(BROKEN) PROMISES

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

Laurie Champion, B.A., M.A.
Denton, Texas

August, 1994

(BROKEN) PROMISES

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

Laurie Champion, B.A., M.A.
Denton, Texas

August, 1994

Champion, Laurie. (Broken) Promises. Doctor of Philosophy (English), August 1994, 218 pp., works cited, 35 titles.

The dissertation begins with an introductory chapter that examines the short story cycle as a specific genre, outlines tendencies found in minimalist fiction, and discusses proposed definitions of the short story genre. The introduction examines the problems that short story theorists encounter when they try to define the short story genre in general. Part of the problem results from the lack of a definition of the short story in the Aristotelian sense of a definition. A looser, less traditional definition of literary genres helps solve some of the problem. Minimalist fiction and the short story cycle are discussed as particular forms of the short story.

Sixteen short stories follow the introduction. Considered as a collection of short stories, the stories can be placed in the short story cycle tradition. The characters in some of the short stories might be the same characters, and except for one story, the stories share the theme of relationships that are unstable. Many of the stories challenge strict definition of a short story, while others can be considered a complete short story by almost any critic's definition of the genre.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Five of the sixteen short stories in this collection appeared first in my Master's thesis (1992). Some of those five have been slightly revised, others largely rewritten. I have omitted one story from the Master's thesis, for thematic consistency. Eleven of the stories here are newly written during the past two years.

For the past four years, while writing these short stories, I also researched short story theories. I found that these stories seemed related to short story theories that involve short story cycles, crossing of genre boundaries, and proposed definitions of minimalism. I intended for these stories to represent a short story cycle. I wanted all the stories to stand as individual stories but also as parts of a unified whole.

I tried to create a collection of stories that involves characters who are involved in unstable relationships. "Just Say, 'My Truck'" is the only story in this collection that presents a couple whose relationship is not on the verge of beginning or ending. I tried to suggest that some of the characters could be the same characters in some of the stories. I hoped to arrange the stories and choose

related themes, settings, and characters to make the stories more unified and reflective of a short story cycle.

Critics have yet to agree on what constitutes a short story cycle. In 1988, editors of the Journal of the Short Story in English presented a special issue on the short story cycle. Until then, critics had paid little attention to the genre. In his introductory essay, J. Gerald Kennedy observes,

> The term "short story cycle", which has entered into general use only in the last twenty years, implies a principle of organization, a structural scheme for the working out of an idea, even a circular integrity. Critics point to such modern collections as Joyce's Dubliners and Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio as formal paradigms, noting that in both cases, the constituent narratives are simultaneously independent and interdependent. ("Poetics" 10)

Kennedy discusses the structure and organization of the short story cycle. Organization and structure are important considerations because the short story cycle must demonstrate links between the stories; however, chronology is not always the most appropriate organizing principle. Whereas in a collection such as The Nick Adams Stories the stories are arranged chronologically (according to Nick's

age), other short story cycles such as Welty's The Golden Apples follow no chronological pattern.

Some short story cycles are linked together thematically, and the themes control the structure of the collection. Winesburg, Ohio and Country of the Pointed Firs are connected through thematic similarities (for example, the theme of loneliness in Winesburg, Ohio and the theme of the search for adventure in Country of the Pointed Firs). Robert Luscher observes the importance of organizational principles such as themes and images that can be found in short story cycles:

> [T]he interplay between recurrent images, character, settings, and interplay between recurrent images, characters, settings, and themes can weave a story cycle together with a complex network of cross reference. While any short story collection by a single author is open to perceptions of intertextuality, story cycles such as Updike's possess a greater variety and degree of intertextual resonance; in addition, their overall pattern is a feature that more miscellaneous volumes lack. (100)

James Joyce's The Dubliners is linked together by themes and a type of chronology and is exemplary of the above definition. Joyce intended for the stories to be read as a group, representative of Dublin. He also carefully

selected the order for the stories. He wanted to represent Dublin, "the centre of paralysis," in four aspects: "childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life." Obviously, Joyce consciously groups the stories according to the ages of the characters. Placing "The Dead" as the final story, Joyce makes an exception to his stated chronological order; but death itself is an end to a life cycle, and "The Dead" presents themes that are found throughout the collection and gives the collection a cyclical characteristic.

Unlike Joyce, who intended The Dubliners to reflect unity, Hemingway's short story cycle, The Nick Adams Stories, was arranged by an editor (Philip Young) not the author. Forrest Ingram suggests that an author's intention should be considered a factor when determining whether a collection of stories represents a short story cycle. He says a short story cycle

> is a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit. . . . I will define a short story cycle as a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on several levels of the pattern of the whole significantly

> modifies his experience of each of the component parts. (19)

Successive readings of short story cycles modify the reader's understanding of individual stories in the collection; however, the author's intention is sometimes irrelevant. The author's intention can add supportive evidence to classify a collection as a short story cycle, but it is not the determining factor. Of course, this is true in analyzing or classifying literature in general. For example, if Joyce had intended for "Araby" to be a novel, it still wouldn't be a novel.

Because he includes authorial intention as a criterion, Ingram's definition falls short. Luscher provides a much looser definition, yet his criteria are still tight enough to exclude short story collections that lack the type of unity he discusses. Although Kennedy acknowledges that an author's intention is a poor criterion for defining the short story cycle, his concluding remarks about the short story cycle seem too broadly defined. He concludes,

> Perhaps we need a different generic term to accommodate narrative groupings now dismissed as insufficiently or belatedly unified. A less restrictive designation might be the "short story collection": this rubric would contain all aggregates of three or more stories by a given author, without regard to the history of

> composition or the presumed intention of the writer. It would encompass both tightly organized story sequences and more loosely bound or problematic works (such as Faulkner's Go Down, Moses); it would bracket volumes devised by editors as well as authors, on the theory that any grouping of stories by a single writer will possess at least a minimal collective identity. (13)

Kennedy's suggestion to call short story cycles "short story collections" defeats the purpose of a definition for short story cycles. If cycles are labeled as collections then there is nothing to distinguish the short cycle as a particular type of short story collection.

Luscher's criteria is much more specific than Kennedy's, and much more useful for distinguishing between a collection of short stories and a cycle of short stories. In an earlier essay, "The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book," Luscher suggests placing short story collections on a continuum. The "'mere collection,' containing stories about diverse subjects, a variety of character types, and a wide range of themes" stands at one end (163). The stories move farther toward the short story cycle end of the continuum as similarities in "setting, theme, motifs, characters, and narrators come into focus" (164).

I think this collection of short stories, (Broken) Promises, could be placed somewhere near the short story cycle end of Luscher's short story continuum. I tried to make the types of conflicts in the stories representative of struggles that arise when building, maintaining, and ending relationships in general. Trying to make the characters share similarities was more difficult than I had expected. For example, in "Nuptials," I tried to think of a list of things that would bother characters in some the other stories. Also, I noticed that Billy does not smoke in "Billy and Me" (it comes out in the story), but in "Lisa and Her Brothers," the male character smokes. I changed Billy to a smoker in "Billy and Me" to suggest that these two characters may be the same man.

I purposely positioned "Billy and Me," "Just Say, 'My Truck,'" and "Lisa and Her Brothers" as the first, middle and last stories respectively. I wanted "Billy and Me" and "Lisa and Her Brothers" to frame the other stories because they most obviously deal with marriage and divorce. "Billy and Me" is told from a woman's first person point of view. "Lisa and Her Brothers" is also told in the first person, and it is the only story told exclusively from a man's point of view.

The narrators' names are not given in either story; however, because of similar situations and conflicts, Billy and Lisa could be characters in both stories. Billy could

be the unnamed narrator in "Lisa and Her Brothers"; likewise, Lisa could be the unnamed narrator in "Billy and Me." I intended for the characters in "Billy and Me" and "Lisa and Her Brothers" to be same characters but tried to leave enough doubt to allow readers to decide for themselves.

I found myself regularly checking for consistency in details, but major issues such as theme and mood were not so difficult, as I usually had a basic theme in mind before I began a story. As a rule, I tried not to sacrifice any story for the collection; in other words, if I thought a change might help the collection have stronger unity but would hinder the individual story, I did not make the change. For example, I thought about replacing James Brown's "I Feel Good" with a country-western song in "Billy and Me," but I felt that the story would lose something without the James Brown references.

I also considered adding a few details to imply that Lisa and Billy in "Just Say, 'My Truck'" are working class people and adding a few country-western songs, but it seemed it would add unnecessary details. "Just Say, 'My Truck'" is the most recently written story in this collection. I hesitated to include it because the couple represented in the story is not approaching the beginning or the ending of their relationship, nor is there any major strife in their marriage.

After some thought, I decided that it might be a good idea to change their names to "Billy" and "Lisa" and place the story in the middle of the collection. This caused complications, because then I had to change Billy's last name in "Billy and Me." The last names of Billy in "Just Say, 'My Truck'" and in "Billy and Me" are naturally revealed as a result of the stories. I changed Billy Klein ("Billy and Me") to Billy Brumley ("Just Say, 'My Truck'") because Brumley is the real last name of the character on whom Billy is based. I wanted all the Billy and Lisa characters to be the same character to show that sometimes, even if for only a brief period, people who have been involved with each other for a long time manage to get along.

Choosing names for my characters is always difficult for me. In this collection, only the name "Darlene" for the protagonist of "Queen of Hearts" seems especially right. I finally decided that anyone who cares to try to figure it out would know that the Billy and Lisa stories are the most autobiographical in this collection, so I just decided to use variations of the real names. While this kind of reasoning leads to lawsuits, it makes the burden of naming seem lighter.

Like Billy and Lisa, most of the characters in these stories are representative of the working class and are set in small towns, although these types of details are rarely

explicitly stated. Very often, they listen to country-western music, own pick-ups, smoke, and drink, representing the stereotypical lifestyles of people who live in small Texas towns.

While I tried to consider character, atmosphere, situation, and theme as linking these stories together, I also tried to give them structural unity. Many of these stories can be considered minimalist stories. I tried not to give too many details and to allow room for readers to decide outcomes and motives for themselves. The stories are often in the present tense, and sometimes the characters are not given names. I provided details such as occupation only when I thought it necessary to the development of the story. Many of the stories are open-ended and lack a sense of plot in the classical sense.

In a 1985 special issue of Mississippi Review, guest editor Kim A. Herzinger assembled a collection of essays that focuses on minimalism, an innovative short-story genre. As a whole, the collection of seminal essays in this special issue defines minimalism as a short-story genre and provides direction for further study of minimalism. In his letter to solicit essays on minimalism, Herzinger explained the type of fiction that he seeks to define. He wrote,

> Our focus is the putative "minimalist" fiction variously associated with writers such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Mary Robison, Alice Adams,

> Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Andre Dubus, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, Elizabeth Tallent, David Leavitt, and dozens of others, works loosely characterized by equanimity of surface, "ordinary' subjects, recalcitrant narrators and deadpan narratives, slightness of story, and characters who don't think out loud. ("Introduction" 7)

Because the genre had not hitherto been given a name, this collective commentary is responsible for offering at least a tentative name for "the new fiction." Minimalism, from those who argue against and for the genre, is also given other labels. In their responses to Herzinger's solicitation for papers, he says critics offered him the following suggestions:

> Dirty Realism (Granata); New Realism/ Pop Realism; and our own lovable Neo-Domestic Neo-Realism. Interested parties, before or since, suggested White Trash Fiction; Coke Fiction; "Post-Alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism" (John Barth); "Around-the house-and-in-the yard" Fiction (Don DeLillo); Wised Up Realism; TV Fiction; High Tech Fiction; Designer Realism; Extra-Realism; and the svelte Post-Post-Modernism. ("Introduction" 9)

Many contemporary writers who critics consider minimalists do not regard the title as a compliment. "Minimalism" seems

to have negative connotations for some critics and writers. Frederick Barthelme says,

> I don't like being called a minimalist, which I am called I think because my characters don't get up on boxes and shout out their views of the world. This is not because they do not have views of the world, but rather that they recognize that we make views of the world the same way we make cars--we produce a great many, but they're not very reliable. So the characters shut up. This pleases me. (Herzinger "Introduction" 9)

Raymond Carver responds to the critics' tendency to call his fiction minimalism: "In a review of the last book, somebody called me a 'minimalist' writer. The reviewer meant it as a compliment. But I didn't like it. There's something about 'minimalist' that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don't like" (Paris Review 317).

Even Herzinger acknowledges that the term "minimalism" has its problems, but as he says, "Some enterprising critic, or reviewer . . . will someday deliver the name that sticks; that is, of course, if whatever 'minimalism' is lives long enough to be named" ("Introduction" 9).

In general, critics use the term "minimalism" to describe the "new fiction" discussed in Herzinger's special essay. In his more recent essay "Minimalism as a

Postmodernism: Some Introductory Notes," Herzinger offers the following characteristics of the genre:

> Minimalist fiction is a) formally spare, terse, trim; b) tonally cool, detached, noncommittal; "flat," affectless, recalcitrant, deadpan, laconic; c) oblique and elliptical; d) relatively plotless; e) concerned with surface detail, particularly with recognizable brand names; f) depthless; g) comparatively oblique about personal, social, political, or cultural history; h) often written in the present tense; i) often written in the first person; j) sometimes written in the second person. Minimalist fiction's characteristic mode is a) representational/ hyperrealistic/superrealistic; b) not fabulist. Minimalist fiction's characteristic "subject matter" is a) ordinary, mundane; b) domestic, local; c) regional; d) generational; e) blue-collar/working-class or white-collar/yuppie. ("Postmodernism" 73)

Although all minimalist fiction certainly does not consist of all of these elements, Herzinger, in general, provides an excellent paradigm for explicating this short story genre. In their discussions of minimalism, many other critics consider one or more of these elements as exemplary of minimalist fiction. Bruce Bawer says minimalist writers

> are inclined to write frequently in the present tense; to favor the short declarative sentences (very short and very declarative); to be preoccupied with domestic details (cooking, dishwashing, laundry), with the most banal of contemporary phenomena (TV commercials, trailer parks), and with brand names; to transmit clues to the nature of a protagonist's personal torments ad dryly and emotionlessly as if those torments were just so many trite domestic details; and to think that surface details, if piled up high enough, can help us to see through to the heart. (Iannone 60)

In his discussion of minimalism, John Barth observes the following attributes of "the new flowering of the (North) American short story," minimalism fiction:

> the kind of terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction associated in the last 5 or 10 years with such excellent writers as Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison and Tobias Wolff, and both praised and damned under such labels as "K-Mart realism," "hick chic," "Diet-Pepsi minimalism" and "post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingwayism." (6)

One obvious characteristic of minimalism is the lack of explanation narrators provide for the text. Characters are involved in some type of activity and usually some sort of inward, psychological experience occurs; however, narrators or characters rarely explain the significance of events. Readers are left to fill in the blanks, "read between the lines." The author's implied meaning is usually the point of the story. It's not so much that a character watches TV or shops at K-Mart, it's the implied, sometimes metaphorical significance of everyday activities.

In short, minimalism portrays an everyday scene in an "average" person's life. Readers are not provided with an obvious motivation for the characters' actions and rarely are the characters aware of their own motives for doing what they do. If characters are aware of their motives, they certainly do not announce their motives to other characters or to readers. Herzinger discusses the unclear character motivation apparent in minimalist fiction:

> Characters in minimalist fictions are not--overtly--motivated by an announced or examined psychology, by determined sociological, economic or historical factors; and they participate in events seemingly disconnected from, or not necessarily connected to, other events in the text. The process of cause and effect is blurred. . . . There is nothing but the surface

> there, the world and its characters just is, and the means by which we typically come to understand it is thrown into what I take to be a liberating confusion, a confusion which compels discovery rather than acceptance. ("Postmodernism" 76)

The reader must recognize the significance of the circumstance as the events relate to characters, and the readers must fill in the necessary background. Herzinger also observes,

> The reader of "minimalist" fiction is being asked to face the characters in the story the way we face people in the world, people who do not--in my experience at least--ordinarily declare their personal histories, political and moral attitudes, or psychological conditions for my profit and understanding. ("Introduction" 17)

For some critics, the lack of announced motivation and proclaimed theme makes minimalist fiction more realistic than fiction that provides a narrator to interpret events for readers. This is not to say that realistic fiction is better than unrealistic fiction. Realism simply offers another attribute useful when defining minimalism as a genre.

Minimalism follows the familiar prescriptive adage that suggests, "It's not what you say, it's what you don't say." Often, it's what the characters do not say or do not think

that becomes the basis for the theme of the story. As John Aldridge suggests,

> The vacant spaces between and behind the words, the strongly sensed presence of things omitted, become expressive of all the alternatives and elaborations, all the excesses and equivocations of language, that have been scrupulously rejected in the style formation. . . . Such a method, composed of a minimum of simple words that seem to have squeezed onto the page against a great compulsion to be silent, creates the impression that those words--if only because there are so few of them--are sacramental, while the frequent reappearance of some of them in the same or in similar order at intervals through the text tends to give them idiographic value. (342-43)

Indeed, fewer words make the words seem important, even if only by "default"--readers can't read what is not on the page. Using less to say more also allows implication to give minimalism a particular power--the power of understatement. In his discussion of the use of present tense, Yagoda observes this power: "But the real power of this way of writing springs from what's implied and not explicitly stated" (30).

Of course, one danger of misusing minimalist techniques is that even the careful reader can't make sense of

connections that seem arbitrary--implication becomes merely mysterious guessing; understatement becomes lack of statement. In his essay-review "Form Over Function: Minimalism's Dead End," Michiko Kakutani explains other dangers of using implication and understatement as techniques of fiction writing:

> Spareness of expression, a willful refusal to impute motive or interpret character, an inability or unwillingness to use the conventions of traditional narrative--all were initially strategies invoked by writers to portray the alienation experienced by a generation. And they were strategies that mirrored, in their very form, the post-60's sense of discontinuity and flux. In the hands of such writers as Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie, this approach could result in tightly controlled works of considerable emotional power; but at its worst, it dwindles into a grudging fiction in which the white space between the words and lines seeps into--and subsumes--the actual stories. (12)

Minimalist fiction offers a view of the world not too different from eavesdropping. For example, dining in a restaurant, one may listen and watch a couple at a nearby table. Naturally, the couple would not address the eavesdropper's questions, nor would the couple provide the

necessary background for the eavesdropper to understand fully the significance of the conversation. The eavesdropper has to figure out the details for himself. At its best, the "eavesdropping" effect of the sparseness that abounds in minimalist fiction allows readers to discover unstated truths about the characters, about themselves, and about the world around them. Isn't that what literature is all about?

It is difficult to understand how this sort of eavesdropping can really be "about" anything. For example, In Carver's short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the entire story takes place in a couple's dining room. But the story is obviously not "about" anything that happens while they talk. If fact, nothing really happens. The characters intend to go out to a restaurant, and they never even manage to get out of the dining room, much less the house.

Carver presents four people sitting around a table talking about love. The real meaning is the message the story offers about love and the implied questions that arise as a result of the conversation between the characters. The technique of readers "listening to," or "eavesdropping on" the four people forces readers to ask themselves questions such as "what is love?"

As Herzinger points out,

> If "minimalist" fiction is "about" anything, it seems quite often to be "about" endurance, tracing the collision of the anarchic self and its inexplicable desires with the limitations imposed by life in the world, with special attention paid to that moment when the self confronts its limitations and decides to keep on going. (20)

On the other hand, as Kakutani recognizes, the misuse of the techniques of minimalism often leads to an incomplete story. To use the eavesdropping metaphor, if attempted without precise skill and knowledge of exactly what to include and what to omit, minimalist fiction becomes nothing more than listening to a boring conversation between people the listener neither understands nor cares to understand.

Naturally, the reader is asked to make the effort to understand the implied and understated message. Sometimes making the connections demands more from readers than a short story form that uses a narrative device to explain seemingly disconnected events and thoughts. If readers are not interested enough to make the connections, to get the point, minimalism often becomes just a meaningless glimpse of an average scene in an average person's life. Barbara Henning considers the importance of readers' willingness to participate as readers of minimalist fiction. She writes,

> Without a reader, minimalist fiction is a static product of contemporary American life.

> With a responding reader, however, it becomes a powerful reaction to and interpretation of daily life. The minimalist writer, a writer shaped by the society she lives in, asks the reader to do her part, to make connections, bring insight and resolution, provide the reasoning, question, revise, accept; and especially, the writer, it seems to me, asks the reader to <u>care</u>, simply to care about the characters and their predicaments. (698)

Just as eavesdropping provides a view of the world in the present tense--the characters are being watched, spied on, if you will, while they do something--the action in most minimalist fiction occurs in the present tense, similar to a movie or a play. In his essay-review "No Tense Like the Present," Ben Yagoda discusses the recent trend for writers to use the present tense in short fiction. Although he does not explicitly discuss minimalism, the present tense is certainly a characteristic of minimalist fiction.

Yagoda acknowledges that one benefit of the present tense is that the details presented seem more selected. Writing in the past tense, one gets the feeling that this <u>really</u> happened and the details presented are a recollection of the events as they really occurred; moreover, since the events have already happened, the narrator often finds it necessary to explain explicitly the significance of the

events. In contrast, the present tense gives readers the sense that the details are carefully selected to provide a frame for the implied theme and understated message. The action is occurring at the time the narrator describes the actions; therefore, the narrator rarely stops to explain the significance of the events. Yagoda observes,

> We know that the writer has chosen these details over everything else he could have invented; by presenting them, and not telling us What It All Means, he distills a kind of polymorphous irony. On the one hand, he implies that the events represent a pattern that the characters are endlessly repeating. At the same time, we are frequently given to understand that beneath the surface is something that cannot be said--a trauma, perhaps, like an incipient divorce, or a more general sense of desperation--and is all the more palpable for being unstated. (30)

Yagoda is not entirely favorable of the use of the present tense. He points out the use of present tense frees the writer from the responsibility of explaining historical events, both cultural and personal. He suggests that sometimes background information is necessary for readers to understand fully the impact the present events have on the characters. He writes,

> Whitman tells us, "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there," and we respect his moral and literary authority. Writers who gravitate toward the present tense don't seem to want that burden. They don't want to tell us what happened, no matter how urgently we want to be told. We want plots; they give us plot summaries, much like those we might find in the pages of TV Guide. This is not an illegitimate position to take. But sometimes it seems that they could try a little harder to pass beyond it. (30)

John Barth calls minimalism "neo-early-Hemingwayism," and many critics consider Hemingway the precursor of contemporary minimalist writers (6). Hemingway says, "You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood" (Barth 7).

