeting Aneka soon."
"The nurse?" he asks.

I've told Jackson about Aneka, and he's met her once when he went in to have a mole removed. She works for the doctor whose wife left him for Martina Navratilova. She's been a nurse for five years, and this is the easiest job she's ever had. Dr. Anderson is a cancer specialist and you'd think it would be depressing, but she says it's not. According to her, you see a lot of the same people over and over, and you develop relationships with the patients, come to know personalities and difficulties. People who are very sick don't complain much. They instinctively know the difference between what's serious and what's not. They clarify. Like my mother always said, it's important to make distinctions. Of course, she was talking about snakes, differentiating between copperheads and rattlesnakes by the way they looked and smelled and acted -- copperheads have a very distinctive smell, whereas rattlesnakes do not -- but I think as lessons go, this one applies.

"That's her." I get my purse and start out the door.

"Have fun, little girl," he says. He throws his can in the trash like he's making a basket, picks up my book again and starts reading the first page.

You wouldn't believe the kinds of messes people make when they know other people have to clean them up. At the Merry-Go-Round, Aneka changes clothes in the dressing room next to me, furiously tossing through a pile of jeans trying to find a perfect fit. Being the middle of summer, the place is dead. I look at myself in the mirror, twenty-seven and already tired, already the lines deepen. There's a darkness around my eyes that creates a haunting, spectral effect. I can't stop any of it. I look all right now, but it won't last forever.

Aneka and I are going to be hypnotized. It's an occasion. Aneka just broke up with her boyfriend and she wants to go out and forget. And what's better for forgetting than hypnotism?
When we walk into Chelsea, a bar just outside of Fort Worth, men look at Aneka. She's over six feet tall, blonde, and has presence. Attitude and all that. I look at Aneka and try to see what they see. Playboy, Penthouse? God, don't let it be Hustler or anything worse. K.C. and the Sunshine Band plays over the stereo, the song about the boogie man, the one who will always be waiting.

Those men don't know the first thing about Aneka, that's for sure.

Early on, we realize we're here on the wrong night for the hypnotist so we just order a couple of screwdrivers and start on our way to drinking too much. Forgetting about this week is going to take some effort in this direction. Two guys at a table near us keep making eye contact and smiling, and all I'm thinking is please don't come over here even though that's what people do in bars -- they meet other people, they make an effort. I thought this is what I wanted, but I was wrong.

"Our boyfriends are giving us the eye," Aneka says.

"I'd like to give them the evil eye. Maybe a sty in their collective eye. Maybe pinkeye. Maybe we all could play I-Spy. I spy some dorks."

Aneka smiles and flicks her ashes in the amber-colored ashtray. "Diane, I thought you liked men. You're not even giving them a chance."

"Picture this," I say, making a framing motion with my hands. "I'm going to get really drunk because the guys will be incredibly dull, then I'll go home with one of them because I'm tired and drunk." I take a sip of my drink and point to myself. "I'm vulnerable, for crying out loud. I'm thinking a lot about my inner child."

"You're killing me. Nothing's happened yet." She brushes her long blonde hair out of her face.

They start walking toward us, and I'm willing them away with everything I have. Of course, the one who looks like John Travolta with orthodontia problems asks if they can join us. Aneka looks at me, and I shrug so she says it's okay. The John Travolta guy offers to light Aneka's cigarette, and she bends down low and lifts her head once the
cigarette is lit and blows the perfect smoke ring. Used to being looked at, she's always beautiful, always posing for an invisible camera.

The only emotion I feel when they try to start a conversation is overwhelming, crushing boredom. I cannot imagine mustering the energy to be interesting or charming or witty. The best I can do tonight is smile and nod and drink.

I down my screwdriver and get another. I need something to do so I consider getting into Aneka's pack of Benson and Hedges. I thought that getting out would be a good way to avoid an empty apartment, but now I'm already thinking about the hangover, I wish I hadn't. Since I've had this horrible middle-of-the-night insomnia lately, I dread going to sleep with the certain knowledge that I'll wake up in a few hours, nervous and antsy. It's been a while since I've been scared in my own house, but those first few minutes of middle-of-the-night insomnia remind me of that feeling. It's usually when I start sleeping with somebody that I get frightened by every little noise, every sound. I have bad dreams. I get circles under my eyes. Sometimes the feeling goes away, and sometimes the men do.

"How are you holding up?" Aneka asks when the pair goes out to the bar to get more drinks.

"Tired. How are you holding up?" I'm worried that she's going to go back to Mark. She'd dated Mark for nine months which can be a dangerous point in a relationship. Mark has the Ted Bundy appeal - - very normal-looking with all the advantages that psychosis gives you. Who says you can't have the best of both worlds?

"I may let one of our boyfriends take me home," she whispers. She's had an amazing amount to say to the John Travolta guy. I've tried following the conversation, but staring at the neon Budweiser sign and humming along with the songs that get played on the jukebox is about all I've managed.

"How far gone are you?"
"Pretty far," she says. She takes out her lipstick and a compact and starts to trace her lips with a dark red. It's the only color she wears. She believes that when you find something that works, you should stick with it. You'll never see Aneka without lipstick because when her mother died, the last thing she said to Aneka was: "Something darker might suit you."

The week after her mother said that, she met a guy in a hotel room on the twelfth floor for drinks. He tried to have sex with her and wouldn't, as they say, take no for an answer. When he threw her on the bed, she threw all five feet five of him slamming into the next wall. She's a second degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do, something she learned as a girl when her parents lived in Korea for three years. She straightened up her clothes, put on some fresh lipstick, and left. The guy sat next to the wall, staring.

That's a story I like.

"Here you go, ladies," the John Travolta guy says as he places the drinks in front of us. Aneka snaps her compact shut. The other guy who's sitting near me has sandy blonde hair and pretty straight teeth. He looks like my first serious boyfriend. It's not a pleasant association.

To note, this is how I met that particularly wicked little man. My friend Galena and I were playing volleyball with a bunch of guys. We kicked off our shoes and ran into the field. It was early spring, and we had just finished with our lifeguard training class for the day. We didn't realize there were stickers in the grass until we'd hit the ball a couple of times and started feeling them. Galena ran to her shoes yelling "If you run, the stickers can't get you." I couldn't move, every step grinding thorns deeper into the soles of my feet. One of the guys came over and carried me out of the field. Six months later, he broke into my parents' house and pretended to be a rapist using a pair of my pantyhose for a mask. He threw me down on the tile floor, put a piece of electrical tape over my mouth, and tore open my blouse before he started laughing. I would have been better off running.
There had been other signs before that. I remember all the little hurts, the promises broken. As we all know, Christ fell three times before reaching His cross. The Spanish remember. Subsequently, their crucifixes have bloody knees. That's the whole story. Anything less than a crucifix with bloody knees is not the whole story.

Aneka claims that if you have to think about whether you like someone or not, you don't. This usually holds up. The men at our table are talking, and I'm thinking I should be interested, what's wrong with me? I should be feeling young and sexy and fun. Instead, I feel like you do when you're sitting through a really dull movie that everybody else seems to be enjoying, trying to check your watch in the dark to see how much more you have to endure. And then I start to think about Jackson and how much I'd rather have stayed in the break room and talked to him and before I know it, I'm engaged in this long fantasy where he asks me out to dinner and it's nice and not at all lonely, like I'm feeling now. And then I start missing my family and all I want is to be home, at my garage apartment right next to the Tasty Freeze and right across from the laundromat. There's a moving sign with a woman in a bonnet putting a piece of clothing into a bucket. I sit near my window and watch the motion almost every night. It almost seems okay to be alone in my apartment now with the sign across the street and the faint noise of sirens outside.

Right now I'm more drunk than I thought and feel like I might start crying. And the guy who has his hand resting lightly on my knee is saying "and then I stopped taking the Prozac in addition to the blood pressure medicine because it was the combination of the two that was the problem."

If this story has a happy ending, I'll be as surprised as you are.
CHAPTER TWO

In answer to your first question: yes. And in answer to the next question: because I couldn't think of a way to say no. After letting myself out his door right before it was light, I drove home, stopping once by the side of the road to get sick. The air was hot and muggy, and I could feel the grit off the pavement every time a car passed. I leaned against my car; I was wearing down. When I pulled up to my place, the filthy sky had lightened and everything was opening. People were starting to wake up and move around.