In his essay "The Sun Also Rises--Sixty Years Later," Aldridge examines Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises in terms of its minimalist features. He says, "We are constantly aware in the novel of the presence of what we are not told, of what Jake refuses to acknowledge and judge because it is too dangerous to make a judgment and thus bring the danger to the surface of consciousness" (343). Hugh Kenner makes a similar comment about A Homemade World: "Hemingway's achievement . . . consisted in setting down, so sparsely

that we can see past them, the words for the action that concealed the real action" (Aldridge 343).

One interesting characteristic of minimalism that many critics (including Bawer, Herzinger, and Barth) observe is the writer's use of brand names. The use of brand names reflects the writer's portrayal of everyday details. It also explains why minimalism has been designated with labels such as "Coke Fiction" and "Diet Pepsi minimalism" that some critics use. Some readers may criticize the use of brand names, for among other things the use of brand names dates the stories and may make them difficult for future readers to understand; but Frederick Barthelme answers such criticism. When a reviewer challenged his depiction of a character drinking a "Diet Coke," he answered, "what was he supposed to drink, a brown bubbly liquid?" (Herzinger "Postmodernism" 78).

Minimalism has also been referred to as "TV Fiction," a term that reflects the way characters in this genre watch TV or make references to specific TV programs. The use of TV illustrates a writer's depiction of surface detail. In their everyday lives, people do watch TV, and the depiction of a character watching TV reflects the writer's attempt to demonstrate a character's ordinary activities. In his unfavorable review of minimalist fiction, Robert Dunn acknowledges the tendency for minimalist writers to show characters in everyday situations. He says,

> One reason we read is to slip past drawn blinds, sit invisibly in an easy chair and watch everything unnoticed. Yet when I turned to some of our most original young writers, those pitched at central points of our common life--Frederick Barthelme, Bobbie Ann Mason, Raymond Carver and Mary Robison--I found lives that even under the clearest light were thin, abashed, undirected and nearly beyond control. (1)

Reading about characters who drink Diet Cokes, shop at K-Mart, and watch TV allows us to see them engaging in activities that may seem mundane. Dunn suggests that reading about such everyday, common experiences becomes boring, an uninteresting view of an average character; but observing characters in common experiences often allows readers a genuine look at a more realistic character than observing characters in extraordinary experiences.

Readers can relate to characters who do things they do or characters who remind them of people they know. Real people drink a particular brand of soda, shop at specific stores, and engage in simple activities like watching TV and listening to the radio. Bobbie Ann Mason also depicts her characters as listening to music. Depicting characters listening to music or singing melodies form popular tunes is similar to depicting characters watch TV or refer to TV

programs. It shows characters who are involved in everyday experiences, and it reflects pop culture.

The portrayal of TV in short fiction also demonstrates one way a writer reveals pop culture. Among other issues, Abrams discusses the way brand names and TV reflect pop culture:

> In the fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason, for example, pop details abound (is current fiction simply two decades behind Andy Warhol?) The Waltons, Toni Creme Rinse, Kwik-Piks, Bert Parks. There is satisfaction, a concurring, in encountering the familiar; we too have watched these same tv shows or used these same products. (28)

In minimalist fiction, the portrayal of TV also represents a technique a writer uses to show a character's social class. As Diane Stevenson points out in her essay "Minimalist Fiction and Critical Doctrine," minimalist writers often "attempt to speak for a class that goes to popular movies, watches T.V. sitcoms, and allegedly believes the messages in commercials, a class left voiceless (because "tasteless") and more than a little maligned and intimidated by a 50s critical class conspiracy" (84).

Minimalism frequently portrays characters in typical, everyday experiences. This technique allows readers to eavesdrop on characters and understand surface-level details on a deeper level. Critics and writers disagree on

everything from the use of the technique to what to call this for of the "Stuff dreams are made on." Nevertheless, minimalism as a short story genre is a topic many contemporary critics continue to discuss and debate. As new critics and writers discover potential avenues, the genre will either fade or grow. Future research may demonstrate that "minimalism" is nothing more than a foolish scholarly attempt to try to categorize fiction. On the other hand, research may demonstrate that minimalism is an accurate label, making future writers and critics increasingly aware of the techniques of the genre.

Most of the stories in this collection, (Broken) Promises, could fit any loose definition of minimalism, as I have a natural tendency to leave out details in my writing. "Coffee," "Yard Sale," and "Portrait of a Family" seem most likely candidates for minimalist short stories. Like "Nuptials" and "(Broken) Promises," "Coffee" and "Yard Sale" are parallel stories. I seriously considered changing the title of "Yard Sale" to "Alcohol" but decided as an individual story, "Yard Sale" seemed the more fitting title. Both stories seem a bit brief for a short story, and they include extensive dialogue. The characters names in "Coffee" are never given, and I intended them to be the same characters of "Yard Sale," Debbie and Tom. Although short, these two stories have some sense of plot. The drowning of the young boy and the forthcoming yard sale, the incidents

in the stories, are not what I intended the stories to reveal. I hoped readers might learn more about the two characters who speak than they do about the incidents the characters discuss.

Inherent in most minimalist stories is the question of genre: When is a story a story? Some stories in this collection cross genre boundaries. Certainly, "stories" such as "Nuptials" and "(Broken) Promises" defy traditional short story definitions. The "How To" stories also break away from traditional short stories. The "How To" stories could just as easily be called personal essays or instruction parodies. The use of the second person and imperative mood of the "How To" stories sets them apart from stories that are easily identified as such.

Most short story theorists agree on the details that involve the historical development of the short story. A frequent critical comment about this development "is that it began as a unique genre in America in the early nineteenth century, particularly with the works of Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville" (May 62). Critics acknowledge the beginnings of both the international short story genre and the American short story genre. Mary Rohrberger and Dan E. Burns begin their essay "Short Fiction and the Numinous Realm: Another Attempt at Definition" with a brief introduction that outlines the international development of the short story:

> Three clearly defined phases of development are discernible: (1) origins with Hawthorne and Poe in this country and with Gogol in Russia; (2) an early modern phase, with such writers a[s] Anderson and Toomer in this country, Mansfield and Joyce in England, and Chekhov in Russia; (3) a contemporary phase with such writers as Coover, Barth, and Barthelme in this country, and from other continents Borges and Nabokov. (5)

Critics debate as to when the "phases" begin and they certainly refer to these phases by different names. There is also continuing critical debate as to what specific elements constitute a short story and what elements are peculiar to the short story genre. Most critics acknowledge that a short story requires the basic elements of plot, character, theme, and setting, but no consensus has been reached concerning conventions of length, structure, and scope. Some of the problem in defining the short story stems from confusion common to distinguishing any literary genre. As Mary Louis Pratt points out in her essay "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It":

> There is at present no single consistent use of the term "genre." The most one can say is that it always refers to a subcategory of some larger category (or subcategory) of literary works. Thus the genre of drama is a subcategory of literature,

> the genre of comedy is a subcategory of drama, the genre of farce is a subcategory of comedy, and so on. The fuzziness of the term arises not just from its being applied at different levels, but also from its being applied according to different criteria. Genre distinctions are based variously on subject matter (detective story, artist novel), narrative situation (confessional novel, dramatic monologue), surface linguistic form (sonnet, prose poem), effect sought in audience (tragedy, melodrama), mode of execution of text (drama) and so on. (175)

Critics recognize that there is no authoritative definition of the short story. In her essay "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form," Susanne C. Ferguson observes difficulties particular to defining the short story genre. She discusses critics' struggle to define the short story as a particular literary genre:

> "Intuition" or even "experience" may tell us that the "short story" exists, but defining it has proven surprisingly resistant to critical effort. A 1976 anthology, Charles May's Short Story Theories, demonstrates the problematic situation. Short stories are defined in terms of unity (Poe, Brander Matthews, and others), techniques of plot compression (A. L. Bader, Norman Friedman, L. A.

> G. Strong), change or revelation of character (Theodore Stroud), subject (Frank O'Connor), tone (Gordimer), "lyricism" (Moravia), but there is finally no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that critics agree absolutely distinguishes the short story from other fictions. (13)

While many contemporary short story theorists point to Brander Matthews's "The Philosophy of the Short-Story" (1901) as one of the first essays attempting a definition of the short story, they often do not consider his definition adequate for contemporary short story theory. Matthews says,

> A true Short-story is something more that a mere story which is short. A true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression. In a far more exact and precise use of the word, a Short-story has unity as a story fulfills the three false unities of the French classic drama: it shows one action, in one place, on one day. A Short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation. . . . The Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained, while the Novel is of necessity broken into a series of

> episodes. Thus the Short-story has, what the Novel cannot have, the effect of "Totality," as Poe called it, the unity of impression. (52)

Writers in contemporary writers' workshops often explain the short story in terms that paraphrase Matthews' criteria, although the definition is rarely attributed to him. The paraphrase usually goes something like this: "A short story is a story that shows one event that happens to a central character in one place, on one day." Usually someone in the workshop will add, "From one point of view."

One assumes that most short story writers' workshops do not devote much class time to discussing short story theory because knowing theory and knowing how to identify literary works by genre are skills that evolve in the course of the workshop. In other words, while listening to other writers discuss short stories and in attempting to write short stories themselves, writers learn to recognize the characteristic elements of the short story.

Ideally, short story workshops educe in young writers a sense of genre requirements. And, as Norman Friedman points out in his essay "Recent Short Story Theories," such a sense is an important first step toward developing an understanding of particular literary works:

> The concept of literature as an art is easier to deal with than the concepts involved in its subdivisions. We can set literature off from

> life, as well as from the other arts, more clearly than we can set off its branches from one another. Indeed, this is precisely the problem many short story critics have in trying to define the genre. How can we talk about something before we know what we are talking about? Don't we have to mark off our field of inquiry before studying it? Isn't it better to interpret and evaluate any given work relative to its kind rather than applying a single universal standard to all kinds? (14-15)

Likewise, it may be helpful to define which genre one is writing in before one begins. I speak in terms of <u>writing</u> a short story; in his essay "On Defining the Short Story: The Genre Question," Austin Wright discusses this issue in terms of <u>defining</u> the short story:

> Efforts to define the short story run into a chicken/egg problem. We must decide: Are we trying to articulate a concept already intuitively clear (trying to find terms to mark off this already understood entity?), or are we trying to establish a new category? Are we trying to rationalize our belief that X is a short story and Y is not, or are we creating terms to give a name to X and Y? Again, would my inclusion of a story by Boccaccio in the ranks of the short story

> precede my attempt to define the short story, or would it follow my establishment of a definition? (47)

I would argue that attempts to categorize fiction in the short story genre follow attempts to define the short story, just as attempts to write short stories follow attempts to understand the genre. At minimum it is necessary to understand a genre's limits in order to write within it.

Although knowing the genre and recognizing boundaries, even loose boundaries, between the genres is not all that is required for one to write good short stories, it does provide necessary tools--the teachable tools. Presumably, anyone can be taught to write a short story, but managing a good short story is another matter. Even writers who have "talent" (or whatever the undefinable quality is that separates those who can write good stories from those who cannot write good stories), need to learn the techniques of the craft of writing to develop their abilities. These techniques include a clear understanding of what constitutes the genre.

This brings the problem full circle, because understanding exactly what forms a short story becomes more difficult with the complex diversity of opinion among short story theorists. Attempts to define the short story as genre range even in depth. Some critics' attempts are as simple as Friedman's definition: "a short fictional

narrative in prose" (29). Johannes Hedberg gives what he calls "a brief definition" in his essay "What Is a 'Short Story'? And What Is an 'Essay'?" He says, "a short story is the name of a story with fully developed theme, yet shorter than the kind of story that is called a novel" (113). Other critics provide elaborate discussions, demonstrating differences between the short story and other genres, frequently drawing comparisons between the short story and the novel.

In her essay "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It," Mary Louis Pratt provides an elaborate comparison. She compares the short story with the novel, establishing differences between the two on the basis of eight propositions. Her first four propositions revolve around comparisons that involve the short story as less complete than the novel:

> . . . . The novel tells a life, the short story tells a fragment of a life. . . . The short story deals with a single thing, the novel with many things. . . . The short story is a sample, the novel is the whole hog. . . . The novel is a whole text, the short story is not. . . . (182-86)

Her last four propositions "relate to [the short story's] status as minor and lesser genre with respect to the novel"

(187). These propositions are subject matter, orality, narrative traditions, and craft versus art (187-91).

As in many short story definitions, some of the conclusions of Pratt's definition are not fully convincing. Pratt tries to separate elements of the short story from elements of the novel and other theorists have attempted the same type of definition, but these types of explanations often fail to provide essential definitions in the Aristotelian sense because they allow too much crossing between the genres. They propose elements that could apply to genres other than the short story.

The problem seems to be that no one is able to expose exactly which elements have continued to distinguish a short story from other prose genres--what, in short, makes a short story a short story. For example, Welty's The Ponder Heart or McCullers's Ballad of the Sad Café could easily fit into two categories. These two works have elements that meet some of the criteria for the short story and elements that meet some of the criteria for the novel; however, they do not meet all the criteria for either genre. It becomes apparent in works such as these that a strict definition, a definition that forces works in mutually exclusive categories, a purely Aristotelian definition, is not plausible.

Trying to define the short story with rigid boundaries forces a particular work to belong to one genre exclusively

and makes the genre question seem pointless. Austin Wright observes,

> When genre is conceived as a category, as it usually is in casual writing, it tends to become nothing more than a pigeonhole, and it gives rise to fruitless questions, such as whether this or that work belongs to it. . . . The question "Is X a short story or is it not?" always seems a bit unreal. It tends to throw the whole concept of genre into disrepute, since when the answer is a clear yes or no, the question seems pointless, and when the answer is uncertain, the question distracts attention from the real interests of the work. (47-48)

He argues for a definition that centers on "a cluster of conventions" (53), saying that "a definition satisfactory to all, agreeable to formalists, structuralists, post-structuralists, feminists, individualists, and all the various critical splinter groups, impossible" (52). Rather than viewing a genre as a "category of works," he views it as "a cluster of characteristics" (47). He says,

> My own sense of the genre--based on what I know, organized by critical distinctions that I find useful, but not tested by any systematic survey of the field--includes such tendencies as the following: 1) The short story tends to be between five

> hundred words long and the length of Joyce's "The Dead" (we have here a difference between the normal upper limit and an absolute one: "Heart of Darkness" is exceptional). 2) It tends to deal with character and action in its fictional world (this is more specific than my outer-limit designation of, simply, a fictional world). 3) This action tends to be externally simple, with few developed episodes and no subplots or secondary lines of action. . . .
>
> . . . 4) the short story . . . tends to be more strongly unified than other short prose narrative forms. . . . 5) [Intensity in] the preference in short stories for plots of small magnitude, plots of discovery, static or disclosure plots, Joycean epiphanies, and the like, as well as in 6) the tendency, especially in modern stories, to leave significant things to inference. (51-52)

"Tendency" is the key word. Wright bases his propositions on the assumption that the elements of the short story are tendencies and not absolutes. Wright's final explanation allows, therefore, a much looser boundary between genres. Although this type of explanation does not provide a definition in the Aristotelian sense, it provides enough information to allow one to recognize the basic elements of most (but not all) short stories. Wright's

"loose" definition allows one to consider literary works that might defy a strictly defined short story genre as short stories.

An empirical approach is probably the best way to understand the basic elements of most short stories. Reading short stories, especially evaluating them critically, allows one to grasp, even if it is only intuitively, the elements of a "typical" short story. To understand these tendencies even more fully and to become more capable of reading short stories (or any piece of literature) productively, it is also necessary to read criticism of short stories. In creative writing workshops, studying the short story form involves just that--reading short stories, (good ones and bad ones and learning the difference between the two) and studying others' analyses of short stories.

Although studying the short story helps one understand more fully what it is, the continuing critical debate demonstrates that the form is not so easily defined. If it were easily defined, there would be a definitive explanation of "the short story." Through studying the form, however, we may understand sufficiently a range of possibilities.

It is just as difficult to define a personal essay as it is to define a short story. Like the boundaries between poetry, short story, and novel genres, the boundary between short story and personal essay is indistinct. The genre

question also arises in critical discussions that elaborate on definitions of the personal essay. Whereas many theorists use distinctions between the novel and the short story to explain the short story, they use distinctions between the first-person short story and the personal essay to explain the personal essay.

The same types of questions arise when trying to distinguish between short stories and essays. In his essay "A Puzzling Literary Genre: Comparative Views of the Essay," Richard M. Chadbourne discusses problems the personal essay as a distinct genre poses:

> If one is willing to grant that the essay indeed is a distinct form or genre . . . , then it instantly partakes of the notorious difficulties involved in all genre studies. The most serious of these has been pinpointed by Paul Hernadi in the form of the following "quandary": "How can I identify tragedy (or any other genre) before I know on which works to base the definition, yet how can I know on which works to base the definition before I have defined tragedy?" (133)

Chadbourne repeats Hernadi's "quandary," which paraphrases the "chicken/egg" problem both Wright and Friedman point out in their discussions of the problems involved in defining the short story genre. Again, I think it is important first to experience the works themselves, in

this case the essay, before one can understand which literary works to include. And again, I think it is important to read personal essays and to read criticism that analyzes personal essays in order to suspect the genre's field of possibility. Fortunately, there are essays that are firmly distinguished as essays, so it is possible to gain knowledge of the genre first. Those seeking to understand the elements of a personal essay first need to recognize the literary works that well-established critics consider as personal essays in order to develop a sense of the genre.

Many personal essays are firmly established in the canon as clearly belonging to that particular genre. Larry McMurtry's collection of essays In a Narrow Grave provides a good example. The nine works in this collection are clearly essays. They are all first-person narrative accounts that reflect attitudes and opinions on various aspects of life in Texas. The collection of essays contains many factual details, yet many details that could be either fact or fiction. They are presented with a warm, personal, and often humorous voice.

One essay in McMurtry's In a Narrow Grave that may appear as a quasi-scholarly essay instead of a personal essay is "Southwestern Literature?" But even this essay is presented as the narrator's reaction to having read three Texas writers: Bedichek, Webb, and Dobie. The essay does

not present these three writers in the way a scholarly essay would; instead, the writers the narrator discusses provide a background for him to tell of his own personal experience. His own experience when he realized that "The writer my age who wishes to write about this state [Texas] must relate himself one way or the other to the tradition" Bedichek, Webb, and Dobie promoted (34). The subject of this essay, then, is not these three early Texas writers, but the narrator's attitude toward them.

It is easier to study first the literary works that are clearly defined in a particular genre to get a sense of the elements of the particular genre. Collections of essays such as McMurtry's provide good starting places for students who wish to study the personal essay.

The difference between the short story and the fictional personal essay is even harder to explain than the difference between the novel and the short story. Johannas Hedberg attempts to distinguish the differences between the short story genre and the personal essay genre in his essay "What Is a 'Short Story'? And What Is an 'Essay'?" He concludes:

> It [the essay] can be long or short, grave or gay, flippant or serious, personal or abstract, partisan or indifferent. The essay is, in short, a method of getting off our chests anything we have got to say on any subject or thought under

> the sun: for we can all write essays--short stories are more difficult to compose. The essay is, by its very nature, usually small-scale; yet it should, as far as possible, be a whole picture in miniature, not merely a detail of a larger picture--a complete work, not an extract. This dictum should apply to the short story as well. (120)

Douglas Hesse says Hedberg's claim that "essays differ from short stories in that they consist of facts sifted through the author's imagination and have unlimited scope in terms of subject and form" is inexact (86). Hesse points out, in his essay "A Boundary Zone: First-Person Short Stories and Narrative Essays," Hedberg's conclusion "ignores stories which seem to meet both criteria and essays that are unabashedly fictional" (86). Hesse argues for the following similarities between a personal essay and a short story:

> Their basic characteristics are a first-person narrator, the possibility and <u>seeming</u> actuality of a one-to-one correspondence between the works on the page and some actual state of affairs in the world, relative brevity, and the dominance of narration. If a first-person short story were "obviously" fiction, it would have no more place

> in the present discussion than an essay that contains no narrative. (87)

Hesse says that most of the confusion of trying to distinguish between the first-person short story and the personal essay stems from reliance in both genres on the use of "I" as narrator. He says readers are not always aware of whom "I" refers to in either genre:

> If we could be sure who I is, perhaps the matter would be unproblematic. In personal essays, I is the author, though in the persona in which she portrays herself. A collection of twelve essays may have twelve different I's yet a single referent in the world beyond the page. First-person short stories share this name. In them, however, we assume that I is not some version of the author. (99)

Another problem involves the issue of "fact versus fiction." A common misconception is that the first-person short story writer proceeds more imaginatively, more fictively than an essayist. This misconception implies that the short story writer uses persona to create a narrator, while the personal essayist does not. In the essay, the narrator and the writer are ostensibly inseparable. Hesse explains that this is not the case:

> Just as one of the first things a fiction writer learns is that he needn't actually be writing

> fiction to write a short story--he can tell his own history or anyone else's as exactly as he remembers it and it will still be "fiction" if it remains primarily a story--an essayist discovers that he doesn't have to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth; he can shape or shave his memories as long as the purpose is served or elucidating a truthful point. (85)

Hesse continues, saying, "For the most part there are obvious differences between essays and short stories" (105), and he gives one such distinction: "The fundamental issue is reference. Essays are supposed to refer to a real world beyond the page; short stories are not" (99). Hesse explains that even this is not always so easy for readers to understand. He says that readers approach short stories and essays differently, depending on expectations of genre. He explains the importance of assigning labels to texts: "What happens when we 'try' the conventions of essay, and those of the short story? What are the relations between exposition and narrative?" (104).

Like Wright's definition of the short story that involves looking for short story tendencies, Hesse seems to look for tendencies in the essay. Hesse understands that for a definition of the personal essay to include all personal essays and exclude literary works in other genres, that definition must be flexible.

Most first-person short stories are easily classified as short stories. Take the familiar short story "A & P," by John Updike. "A & P" is obviously a short story, even though Updike presents much of the story as the narrator's summary of what the girls do when they enter the grocery store. The story observes a plot in the classical sense, and the plot becomes more important than the narrator's telling of the episode. The narrator is also very involved in the action of the story; he is not using the incident to express his personal feelings. The climax of the story obviously involves the narrator's attitudes toward the action, but through dramatic irony the narrator is portrayed as not being aware of his true attitudes.

A more complicated issue arises when the short first-person narratives are not traditional short stories. Two familiar short works of fiction provide good examples: Donald Barthelme's "The Sandman" and Frank O'Connor's "My Oedipus Complex." If the narrator's name were not explicitly stated as Larry in O'Connor's "My Oedipus Complex," this short story might just as easily be called an essay. One could argue that all the incidents in the first-person narrative are examples that support Larry's portrayal of his Oedipus Complex, his unconscious desire to marry his mother and to kill his father. Larry's attitudes toward the incidents are more important than the incidents themselves. However, one could just as easily argue that "My Oedipus

Complex" reflects set-up, conflict, and resolution to suggest the theme of Larry's Oedipus Complex and how he overcomes it. Larry clearly identifies with his father at the end of the story, and his identification represents the end of the phallic stage of development in Freud's explanation of psycho-sexual stages of development.

"My Oedipus Complex" has a clear plot; it uses characterization, dialogue, and point of view in the way a traditional short story does. "My Oedipus Complex" clearly has elements of both a short story and an essay, but since the author's name is Frank and the narrator's name is Larry, "My Oedipus Complex" defies the essay's traditional use of author as narrator.

Barthelme's "The Sandman," however, could clearly represent either an essay or a short story. This is an epistolary narrative, so it is more complex to label than "My Oedipus Complex." One could easily argue that "The Sandman" clearly presents the narrator's evidence that his girlfriend, Susan, should quit therapy and buy a piano. All the summary, in the form of the narrator's letter to Susan's psychiatrist, supports this thesis. The narrator presents all the incidents as arguments to support his thesis. But we also discover much about Susan, the narrator, and the psychiatrist, which gives the work strong characterization. "The Sandman," like Updike's "A & P," is as much about the narrator as it is about his intended subject. The narrative

reflects dramatic irony, plot, and scene--elements of a short story. One could argue that the conflict builds to the resolution that the narrator loves Susan very much or even that the reader increasingly discovers that the narrator may need a little therapy himself. Like a short story, "The Sandman" reveals many themes through the use of traditional short story elements. "The Sandman" can represent either a short story or a personal essay.

In the case of a literary work that fits into either the short story or the essay genre, even when attempting to classify using Wright's "tendencies," Hesse offers the following suggestion: "yet, at some point, we rely on authors or editors saying what they are" (105).

Even with Wright's tendencies, we must in the case of extreme "gray areas" depend on writers or editors to categorize the work in a distinct genre. For the most part, we can look at tendencies of the genres to understand fully the genre of any literary works. Most of the time, this is not a problem--the genre is obvious. Through the process of reading across genres, reading criticism about literary works across genres, and reading literary genre criticism we come to understand not only <u>what</u> to label literary works, but <u>why</u> we should label them as a particular genre.

While some of the stories is this collection clearly represent fiction that is indicative of the short story genre, others stretch short story boundaries. "Billy and

Me," "Queen of Hearts," "Attachments," "'Thinking About It,'" "Just Say, 'My Truck,'" "The Whiskey Man," and "Lisa and Her Brothers" seem more clearly representative of the short story genre than the other stories. To varying degrees, these seven stories all build to a climax, then move into a resolution. These stories do not have a thesis and can be interpreted in a number of ways. They all portray characters who perform actions that develop the plots. The incidents in these stories are not used as illustrations of any one controlling idea.

"Seven X Seven," "Portrait of a Family," "Coffee," "Yard Sale," "Nuptials," "(Broken) Promises," "How to Divorce Your Husband," "How to Listen to Country Music," and "Motel Wo(Manners)" seem least representative of the typical short story as discussed above. "Seven X Seven" could just as easily be classified as a personal essay. If it were written in the first person, "Portrait of a Family" could easily be considered a personal essay. In both "Seven X Seven" and "Portrait of a Family" several incidents are portrayed that reveal the protagonists' neurosis. The controlling themes seem more important than the incidents. But the stories have resolutions in the sense that the reader comes to understand that the characters will probably never change their situations. The protagonist in each story might or might not be the same woman in both stories.

"Coffee" and "Yard Sale" and "Nuptials" and "(Broken)

Promises" are parallel stories: they are meant to be read as unities, and I considered placing them next to each other but opted for overall textual unity instead, placing one story of each pair near the beginning and one near the end. The speakers of these pieces could be many of the characters in the collection. Standing alone, they would not make much sense; however, within the context of (Broken) Promises, I hoped they would help develop themes and attitudes expressed throughout the collection.

"How to Divorce Your Husband," "How to Listen to Country Music," and "Motel Wo(Manners)" represent stories told in the second person, future tense. Critic have yet to define this type of story. I call them "How To" stories." Of the three stories here, "How to Listen to Country Music" seems to have more of a plot than the other two stories. They represent stories set up as though the speaker were speaking to an audience, similar to a dramatic monologue. Usually these "How To" stories are really about something other than the stated instruction. Lorrie Moore, Pam Houston, John Updike, and other contemporary writers have used this format in similar stories.

As I soon discovered, the "How To" stories are more difficult to write than they appear to be. Maintaining the second person and the future tense for an entire story becomes challenging--it's easy to slip into the third person or the present tense.

With the exception of "Nuptials" and "(Broken) Promises," I think these stories can stand alone as individually stories; however, I hope that my arranging them together as a short story cycle might add intertextual significance for any reader.

WORKS CITED

Abrams, Linsey. "A Maximalist Novelist Looks at Some Minimalist Fiction." Mississippi Review 40-41 (1985): 24-30.

Aldridge, John W. "The Sun Also Rises--Sixty Years Later." Sewanee Review 94.2 (1986): 337-45.

Atlas, James. "Less Is Less." Rev. of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, by Raymond Carver. Atlantic (June 1981): 96-98.

Barth, John. "A Few Words About Mimimalism." New York Times Book Review 28 Dec. 1986: 1+.

Bonetti, Kay. "Ray Carver: Keeping it Short." Saturday Review (Sept.-Oct. 1983): 21-23.

Carver, Raymond. "Raymond Carver." Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews. Seventh Series. Ed. George Plimpton. 299-326.

Chadbourne, Richard M. "A Puzzling Literary Genre: Comparative Views of the Essay." Comparative Literature Studies 20 (1983): 133-153.

Dunn, Robert. "Fiction that Shrinks from Life." New York Times Book Review 30 June 1985: 1+.

Ferguson, Suzanne C. "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form." Modern Fiction Studies 28 (Spring 1982): 13-24.

Friedman, Norman. "Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition." Short Story Theory at a Crossroads. Ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. 13-31.

Gass, William H. "A Failing Grade for the Present Tense." New York Times Book Review 11 Oct. 1987: 1+.

Hedberg, Johannas. "What Is a 'Short Story'? And What Is an 'Essay'?" Moderna Sprak LXXIV (1980): 113-120.

Henning, Barbara. "Minimalism and the American Dream: 'Shiloh' by Bobbie Ann Mason and 'Preservation' by Raymond Carver." Modern Fiction Studies 35 (1989): 589-99.

Herzinger, Kim. "Introduction On the New Fiction." Mississippi Reveiw 40-41 (1985): 7-22.

---. "Minimalism as a Postmodernism: Some Introductory Notes." New Orleans Review 16.3 (1989): 73-81.

Hesse, Douglas. "A Boundary Zone: First-Person Short Stories and Narrative Essays." Short Story Theory at a Crossroads. Ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. 85-105.

Iannone, Carol. "The Fiction We Deserve." Commentary 83.6 (June 1987): 60-63.

Ingram, Forrest. Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.

Kakutani, Michiko. "Form Over Function: Minimalism's Dead End." New York Times 1 Sept. 1986: L12.

Kaufmann, David. "Yuppie Postmodernism." Arizona Quarterly 47.2 (1991): 93-116.

Kennedy, J. Gerald. "Toward a Poetics of the Short Story Cycle." Journal of the Short Story in English 11 (1988): 9-25.

Luscher, Robert M. "John Updike's Olinger Stories: New Light Among the Shadows." Journal of the Short Story in English 11 (1988): 99-117.

---. "The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book." Short Story Theory at a Crossroads. Ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. 148-67.

Matthews, Brander. "The Philosophy of the Short-Story." Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles E. May. Ohio UP, 1976. 52-59.

May, Charles E. "Metaphoric Motivation in Short Fiction: In the beginning Was the Story." Short Story Theory at a Crossroads. Ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. 62-73.

McMurtry, Larry. In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas. New York: Touchstone, 1989.

Meyer, Adam. "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism." Critique 30 (1989): 239-51.

Newman, Charles. "What's Left Out of Literature." New York Times Book Review 12 July 1987: 1+.

Pope, Dan. "The Post-Minimalist American Story or What Comes After Carver?" Gettysburg Review 1 (1988): 331-42.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of it." Poetics 10 (1981): 175-194.

Rohreberger, Mary, and Dan E. Burns. "Short Fiction and the Numinous Realm: Another Attempt at Definition." Modern Fiction Studies 29 (Spring 1982): 5-12.

Saltzman, Arthur M. "To See a World in a Grain of Sand: Expanding Literary Minimalism." Contemporary Literature 31 (1990): 423-33.

Stevenson, Diane. "Minimalist Fiction and Critical Doctrine." Mississipppi Review 40-41 (1985): 83-89.

Wright, Austin M. "On Defining the Short Story: The Genre Question." Short Story Theory at a Crossroads. Ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. 46-53.

Yagoda, Ben. "No Tense Like the Present." New York Times Book Review 10 Aug. 1986: 1+.

BILLY AND ME

I'm never getting another divorce, I think to myself. I almost run a red light trying to dance to James Brown's "I Feel Good" in the car. The d.j. announces that Brown's getting out of prison today. I am too, so I sing along with the d.j.'s repetition of the song. "I feel good," I say, trying to convince myself. The truth is--I'm a nervous wreck.

I'm driving to my attorney's office, so I can, as he so eloquently instructed over the telephone yesterday, "have a brief meeting to go over a few procedural technicalities. Then we can just walk to the courthouse. . . . Everything is signed, it's a simple task, really. . . . I've requested Judge Bartlow; she's especially sympathetic to women."

Right, "a few procedural technicalities." He went on to say that she'd bong the gavel, and I'd be legally divorced. "Bong?"--from a man who had the nerve to tell me what to wear to the hearing. It normally wouldn't have bothered me, but his condescending tone made me wonder who was paying whom.

"Now, Ms. Brumley, I mean Mrs. Brumley, what are we going to wear tomorrow?" He mentioned the cut-offs and thongs I sometimes wear to his office.

"My wedding dress," I should've answered. Then he proceeded to tell me what to wear.

"Yes," I agreed, then told him there was someone at my door, so I had to get off the phone. I'm always making up lies to get him off my phone. He likes to sit around and talk about inconsequential things, then send me the bill for his quarter-hour's time or "any portion thereof," as his bill always points out.

I pull into a parking space behind his office, get the shoe polish out of my glove compartment, and start decorating my car. I smear "Just Divorced" on the back windshield, then tie beer cans to the bumper. My girlfriends are waiting at my house, and they're throwing me a "freedom" party. "Free at last," one of the banners on my living-room wall says, quoting Martin Luther King. Well, really, it's my husband's living room, but I get to stay there for six months.

I sit down across from my attorney.

"This is a relatively uncomplicated divorce," he says.

"Yeah," I agree, while monitoring my mental calculator. I've got it just about figured out to the word. He talks slowly, so every word costs me approximately 13.3¢. He continues to talk, but it's getting increasingly difficult for me to listen.

His words gradually start sounding like the clown at the Jack-in-the-Box drive through. He pulls out one last "I

have advised my client to _____, but she has instead chosen to _____" forms.

"Just sign here, Mrs. Brumley."

I sign the form and give it back to him.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm working for Billy, because you won't let me work toward your best interest. . . . No wonder he didn't hire an attorney; he didn't need one."

I'm not out to kill him, I think.

He puts the form in my file, then leads the way outside, and we walk toward the courthouse. I notice my husband's pick-up in the courthouse parking lot. He's left his lights on again. Little things like that led to this divorce.

"Okay," I said three days before we broke up. "One more time: daytime, lights off, nighttime, lights on. It's really a simple lesson."

"Not always," he answered, standing there with his hand slightly below his hip. "It might be raining, you don't know . . . funeral processions . . . what was it? Remember that time someone got shot or something, and everybody turned their lights on?"

"Excuse me," I say to my attorney and leave him standing in the middle of the parking lot, while I go to turn Billy's lights off.

"The door was locked," I explain when I return.

"What?" he asks.

"That's Billy's truck."

"Did you tell him he didn't have to come? He's already signed the papers."

"Yes, I told him. I guess he just wanted to."

We walk in the courthouse, and I see Billy, puffing away, standing in the corner designated for smokers. He's just standing there, looking down towards his feet. He looks up at me, then walks toward us.

"Hi, Billy," I say.

"Hello."

"Billy, this is Mr. Timmons."

Billy extends his hand toward Mr. Timmons, but Mr. Timmons ignores him.

"Well, I guess we better get up there," Mr. Timmons advises.

"Okay." I agree, but I feel terrible. I want to invite Billy. He probably doesn't even know the room number. "Now, just say 'yes' to everything I ask you," Mr. Timmons had informed me. "Don't talk to anyone; don't say anything." I suddenly feel like the world's greatest conformist, and I guess I am a conformist. I don't know why, but Mr. Timmons suddenly has some sort of magical power over me, although I'm sure his instructions were only to make himself look good in front of the judge. He once told me he had "political ambitions," and I personally think he'll make a great Congressman. I look behind me, and Billy follows

us. Mr. Timmons pushes the elevator button, and we all three stand waiting.

"You look nice," Billy says to me.

I smile, but he stands slightly behind me, so he can't see me. I hope the elevator is crowded, so I won't have to deal with dead silence. The elevator approaches us, and we walk into an otherwise empty elevator.

"Nine floors up," Mr. Timmons says.

"Eight," Billy says as the light indicates we are passing the second floor.

Mr. Timmons ignores him, but I laugh.

"Seven," Billy says as the elevator stops on the third floor.

Good, I think, more people. I hope they like to talk. The doors open, and nobody is there. Billy stretches his arms out to hold the doors open and looks down the hallway. I stand behind him, and I start thinking about all the fun we've had. I wish I could look forward to going home and telling him what happens today. I remember us always telling each other what we'd done during the day . . . all the private jokes we used to laugh about.

"Gremlins," he says, then steps in the corner across from me. "Remember the gremlins. Are they still in the house?"

I just smile. I notice how sexy he looks, standing there in his baggy, faded 501's. I decide I don't really

want a divorce, but I can't think of what to do. I stare at Mr. Timmons; he's holding his briefcase--ready for business. I think of the money my sister sent me to pay him. All those mean things I exaggerated to my friends. Well, it's too late now, I decide. Not really, I think. Just tell Mr. Timmons. Just say . . . , but I think of no words.

The elevator stops at the fifth floor, and a man gets in. Say something, I think. I start to panic. Just say, say . . . . "Uh . . . ," I finally manage to mumble, but apparently nobody hears me. I just wish someone would say something. Billy's got his head down, but he's looking at me out of the tops of his eyes.

"Uh . . . uh . . . "

"Yes, Mrs. Brumley?" Mr. Timmons asks.

"Uh . . . noth . . . do you have any gum?"

"No, and it wouldn't be a good idea to go in there with a mouthful of gum."

Billy pulls out a piece of Juicy Fruit and hands it to me, then puts a piece in his mouth.

"I feel good!" the man from the fifth floor sings.

"Did you hear James Brown got out of the joint today?" Billy asks, looking at me.

"Yeah," I mutter. I'm thinking maybe I should ask Billy how to get out of this. He thinks logically. I need some advice from someone who doesn't panic.

We leave the elevator and sit on a bench outside the courtroom. I hear two women discussing Judge Bartlow's ruling on a case earlier this morning. One woman explains that an Iranian man was up for domestic violence.

"Yeah," the other woman says, "Bartlow stuck it to him. . . . As the man walked away from the judge, I heard someone say, 'Welcome to America!'"

Billy looks at me and laughs. I grin and fight the urge to move next to him and talk about it. We go in the courtroom and sit for a minute.

"Brumley vs. Brumley," Judge Bartlow summons. She asks us our names, then asks if I signed the paper. "And this is your signature?" she asks Billy, holding up the decree.

"No," he answers, "It's the tooth fairy's."

I knew he was going to say that, and I think it's hilarious. She lectures him about proper respect for the court.

"Yes ma'am," he answers.

I'm standing there in front of the judge, waiting for the opportunity to bail out. She's going through all the agreements in the decree, asking each of us if we understand and agree to the various clauses.

"Yes, yes, yes," I keep answering. I can't even understand her anymore, "yes" just keeps creeping out of my mouth.

I'm looking at Billy, thinking how much I love him and wishing he would say something cute, but he doesn't--he's become serious.

I think about all my friends at my house, waiting for me to get home. I look at Mr. Timmons and remember all the nasty things I said about Billy. I hate myself for being so gutless, but I'm panicking. I never was any good at impromptu speeches.

I start thinking of something to say, but "Yes" is all I say. I tell myself to calm down. Just spit it out. N---O, yeah, that's all I need to say. No. Yeah, just say no. No, no, no, no, I repeat to myself; but I can't seem to control the words. "Yes," I keep repeating. Then I say "yeah," and nod my head.

I just about get the nerve to say something besides "Yes," when the Judge says, "The state of Texas grants you a divorce" and raps the gavel. "Good luck to you both," she adds but only looks at me. Billy rushes out.

My attorney lightly grabs my arm. He says something to me, extending his hand. I ignore his handshake and run off, pretending I have a dental appointment. I want to hurry, so I can see if Billy gets his truck started. I get in the now crowded elevator, and it seems to stop at every floor, exchanging one plaintiff for another. The expressions on their faces reveal the outcomes of their hearings. One man complains about his "atrocious" child support, amidst a

stream of cuss words and accusations against his "new" ex-wife.

Just as I rush to the steps outside the courthouse, I see Billy's truck rolling out of the parking lot--his lights still on.

COFFEE

He sits in the enclosed porch, staring at the nearby lake through the screen. His wife sits across from him, sipping her coffee.

"Look at the sunrise."

"More coffee?" she asks as she pours herself another cup.

"That's what I thought was so weird about it. The bright orange sun was setting in the west, and you could see its reflection in the lake. It looked so calm. The water looked so smooth and peaceful. Tranquil."

"Why was that weird?"

"Well, it seemed strange. Hard to believe that just two hours ago there had been so much chaos."

"Chaos?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to tell you because you were depressed."

"Tell me what?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Tell me, dammit!"

"I don't want to tell you."

"I've told you a hundred times. If you're not going tell me something, don't start it. You can't just leave people hanging like that."

"I'm afraid it'll upset you."

"You are upsetting me. Tell me."

"Okay . . . I was driving across the bridge." He points to the bridge over the lake.

"Yeah," she says.

"On my way home from the store. Yesterday, maybe the day before. I don't remember. The night we ate tv dinners."

"Well that certainly narrows it down."

"The day you were gone to the airport. Anyway, I noticed the sunset. It contradicted what I'd seen earlier that day. What day was that?"

"Who cares what day it was. Just finish the story. What did the sunset contradict?"

"Well, I'd come home earlier that day, and Mary Jo told me that someone had just banged on her door. He wanted to know if my boat ran."

"And she said 'yes,' and he said 'you better go catch it'?"

"Ha!"

They sip their coffee, and she tells him she loves him because he laughs at her jokes. He says he loves her because she listens to his stories.

"Okay, why did he want to know if the boat ran?" she asks.

"This is a terrible story. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"Yes. You've already started it."

"Anyway, he told her that two boys had drifted out too far on their raft. Well, it wasn't really a raft. It was one of those little paddle boats. Plastic. I wish I'd been home. I'd have gone down there."

"What did Mary Jo tell the man?"

"She said she didn't know. She said the man ran off. I thought it was eerie. After she told me, I drove over there?"

"Where?" she asks.

"Right over there?" He points to the nearby lake. "There were cars everywhere. Mostly highway patrol and police cars. I saw an ambulance."

"Really? Did you stop?"

"Yeah." He slowly pours himself coffee. "More coffee?"

She waits for him to continue the story. She sees him stare at the morning sun, and this irritates her.

"You haven't told me anything," she says.

"I only got little bits and pieces of the story. Some from Mary Jo. The men at the store were talking about it."

"Well, you tell me stupid things like the boat was plastic. You worry over details like the particular day and what the sun looked like."

"I'm just telling you the story. Just like I heard it."

"I don't care how you heard the damn story. I want to hear it in the order it happened."

"I don't know how it happened. I wasn't there."

"Just forget it. I'll get a paper."

"Papers never get stuff like this right. They're just telling what someone told them. They leave out the important stuff. Yeah, they'll leave out the part about the guy who saved one of the boys. Joe Bradley told me the kid was only sixteen."

"The paper wouldn't leave that out."

"Not that part. That he feels real guilty. The kid."

"What kid? One of the boys? What happened?" she asks.

"Twins. The sixteen-year-old was driving across the bridge, and he saw a lady waving her arms and screaming for help. He got out of his truck and followed the lady down to the lake. Two boys were drowning."

"Who was the lady?"

"I heard it was the boys' mother. Couldn't swim," he explains.

"Poor lady. Can you imagine?"

"Yeah. What's bizarre is that he got one boy and put him back in the boat, and that's the one he didn't save."

"Oh, God. I bet the kid who survived will feel horrible when he grows up. I wonder where their father was?"

"Yeah, guilty. You know, if they'd thought about it, the mom could've stayed on the bridge and flagged another person down," he says.

"Yeah, people always say could've, should've, and wished I would've. . . ."

She reaches over and unplugs the coffee. He pours a little more coffee in each of their cups, emptying the pot.

QUEEN OF HEARTS

Darlene hates it when her husband and her lover get together, especially when the occasion calls for her presence as well. She thinks the acquaintance between Wayne and Johnny is peculiar. Her affair with Johnny must be the result of some sort of mystical magic in order to transcend tense situations.

"It's just meant to be," she says. "Preordained from the beginning of time."

Of course, these romantic feelings are only magnified by her habitual reading of romance novels. Johnny, she thinks. She imagines his big, broad, muscular shoulders: Johnny standing shirtless, with baggy Levi's hanging loosely around his hips. Although she'd always been embarrassed to try, she calculates that the jeans might be precisely loose enough for her to pull them off him without dealing with zippers--too practical, sometimes awkward, and always boring.