When I walk into my apartment, I turn on the television and watch a rerun of the McDonald's Cup. Bart Connor discusses each gymnast's routine, detailing previous and present injuries, weaknesses, specialities. I take a quick shower, change into a nightgown, and come out towelling my hair dry. Conspiracies of the body don't interest me. I brush my hair while wet without worrying about breaking off the ends. On my small screen, a man is doing a difficult punch front combination -- all the tumbling goes forward in one pass, there are no backward moves. Afterward, Connor says, "You have to know where you are in the air and you have to know where the floor is."

When I get into bed, I gather myself into the comforter and think of a story that Jackson once told me. He said that once it got so cold one winter in New York that there wasn't anything for the deer to eat so they would come up to peoples' yards at night and eat holly even though it cut up their mouths. In the morning, blood would be all over the
snow. I'd like to think that I cover my tracks better than that, but maybe not. Maybe that's why Jackson hasn't asked me out. He sees my blood all over the snow.

A few hours after I fall asleep, the phone rings. I can pick up, or I can choose not to pick up. It rings five times. Persistence counts for something.

"Guess what?" Aneka says. And before I answer, she continues. "Something happened last night. I mean, not with the guy at the bar. You see, I was at the guy's place, right? And things starting happening, and well I realized he wasn't Mark and that he would never be Mark."

"And the point of this obvious yet deeply compelling discovery?" I prop myself up on my pillow, preparing for a long conversation.

"The point is I knew what I wanted. I went over to Mark's and apologized. We ended up making love." She pauses. "Then he said the m word."


"We're getting married. He asked me to marry him."

This cannot be happening. Mark is almost as bad as her first husband, a short wiry little dentist. The first husband is slightly worse for the wear; he refused to give Aneka a divorce so she took a baseball bat to his head one night while he slept. She doesn't remember anything except going to bed very, very angry and waking up with the lights from the ambulance in the bedroom bay window. He didn't press charges - - at that point, he decided he just wanted out. There's something to be said about making up before you go to sleep, I believe that.

"I'm going back to bed." And then because I feel like a jerk, "Congratulations. I'm sure it'll work out."

"I know. We have to start planning the wedding. Dinner, next week. Be there. Oh, how was your night?"
"Well, let's just say that we're only going to have to plan the one wedding," I say and put the phone back in its cradle.

On Saturday nights I go to the Safeway. This one store has everything I need. Very few people shop on Saturday nights; they include the serious, the down-trodden, the lonely, and, of course, the desperate, people making arrangements on the pay phone outside. They talk in low voices and I try to hear what's so important as I pass by on my way in. Burdened by the particular, I stay a long time, imagining my choices reveal things, a form of intimacy I engage in unwittingly. To put something in my basket (even the choice of a basket means more than one might imagine) is to say I need this.

Curtis is also at the Safeway tonight, and I spot him perusing the M&M's, deciding between plain and peanut. I know his preference is for peanut, but sometimes he likes to mix it up. We both learned to love M&M's because our babysitter would give them to us for a special treat. She was an old woman named Betsy, and we spent many long scary hours at her house. This ought to count for more than it does, but it occurs to me that you can know too much about somebody, and that's part of the problem between me and Curtis. Maybe we know too much.

At the current time, Curtis is dating a man named Mike who goes by the name Carol Burnett. That's how Mike's listed in the phone book and that's what his friends called him. I know this because my dad used to work with Mike/Carol and my dad liked him, but he could never quite get to the point of calling him Carol, let alone the full Carol Burnett. I wish I could say something like "I hope you and Carol are doing okay," but I am part of his unhappy past and he is part of mine.