She has more enticing things to do, like running her fingers through his thick, black hair and feeling his muscular arms around her. He stares into her green eyes with those incredible brown eyes of his and gently swings her long, auburn hair away from her breasts.

"Forbidden fruit," he once whispered ever so softly into her left ear, while gently massaging her breasts.

"Fruits," she corrected. Reading novels makes her more aware of language, and she wants the affair to be grammatically correct.

Darlene exaggerates Johnny's sex appeal to some extent, but most women do find Johnny attractive. He's a construction worker, and he works out four nights a week in the garage he converted into an exercise room; his robust body and handsome face are not found only in Darlene's dreams. But glances and coos from other women go unnoticed. Darlene perceives she's the only woman for Johnny. Johnny has good taste.

Darlene thinks it's unnecessary to exaggerate her own beauty--she looks like she stepped out of every man's most sensual fantasy. She's voluptuous, with long legs and beautiful, thick, curly auburn hair. But more overwhelmingly, she has that undefinable feature--sex appeal. She's got it down; it's something about the way she carries herself--her smile, her strut, the twinkle in her eyes, and God, the clothes she wears to accentuate her attributes. Drives men crazy!

Darlene knows Johnny wants her to divorce Wayne, and she's trying to devise a scheme that will keep everyone happy. She sometimes feels like an evil person, so she's extra careful to keep Wayne from finding out. This way, she

thinks, nobody gets hurt. Lately, however, Johnny's putting pressure on her. She's noticed he's been acting weird when he gets around Wayne, and she wonders if what appears to be Wayne's suspicion is merely her own guilt or imagination.

Darlene plans to do something quick; she can't take more incidents like last month. She and Johnny lay on the living-room floor. Everything was perfect--she'd met him at the door, wearing only her satin, black underwear. She and Johnny were in the most imaginable passionate moment, against the background of soft music and candlelight. They never let the fear of Wayne coming home spoil their appetites. Her plan is to deny it, deny it to the end. If he ever comes home and catches them on the floor, she'll say it isn't her--must be someone who looks like her. Johnny agrees that that's the best plan, so he'll deny it, too.

So, they lie there, intimately taking advantage of Wayne's gambling habit--he was at his weekly poker game. Suddenly, Darlene felt him bite her ear. She knows he has a "thing" for ears, so it didn't startle her at first. But then she felt his teeth again.

"What are you doing?" she asked. She ran in the rest room and looked in the mirror. "My ear has teeth marks on it. You can't do that!"

"What?" Johnny asked from the living room.

"You bit my ear."

"I thought it would be romantic."

"No, you didn't. You want Wayne to find out. This has to stop. I can't take a chance on him finding out. You did it on purpose."

"No," he said apologetically.

"Look what you did," she said as she marched into the living room, holding her red ear. "I don't trust you."

"You don't trust me? You're the one who's married."

She made him leave but called him the next day and apologized. She keeps telling herself it didn't happen, and she hates even to think about it now. Stuff like this doesn't happen to Madame Bovary, she thinks. Although she hasn't actually read that one, she's heard about the good parts.

Luckily, Darlene has an incredible ability to re-create experiences. It won't be long until she's able to remember that evening as one filled with ecstacy--utopia, right in her own living room.

She's already beginning to weaken her accusations. Johnny loves me, she thinks. He can't help himself. When he comes over tonight, everything will be back to normal. Like old times, she thinks. She imagines herself in the new panties she bought last week at the new Foley's downtown. Or maybe, she should do like she did that one time--no panties.

She and Johnny get together every Friday night, while Wayne plays poker over at the one-bedroom apartment A. C.

and Ted rented for gambling and such. She's busy fluffing the pillows on the bed, when Wayne walks in the bedroom.

"Have you seen my plaid socks?" he asks.

Darlene sits on the bed. "What plaid socks?"

"My poker socks?"

"No, I haven't." She gets up and searches in his top drawer. "Umm. Maybe they're dirty. How about these?" She tosses a pair of red socks on the bed.

Wayne asks her if she wants to go to the poker game with him. "Remember all the money I won last time you went?"

"Yeah." Two or three years ago, Darlene recalls. She starts looking under the bed. "I can't figure out what happened to those socks." She hopes Johnny didn't accidentally wear them home. "Did you have them on last week?"

"I think so. Yeah, I remember. I did."

"I'm lucky."

"Yeah, you are." He repeats his request.

She thinks Wayne's invitation for her to join him sort of strange and worries he might be suspicious if she doesn't agree to go.

"It'll be fun," he says.

"I don't know anything about poker," she argues. What about Johnny, she thinks.

"Just go this once," he pleads. "Besides, I might win enough to take you to Galveston."

"Well, okay," she agrees. "I'll have to run down to 7-11 and get some mascara." On the way to the store, she imagines herself lying on the beach in the Bahamas--number eleven on her list of things to do before she dies. She envisions men staring at her, while she sips a margarita. A foreign lover. How exotic.

She hops out of the car, puts a quarter in the pay phone, and calls Johnny.

"Johnny, we can't meet tonight."

"Okay, I need to work out anyway. . . ."

"I know you're disappointed."

"Darlene . . . there are other Fridays, you know."

"Wayne wants me to go to the poker game--"

"Poker game. What poker game?"

"The one at A. C.'s. I'm afraid to tell him no."

She tells him she thinks he should go to the poker game. "That way Wayne won't get suspicious."

"Poker game. Yeah, I'll go!"

Darlene gets the mascara and starts toward home. By the time she gets home, she convinces herself that Johnny said he'd go to the poker game or anywhere else she wanted him to go. She assures herself he insisted, despite her persistent objections. He just can't resist her. He's even willing to subject himself to an uncomfortable situation.

"No," she now remembers him saying. "I can't miss my Friday night with Darling Darlene."

When she and Wayne sit at the poker table, she instantly feels tense. Everybody's so serious, and they're playing some game where they deal the cards so fast, declare a winner, and start dealing again so quickly that she can't figure out what's going on. They're playing hold 'em, but she doesn't really care. She believes she's only interested in personal aspects of the game. Kind of like Faulkner. She's concerned with the "human condition."

She finds it amusing that a young man waits on the poker players. She gets up to get herself a glass of wine and asks if anyone wants anything.

"I'll take a beer," Red Wright says.

She brings him a beer, and he tosses her a red chip (five dollars). She's embarrassed. Johnny makes sure nobody is looking and winks at her. It starts getting tense around the table, and she thinks it's because she's torn between her feelings for Wayne and her feelings for Johnny; but it's really because it's always tense. All the men believe they're the best poker player, so of course it's tense. Not only are their egos at stake, but so is their money. Their money, they admit they lose, but they never forfeit self-imposed titles.

Darlene moves to the living room and listens to the men. Wayne stops by on his way to the rest room.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," she answers. "You winning?"

"Yeah," he answers, but he isn't. He's one pay check down and one on tab. He sits beside her on the couch. "Red's trying to piss me off," he says.

"Really."

"Yeah, he gave you that chip, so I'd get mad. He's an asshole. He wants me to think he's flirting with you."

Darlene doesn't believe him. She thinks Red gave her the chip because he was flirting with her. "Why does he want to piss you off?"

"So I'll play lousy. Everybody hates him. He's got a lot of money, so he usually schemes it to where he'll win a couple, then he leaves. He never tips the waiter. He's tight."

"How could he win just because he has a lot of money?"

"He can bet more."

Darlene knows that also means he can lose more, but she decides to encourage Wayne's illusion. "Yeah," she says. "Asshole." She stands up, gets the chip out of her pocket, and gives it to Wayne. "For luck."

Wayne goes back in the other room, and Darlene pretends to watch television. There's some guy on Sally Jessy Raphael who claims he can save marriages. He instructs viewers to put their wedding rings on the coffee table, then

he will perform the ritual. Darlene's interest elevates, but she doesn't see a coffee table.

"What are you watching?" Johnny asks from the hallway.

"Nothing," Darlene answers.

Johnny approaches her and tells her Red gave her the chip to piss him off.

"How would he know about us?" she asks.

"He doesn't! But he likes to make me mad."

Darlene doesn't think his reasoning is sound, and she recognizes that only she knows the real reason Red gave her the chip. Face it, she thinks. I'm irresistible. She also quickly concludes that Red must be winning.

Johnny returns to the table, and Darlene waits a while, then follows, sitting beside Wayne.

She sees Wayne with a lot of chips, and he holds up three blues.

"Five hundred," he says with a smile.

"How much are the black ones?" she asks.

"A hundred."

She estimates that he has about $3,825.00, but she doesn't know about the tab.

"We should leave while your ahead," she whispers.

"No," he whispers. "Red's left, A. C. fell asleep, and Johnny can't play poker. Ted and me can get his money."

Ted deals the cards, and Darlene looks at the three men. Johnny has a lot of chips, but Ted keeps borrowing from Wayne.

The stakes get pretty high. Ted folds; Wayne keeps raising Johnny.

Wayne keeps tapping his foot, like he does when he gets nervous. Darlene thinks Johnny wants to win so he can help her get a divorce. The Bahamas is gradually losing appeal. She looks at Wayne's cards, but she doesn't know what beats what, so his hand means nothing.

Wayne shoves all his chips to the center of the table, and Johnny calls, throwing his hand on the table. Before she has time to consider who wins, Johnny shouts, "I nailed your ass!"

On the way home, Wayne explains that Johnny knew he'd won without seeing his cards, because he had the highest possible hand. "The nuts," he explains.

Wayne says he'll win next week, or when he gets enough money to play again.

Darlene waits months for Wayne to win--the Bahamas gradually regains enticement. She never hears from Johnny anymore, but she knows the reason, the <u>real</u> reason. It's not because, as he put it, "I've found someone without complications. I'm happy."

No. Time helps Darlene think up other conditions that caused the breakup between her lover and herself. She

thinks she may even write a story about it--one of those "based on personal experience narratives." She ponders the closing line:

"When propelled in the position of seeing him compete with someone she only thought she loved, Charlene realized she loved her husband. She had no choice but to break her lover's heart. She remembered the ring, still lying on the coffee table."

Things He Does to Bug Me

Leaves belt unbuckled, making clanging noises.

Eats pasta for breakfast.

Snores.

Uses my razor.

To make fresh coffee, just adds more coffee on top of the old grains and fills the pot up with water.

Makes weak coffee.

Forgets I like cream in my coffee.

Picks toenails during prime-time tv shows.

Eats too many Doritos.

Combs hair, looking in the car's rear-view mirror.

Falls asleep on the sofa with his clothes on.

Walks pigeon-toed in Kroger's.

Mispronounces Walmart--says "Walmarts."

Obsesses over the Herald's crossword puzzle.

Sometimes drinks whiskey on national holidays.

Stands in the study and looks at me funny while I read Women's Day.

Calls me by his ex-wife's name--well, only once when he was mad, but still.

Refuses to eat tv dinners, even twice a year.

Refuses to cook tv dinners.

Refuses to buy tv dinners, even when they're on sale.

Puts the comforter on the bed crooked.

Won't ever get under the top sheet.

Leaves his clothes at the cleaners, so I'll pick them up and pay for them, along with my clothes.

Forgets to pay the light bill--well, only once, but drastic consequences.

Insists that I rub his back <u>first</u>.

Lets the car's gas-gauge go past empty.

Runs out of gas--only twice.

Sleeps late on Sundays.

Buys lotto tickets.

Thinks he will win the lotto.

Occasionally forgets to write down checks in the checkbook.

Misplaces the checkbook, even though we agreed always to keep it in the bread box.

Sex, more or less.

On rare occasions, laughs after I have an orgasm.

Gives me a mysterious look when I laugh after I have an orgasm.

Refuses to buy Tampax, even during the most extreme emergencies.

Parks in "No Parking" spaces when he feels rushed.

Thinks he is more committed than I am.

Thinks he is more than I am.

Thinks he is more than he is.

Thinks he can outlast me.

Sometimes drives too fast.

On rare occasions, drives drunk.

Drives me to drink.

Things I Do to Bug Him

Forget to put the cord through the top two notches of lace-up ropers.

Use his razor.

Use his shaving cream.

Forget to stock up on Tampax.

Eat TV dinners for breakfast.

Grind my teeth during sleep.

Leave empty coffee cream containers on the kitchen counter.

Make strong coffee.

Talk too much.

Freshen my lipstick, looking in the sun visor's mirror.

Eat too much chocolate during PMS.

Wear his pajamas.

Make too many puns.

Tell jokes that aren't funny.

Put lime and salt in Miller Longnecks.

Splatter lime and salt on the kitchen counter.

Drink too many Miller Longnecks and Diet Cokes.

Impatiently put incorrect answers in the Herald's crossword puzzle.

Read too many women's magazines (e.g. Glamour).

Call him by his ex-wife's name--only once when he called me the same.

Burn frozen pizza.

Buy TV dinners only because they're on sale or because I have cents-off coupons.

Want the bed made up perfectly.

Insist I get under the top sheet.

Insist I get on top.

Blame him for losing clothes I forget to pick up from the cleaners.

Forget to pay the Mobil charge card--only once.

Beg him to rub my back every night.

Sleep late on Saturdays.

Smirk when he doesn't win the lotto.

Periodically forget to write down checks in the checkbook.

Put the checkbook under the bread, making it impossible to find.

Sex, more or less.

Every once in a while laugh after I have an orgasm.

Ask what's so fucking funny, when he laughs after I have an orgasm.

Think I am more committed than he is.

Think I am more than he is.

Think I am more than I am.

Think I can outlast him.

Can't drive at all.

ATTACHMENTS

Jeannie was an unemployed job-hopper; Earl was a depressed mechanic. Earl always came home from work, hit the couch, and complained that he didn't have energy. He couldn't carry on long conversations, and neither of them felt like entertaining guests the way they once did. When they first got married, they played a lot of board games and had people over a lot.

At first, they tried to cheer each other up. One or the other would suggest going to a nice restaurant or make plans to go dancing. But they never managed to get out the door. Finally, they lost interest in going out--they'd sit home every night glued to the TV.

Jeannie even enrolled in a semester of college, thinking a little outside activity might lift her spirits. But she found herself dreading her classes. She went to the malls or spent all day running errands. Sometimes she just slept most of the day. She thought dust or something in the house caused them to feel so tired and lifeless all the time, so she had herself tested. No allergies.

"I'm not really sick. I mean I don't feel bad physically. I just don't have any energy," Jeannie told Earl one day.

"Have you taken the vitamins I bought you? Everyday?"

Earl asked.

"Vitamins," Jeannie repeated. She chuckled. "Yeah.

"I'm just exhausted. Constantly. Maybe I just need to get out of this routine."

"No," Earl said. "I think it's something physical. Something that's causing us to feel so tired and down."

"Seems we both need someone to pull us up, but both of us are too weak to help the other."

"Enough is enough," Earl said. "I'm going to the doctor."

The doctor told Earl he was chemically depressed. Then he prescribed anti-depressants. Driving home from the doctor's office, Earl told Jeannie that she was probably chemically depressed too.

"Seems sort of circular to me," she told Earl.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I feel tired and depressed and cause you to feel depressed. Then you feel tired and depressed and cause me to feel depressed. And so on and so on. God, Earl, this could go on forever."

"No," Earl said. "I think we both just have our biochemicals off balance, like the doctor said."

"I mean," she said, "something has to cause the unbalance." Jeannie felt as confused as she did before Earl went to the doctor.

"I think these pills will really help," Earl said.

"There not going to help me, because I'm not going to take them. Earl, Earl, I think it's just life. We need some other kind of help."

Earl explained that the doctor had asked about their marriage and suggested marriage counseling.

"Yeah, well, they are all in cahoots--doctors and counselors and attorneys--all of them. Referring everyone to everyone else and getting some kickback or something."

"Well, it couldn't hurt."

"I don't know. What would we talk about if we went to marriage counseling?" Jeannie asked.

"Our marriage, I guess."

Jeannie looked out the car window and saw a Kirby Vacuum Store. She remembered she needed some attachments for the vacuum cleaner her mother gave her last week.

"There's a Kirby Vacuum Store," she said to Earl. "Let's stop and get some attachments for that vacuum cleaner Mom gave me."

"Where?"

Jeannie pointed toward the store, and Earl pulled in to the shopping center. They browsed around the store awhile, looking at all the vacuum cleaners and accessories.

"Good morning," a salesman said, approaching them. He held out his hand and introduced himself.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. "We've got a special on these new Heritage models."

"Oh, well, we just came in to get some attachments," Jeannie said.

"Right, okay, sure thing," the salesman said, walking toward the sets of attachments. "What model do you have?"

"Uh . . . Well, I'm not sure," Jeannie mumbled. "My mom gave me her vacuum cleaner last week."

Earl walked toward the vacuum cleaners, looking for their model. He stood there, staring up at the vacuum cleaners on the display platform. The salesman joined him.

"You see it?" the salesman asked. He climbed on the platform, pointing to different vacuum cleaners. "Is this it?"

"No," Earl answered. "I don't see it." He looked at the different models the salesman pointed to. The salesman pushed a newer model by the handle and tilted it on the platform.

Jeannie heard a loud boom, turned around, and saw the vacuum cleaner and the salesman sprawled on the floor, below the display platform. She laughed and looked at Earl. He turned around and walked toward Jeannie.

"Let's get our attachments and get out of here," he whispered. They turned away from the salesman and laughed.

"Don't laugh at him," Jeannie snickered. Jeannie put her hand over her mouth, trying to stifle her laugh. Earl moved closer to Jeannie and laughed.

"Stop it," Jeannie said.

"I can't," Earl said.

When the salesman approached them from behind, Jeannie turned around and nudged Earl.

"Newest model," the salesman announced, rolling the vacuum around them. "This one does it all," he said, as he bent down to demonstrate.

"No, really, sir, really. We won't waste your time. We just need some attachments," Jeannie said.

"Okay," the salesman said. "Have a seat, and I'll bring some out." He pointed toward two chairs in the corner of the store.

Earl and Jeannie sat down, while the salesman went behind the curtain. Jeannie jumped up and ran toward the vacuum. She stood behind it, pretending to vacuum. "This one does it all," she snickered.

"Stop it," Earl said, laughing. "Does it <u>all</u>? It even does windows?"

"Yes Sir," Jeannie said, rolling the vacuum toward him. "Windows, beds, you name it."

"Would you like to dance?" Earl asked, looking at the vacuum.

"Yes Sir." Jeannie laughed, pretending to dance with the vacuum cleaner. "Do you love me now that I can dance?"

"Stop," Earl said. "Here he comes."

Jeannie pretended to look at the vacuum cleaner when the salesman returned with an armful of attachments.

"Yes Ma'am," he said, approaching Jeannie. "The best in the house." He set the attachments down and rolled the vacuum cleaner next to Earl. "Here, have a seat," he told Jeannie.

Jeannie sat next to Earl, and the salesman stood in front of them. "Now, this is the last one left. The last one. Last of the Mohicans." He laughed loudly. Jeannie and Earl laughed. "Yes Sir," the salesman said. "It does it all."

Jeannie nudged Earl and they both laughed uncontrollably. The salesman looked at them and turned the vacuum cleaner on its side.

"You see this?" he asked, pointing to a clear, plastic tube on the side.

"Yeah," Earl said.

"You know what that is?"

"Well, looks like a vacuum cleaner part," Earl answered. He looked at Jeannie, and they both laughed again.

"Okay, enough," Jeannie whispered to Earl. "He's trying. Let's give him a break."

"Well, yes," the salesman said. "You are right. You are exactly right. I bet you're good at those guessing games on TV. Those game shows, aren't you?"

"Well, not exactly," Earl answered.

"No? Well, surprise, surprise. Maybe not, but you got

this answer right. A vacuum cleaner part is the perfect description for this little jewel." The salesman chuckled at his joke, then opened the plastic tube.

Jeannie and Earl nudged each other and laughed. Earl nudged Jeannie again, and she told him she couldn't figure out why they were laughing.

"It's like those funerals we read about in Ann Landers. Remember, people wrote in and admitted they laughed at funerals?"

"Ma'am," the salesman said to Jeannie. "Let me show you this little jewel." He put his hand inside the tube, took it out, then closed it. "A woman invented this for us. Let me show you what it does." He got a screw out of his pocket, threw it on the floor, then tried to turn on the vacuum. "Hummmmm," he said, looking at the floor.

"Plug it in," Earl instructed.

The salesman plugged it in, then vacuumed up the screw. He turned the vacuum off, then showed Jeannie the screw inside the plastic tube.

"Wow!" Jeannie said, snickering. "That's what you call screwed up." She felt Earl nudge her again. He told her to stop laughing at the salesman.

"See," the salesman said. "If you accidentally pick up a ring or something valuable, you just open the plastic case and get it out. Marvelous. Truly marvelous."

"Boy, wouldn't want to do without that," Earl whispered

to Jeannie.

"No Sir," Jeannie whispered back.

The salesman opened the case and retrieved the screw. He tried to unzip the fabric bag and show them how to change bags. His clumsy hands twisted the used bag, until Earl bent down to help him. They finally got a new bag in.

"Easy, that's what we go for. Did you notice how light the newer models are?" he asked, looking at Jeannie. "Now, that isn't all. With this model, we specialize in total carpet care. Let me go get the shampooer." He walked toward the curtain.

"Yeah," she said, and she laughed and held her arms out in dancing motion. "Boy, talk about losing screws. I think he's missing a few."

"I know," Earl agreed. "Well, he can't help it."

"I know. Okay. No more. Let's be nice. I feel bad for him."

The salesman walked toward them, carrying a box and several small bottles. He dropped the bottles at their feet. "Now this is our special in-house shampoo and stain remover. Just think of all the money you'll save if you clean your own carpets."

"Yeah, nice," Earl said.

The salesman tried to put the shampooer on the vacuum.

"No, really," Jeannie said. "We don't need a new vacuum cleaner."

"Well, let me just show you how nice this thing works. Won't cost you a dime. Not one dime. A free demonstration." He continued to install the shampooer. "Plus, with this special, you can't beat the price."

"Really?" Earl said. "How much? How much for the whole system?"

"Well," the salesman said. "I'm glad you asked. Normally it's $1200.00, but today's your lucky day. I'll sell the whole thing for $1,000."

"No thanks," Jeannie said. "Really, we only need attachments."

"Well, yes Ma'am. I'll throw those in at no cost to you. Plus, and don't forget this." The salesman struggled to get the shampooer on. "Just a minute," he said, then walked back behind the curtain.

Jeannie stood up and faced Earl. "Yes, Sir," she said. "Only $1,000. You <u>too</u> can have clean carpets."

"Yes Ma'am," Earl answered. "That's certainly a priority in our lives."

"Clean carpets," Jeannie said, laughing.

"Sit down," Earl said. "Here he comes."

The salesman returned with another box. He showed Earl and Jeannie the attachments. He pulled out a long rod and attached a small brush to the end. Turning the vacuum on, he instructed Jeannie to hold out her hand. "Just feel that suction," he said.

"Wow!" Jeannie said. "That thing really gets after it."

The salesman handed the brush to Jeannie, and she rubbed it across her arm. "Yeah, this thing really sucks," she whispered to Earl. Earl cracked up again, and Jeannie had to fight to keep from laughing.

"What's so funny?" the salesman asked.

Earl was laughing so hard he couldn't answer. Jeannie tried to say something, but she knew if she opened her mouth she'd start laughing too. She shrugged her shoulders and handed the brush back to the salesman.

The salesman turned the vacuum cleaner off. "Now you people are really lucky. Lucky. I'm trying to win a trip to Hawaii, so I can offer you the whole system for $900.00. $900.00, that's a steal."

"I thought it was $1,000," Earl said.

"Well, it was. But I was just in the back of the store, thinking about how sweet you two look and I really want you to have this great vacuum. If I sell just one more, I get the prize for top sales and win that trip."

Jeannie and Earl stared at each other. "Boy, I'd love to see the ones who sold less than him," she whispered. They laughed.

"No, really. We don't need a new vacuum cleaner," Earl said.

"No, really," Jeannie agreed. "We didn't really need

the one my mom gave me, but she just gave it to us. She got a new one."

The salesman changed the brush on the end of the rod and vacuumed under their chairs. "This baby does it all," he shouted from under their seats. The salesman stood up and looked at them. "Well, well, look how clean this carpet is. Okay, okay. $800.00. I know that's crazy. But you got it. $800.00 and you take this baby home with you. I'll tell you what. I know how sometimes folks like to discuss things alone. I'm going to step over here and let you two talk this over." The salesman moved to the corner of the store.

"Boy," Jeannie said, "I can't stop laughing. We haven't laughed like this in months."

"Years," Earl said. "Boy that guy is a real klutz."

"God, yeah, but he can't help it. Let's be nice to him. He seems like a nice guy."

"He does. Man, I hope he wins that trip."

"Me too," Jeannie said. "But we're not buying a new vacuum cleaner."

"No," Earl agreed. "No new vacuum cleaner."

"Well, what do you think," the salesman asked, approaching them. "Hard to resist, isn't it?"

"Well, that's for sure," Earl said, nudging Jeannie.

"Yeah," Jeannie agreed. "Almost impossible. But could we just see that first box of attachments?"

The salesman set the box of attachments in front of

Earl and Jeannie. He dragged each attachment out of the box, trying to figure out how they worked. "Cleans near the walls," he said, holding up a slim shaped rod.

"Walls," Earl said. "Walls. Can't forget the walls."

"Stop it," Jeannie whispered.

The salesman looked in the box, examining the pieces. He held them up one at a time, trying to explain what they did. Jeannie and Earl called out various purposes, as he pulled out different attachments.

"Ceilings," Jeannie shouted.

"Yes Ma'am," the salesman said.

"It's like Jeopardy," he whispered to Jeannie. "What is upholstery?" he shouted.

"No, no, that's for your car. Your car," Jeannie shouted.

"No," Earl said, taking the attachment from the salesman and showing it to Jeannie. "Look at that. That's got upholstery written all over it."

They laughed at each piece the salesman held up. Jeannie tried to answer before Earl, but Earl kept shouting answers.

"Quit cheating," Jeannie said. "You answer too fast." She laughed and nudged Earl.

"No," he said. "I'm really thinking what they might be used for."

"Mattress," Earl shouted, as the salesman held up the

last attachment.

"What is mattress?" Jeannie answered. "Yeah, mattress. Beauty Rest. Rest in beauty." They both laughed hysterically.

"Jump on the mattress," Earl shouted.

"Mattress spring. Box spring," Jeannie said. She noticed the salesman staring at them. She nudged Earl. "Enough," she whispered, which made her laugh even more.

"Okay," the salesman interrupted. "Okay, okay, just because I kind of like you two. $700.00. Bottom offer. $700.00 and you take this baby home." He pointed to the new model.

"Okay," Earl whispered. "No more laughing."

The salesman walked behind the counter. "$600.00 and that's my final offer. You get clean floors, I get a trip to Hawaii."

Jeannie started to laugh, looked at Earl, and thought about how much he loved a bargain. "No, no, thanks," she said. She looked at Earl and shook her head.

"What kind of vacuum cleaner do you have? Did you ever find your model?" the salesman asked, looking at Earl.

"No," Earl said. "Do you know?" he asked Jeannie.

"No, I don't see it here."

"What color is it?" the salesman asked.

"Red," Jeannie said.

"Well, I'm sure it's a re-conditioned model, but I'll

still give you some trade-in on it."

"Trade-in?" Earl asked.

"Yeah, I can give you anywhere from $100.00 to $200.00, depending on what shape it's in."

"Oh, it's in perfect shape," Earl said.

"Yeah, perfect shape," Jeannie said. "That's why we can keep it."

The salesman told them he'd throw in free attachments and free carpet shampoo and stain remover. "Just think," you're getting this brand new vacuum cleaner for practically nothing. Hard to resist."

Earl smiled at Jeannie.

"A $1200.00 vacuum cleaner, attachments, and everything you need to shampoo your carpets for only. . . ." He paused, adding figures in his head. "For only $400.00, with the trade-in. I don't think I've ever sold one for less."

"I wonder if he's ever sold one," Jeannie whispered to Earl. They both laughed. Jeannie nudged Earl. "Stop it," she whispered.

Earl looked at Jeannie. They nodded their heads at each other, then they smiled at the salesman.

"We'll take it," they said simultaneously.

"Owe me a Coke," Earl said, laughing.

They paid for the vacuum cleaner, and the salesman loaded it in the back seat of their car.

"What have we done? The last thing we need is a new

vacuum cleaner," Earl told Jeannie when they got home.

"I know," Jeannie said, nodding. "You want to get it out of the car and try it out?"

"What is vacuum?" Earl asked, pretending to dance across the living-room floor.

"No, please. No more, I can't take it," Jeannie said. "I'm dying of laughter. Literally." She took Earl's arms and pretended to dance beside him. They moved toward the hall closet. Jeannie opened the closet and pulled out the Scrabble game. She set it on the dining-room table, sat down, and Earl sat across from her.

"You go first," Earl said.

"Enough is enough," Jeannie said, arranging her letters across the board.

HOW TO DIVORCE YOUR HUSBAND

It's one of those things like most things you dread--you know you have to do it sooner or later. So you might as well go ahead and deal with it. Sign up for a mini-course on procrastination. Show up late for the first session and attend almost every session. Think of yourself as a go-getter, a self-motivator, a person who gets things done.

Make lists--call apartments and check the rates. Check the *Sunday Herald* for better-paying jobs. Imagine yourself in your new apartment, and think about color schemes. Go to garage sales. Buy things to furnish your apartment. Hide them in the attic. Avoid easy-to-find places, like under beds or in closet shelves.

Sign up for group therapy. Your therapist will say, "Either leave or stay, but make a decision one way or another." Don't tell the therapist about your apartment fantasy. Say you're thinking it over, weighing the pros and cons. Talk fast; this costs money.

Before you go home from therapy, buy a plant for your imagined apartment. Plan what you'll do when the divorced women lying beside the apartment complex pool ask your name. Make one up. Tell them you travel a lot, so you're hardly home. Decide what you'll say if they ask what you do for a living. Tell them you're a corporate decision maker.

Answer quickly. Act naturally.

Plot your exit. Maybe you could tell him you're going to 7-11 for a pack of cigarettes, then sneak off. Go to your mother's, or to a friend's, or even to a motel room. Stay gone all night. He'll remember that you told him not to trust people. Make more lists:

Don't trust people

Don't believe Paul Simon <u>really</u> knows how to leave his lover

Use plenty of sunscreen

Buy a dust pan

Sing about Fat Charlie the Archangel

Think about breakdowns that come and go

File for divorce

Clean bathroom

Go back home the next night. Wear jeans and smile real big. Say, "Sorry it took so long. 7-11 was out of Marlboro Lights." Then light up a Marlboro light. Use wooden kitchen matches.

Explain to him that you don't know what went wrong. Get mad; go crazy. Sit on his chest and shake his shoulders. Cuss him out. Say, "Mother Fucker!!" Ask him why he did it. He'll stare up at you and offer no explanation. Ask him again. "I have to know," scream at him! Tell him you can't roam around the rest of your life wondering what went wrong. You have to know.

"I . . . I don't know," he'll say.

You won't believe him. Shake his shoulders again. Say, "Make something up. . . . Anything."

"I don't know," he'll repeat. "I don't know. I don't know why."

Maybe he left a dirty sock on the floor; maybe he drank too much; maybe he slept with your sister. Tell him you need a reason. Think about the urge to understand. Read the Bible. Read Milton. Buy self-help books. Read them.

Maybe he'll say he did it because he wanted to do it, or conclude that he wasn't thinking straight, or insist he wasn't thinking at all. Tell him he'd better start thinking and thinking real straight-like and real hard-like. Demand a reason. Maybe he'll say it was because he couldn't find the dirty clothes hamper and apologize. Perhaps he'll shout, "Because dirty socks on the floor don't bother me!"

He might look you straight in the eye and say, "I love you." He may acknowledge that he has a drinking problem or boast about his passion for pot. But he's likely to tell you to get the hell off of his God damned chest, then admit that he likes your sister.

At this point, it's best to very calmly get off his chest, and walk out the door. This undramatic type of departure has the "understated effect." Don't blow it by saying something clever like "Frankly, My Dear, I don't give a damn" or "We'll always have Wichita Falls."

Get an answering machine, and don't take his calls. Say something on the recording like this: "This is not me, or I, or whoever. No, really it's an answering machine. You know what to do, and you know when to do it . . . buzz." Change the message a lot and keep it silly, so he'll think you're okay. He'll either say something funny back, or he'll say, "Remember me, that guy you used to sleep with . . . well, you can't fool me. Oh, no. . . . Remember it's me! I know you're not okay." On the next message, say, "I'm Okay, You're Okay," then say, "How to be your own best friend." Next, explain how your first million bucks is the hardest to make. He'll most likely comment that it's also the easiest to spend. Ignore him.

Your mother will tell you to get half of everything, down to the pickle forks and ice tea spoons. She'll say it's only fair: "You deserve it, after all you've been through." Tell her you are getting half of everything. Thank her for her advice. But don't, under <u>any</u> circumstances, try to make this thing come out fair. Settle for your sanity. Put an ad in the *Herald's* classified, under miscellaneous. State it like this: "Want to buy sanity--any size. Will haul off your surplus."

Maybe he'll leave a message on your recorder. He might even leave a message asking you to listen to the dedications on the country station. Although you are <u>never</u> to admit you'll listen, you will. You won't be able to help

yourself. Maybe he'll ask the d.j. to play a song for you. Perhaps he'll have Willie sing that he didn't love you enough and ask for one more chance to keep you satisfied.

Maybe he'll ask you not to tell his achy-breaky heart, or admit he falls to pieces every time you walk by, or ask you to remember your faded love. When the d.j. asks him if it's a crying, loving, or leaving request, he might say, "It's a not-liking, an un-love," then dedicate you the one that says, "Here's a quarter, call someone who cares."

Of course, there's always the possibility that he won't dedicate you anything--the message turns out to be a ploy to keep you up all night waiting for your song. The unsong--the unsung melody. You will contemplate dedicating one to him--you'll think of all the leaving lyrics. "You lie, your cheating heart, I'm gonna be somebody." Maybe you'll scramble the songs up: "You cheat, your lying heart, you're walking the floor over me," or "you can't break my plastic heart," or maybe even "I can't help it if I'm still in love with you--NOT!" Don't do it; resist any hint of temptation. Don't confess that you miss his faded jeans. Make him think that you're not even letting him cross your eyes.

Send off for a transcript of one of those afternoon talk shows, Oprah or Geraldo. Episode number 228 or something like that. You don't have to know exactly when it first aired, but it was somewhere around December, 1987. It's one about ex-spouses plotting revenge against each

other. Get some good tips. Consider crawling under his car and draining all the oil out. Try to remember what you did with your key to the garage. That's a good one, then laugh when he tries to explain it to his insurance company. If he tells you about it, say, "Yeah, well my engine blows up too, if I forget to put oil in it. I told you that oil light was broke. Remember, you didn't believe me."

You'll learn all sorts of revenge tactics, but you probably won't do any of them. You know how expensive engines are, and you really don't want to cost him money. Convince yourself you didn't do it because of your propensity to procrastinate, or try to assure yourself you got scared his car would fall on you.

Your attorney will demand a retainer. He won't believe that this is going to be a low-cost job. Explain that you want out quickly and peacefully. Instruct him to write the decree as though he were working for your husband. He'll argue, saying he's supposed to have your best interest in mind. Tell him a prompt and easy escape <u>is</u> your best interest. He'll pretend he won't do it, but he will. Talk fast, this costs money. He'll try to spend your retainer, so when he calls and asks some nonsense question like "How are we going to do this?" act like you're not home. Pretend you're someone else. Make up a name. Say you travel a lot, so you're hardly home. Don't ever be home when he calls, then he'll leave a message on your recorder, telling you the

court date.

Show up for the hearing. Wear jeans and smile real big. Tell your attorney you want the rest of your retainer back. Use the money to buy the sanity you requested in the *Herald*. Tell your mother you got half of everything, then offer her some forks and spoons.

Make plans for the future. Put them in a list.

Things to do:

Go to bars

Drink a lot

Dye hair

Travel a lot

Get new jeans that look old

Never get married again

"THINKING ABOUT IT"

Julie and Rhonda stood at the Albertsons deli counter, drinking coffee and sampling cookies. Julie was telling Rhonda about a fight she'd had with Carl, her husband, the night before.

"Of course, he always makes sure he's real subtle about it. I mean, he doesn't come right out and say, 'obey' or anything like that. It's more an attitude."

"Uh, huh," Rhonda murmured.

"It's driving me nuts. I don't know how much more I can take."

"Yeah, I can see how it might seem rough at times."

"Sometimes unbearable. And little things. Stupid little things. Like the way he rushes to the answering machine when we've been gone. Even if we've only been gone a little while. Ridiculous."

"Yeah."

"Rhonda, are you listening to me?"

"Fuck him," she said. "Let's go to Six Flags."

"Six Flags?" Julie asked.

"Yeah, why not?"

Julie didn't want to question Rhonda further. She remembered the advice Rhonda had given her last week. "My new theory," she'd said. "All my life I've asked myself,

'Why, why? Why should I do this or that? Why? Why?' Lately, I ask, 'Why not? Why not do this or that? Why not? Why not?' Makes more sense that way." She remembers that Rhonda really went on and on about this one, trying to persuade her to think the same. "If I can't come up with a good, solid reason not to do something, I do it. By God, I up and do it."

They moved from the deli to the laundry detergent aisle, and Julie put a box of Tide in her basket. Rhonda looked at the fabric softener, reading the advertisements out loud in a dubbed voice tone.

Julie laughed. Every Friday that summer, Rhonda's fifteen-year-old daughter babysat Julie's two young children, and they spend the day together, grocery shopping, going to garage sales, and running errands.

"Six Flags. Uh . . . uh . . ." Julie said. "Well, I hadn't really planned on it." She stared at the full shopping cart in front of her. "I mean, what about the groceries and everything?"

"Groceries? You're worried about groceries?" Rhonda asked. "Well, we'd have to go get the kids ready and everything," Julie said.

"Kids?" Rhonda asked. "No, let's just you and me go. By ourselves."

"By ourselves? We're too old for that, aren't we?" Julie asked. She thought about her backache and all the

housework that she needed to do. She knew they wouldn't be home when Carl got home from work. He'd be mad. No, he'd be furious, especially when he found out they went to Six Flags.

"Too old? For Christ's sake, Julie. No. You have to be a certain height to ride the fast ones, but let me assure you, Six Flags does not discriminate against age, race, or gender."

"Well, I don't know." Julie didn't laugh at Rhonda's attempt at humor. She tried to think of a good excuse not to go to Six Flags. Six Flags was a good hour away, and it just didn't seem like something to do without planning.

"I'm going to Six Flags," Rhonda announced. "Come on, Julie. We'll have fun. Fun, that's what you need."

"I'm thinking about it."

"Come on, go with me. Just for the ride."
Rhonda finally persuaded Julie to come along. She grabbed a bag of Doritos and a package of Oreo's out of the basket, leaving the basket in the middle of the aisle. She walked toward the front of the store. "For lunch. Remember, I'm saving my money," she said to Julie.

On the way to Six Flags, Julie did what she always did when she had an extra hour--she took a small note pad and a pen out of her purse and worked on her list. "Reasons to leave Carl," she wrote on the top.

"Oh, no," Rhonda said. "Not that again."

"I have to make a decision," Julie defended herself. She flipped the page on the tablet and wrote, "Reasons not to leave Carl," on the next page. "I love him," she wrote. She flipped back to the first page and wrote, "He's an asshole."

"How many do you have for each?" Rhonda asked a little while later. "You know you have to weigh those things."

"Weigh?" Julie asked.

"Yeah, say you get 10 reasons for staying and 8 for leaving."

"Yeah, then I guess I stay with him."

"No, that's what I'm saying. What if one of the 8 is death? Some things are more important than others."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." That point interested Julie. "Okay, here's what I have so far. See what you think." Julie read the list out loud:

Reasons to Stay with Carl

I love him

He loves me

He makes good money

Misty & Danny

"So, I have four. Four, valid, I think, reasons to stay with Carl. Four. Now, for the other side." She turned the page and began to read out loud again:

Reasons to Leave Carl

He's an asshole

He's arrogant

He makes excuses

Misty & Danny

"Misty and Danny?" Rhonda asked. "How can the kids be on both lists?"

"I don't know. I'm wondering the same thing. The book didn't say what to do if the same thing goes on both lists."

"Maybe you scratch it out on both lists. Sort of like algebra--they cancel each other out."

Julie drew a line through "Misty & Danny" on both lists. "Okay, now I've got three things on each list. You know, I think that 'I love him' is more important than 'He's an asshole.' Wouldn't you say so? Don't you think love weighs more than personality?"

"Love?" Rhonda asked. "How can you love an asshole? That doesn't make any sense."

They walked through the gate at Six Flags, and Rhonda suggested they walk to the back of the park, ride those rides first, then work their way back to the front. They got as far as the Texas Giant, a big roller coaster.

"Let's ride this one first," Julie suggested. "The line isn't all that long."

"Okay," Rhonda agreed.

They stood at in the back of the line, near a sign that said "Approximately 20 minutes waiting from this point."

"Let's get in the front car," Rhonda said.

"The front?"

"Yeah, it's a blast."

"I don't know. It looks pretty high," Julie said.

"You're not going to chicken out on me, are you?" Rhonda asked. "You better not. If we stand in this line, we <u>are</u> getting on this ride."

"Sure," Julie said.

As they approached the ride, Julie noticed a sign with instructions written on it. One of them said, "Do not ride this ride if you have a heart condition." It also said, "Sorry, we do not recommend this ride for pregnant women."

"Are you pregnant?" Rhonda asked. She laughed.

"God, I hope not," Julie answered. "Wouldn't that be awful?"

"Yeah, which list would you put that on?"

Julie laughed. "Both lists, I guess. No, I mean neither list."

They approached the ride, and they stood in line behind the front car. Julie felt scared, but she was too embarrassed to admit it to Rhonda.

They got on the ride, the attendant checked to make sure their safety latch was secured, and Julie stared up at the big hill ahead. The train slowed way down as it rolled up the first, tall hill.

"No more!" Julie shouted. "No more big rides."

"Loosen up," Rhonda said. "It's just a ride."

"This scares me to death." The ride slowed down, barely traveling up the tracks. It came to a complete stop for a few seconds. Julie could hear the train rolling across the chain, traveling slowly toward the top of the hill.

"Do you hear that clickity-clack noise?" she asked Rhonda. "It scares me when it slows down. What if it goes off the track, and we start falling all around?"

Before Rhonda could answer, the ride approached the top of the hill, then began its high-speed journey downward. Julie gripped the bar tightly and closed her eyes, telling herself she wasn't riding anymore fast ones.

"No more!" she shouted again, as the ride approached the end of the track.

"Yes more!" Rhonda said. The ride came to a complete stop, and they got off the ride.

"Now I have a heart condition," Julie said.

"Yeah, and I'm pregnant," Rhonda said.

"Man, that scared me to death. I got scared when it stopped on its way up that big hill."

"What?"

"I know, it's weird, but I got scared when it slowed down and stopped," Julie said.

"That is weird. I think the idea is to get scared when it goes fast."

"I know, but I kept thinking it was going to fall off

the tracks."

"I thought it was fun," Rhonda said. "It's not going to fall off the tracks."

"Well it could," Julie reasoned.

"Well, it's highly unlikely. I mean, you can stand there and watch it, hour after hour, day after day. It keeps going. It never falls off the track."

Julie noticed that people getting off the roller coaster were heading toward a concession stand. She glanced at the concession stand attendant to see what she was selling. She saw a small TV that was playing a video-tape of the roller coaster. Pictures of people in individual cars flashed across the screen.

"Look!" she shouted. "I saw us, Rhonda. It's our picture."

"There we are!" Rhonda shouted.

"God, look at us," Julie said. In the picture, Rhonda's hair flew way behind her. She had a big smile on her face and held one arm over her head. Her eyes were cut toward Julie. Julie looked closer and noticed that Rhonda had her other arm around her.

"Look at you!" Rhonda said. Julie saw herself. Her hair was pulled in a ponytail. She gripped the bar tightly and gritted her teeth. Her eyes were shut.

Rhonda wanted to buy the picture. "God, I look awful," Julie said.

"I'm buying the picture," Rhonda said. "Nothing like souvenirs for remembering good times." Rhonda paid the attendant for the picture and stuck it in her purse.

They rode almost every ride that afternoon. They ate lunch at a restaurant that was decorated in 50's style. Then they stood outside and listened to some singers who impersonated 50's entertainers.

Julie protested a little, but Rhonda insisted that they stay until the park closed. "The lines get real short around 8:00," she said.