After the grocery store, I go to Curtis Mathis to rent a video. The video section is pretty small, and they don't get much new stuff. I'm not sure why I go here, except that nobody else does, and it's familiar. It's the first store in town that ever rented videos.
Curtis and I used to spend hours in here as teenagers trying to pick out the perfect background for the wildly unsuccessful Halloween parties he used to insist on having each and every year. I feel a wave of nostalgia as I walk over to the slasher section. The *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was an old standby, and I consider renting it tonight just to be sad, the way I used to play the Charlie Brown Christmas record in the summer when I was a little girl just to make myself long for the holiday. As I pick up the box, I hear Jackson call my name. I drop the box.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he says. He's dressed in brown shorts and a white t-shirt and I'm thinking, he's pretty attractive, where have I been, etc., etc., etc.

"I'm just looking for something to watch. It's a rocking Saturday night." I bend over to pick up the box and try to place it back on the shelf before he sees what it is.

"What do you have there?"

"Nothing. I was just looking at the *Massacre*. I mean, it happened in Texas, right? Historical significance." I don't know why I'm so nervous. I've always been relaxed around him at work. I end up knocking three other boxes from the shelf while I try to strike a casual pose. Oh, I'm cool.

"Well, I'm thinking I need to see *Valley of the Dolls* again."

"Who doesn't really? Maybe you could make it a double feature with *The Stepford Wives*. I think you'd find that in the new releases section here." I want to say hey, *why don't you come home with me*, but I can't.

"Yeah, I think it'd be pretty cool to have Katherine Ross as your Stepford wife."

We talk for a while, and I'm scared things are going to become awkward, so I pick up a box and start to move toward the counter.

"I guess I'm going to get this one," I say, hoping he'll ask me to do something with him.

"Be careful out there," he says as I check out. He turns back to the wall of choices in front of him.
My aunt and uncle met Jim Jones once, shook hands with him and everything. Jim Jones was buying a house from a friend of theirs in California in the 1970s for the People's Temple and he was surrounded by four huge bodyguards and wore his usual dark sunglasses. They said he was a big man, pale with very dark hair, striking -- he made an impression. I look through the pictures of Jonestown at the library on the microfiche machine after cleaning house on Sunday afternoon. It kills the time. At any rate, it's interesting to know how everything was documented, what was considered worth a picture. It's from looking at pictures of hundreds of dead bodies that you start to realize that the most mysterious thing is a fact clearly stated. The more you know about Jonestown, the less it makes any kind of straightforward sense. There are reasons, of course, but it's not a math equation. Nothing equals anything else in a way you can get to through a formula.

The next week at work is a long one. The summer days seem relentless and bleak in light of the heat wave we're having and everyone is tired out from the hot days and hot nights without any reprieve. Theresa still hasn't returned to work and each day people call to find out information about the murder, but there isn't really any. We've started getting obscene, angry phone calls so violent that I dread answering my line. To top it all off, Jackson has been gone to some sportswriter conference, and I'm left on my own in the break room each evening.

The heat rises off the pavement as I drive to the county courthouse each day, making all the convenience stores and buildings look like mirages. Everything shimmers. I try to take pictures in my mind as I drive, capturing that unreal, painful quality that exudes from these days.
I develop at night. I lock myself in the office after hours and watch pictures form from negatives. The event I'm taking pictures for this week is the Dunbar Reunion, a five day get-together of all the graduates from Dunbar School, the school African-American students went to during segregation. Every two years, they have a week of events at the Martin Luther King Community Center which is on the very edge of the town. They use the community center instead of the school because it's a dilapidated two-story white wooden building without good air-conditioning. I thought I might pass out while I was there every night for five days, but I held steady.

There's a certain invisibility to being the only white person at the reunion. Nobody ever sees you. You might think it would be just the opposite, but it isn't, which is ideal for a photographer. Plus, I'm small: 5'6 and a 110 pounds. It's easy to sneak around when you're me. Despite these advantages, I take picture after picture, but I never get what I want. There's a sense of history here, but it doesn't show up on the rolls. What I have is intimacy without a past or future. I'm forgetting what the people look like as soon as I pack up my camera bag each evening and make my way home.

When Jackson returns on Wednesday, I'm so happy to see him I can hardly believe it. When five o'clock hits, we resume our usual break room conversation. Today he buys me a Coke.

He puts sets the Coke in front of me and puts his hand on my shoulder. It's the first time he's touched me. I can barely get the Coke open I'm shaking so hard.

"Did you miss me?" he says, settling into his chair.

"I did. Nobody around here's any fun. Okay, I take that back. There's the thrilling "Love Is" contest to think about." The "Love Is" contest is a continual source of mockery for me and Jackson. The lifestyle editor came up with the idea from those naked characters in the "Love Is" comic strip. Every few months, she has readers finish the sentence "Love Is..." The winner gets his or her sentence published in the Sunday
edition and a gift certificate for two to K-Bobs. Last month, I turned in the following:

"Love is taking a rattlesnake, aware of the risks, knowing that any minute you could come out of your trance to the slow reality of fangs sinking into your arm." She didn't print that one.

"How about we go out this weekend. Dinner?"

"Sure," I say. I can't help it. I'm smiling like a madwoman.

"Where do you want to go, Diane?"

I shrug and nod my head. "Wherever. I'm not picky," I say.

"I guess the burden's on me then. My cross to bear." He smiles back.

The rest of the week I have dreams about my dad. He's in a tunnel and he's dying and there's a party going on upstairs and I'm the only one who knows where he is. I run through the tunnel and give him CPR and everything's okay and he's happy and he hugs me and it's all just fine. Then I get scared, because I think about the next time and what if I'm not there. When I wake up panicked in the late part of the night, I watch the clock go round and round, savage minutes ticking themselves off. I drift back to sleep with the sound.

It's a late afternoon/early evening date, and we end up driving to Ft. Worth to go to the museum. Hardly anyone is there except a few tired-looking curators. The main exhibit is a Jenny Holzer display, words etched on benches, phrases transcribed on liquid crystal displays, flashing in endless repetition: murder has this selfish side men are not monogamous by nature protect me from what I want. For a long time, we stand in a room with hundreds of LCD's and try and figure out the pattern. Eventually, I can't stand it anymore, all the words run together and nothing means anything anymore which might of been the effect she was going for, it's hard to know.
I move to the next room and Jackson follows me, rubbing his eyes. A gigantic stake rises from the floor.

"All those lights about did me in," he says. "I felt like I was at Circus Circus or something."

I nod. "I think the point of Jenny Holzer is irritation. That I don't get." I point to the stake.

"Darling, there's nothing to get. It's a big stake in an empty room," he says, leading me on. We look at one thing, then another, until we're back at the beginning.

It's nice to be back in the heat after being in the cold museum. When we get into his car, he puts Gord's Gold into the tape deck, which, as he points out, doesn't have "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" on it.

"What kind of justice is there in a world in which Gordon Lightfoot has throat cancer?"

"Not a good one," I answer.

We go to a Chinese restaurant, a small dark place named Polynesian Gardens. The name implies a certain lushness that is missing from the scene; the only thing remotely Polynesian or garden-like are strange drink glasses that line the walls. Nobody ever seems to order those drinks and dust settles on the arrangement. Some of the glasses are twisted into strange totum-like shapes, and I long to sip out of their heads, but I order a Coke which comes in a thin plain glass with a straw.

Jazz music plays over the radio. Jackson looks at me across the booth and says "Hi. I'm Hugh Hefner and welcome to Playboy After Dark."

I laugh and want to touch his hand, but for some reason I can't. It occurs to me that I could spend a lot of time with him without being able to figure out who he is. He reminds me of a complicated picture in that every time you look at it, you see something
else that makes you think you didn't understand it the first time at all. The more you're around it, the harder it gets to describe.

The rest of the dinner passes quickly. I spend a lot of time looking at Jackson because it occurs to me that he's not one of those people you think of in a visual sort of way, which is unusual for me. If I had to describe him, I would start with his voice. He sounds like he's from somewhere else, but it's hard to pinpoint where exactly. You could listen to him talk about anything and be entranced by his inflections, his tone, the way words seem somehow more than they are when he speaks.

We get our fortunes and I'm hoping for a good one. "To one who waits, a single day seems like a year," I read, a little spooked by the implications.

"That's not a fortune; that's a saying," he says.