After calling home several times to check on the children, and after one hour seemed to turn into another hour, Julie finally agreed to stay until the park closed. Later that evening, Julie called home to tell Carl where she was. Carl answered. She thought he might.

"Six Flags?" he asked.

"Yeah," Julie said. She could tell he was mad. She knew he'd be mad.

"Grow up," Carl said, just before he hung up on her.

Julie hung up the phone. "He told me to grow up," she told Rhonda.

"Grow up? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. Adults don't go to Six Flags, or what?" Julie asked.

"Oh well, he'll get over it," Rhonda said. "Let's ride some more rides."

They approached a parachute ride—it went way up, then dropped down with a sudden, high speed. Julie told Rhonda she wasn't actually afraid of heights.

"No, you're afraid of speed," Rhonda said.

"No, I swear," Julie said. "I'm so afraid the ride will fall off the track. They start sounding all weird. I mean I could hear that chain on a few rides. I could hear it."

Fifteen minutes before the park closed, Rhonda and Julie ran toward one last ride. They chose the ride that spins around and around, gets going really fast, then the floor drops out of the bottom and the people stick to the sides of the wall.

"Let's get across from each other, so we can watch each other climb the walls," Julie said.

"Yeah," Rhonda said. And they did. Julie watched Rhonda, and she noticed that Rhonda watched her. When the floor dropped, they raised their knees and scratched above their heads. They pretended they were trying to get out of the round room.

Julie felt a little dizzy after the ride. On the way to the exit, they bought funnel cakes.

"See, I told you," Rhonda said. "No lines."

She was right. They walked right up and bought the funnel cake.

"I'm tired," Julie said when they got to the parking

lot.

"Me too," Rhonda said.

They got in the car, and Rhonda drove down the highway, toward their homes.

"I hope my car's all right in Albertsons all day," Julie said.

"You worry too much," Rhonda said.

"Yeah, I know."

"I wonder if our shopping baskets are still sitting in the middle of the aisle," Rhonda said, laughing.

Julie unwrapped the funnel cake and broke a piece off for Rhonda.

"Thanks," Rhonda said, as Julie handed her the piece of cake.

"Good, isn't it?" Julie said.

They drove a short while, then Rhonda pulled off the highway.

"Where are you going?" Julie asked.

"I was thinking about going to Jack-in-the-Box and getting a cup of coffee."

Rhonda ordered each of them a cup of coffee. Waiting behind another car, Rhonda pulled the picture out of her purse.

"Look at us," she said, handing the picture to Julie.

"You were scared to death."

"I know. Weird. God, look at me. It couldn't have

been that bad." Julie didn't like to see herself like that. Right there in vivid color—scared to death, gripping the bar for dear life.

"No, it wasn't. I'm so glad I got this picture. It's a trip," Rhonda said.

The people in the car ahead of them took their order. Rhonda drove up to the window, paid for their coffee, kept one cup for herself, and handed Julie the other cup.

"Thanks," Julie said.

"Sure," Rhonda said.

Rhonda drove back toward the highway. Julie handed Rhonda some more funnel cake.

"It's good when you dip it in your coffee, isn't it?" Julie said.

"Yeah, it's great."

Julie stared out the dark window. She thought about all the rides they rode and all the things they talked about. "We had fun, didn't we?"

"Yeah, it was a blast," Rhonda said.

Julie opened her window and rested her arm against the door. The wind blew cool air over her face. She glanced on the dash and noticed the pad she'd been writing on earlier that morning. She picked it up and tried to read it, but it was too dark inside the car. She stared out the window for a long time, sipping her coffee and thinking about the list. The silence didn't make her feel

uncomfortable. If she'd been riding with another friend or an acquaintance the silence would have felt awkward. But not with Rhonda.

"God, Rhonda, what am I going to do?" she asked finally. "What can I do?" She tried to keep from showing how desperate she was. She'd had a good time with Rhonda, and she didn't want to ruin the day now.

Rhonda looked at Julie, but she didn't say anything. She pulled off the highway and drove on the service road, toward Albertsons.

"It's okay," Rhonda finally answered. "You're just scared, that's all."

Rhonda pulled into the Albertsons parking lot and parked beside Julie's car. "Well, my car's still here," Julie said. "That's something, isn't it? I mean, here it sits."

"Yeah, I told you it'd still be here," Rhonda said.

Julie got out of the car and walked to the driver's window. She hugged Rhonda. "Thanks, Rhonda. I had a great time." She tried to smile.

"I did too," Rhonda said.

Julie could feel Rhonda watching her unlock her car. She sat inside her car and held the steering wheel. Rhonda honked and stuck her hand out the window, waving goodbye to her.

"Take it easy," Rhonda said, as she drove out of the

parking lot.

Julie drove past her house to see if Carl was still awake. The lights were on, but she decided not to pull in the driveway. Instead, she drove to the other side of town and pulled in an all night diner parking lot.

She sat in a booth and ordered coffee. She stared out the window for a long time, thinking about Rhonda and Six Flags. The whole day went through her mind, mixed together with her confused feelings for Carl.

"More coffee?" the waitress asked.

"Please," Rhonda said, holding up her cup. She wondered if she had that expression on her face again. The waitress filled her cup full of coffee.

"Thanks," Julie said.

"You okay?" the waitress asked.

"Yeah," Julie said.

She remembered her expression in the picture, unable to get that look on her face out of her mind. She watched the waitress to see if she noticed her expression. She got her powder compact out of her purse and looked at herself in the mirror. No, it's not that bad, she thought. She looked at her reflection in the window and forced herself to smile.

She remembered the way Rhonda had her arm around her in the picture--not pulling or tugging on her, hanging comfortably around her shoulder. "You're just scared," she kept repeating what Rhonda had told her. Sitting there,

looking out the window and thinking about Carl, she felt she had to get away from him.

She thought maybe she should call Rhonda, but she knew she would wake her up. What the hell, she decided, I'll call her. Rhonda won't care if I wake her up in the middle of the night.

"Hello," Rhonda said when she answered the phone.

"Hi, Rhonda. What are you doing?"

"Oh, hi. I'm doing laundry. I always do laundry at 2 a.m."

"Listen, I'm sorry. I know I woke you up. I have that terrible habit, don't I?"

"No, you hardly ever wake me up."

"No, I mean I always say, 'What are you doing?'"

"Yeah, <u>always</u>," Rhonda said. "What are <u>you</u> doing?"

"Listen, I was just wondering." She paused for a few seconds.

"Yeah," Rhonda coaxed her.

"I was just wondering if maybe I could spend the night."

"Spend the night?" Rhonda asked.

"Yeah, well, maybe Carl's right. Maybe I do need to grow up."

"Grow up," Rhonda mocked. She laughed.

"I don't know," Julie said, searching for words.

"Sure, come on over. I'll start some coffee."

PORTRAIT OF A FAMILY

Yesterday. The mother was supposed to leave yesterday. Then she remembered Christmas was soon. Her kid wants a four wheeler. She thought about finding a job. Who'd hire her? Reminded her of the old Groucho Marx joke: She wouldn't want to work for any company that would hire her. She thought about leaving in January, but she remembered the grandparents--yeah her mom and dad. Their anniversary was in January. God, why'd they get married in January? Why'd they get married at all?

She convinced herself to wait till February. Make it an even eight years. Maybe it'd ease her guilt. She wouldn't feel like such a failure. Anyone who hung around eight years deserved credit for at least trying.

She came close to leaving once. She had her bags packed and everything. Sat in the den waiting for the kid to come home from nursery school. She was going to load him up and take off. Then she remembered she'd ordered that damn Tupperware from the grandmother. She was supposed to deliver it that day. She worried she might come over and catch her leaving, so she said to hell with it. She made a mad dash to unpack everything before either she or the kid came through the door. What a wasted day. All she accomplished was an exercise in jiffy packing and

unpacking. The husband wonders why the wife is able to get ready for vacations so quickly. Oh well, he doesn't know she sits at home and practices all day while he's at work.

She was going to tell the grandfather, but she was afraid he'd tell everyone and ruin her chance. She'd hear the same old speech:

"I think marriage is good," he'd say. "Good for the family. Good for society. There's not anyone who's been married as long as you who hasn't felt the same. . . . A supportive mother . . . a stage. . . . Give yourself a little time. . . ."

She'd waste three hours, only to discover she was a social disgrace. "A stage."

Seriously, the wife thought the husband and the grandmother ganged up on her. They said they tried to help her. They "loved" her. They loved them all. They all loved families. They loved all families. And God, family portraits, her family obsessed over family portraits, countless family portraits. She recalled one in particular.

"Get a picture of just your family . . . For Christmas gifts . . . sure would look nice on my mantel," the grandmother said.

The wife went out and bought "color co-ordinated" outfits--just like the brochure suggested. She set up the appointment, made sure everyone was clean, and they drove to

the studio. They seemed like a normal family that day.

Yeah, that day. Then the postcard announcing that their family portraits were ready came in the mail. Once again, they loaded up in the Wagoneer and headed for the studio. Looking like models for a Norman Rockwell painting, they approached a saleslady. The saleslady led the kid and the husband to her sales office, while the mother excused herself. She had a weak bladder. She guessed it was because she drank too many Cokes when she was a kid.

When the mother got back, the saleslady spread the portraits across her desk. "Lovely family," she said. "Nice colors . . . take advantage of our special. . . ."

The mother was nauseated. She had her usual Howdy-Dowdy expression. She held up an eleven-by-fourteen and showed it to the husband. He sat down and held the portrait. "Wouldn't this look great on the living room wall?" she asked. He thought she was serious.

"Fine portraits," the husband said as he studied their photographed expressions.

"Well, we certainly look happy," the mother said.

"Well, it's a picture, you're supposed to smile."

"What's the matter, Mommy?" the kid asked.

"You're Mom looks . . . looks . . . too stiff. Too normal."

"What's wrong with normal?"

"Okay," the father said. "We'll get another picture

taken, and maybe you can tone it down a little. Just a little."

"Is there a problem with the photographs?" the saleslady asked.

"No, no," the mother said. "You take wonderful photos."

"Can we get them re-taken?" the father asked her.

"Yes, of course," the saleslady said. "We want our customers to be happy with their treasured photographs."

The mother was disgusted. She took the kid by the hand, thanked the saleslady, and went to the car.

A couple of days later, they were out shopping, and the father caught the mother in the Foley's cosmetics department practicing "that natural look" in the mirror. He saw her and acted embarrassed.

"Caught me," she mumbled. She thought he felt a little embarrassed for her.

The mother needed to find a place to live and get a job. She could just move across town, but they'd all be coming around. Everyone would want to know stuff like who's going to take the kid fishing. Who's going to teach him to drive a standard? They'd start preaching about violating an oath to God. All this male role model and stuff. No, no way, she had to get away from here.

She guessed she'd just have to wail till April. She'd be realistic about this. Get a grip on herself. She

planned on making her escape last year, but she had that crisis. It was awful. She remembered the husband taking her to counselling--just like Ann Landers always suggested. She felt kind of flustered, but it was true. Yeah, he sat turned from the wheel and sang Paul Simon. Something about going to Graceland.

"Breakdowns come and breakdowns go, but what are you going to do about it? That's what I want to know," the mother sang. She laughed. They sang some more and they both laughed. He always made her laugh.

"This is not a laughing matter," the husband said to the grandmother over the phone the next day.

The wife heard the husband tell the grandmother that her "incessant talking" was getting worse. "Rattle, rattle, rattle," that's what the grandmother said she did. She said she got it from her dad, the grandfather.

"Now, I've lived with your father too many years to really listen to all that rattling. I've learned to nod my head and say 'yeah' and 'uh-huh' at the right intervals."

The mother told the grandmother that her own husband wasn't getting away with that, so she said she gives him a little pop quiz every now and then. For example, last week, she told him a lot of stuff, details and all, entire narratives. Fully developed tales. Some of them were even true.

For example, she said, "I just can't handle it

anymore. . . . I mean, think about it. This woman goes up to a man and asks how many pushups his father can do?"

"Yes, Sweetheart," the father answered.

"No, really, Honey. Remember? You told me about it? The guy at work who went up to the secretary and told her to ask his friend how many pushups his father could do?"

"Yes, Honey," the husband asked. "Okay, it was mean. What can I do about it?"

"Okay, you're not listening. Tell me, then what happened?"

"I am listening. Then, when the secretary asked the guy how many pushups his father could do, the guy looked real sad and said, 'My father doesn't have any arms.'"

"Yeah, well that's mean."

"That was the point. We've discussed this before. It was a set-up. The guy was in on it. The joke was on the secretary."

"I still think it's mean to make fun of people who don't have arms," the mother said.

"No, let's review. The guy had arms. The secretary just thought he didn't. Then everyone told the secretary the joke. Don't you get it? The joke was on her."

"I don't see the humor," the mother said.

"Okay, I'm sorry I even brought it up," the father said.

"I brought it up."

"Let's just drop it," the father said.

Later, she recalled all the "yes's" and nods of the head he gave, so she called him at work the next day and gave him a quiz. He didn't have the vaguest what she'd said. He failed miserably.

He always failed miserably. She needed out of here. She should have gone ahead and made her move that day, but they had an appointment for family portraits. Yeah, and she knew what they'd do--the mother and the father and the kid--they'd all sit there and they'd smile and they'd pretend everything was like some diamond sidewalk without even one crack in it.

SEVEN X SEVEN

My sister was once married for five weeks, and I never even met her husband. She had the marriage annulled, carrying on her daily routine as if nothing had happened. She continued to live in the apartment she rented before the marriage and kept the job she'd had for four years. In fact, she didn't even tell me about her "brief union" until three years after the marriage had dissolved.

Shortly after my own divorce, I went to see her. I was in my usual maniacal mood, panicking about my unsuccessful job search. I was in tears, explaining that I had to get my life in order. I told her I didn't know where I was going to live after my six months stay in the house was up. The judge awarded me the house but only for six months. I'd been reading a lot of self-help books and wondered if my behavior was self destructive, what Freud calls "the death wish." I explained to her that I couldn't <u>really</u> get a job until I knew where I'd be living.

"I must be saying something in interviews that reveals my unconscious desire <u>not</u> to get the jobs," I said. "But then again," I added, "How can I decide where to live until I know where I'll be working?"

She just stood there in her too-tight lycra pants, pasted her hand to her hip, and puffed her cigarette.

"You worry too much," she accused.

Then she told me about her "undramatic liaison" and said getting "unmarried" was almost as easy as getting married.

"Rent an apartment; get a job," she advised as I was leaving.

I didn't have the patience to explain to her what a real divorce was all about. Since she holds a traditional job, I suspected she missed the Oprah episode where a panel of experts decided that it takes a minimum of two years to get over the trauma a divorce from a ten-year marriage causes. The experts talked about how one cause of the trauma is a sense of disorder that divorce brings about--it breaks up routines and demands major changes.

Knowing I would never make it another year and eight months in the state of mind I was in, I decided to try to speed up the "healing process," as the experts termed it.

I decided it was time for more therapy. This time, I bought a three-volume set of self-help books. Because I wanted to speed the journey towards my arrival to "emotional health and stability," as the author claimed on the dust jacket, I skipped the first two volumes. According to the third book, Getting To Know Me, one who desires to enhance one's life needs to take that crucial first step: defining priorities.

I had a hard time choosing priorities, so I skimmed

volume one, Getting To Be Me, but didn't find the answer. I scanned the chapter entitled "priorities" in volume two, Getting to Like Me, and found the answer. On p. 132 was a questionnaire. It depicted a highway and the road signs represented questions printed in big, bold letters. The question on the last road sign asked, "**What should be most important in your life?_____.**" I turned the book upside down, found the answer that corresponded with the question, and read: "Myself."

Item number two on my priority list was not so easy to define. I flipped through volume two and found a list of suggestions: God, country, job, etc. The suggestion termed "significant others" was subdivided into parents, friends, children. I read no further. I had my answer--my only child, Johnny.

I was number one; Johnny was number two. That's all I needed to know. I could feel it; it was intuition. Order in my life was only a chapter away (or a rest stop away, as the book claimed). I felt so sure of myself that I decided to move beyond the books. It was time to turn theory into practice. I was going to do it--I was going to demand order in my life, and it would start with what was left of my family--a displaced homemaker and an eight-year-old baseball player.

I decided to begin a program I had considered just before my divorce. I read somewhere, probably another pop-

psychology book or one of those psychology magazines, that a national survey revealed that parents spend an average of 7.1 minutes of quality time a day with their children. I decided right then and there--no 7.1 for Johnny. I wanted Johnny to be seven times healthier than the average American child, so I thought I would give him 49.7 minutes. But then the divorce sort of messed everything up. Having read that boys react more strongly to divorce than girls, I predicted Johnny would unfortunately become a victim of the "broken-home syndrome." I didn't think quality time could help.

Fortunately, the series of self-help books changed my way of thinking. I "overhauled my mental mechanism," just as the author recommended. I discovered that I needed to put my car in drive, not reverse--think ahead, plan for a smoother ride down life's highway. Trade in my Volkswagen for a Cadillac! I knew I needed to get back on the road, so I reinforced my earlier resolution--no 7.1 for Johnny.

I was determined to enforce the rule, and no cheating, of course: 49.7 minutes--whether the kid wanted it or not. Sometimes, Johnny wasn't as committed to the itinerary as I was. Take last month, for example, Johnny wanted to catch the ball game on tv. I warned him.

"Johnny," I said. "Don't forget our 49.7. You want it now or before bed."

Johnny said he'd rather wait. Yeah, he thought he'd slide one right by his old lady. Nope, not his mom. At

exactly 9:10.3, I flicked the tube off.

"How about we finish this baseball game together?" Johnny asked. I pondered the suggestion only a second, so it hardly counted as a strike against my judgment. I knew I'd watch Johnny watch the Rangers and listen to his comments. Maybe I'd even bet him a dollar or two to keep it interesting. Before I knew it, we'd be hollering and shouting for one team or another and forget the reason we were watching the game. No, I couldn't have the box blaring during our quality time. No way Jose Canseco!

Instead, we sorted Johnny's baseball cards. There are many categories for baseball cards: brands, teams, positions, values--the list goes on and on. Johnny said he wanted to sort them according to brands. He said we should get all the Upper Deck cards and put them in alphabetical order.

I got a little confused. I wasn't sure if the category was brand or the first letter of the player's last name. I'd never thought of mixing categories. Oh well, I thought. At least I was spending time with Johnny. He wouldn't notice if I didn't get it <u>exactly</u> right.

While we were arranging the cards, I was thinking that I should cut out the crazy weekends. I didn't need to go out with my girlfriends, and I needed to put a stop to family members coming by for what they called "social visits." These sort of "detours" interrupted my daily

schedules.

I had my pile up to the "H's". Ricky Henderson to be exact. I thought about how I wasn't going to have any more weeks like last week. My brother's children had stayed with me, and my relatives stopped by one by one. It was a close call. I feared I'd never return to my 49.7 with Johnny, but we escaped via a quick trip to the park. I sat on the swing beside Johnny. We sang to the rhythm of the motion and played word games. This went on, of course, for 49.7 minutes--dizziness was no excuse.

We talked about the cards as we separated them. Johnny taught me the stats. I showed him the autographed Ken Griffey, Jr. I found. He said his Dad had taken him to a baseball card show and had paid for the autograph.

"Put that one in this pile," he said.

"What?"

He explained that he had a separate pile for autographed cards. I looked at the pile, and he was right. There it was, right on the corner of the table--a stack of autographed cards. I noticed they weren't in alphabetical order.

"I thought we were putting them in alphabetical order," I said.

He said he liked to organize his autographed cards according to value. It bugged me. There were all those cards, and although they appeared neatly stacked, the order

seemed random. Besides, what if the values changed? They'd be out of order.

Well, I thought. I could still do a good job of putting the rest of the cards in alphabetical order. Johnny suggested we combine our stacks of Upper Deck cards.

That's when the trouble started. Johnny told me he noticed that I had other brands in my stack.

"It was only supposed to be Upper Deck," he said.

I admitted that I'd gotten confused.

"Look," he said, holding up two Nolan Ryans. "Do these match?"

"No." I had to admit it. "It's okay." I told him I was sorry. I said it was sort of hard for me to tell the difference. I told him it was an "adult thing."

"Yeah," I said, desperate for an excuse. "To an adult, one baseball card looks like another."

He just looked at me out of the tops of his eyes. He was glaring at me like he thought I was from Jupiter. I was just glad he hadn't figured out I was a wreck. I tried to cover for myself. I told him I'd fix the cards.

"We'll get them organized right," I promised. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow, during our 49.7. Yeah, we'll do it."

Johnny asked if he could go skating instead, and I told him absolutely not. Maybe he could go Saturday, but not Friday. I mean, with school and everything, it's hard enough to get in our quality time.

"Extracurricular activities are for the weekends," I explained.

I got frustrated looking at those disorganized stacks of cards on the table. It just wasn't working. Something was wrong, but I couldn't figure out what it was. I dragged all the piles into the center of the table and mixed them all together. I told myself to think fast. I tried to recall some advice from the Me self-help series, but I couldn't recall what it said about quick recoveries from disasters. I remembered reading about what to do in case I had an accident. I could see the heading: **If you are involved in an accident:** I remembered the first thing on the list was never to admit fault. Yeah, that was it. Now, all I needed was to convince Johnny that it wasn't my fault.

"I don't know, Johnny." I said. "The cards just sort of fell out of my hands."

He gave me another one of those looks. That's when I remembered that I hadn't read instructions on what to do if I was involved in an accident in my self-help books. No, I remembered I'd read those instructions on the back of my car insurance policy.

Ten o'clock came. Johnny assembled the scattered cards into a pile and stacked them at the end of the table.

"We'll do Topps tomorrow," we said simultaneously. Johnny grinned and said, "Owe me a Coke."

Johnny went to bed, and I sat at the table, feeling

confused. Okay, I reasoned. There should be a simple way to get these cards in order. All right, I thought. What are the brands? Upper Deck, Topps, Donruss, Bowman, Fleer, Score, and umm. Uh, oh yeah, there's Leaf, Pacific, and Mother's Cookies. That should be simple enough. I decided to combine the last three into one category called miscellaneous.

So, I had seven categories. Now all I needed to do was put each card into one pile. I got about eighteen cards done, then I came across one without a brand name. "Forget it," I told myself. It wasn't as easy as I'd thought it would be. No, nothing's easy. The books said sometimes I'd feel like I was trying to parallel park between two Jaguars. I could've handled occasionally feeling that way, but I always felt that way. I wasn't so sure about the books anymore. I wondered if they were only for normal people. I should've bought some that were written specifically for newly divorced people.