He hands me his fortune. "You are headed for a big change in your career plans." At forty-three, it seems unlikely so maybe he got mine. I definitely believe you can pick the wrong one.

Chinese food reminds me of my mother. Very few people know how to order like she did, plates and plates of food all coordinated so that something would appeal to everyone at the table. When I started going out to dinner on dates, I hardly knew where to begin to make a choice. I didn't know the names of the dishes I liked. Also, she would let me have her fortune cookie if I didn't like mine.

I don't expect him to kiss me, but he does. Sometimes people can surprise you in all the right ways. It's a mild summer night outside and all the stars are lit up. Lights from the nearby carnival glow in the distance. A carnival is something that is tremendously ugly up close and unbearably beautiful from far away. Jackson walks me to my door and puts his hand on my face and kisses me. And for the first time in as long as I can remember, I go straight to bed and don't wake up until morning.
The next day, I go to Fort Worth to see Aneka. As I drive the long stretch of road littered with firecracker stands and trailers, I listen to the radio and hear that Evil Knieval has been arrested for beating up his 26 year-old girlfriend outside a go-go bar in San Bernardino. I remember Evil K. and his jump across the Grand Canyon from grade school.

Aneka and I meet at a Tex-Mex restaurant where we sit on the porch and watch the cars go by on Camp Bowie. The porch is partially enclosed with an air-conditioner and fans running, and it’s still hot. I tell Aneka all about my date. She’s still in that wedding glow, so she’s predisposed to a love story.

“So he’s the one I met? Mole on right arm. Non-malignant. What’s his story?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t talk about other people,” I say, although this will cause her to worry.

“That’s not a good sign. He’s not still hung up on somebody in the past, is he?”

She motions to the waiter for another drink and he brings one almost immediately. Her effect on people never ceases to amaze me.

I shrug.

“So what’s the strategy?” she asks.

Cars pass on the road, and I feel like I could watch them forever. We’re next to the part of the street that’s paved with bricks instead of cement.

“What do you mean, the strategy? I thought we were talking about a boyfriend, not Vietnam.”

“We are, Diane. I am. I just don’t think you have to go into it without some thought. I mean, what do you want from him? It’s good to have some sort of success parameters mapped out before you start; otherwise they can screw you over, and you never know it,” Aneka says, trailing off and taking a drag of her cigarette.

“What are you talking about?” Aneka never used to say things like “success parameters.” I think imminent weddings warp the mind a bit.
"What you want. It's good to know," she says, dipping a chip into salsa.

I want him to love me for a really long time. I want him to stay around. I don't want to be scared anymore. I want to be able to rest. "I want him to ask me out again."

"Well, that's a start I guess," she says as the waiter sets down our order. "That's a place to begin."

After dinner, we go back to her place to look at wedding magazines. She lives in a tiny wooden house that's decorated in blue and white gingham. It's usually very cute and clean-looking, but today Mark's clothes and magazines are strewn about. Mark is like a centipede leaving traces of its poison as it crawls across skin.

I try to get excited about the wedding, but it's difficult. How excited can one get over dishes and dresses and honeymoons?

Aneka has the bridesmaids dresses she likes tabbed with post-it notes. Her favorite is a light blue monstrosity of lace and bows.

"Please do not make me look like Blueberry in the Strawberry Shortcake Gang," I say, pointing to it.

She laughs and agrees. Thank God. I think she knows I'm not into it.

"Let's get out of here. I need some make-up. I'm almost out of foundation," she says. We go to Foley's and I end up at the skin-care section thinking that maybe I'll get something in case there's a next date. The saleswoman examines my face with the gravity of a priest, the precision of a surgeon. She touches me around the eyes, smoothing skin as though it were a bedspread. She shakes her head. I look at Aneka who's spraying on Opium. She's already managed to hit the Joy and something new called Champagne.

"Lots of damage already," she says. "You see those lines?" She points at the mirror. "Sun, probably. Do you smoke?"

"No." I'm thinking that I look like this because I haven't slept a full night's sleep in recent memory, but I don't say anything.
"Well, then it's definitely sun damage. I would recommend the Clinique products. If you catch this early, it could make a difference."

I buy it all, but like the woman said, the damage is done.