Then I tip-toed into Johnny's room and kissed him on the forehead. "You can go skating tomorrow night," I whispered in his ear. It's kind of like he'd told me: a parking-lot full of parents couldn't be all wrong. Face it, it was true--other kids went skating on Friday nights. As I lay in my bed, I looked forward to watching Johnny skate around the rink. I imagined him skating around and around.

I'm gradually weaning Johnny from his 49.7. I've also

taken my sister's earlier advice and have found a job and an apartment. I'm reading new self-help books, and I've discovered I may have obsessive-compulsive tendencies. I'm now reading a book that promises to remedy this mental disease. The author compares life to a Pee-Wee Herman show and says obsessive-compulsives worry too much.

JUST SAY, "MY TRUCK"

Lisa closed her eyes, opened the university schedule, and circled her finger above her head. "This one," she said, pointing down to the opened page. She opened her eyes. "Wow, linguistics," she said to her husband, Billy. "I landed on linguistics." Actually, her finger landed dead center between "Introduction to Linguistics" and "Interpreting Intertextual Signifying Systems of Discourse in Anglo-Saxon Poetry." She only moved her finger a fraction of a centimeter to make it point to linguistics. [Up.] She didn't think she was cheating because she'd moved her finger down when she chose her chiropractor last year. Up, down, what the hell, she thought.

"This is serious stuff," she told her husband last week, when she was studying for her third exam. She knew she was too far gone to pass the part of the exam that required applied knowledge, so she hoped to do extra well on the multiple choice part. She walked around in a daze all week, repeating memorized definitions of linguistics jargon. Poor Billy. Instead of singing, he heard phrases like "'Illocutionary acts,' 'Expository discourse,' 'Culturally constrained narratives,' 'Iconicity,' and 'Transitivity'" echoing from the shower curtain.

One morning, she peeped her head out of the shower and

said something like, "Hey, Billy, would you look through those papers on the dresser and see what 'Free Indirect Speech' means? I can see it, I just can't remember what it means. I think it's highlighted. In pink, I think. [Actually, it was yellow.] Yeah, over on page 3, near the upper-right margin. I'm not sure, maybe I'm thinking of 'Free Direct Speech.' Thanks, Honey," she added just before she stuck her head back in the shower.

Billy didn't take linguistics seriously. [He didn't take much of anything seriously.] He continued shaving in front of the bathroom mirror, waited a few seconds, and answered something like, "One's direct and the other is indirect. That's close enough."

"Thanks," Lisa said, knowing he'd only guessed and never looked at the notes. "Was it highlighted in pink?"

"Yellow," he said. "I think. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between pink and yellow. For me." [He was just kidding.]

"Average," she said, poking her head out of the shower and winking at him. [A private joke.]

"Average," they said simultaneously. In the third grade, Lisa was in the "Scarecrows" reading group. Her teacher divided the groups into "Scarecrows," "Lions," and "Tinmen." Billy's teacher divided his class into groups "One," "Two," and "Three," placing him in group "Two." "Scarecrows," "Two," no matter how you looked at it, they

were both average. To her credit, Lisa's teacher tried to confuse the class. [She avoided obvious labels like "One," Two," and "Three" that suggested strong, average, or weak readers respectively.] But it didn't take long for the class to figure it out. When her mother asked her what reading group she was in, Lisa said, "Average. Average. If I only had a brain." [Ray Bolger, The Wizard of Oz, MGM, 1939.]

Needless to say [Then why did you say it?] Lisa made a C on the exam. [After the curve.] It turned out she needed more specific answers than general guesses like the one Billy offered from the bathroom sink.

"I can still do the term project," she told Billy. "I have two D's and a C. I need to get at least a C."

"Yeah, the term project," Billy answered. "What term project?"

"A personal narrative study. Stories people tell. Folklore. You know oral stories. Like they did in the old days. You know, people sitting around talking." Lisa tried to explain "personal narratives" in more detail, but she got confused.

"You mean, you have to write a story?" Billy asked.

"No, not exactly. Just a second." She went and got her notebook and read from her class notes.

Personal Narrative

Stories people tell
--on the porch
--in bars
--at parties and stuff
--etc., etc.

Use historical present tense
--like the story is happening now
~~--weird??????~~
--usually start off talking in past tense

Labov and Waltzky (✓ spelling--handout)
Five parts of a story--personal narrative
1. abstract--summarizes the story
2. orientation--time, place, people involved
3. action--the core of the story begins with the first narrative clause??? (look up)
4. evaluation--most important--point of the story <u>you have to have a point</u> before the resolution
lots of kinds of evaluation
5. coda--returns the story to the beginning
example: And that was that.

~~(WO)~~Man on the street interview (~~Labov sexist~~)
Classic question: "Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?"
Then the guy says, "Yeah."
Then person asking says, "What happened?"
Personal narrative starts here.
The guy wants to make a point and prove his point
Entertainment value
Most try to tell a good story

Turn taking and being polite--see last week's notes
Middle-class give more evaluation

<u>EXAM NEXT THUR.</u>

"Okay," Lisa said when she finished reading her notes out loud. "I think I got it."

"It's like a story. Right?" Billy asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Now, I have to tape record someone's personal narrative. I'm supposed to tape record someone telling a story and then. And then. Well, I'm not real sure what I'm supposed to do after I get the personal narrative. Say something about it, I guess." [She was supposed to transcribe the personal narrative as it was spoken, ask the narrator to write the story down, then compare the oral and the written accounts.]

Billy picked up the newspaper and started working the crossword puzzle. "Yeah," he mumbled.

"I need a tape recorder," Lisa said. "Uhhh . . . Billy, I was going to see if I could get you to tell a story. I need someone to tell a story." [She knew she could talk him into it.] Billy continued to work on the crossword, ignoring Lisa.

Lisa found the tape recorder [in the hall closet--under the photo albums] and set it down on the table in front of Billy. He was still working on the crossword. "Yeah, now I'm rolling. I'm supposed to record the story. Then I write down the story. You use all these weird symbols and stuff."

[Like this:

Transcription Code	Narrative Action
CAPS	emphatic stress
/?/	inaudible utterance
...	pause ≥ ½ second
?!	exclamatory intonation
/words/	uncertain transcription

"Weird," Billy said.

"First, I need the story on tape. Will you, Billy? I need to record a story."

"Huh?"

"I want you to tell a story, so I can record it."

"Now?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"What story. What kind of story?"

"Well we're supposed to ask the person the question 'Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?'"

"Killed?" he asked.

"Yeah, I wanted to get you to tell about your truck. About when your truck got stolen. That's a great story."

"KILLED. I wasn't almost killed."

"Well, sort of. Come on, it's a great story. I can

make it work."

Billy finally agreed to tell the story. [If Lisa remembers she's also supposed to have the narrator write the story, Billy is going to be pissed off.] Lisa set up the tape recorder.

"Okay," she said, "Let's start." She turned the tape recorder on and spoke into it. "Sir, were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?"

"SIR?" He put his hand over the microphone and whispered in Lisa's ear: "Am I supposed to be a stranger?"

"Yeah, man on the street type question," she whispered back. [She forgot the professor said students could get friends or relatives to recite narratives.]

Billy took his hand off the microphone. "Well," he said. "Not really. Not really life-threatening or anything. I'd say my life's been pretty normal. Average. [Lisa snickered.] Pretty non-life-threatening to tell the truth."

Lisa turned the tape recorder off. "No, Billy. That won't work. I have to say, 'What happened?' next. It won't make any sense unless you say 'Yes' to the question."

"Come on, Lisa, my life was never threatened." [She should have threatened to kill him for answering 'incorrectly.']

"Well, just say it was. Then when I ask 'What happened?' you can tell about your truck getting stolen.

Come on, Billy, it's a great story."

"Jesus Christ," Billy said. "How did I get into this, anyway?" [The answer to that question had endless possibilities, starting with the day he met Lisa.]

"Come on, Billy, your life was threatened. You were in serious danger of being killed. You could be dead right now. You know it. Shane [The man who stole Billy's truck] could have had a gun or anything. Remember the part about the deadly weapon?"

"For Christ's sake, Lisa."

"Please, Billy, I just want to get this project done. Finished. I wished I'd never signed up for this damn class in the first place. And then I'll help you with the crossword. [Billy hated for Lisa to "help" with the crossword--she blurted out the first answer that popped in her head. If the answer was the right number of letters, she scribbled it in without considering any of the connecting answers; if it wasn't the right number of letters, she always said, "Screw it, let's try the next one."]

Billy finally agreed to answer 'yes' to Lisa's first question. [He was anxious to get back to the crossword.] Lisa turned the tape recorder back on.

"Sir, were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?"

"Yeah," Billy mumbled.

"What happened?" Lisa nudged Billy and grinned.

"This guy stole my truck."

"Yeah," Lisa said. "Then what happened?"

"Well, this guy stole my truck. I was asleep upstairs, and I heard my truck start. I've had this truck since high school. It's a classic. Short-bed Ford. Fire engine red. I've sold it three times and bought it back. [He didn't want Lisa to know about the time he lost it in a poker game.] Had to restore it this last time. [He was also restoring a Victorian house, restorations Lisa called mid-life crisis metaphors or something.] It was the middle of the night. Around two or three."

Lisa scribbled on a piece of paper and held it up for Billy to read. It said: "Remember to make a POINT."

"Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, like I said, I was upstairs asleep, and I heard my truck start. I thought it was you. [Lisa frequently stayed up late and sometimes went to the store in the middle of the night--smoking habit.] Then I thought, God, it couldn't be YOU. Lisa wouldn't take the truck--it doesn't have a radio."

Lisa stopped the recorder. "Billy, what are you saying? You can't say my name. Then they'll know you're my husband. Just say, 'my wife.' And you probably don't need to describe the truck--it's not important. Just say,'My truck.'" She pushed rewind, asked the initial questions, and Billy began his story again.

"This guy stole my truck."

Lisa stopped the recorder. "Hey, Billy, tell the part about how we'd had a fight, and I was sleeping downstairs by myself. Tell how we hadn't talked to each other all day. Then the story makes more sense when you say you thought I stole your truck." [She also wanted Billy's narrative to have a clear 'Orientation' section so it would be easier to analyze.]

Billy didn't give an orientation. He told the story pretty much the same as he told it the first time. Changing "Lisa" to "my wife," of course. [He repeated the descriptin of the truck and Lisa grinned, knowing he couldn't help himself.] He finished the part about the truck not having a radio, then paused. [...]

"Then what happened?" Lisa asked. [She had long forgotten that the interviewer wasn't supposed to talk.]

"Well, I sort of still thought it might be you. I thought it was my wife going after a pack of cigarettes. Maybe. The next thing I know, I'm halfway down the stairs, not really thinking. Then I bust through the front door and see my truck rolling backwards. I'm still thinking it might be my wife, because the truck's cold natured and it takes it a long time to start." ...

[Lisa wondered how she could work the letter Shane wrote Billy into Billy's narrative. She wanted to use it in her project--8-10 p. requirement. It's in the back of her

head. The letter:

Mr. W. Brumley,

Hows everything going? I know I shouldnt be writen this letter, But I dont care. What I want you to knew is, Im not the one that took your truck, I do know who it was and it would be very hard for me to prove it. The coat and hat that I had on wasnt mine, I got it from the guy that took your truck, After he did what he did, I seen hem, I got the coat and hat from hem Because I was getting on a motorcycle and going home. I had a cowboy hat on and no coat. I guess I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Ive told the guy what was going on, and all he had to say was good luck. I'd [note the apostrophe] tell who it was, But it wouldnt do any good Because I had the coat and hat on and my past is still with me. Ive never took anyones car or truck. I was trying to stay out of trouble and do what is right. Ive been to prison and its not nice at all. I dont wont to go back. I want out of her [Freud would have a field day with that one] and go back home to work. Ive got a grate job with my Dad. I will help you fix up your truck, and pay for what ever was tore up. Ive got a truck Im fixing up my self and I know how you feel. But I'm wheeling to help you in anyway that I could. And I'd rather be your friend then us be enemy's for something some one else has screwed up, Ill tell you who took your truck later, If I dont get into more trouble with this letter, Because your probaly not real happy about everything, And if you give this letter to the court Ill probaly get in more trouble but its a chance Ill halft to take. Sorry about everything, and my word is good. Thank you Mr. W. Brumly [Friends who misspell friends' names--the next Oprah.] for helping me if you do, and if not, I dont hat you, Im not the one thatll be out for revenge.

Shane

She considered scribbling Billy another note, asking him to tell about the letter. She decided to wait until it seemed a natural part of the narrative.]

"Yeah, then what happened?" Lisa asked.

"I see the back of the driver's head. He's got on a baseball cap, so I know it's not you. Then I think maybe it's John or someone."

"Then you shouted 'Hey!' That must've been when I heard you shout 'Hey!'"

"Yeah, I shouted 'Hey!' But the driver kept going. Man, I don't know what happened next. I just remember the truck rolling backwards down the driveway." ...

Lisa scribbled on a piece of paper: "Mention the long driveway."

"Yeah, our driveway's real long. Only an idiot would try to back out of it. So I'm still thinking it might be Li--I mean, my wife, but then I start thinking maybe someone's stealing my truck."

"STEALING your truck?"

"Yeah, well, you know, you don't think something like that's going to happen to YOU, but I thought maybe it was John or one of your brothers or someone. So without really thinking, I jump in the back of the truck. Before I know it, I'm laying in the back of the truck going down Oak Street about 40 miles an hour."

"Then what did you do?"

"Well, I figured out it wasn't anyone I knew, so I panicked. I mean it, I'm laying [sic] back there rolling around. Rolling around like an empty Coke bottle."

"Jesus Christ."

"Yeah. So I see a shock. I'm getting all cut up. There's glass and shit, bob-wire, tools, all kinds of shit back there. Car parts, sparkplugs, junk, and I'm getting all cut up." [Good argument for keeping a clean pick up.] Well, I see a shock in the corner. So I grab it and stand up. The driver's window is open a little [he demonstrated the distance with his hands]. So I hit the driver with the shock. Well, by this time. I mean, before I hit him, I was certain he wasn't anyone I knew."

"Yeah, God, I'm glad it wasn't me," she said. "Say that he still has 'Monroe' engraved on his forehead," she whispered.

Billy laughed. "Yeah, shit, man, so the guy's shocked. He turns around and sees me in the back of the truck. He doesn't even know I'm back there. So he speeds up and starts trying to sling me out. Now I'm really rolling around."

"Man."

"Yeah, well, he turns. Turns down the road. I'm really getting the shit cut out of me by now. Then I--"

"Man, you could've got killed. Weren't you scared? That was really dangerous."

"Yeah, well at the time, I wasn't really thinking about it. But man, I'm just glad I'd gone to bed with my pants on. God, I could've been rolling around in my underwear. At least I had a little protection."

Lisa stopped the recorder. "Wait, Billy," she said. "Let me rewind it a little and you say you were in your underwear. That's better and more believable. Okay, will you?"

"Lisa, it doesn't matter. I wasn't in my underwear."

"Come on, please." She rewinds the recorder.

"Okay, so I'm laying there in the back of the truck. Like I said, I'm getting the shit cut and banged out of me. I'm in my underwear. God, I'm wishing I'd fallen asleep with my pants on."

"Really, really dangerous. Man, you're lucky to be alive."

"Yeah, right when I hit him. I mean, the instant I hit him, I start thinking what I will do if he has a gun. It hits me. The guy could have a gun or anything."

"What did you do then?"

"I start wondering what I should do. I'm thinking how I'm going to get the gun away from him. He might think I have a gun. He's trying to throw me out of the truck. Then I decide to just stay back there until he stops. I remember the truck doesn't have that much gas [it never does], and I know he'll have to stop sooner or later."

"God, you could've ended up, uh, God knows where."

"Yeah, I thought about that too. Well, I didn't have much time to think. Right after he turns the corner, he crashes into a culvert. I'm pissed. I mean, my body goes

flying to the front of the cab. My body and all that shit in the back of the truck rolling on top of me."

"Man, you could've smothered."

"No, I was mad then. That's when I got mad. When he wrecked my truck. I jump out of the back of it and holler at him, but he runs. [When Lisa told this story to her friends, she said, "The guy's name was Shane. Billy should've just stood there and said, 'Shane, Shane. Come back Shane.'"] Luckily, a man heard the crash. A man who lives by the ditch. Anyway, he tells me he's called the cops."

"Tell about how they caught the guy and got him for auto theft and attempt to do bodily harm with a deadly weapon--the truck. Remember, they said the truck was a deadly weapon," Lisa whispered in Billy's ear.

"Oh yeah, they charged the guy with truck theft and said he was trying to throw me out of the truck. Deadly weapon." ...

"He tried to KILL you?"

"Well, I think he just wanted to get me out of the truck." [Lisa elbowed Billy.] Yeah, now that I think about it. He tried to KILL me. No doubt about it."

"Man, that was really dangerous."

"Yeah, I saw the guy run off. Then this guy walks out of his house. The truck crashed near his driveway. Anyway, he hollers, 'What the hell's going on!'"

"Did he? Really, is that what he said? I never heard that part before."

"Yeah, he did. Screams in my face. For all he knows, I'm stealing someone's truck. He says he's called the cops. Says I can use his phone."

"He could probably tell by looking at you. Probably saw you shaking or something."

"Yeah, especially since I'm standing there in my underwear."

"You are? ... Oh yeah, underwear."

"Anyway, I call my wife and ask her to bring me a cigarette. You know what she says?"

"What did I say?" Lisa asked.

"She says, 'Yeah, where are you? I thought someone stole your truck.' Isn't that weird? Someone DID steal my truck."

"Yeah, and then." ...

[Lisa told this part of the story to some friends at a party: "So I bring Billy a cigarette. Then I go looking for the guy who stole Billy's truck. So I'm driving around at two o'clock in the morning. Then I see this big guy. This huge guy, football player looking, walking down the street. All of a sudden, I start thinking. What am I going to do? Stop the guy and say, 'Get in the car. You just stole my husband's truck.' I mean it, the guy was huge. Luckily, I look down the road and see some cops arresting someone. I'm

thinking it's the guy. So I drive up there and stop. 'Hey, Lady, is this the man who took your husband's truck?' the cop asks. I don't know how he knew I was even looking for the guy. So I look and the guy and say, '<u>Excuse me, Sir, are you the man who stole my husband's truck?</u>"'

When Lisa got to the underlined part, Billy said, "You didn't say that."

"Yeah I did," Lisa said. "I said something like that." Needless to say, on the way home from the party, Lisa told Billy she'd appreciate it if, in the future, he wouldn't publicly correct her version of stories.

Billy had a good excuse. He said he wasn't correcting her, he didn't mean it that way. No, he'd just never heard that part of the story before and wondered if it was true.

"It's true," Lisa said. "Now I remember, that's exactly what I said. I said, and I looked him right in the eye, 'Excuse me, SIR, are you the man who stole my husband's truck?'"]

"And then, well, my wife brings me a cigarette, and the cops catch the guy." Billy just sat there, staring at Lisa.

Lisa stopped the recorder. She said the story was fine. [She forgot it needed a 'Coda' section--the part that brings the story back to the present.]

Billy picked up the crossword puzzle. "Okay," he said. "Two down. We need a seven-letter word for disperse."

"Scatter," Lisa hollered.

Billy paused a few seconds. "No, won't work. Third letter's got to be "F."

"Screw it," Lisa said. "Let's try three down."

HOW TO LISTEN TO COUNTRY MUSIC

There's a lot more to listening to country music than just going out and getting yourself a radio. I mean, if you really want to do it right. Anyone can pretend to like country music, when they only know one or two songs. These wanna-be country-western fans only recognize the songs that somehow make their way to stations that play popular tunes. Or maybe, by some weird fluke, they hear a Willie Nelson song on an elevator. That doesn't count.

To learn quickly, re-set all your car radio buttons to country stations. Dress in comfortable jeans, pull your hair back in a pony tail, and put on your bomber jacket. Then just sort of cruise around town punching around on the buttons. Try to figure out what songs are played most often and listen closely to the singers' names. If you want, you can get a six-pack, but don't drink too much—the songs won't make sense. Face it, lines like "I miss you already, and you're not even gone," "Let's quit before we start," "If your phone doesn't ring, it's me," "Is forever longer than always?" don't make a whole lot of sense even when you're sober.

Plus, you could get a DWI, but that's not all bad—it sort of goes along with country music lifestyle. You know, mama, trains, trucks, and prison. All that stuff, along

with a little cheating and crying. You also meet a lot of country music fans in jail and can get a pretty quick education into the lifestyle. In fact, it's one of the fastest ways to learn first-hand what country music is all about.

It's best if you study country music before you fall in love. The lyrics won't make a bit of sense, but you can at least get a feel for the beat. Then you can sort of work your way backwards and learn the oldies. Hank Williams, Ernest Tubb, Bob Wills, Johnny Horton, Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline—all the classics. That way, when newer artists refer to their forefathers, you don't have to sit there like an imbecile—you'll know what they're talking about. Background is essential. You can't completely understand songs like "Achy-Breaky Heart," unless you know their predecessors—songs like "Your Cheating Heart."

Listening to this stuff takes a little getting used to. I mean, you'll hear some really strange lyrics that may sound a little weird at first. Maybe you'll hear something like "If I don't love you, grits ain't groceries," "Old King Kong was just a little monkey compared to my love for you," or "How come your dog don't bite nobody but me?" Don't panic—you get used to this stuff after a while.

You'll even get to where you can recognize recurring themes. For example, they sing about walking and shoes a lot. There's familiar lyrics like "I'm walking the floor

over you" or "These boots were made for walking" and not so well known lines like "My shoes keep walking back to you" or "I bought the shoes that just walked out on me." Then there's lines like "She can put her shoes under my bed any time" and "I wish I was walking out of your shoes tonight."

Anyway, ride around and punch the buttons a lot. But try to keep a low profile. You're not ready to go public yet. Shouldn't take more than a couple months till you start to get a grip on the songs. When you feel like you're starting to figure out what it's all about, get a "I Love Reba" bumper sticker and a Billy Ray Cyrus tee-shirt. This is a turning point, the place where your life starts to change. You'll get honked at, waved at, and even flipped off more often than ever before.

Next, you need to fall in love. That first-in-love feeling adds a little meaning to the songs. So you got to find someone to fall in love with. The best way to do this and increase your country music listening skills at the same time is to start going to country western bars. Pick a place with a name like Cowboys or Billy Bob's. Now you want to make sure you wear the right stuff. No lycra tights or skirts. You need to get you some Rocky Mountain jeans, the Calvin Klein of cowgirl denim. Then you need some Justin lace-up ropers. Preferably red or maybe black. Either way, make sure to get black laces.

Always get a matching belt. Trust me. If you just get

the boots, you may never get around to buying the belt and it won't look right. Add a cowgirl blouse, one that buttons down the front and ties in the center, and you're ready to go. Don't get a hat. You'll look like a tourist or a beginner. You can only wear the hat once you're confident enough and after you get all the rules down real good. Well, you want to look good, of course. Curl your hair, paint your nails, all that stuff. And perfume, lots of perfume. Get some of those samples from the cosmetics counter at Foley's and stick them in your purse. Make sure to put lipstick on and always, always carry a comb and travel-sized hairspray.

Until you get used to country-western bars, it's best to go with a group of girls—that way you won't look so out of place. The first time, go real late, around eleven. That way a lot of people will be drunk, and they won't notice if you stick out. Just walk in like you've been there a million times. They'll easily mistake you for a pro, especially in those jeans.

First thing, get situated at your table. Sit next to the men's restroom, so there will be a steady stream of men walking past you. When the waitress takes your order, say, "Miller Longneck, please." Say it like you mean it. You might want to remind her not to bring you a Miller Lite. For some reason, waitresses confuse these two drinks a lot. Don't just drink the beer. You got to do this right, too.

There's an art to drinking a beer. Whatever you do, don't pour it in the glass. Drink it out of the bottle. Squeeze a little lime in the bottle and around the rim, then sprinkle salt on it.

Observe the couples who sit near your table. Watch the girls and take tips from the ones who look natural. Notice what they do with their hands during conversation. Watch them fold cocktail napkins or touch their earrings. Look at them as they approach the dance floor. Note how the men usually walk behind the girls. Look at the way the girls stand alone on the dance floor for a second, waiting for their partners to arrange their arms. At first glance, it all looks so natural, but believe me, someone out there's doing some counting. Only the couples who are real good at it can dance and talk at the same time. Save all this for future reference—later, you will have to learn to country-western dance. Sorry, there's no way around it.

Take a cigarette out of your purse and light it with your friend's lighter. Never, never bring your own lighter. Sooner or later some cowboy will walk by; if he looks like your type, ask him for a light. He'll give you one, then he'll kind of hang around your table. "Wanta dance?" he'll eventually stutter. Say no. But you got to say it in real nice way. Believe me on this one. Sort of bat your eyes and flip your hair and say, "No, but thanks for asking. I just never really learned how to dance. Want to talk?" If

he says, "Up yours. I just never really learned how to talk," you're out of luck. Most likely he's a smart ass who was potty-trained too early or something. Say, "Excuse me" and go to the restroom. Put fresh lipstick on. Buy some gum from the old lady sitting by the door, selling bar-hopping essentials. Tip her.

Return to your seat and wait for another cowboy to approach you. Ask him for a light. This time, say it this way: "Excuse me, do you have any matches?" He'll say "yes" or "no" and eventually get around to the dancing question. Answer accordingly, but change it a little to entertain yourself. Be a little more simple. It's getting later—people don't want to mess around. Just say, "No thanks. I can't dance. Want to talk?" If he <u>just</u> says, "I can't talk," you're in luck. He's got a sense of humor. If he smiles real big and adds, "but I think I can talk to <u>you</u>, darling," you're in double luck. He's also charming. Yeah. Go for this guy. Say, "Well, you're talking just fine. You can talk." Try to say it with a country accent. Don't say something real hip like "I bet you can really psychobabble."

* **Warning:** The music will be so loud, you'll barely be able to hear him. You cannot carry on a real conversation in these places.

Just nod and say "uh-huh" a lot. Smile and sort of act all fluttered. If he's your type, you'll really feel fluttered. If this is the case, try not to act <u>too</u>

fluttered. Just sort of act like you don't care one way or another. You don't want to come across as desperate. Look up at the ceiling or watch people dance. Say, "Man, I sure do wish I could dance like them." Then look around, pretending you're staring at some of the other cowboys.

Now here's where all your studying of country tunes and singers comes in handy. Wait until the band plays a George Strait song. Say, "I sure do like George." He'll think you're on a first-name basis with these people. If he says, "Yeah, me too. You know, 'this really wasn't my chair after all,'" you are fortunate. This guy is into entertaining you, and apparently he's done some studying too. Laugh. Laugh and say, "That's funny, but I <u>meant</u> Jones. George Jones." He'll laugh. Maybe he'll quote George Jones. Maybe not.

* **Note:** If the guy sitting beside you is named George, pick another singer. He might think you're talking about him and feel uncomfortable.

If you get nervous, re-tie your boots. These boots really come in handy when you need something to do with your hands. Say, "Excuse me, my boot came untied." Then bend down and act like you're tying it. Don't look up and say something like, "Isn't that strange? I mean I was just sitting here, and my boot came untied." You know, the guilty dog barks. Try not to make a big deal out of it.

fluttered. Just sort of act like you don't care one way or another. You don't want to come across as desperate. Look up at the ceiling or watch people dance. Say, "Man, I sure do wish I could dance like them." Then look around, pretending you're staring at some of the other cowboys.

Now here's where all your studying of country tunes and singers comes in handy. Wait until the band plays a George Strait song. Say, "I sure do like George." He'll think you're on a first-name basis with these people. If he says, "Yeah, me too. You know, 'this really wasn't my chair after all,'" you are fortunate. This guy is into entertaining you, and apparently he's done some studying too. Laugh. Laugh and say, "That's funny, but I <u>meant</u> Jones. George Jones." He'll laugh. Maybe he'll quote George Jones. Maybe not.

* **Note:** If the guy sitting beside you is named George, pick another singer. He might think you're talking about him and feel uncomfortable.

If you get nervous, re-tie your boots. These boots really come in handy when you need something to do with your hands. Say, "Excuse me, my boot came untied." Then bend down and act like you're tying it. Don't look up and say something like, "Isn't that strange? I mean I was just sitting here, and my boot came untied." You know, the guilty dog barks. Try not to make a big deal out of it.

she asks if she looks all right, say, "Yeah. You look great." She will stand in front of the full-length mirror, bend her head way down between her knees, and run her fingers through her hair. Ask her what she's doing. "Fluffing my hair," she'll answer. Take notes. This is an important lesson. Stand beside her, and do the same to your hair. Gaze at her through your knees, cut your eyes, and ask yourself, "Is this what my life has come to?" Look at her and smile. Ignore the woman in the second stall who complains that her husband flirts too much. When your friend says, "They all flirt too much," laugh. Follow her out of the restroom, nonchalantly returning to your table.

Try not to get too drunk. Look at it like a first date. Drink water or Coke in-between the Millers. If the guy's last name is Miller, make a joke. If not, make a joke about something else. Don't talk about anything too serious. Remember, he can't hear you anyway.

If the band plays Garth Brooks, make up a story about something that once happened to you while you listened to Garth Brooks. Use your imagination. He's probably drunk by now, and there's a good chance he won't remember what you said. If he appears really drunk, just move your lips. Move your lips and smile a lot. And laugh.

Stay until the club closes. He'll walk you to your car. Give him your phone number, but don't, under any circumstances, kiss him. First kisses are important, and

you want to make sure it's something he'll always remember. Keep up the cool act. Open your car door, start the car, and wave goodbye with your right hand.

On the way home, tell your girlfriends that you really like him. Say, "I really, really like him. I hope he calls me." Be thankful you gave him your correct phone number. Thank God you could even remember your phone number. Hope to God you did give him your correct number. Say, "What's my phone number?" out loud to your girlfriends. They'll look at you like you're crazy. Quote your number and ask them if it's right.

"Of course it is," one of them will say. "What's the matter with you?"

Breathe a sigh of relief and say, "I don't know. I think I'm a little tipsy." Giggle.

When he calls you, make light conversation. He can hear you, and he's probably sober. You are now accountable for what you say. Tell him you're busy Friday, but you'd be happy to go out with him Saturday night. Remember, you are not desperate. Pretend he's just one of many men you see on weekends.

On the first date, you get your chance to make the all-important first sober impression. Make mental lists of the things you'll talk about. Absolutely do not mention your dating history. Don't tell him your former boyfriend dumped you for his first ex-wife.

If the lyrics, "I wish I was a teddy bear, and I wish I hadn't have fallen in love with you" come over the radio, don't comment. Just laugh. He'll say the song doesn't make much sense. Agree with him, then laugh again.

Enjoy your dinner, then let him take you to a country-western club for a few drinks. Don't tell him you spend your weekends riding around town listening to country music. Pretend you're a regular at the bar scene. Act at home.

By the third date, you can go ahead and start falling in love with him. Always, always, keep your <u>real</u> goal in mind: understanding country music. It has little to do with the guy.

Go out with him on Friday and Saturday nights. Talk to him on the phone frequently. Learn how to two-step. Dance with him a lot. Remember, continue to listen carefully to the country lyrics. Keep up with the new songs and singers and listen for singers you don't recognize. Wait a couple months before you sleep with him, but wait much longer before you tell him you love him.

* **Note:** No matter what else you do or don't do, <u>do not</u> tell him you love him for the first time while you're in a country bar. Make sure he's sober. Make sure you're sober. Make sure he can hear you. Don't laugh. Most likely, he'll say he loves you too. Believe him.

Now you got things rolling. You're just a two-step away from knowing what country music is all about.

* **Note:** "They ought to put warning labels on sad country songs."

You're really in luck when he sends you flowers and cards and buys you country cassettes. Keep telling him you love him. Convince him. Convince yourself. He'll take you out and say witty lines and caress you and sing country songs to you. "I love you, and that's all I know," he'll sing. He'll dedicate you country songs over the radio. Dedicate country songs to him. Dedicate "If I had only one friend left, I'd want it to be you." You can even fax dedications. Fax the d.j. a dedication for him every night. Every night for two weeks straight. Tell him you will <u>always</u> love him. Have Tammy Wynette sing "Stand by Your Man" for him. Don't cheat—stick to country tunes. Most likely, some man will call the d.j. and say, "Boy, he's a lucky man." Tell him other men think he's lucky.

On his birthday, sing to him: "Happy birthday, Darling, I don't have anything to give you, but I'd like to take a few things away . . . doubt." On the six-month anniversary of the day you met him, buy him a Hank Williams C.D. boxed-collection. Hank Sr., of course. Wrap it. Quote Willie: "Pretty paper, pretty ribbon, of blue. Wrap your present to your darling from you."

If he begins to act strange, forgets to call you or

acts less anxious to go to country bars, assume it's your imagination. Blow it off when he tells you that he doesn't like the way you hold your cigarette, the way you fluff your hair, or your shade of lipstick. Presume his complaints are really job related—he's under a lot of stress at work.

When he tells you he's moving to an apartment closer to his work, don't wonder why he doesn't suggest you move in with him. Assume he needs his personal space. Maybe he doesn't believe in living together before marriage. Maybe he doesn't believe in marriage. Never, never suspect that he doesn't believe in you. Remind yourself that you're only in it for the country music.

Don't take it personally when he calls three weekends in a row and says that he's going out with the boys again. Remember, he was out with the boys when you met him. No, don't remember that. You'll start thinking about the night you met him, and you may get all wimpy. You'll suspect he'll be dancing with other women. Convince yourself that he won't even be thinking about lighting anyone else's cigarette.

When you're punching the buttons on his car stereo, and you notice a loop earring hanging over the volume control, jerk it off and hold it near his face. "What's this?" say loudly.

"An earring," he'll say.

Even though his sense of humor first attracted you to

him, absolutely do not laugh. Whether or not he is really kidding is beside the point. Instead, keep a straight face and remain calm. In a straight-forward, informative tone, say, "Did I ever tell you I don't have pierced ears?"

"Uhhh. . . . I don't guess you did," he'll say.

"Isn't that weird. I mean everyone thinks it's strange that I don't have pierced ears." Put in the Hank Williams C.D. Punch the number for "Your Cheating Heart," then just sit back in silence. Believe me, the silence will torture him. Just sit there for a few songs, holding the earring. Pretend you're examining it. Hold it real close to your face, and ask him to turn the light on. Look at the C.D. case, and study the songs. Use the earring for a pointer, while you recite the titles out loud.

When he stops at the fourth red light, while "I'm So Lonesome I could Cry" plays, scream at him. Cuss him out. Lose control. Consider this a pivotal point in your country-music education.

He'll mumble something about ladies' night at some country bar. Wednesday. Yeah, it all starts fitting together. The night you usually have dinner with your mom or do laundry.Say, "I thought you just didn't want to meet my mom." He'll either nod or try to defend himself: "I get nervous."

Don't start pumping him. Don't ask him her name or how long he's been seeing her. Sing along with Hank: "If you've

got the money, honey, I've got the time." Tell him to take you home. When he pulls in the driveway, he'll turn the car off. Ask him to turn the key on, so you can hear the music. Over Hank Williams, you'll find out all about the other girl. He'll explain how he thinks you both should date other people.

This is where it gets hard, but you got to do it. Remember your dignity. Agree with him. Say, "Well, yeah, I was thinking the same thing." Don't insist he see only you. Don't beg. Don't crawl. Don't, no matter what, become a whining character out of some country-western song.

A month later, when he calls you and says he's doing okay, hanging out with his friends, just say, "Yeah, well, that's funny. I'm going out with the girls a lot lately. Nothing like perfect timing. Perfect timing, that's what we got, isn't it?"

"Uh, huh," he'll say.

Don't admit you still love him. In fact, don't admit much of anything. Eventually, he'll say, "Well, I just called to see how you were doing these days."

Don't pretend you didn't hear him. Don't make a joke. Just say, "Oh, okay, I guess. Yeah, I'm doing all right." Wait a few seconds, then say, "Goodbye." But don't go out with the girls. Don't go out with anyone. Dress in some comfortable jeans, throw your hair back in a pony tail, and put on your bomber jacket. Then just sort of cruise around

town, punching around on the buttons.

Fill your car up with gas. Treat yourself. Get full service, and ask the attendant to check your oil. Buy a six-pack of Miller Longnecks and cruise around. Sing with Wynonna: "How did you get to me?"

Crack your window and smoke a lot. After two beers and seven cigarettes, slip the Patsy Cline he bought you for Christmas in the cassette player.

When Patsy sings "Crazy for thinking that my love could hold you," light up another cigarette and drink some more beer. Whatever you do, don't cry. Do anything to keep from crying. Take Patsy out and turn the radio down real low. Sing to yourself: "Where there's a cloud don't mean there's rain. Tears in my eyes don't mean there's pain." Fidget with the cruise control. Reach under your car seat and feel for loose change. Find a quarter and sing: "Here's a quarter, call someone who cares." Re-tie your boots.

Take a couple deep breaths, then turn the radio back up.

* **Warning:** If you play the music too loudly, you'll bust your speakers.

If Merle Haggard starts belting out "Today I started loving you again," punch the button. Maybe George Jones sings "He quit loving her today" on the next station. If so, punch the button again. When you hear "I can't help it if I'm still in love with you," cry. Cry and cry and cry.

Pull into a 7-11 parking lot and cry some more. Buy more Miller Longnecks. Don't forget the lime. If the checker asks you if you're okay, don't try to talk at first. Just nod. Keep nodding, while he rings you up. Take your change and say, "Thanks. Yeah, I'm okay. I'm just having a bad day." Don't, under any circumstances, cry while you stand inside 7-11. Wait until you get back in the car. Start the car and cry some more. Sing: "Funny Face, I love you. Funny Face, I need you." Light a cigarette, and start on another Miller Longneck.

Now you can drink too much—the songs will still make sense. The songs will always, always make perfect sense, and after all, that's your goal—to learn country music.

THE WHISKEY MAN

I told Roger I'd marry him--flat out said "yes, I will. I do. But," I added, "you'll have to come up with the right ring, of course." I told him I didn't want just a piece of the rock--I wanted the whole rock.

"Till death do us part?" I asked.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Otherwise, what's the point?"

Then, I tactlessly reminded him that he'd been married once before. One night when I first met him, he got drunk on whiskey and told me all about it. He had a reputation around town for drinking whiskey and doing all sorts of wild things. "The Whiskey Man" they called him. I'd heard tales about the Whiskey Man, and I admit I was curious to witness this transformation from human to beast.

"Let's do it like a real date," he had suggested the day he asked me out for the first time.

"Sure, why not?" I asked. Right, a real date; then he showed up twenty minutes late.

"Little late," I said when I answered the door.

"Well . . . uh, I guess so." Then he looked down at his watch and said "eighteen and a half minutes."

I had a good mind to tell him I'd made other plans, but he waltzed right in my door and sat on the couch. Started rattling on about how he liked to be a little late when he

picked up a girl for a date.

"That way, she'll have plenty of time to get ready and everything."

"And everything?" I asked.

"Well, you know, getting her lipstick on and all that stuff. So, where would you like to go? I'll take you anywhere you want. He started naming all these places down in Dallas, but I stopped him mid-sentence.

"Dairy Queen."

"Dairy Queen?"

"Yep." I had a look that dared him to suggest anything else. I asked him if he won any money playing pool at the V.F.W. I knew he'd been there because I had driven by a couple of hours earlier and had seen his truck in the parking lot.

He admitted he'd been there, so I figured I'd at least give him credit for honesty. I pulled the keys out of my purse and said I'd drive.

"Would you pull over next to my truck?" Roger asked.

I parked next to his truck, and he got out and reached under his seat, dragging out a bottle of whiskey.

"Won it in the pool tournament," he said as he returned to the seat next to me.

I drove to the car wash, explaining that since this was a "real" date, we needed a clean car. Roger got out and washed the car. I stayed inside, hoping maybe the mist

would sober him up. But he was just as drunk when he got back in the car. I stopped at the convenience store and got two Cokes, handed him one, and opened the other for myself.

"I'm going to drive down the highway and dry the car," I said.

"Sure," he said as he opened the whiskey and took a drink.

"Ugh," I said. "I don't see how you can stand that."

He just looked at me and smiled. Then he took the purple bag off the whiskey bottle and hung it on my rear-view mirror. "I like purple," he said. "But my favorite color's brown."

I thought that was strange. How much personality could a person whose favorite color is brown have?

"Brown?"

"Yeah, what's the matter, don't you like brown? Well, too bad. Brown, brown, brown."

That's when I realized who was in my car. It wasn't Roger; it was the Whiskey Man. I considered taking him to his house because I didn't really want to haul a drunkard around all evening. We were a few miles outside of town, approaching the bridge that crosses the lake.

"Go down that dirt road," Roger suggested, pointing to a narrow pathway just before the bridge that lead downhill toward the lake.

All of a sudden I had this funny feeling. What if he's

planning on killing me, I thought. It was eerie.

"I want to show you something," he said. "It's a secret."

I was scared and curious at the same time. If I drove down there I feared my life may end. God, I reminded myself, he's not a mass murderer. So he's had a little too much to drink. Who hasn't at one time or another? I've dealt with drunk people before. Get a grip--this is life, not a horror film. I looked over at Roger. He was looking up at the stars through his window, his knees curled up, with his whiskey bottle leaning against the door. Now, really, how dangerous could that be? Come on. Besides, what's life without a little jeopardy?

"I wish life was like the movies," he said, just as I swerved onto the dirt road.

This is it, I thought. My life ends today. I started planning my funeral. I was driving down the hill, slowly following the curve in the road that went beside the lake. I thought maybe I should drive into the lake and take my chances. After all, sober people generally swim better than drunk people. I was somewhat embarrassed to ask him about his reputation, but I couldn't stand it anymore, so I decided to confront him.

"I heard you were the Whiskey Man," I said.

"Whiskey river take my mind," he started singing; then he winked at me. "Don't let her memory torture me." I'm

going to have them play that song at my funeral. He held up the whiskey bottle and offered me a drink.

"No, thanks."

He took another swig from the bottle, then rolled his window down. He folded his arms across the top of the car door and rested his chin on his hands. The wind was slightly blowing his hair, and I suddenly had an incredible urge to reach and stroke his back. I felt concerned for him in a motherly manner, but I didn't know why.

"What you thinking about?" he abruptly turned around and asked.

I thought about admitting that I was having maternal feelings for him, but I was afraid he'd take it wrong. I once dated a guy who got really ticked because I told him I had maternal feelings for him. I had meant it as a compliment, but he said it made him uncomfortable to think I felt like I was dating my son. I was afraid Roger might have the same reaction, and I didn't want to get the Whiskey Man mad at me. Taking risks was one thing, pure stupidity an entirely different matter.

"Oh . . . nothing," I lied. "Nothing."

"Must be nice."

"Yeah," I said, although it didn't look like he was having a difficult time losing concentration.

"Let's stop here," he suggested.

I parked the car, and we got out. I followed him a few

feet off the road, then he sat down on an old broken log that looked like it had washed ashore. Cigarette butts were scattered around.

"This is it," he said, pointing to the log.

"What?"

"My secret. I come here sometimes and sit."

He scooted over, and I sat beside him. I kept waiting for him to do something, but he kept sitting there, looking back and forth at the water and the stars. I kept trying to think of something to say, but I couldn't. I started getting that creepy feeling again. I wondered if he was scheming. I decided my best defense was to go along with him, pretend I liked whiskey men.

"So, are you the real Whiskey Man?"

"Will the real Whiskey Man please stand up!" he shouted, then stood up, got his bottle out of the car, and started dancing around. "Roger T. Whiskey," he said. "That's what they call me. Once a respectable man. . . ."

Then he sat back down and got serious. He told me about his divorce, explaining that his wife left him for no reason. I felt bad for him, but I had to be honest.

"No reason?" I asked. "They all say that."

"Well, okay, not a good reason." He said he would never divorce someone--he just assumed he'd be married for life.

"I won her in a poker game," he claimed.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I was playing cards with some men who used to get together on the weekends."

He said he had some hand, a full straight or something, and some guy he was betting didn't have any money. So he told the man he'd go ahead and bet the money, but if the guy lost he had to introduce him to the blonde he'd seen him with the weekend before.

I didn't know whether to believe him or not, but he acted like he believed it. I thought the story was kind of foolish yet endearing.

He told me all about how much he loved her, even if he didn't always show it, and how he felt when she left him. How lonely he'd been all the years since. I couldn't believe this man, who was practically a stranger to me, confessed his personal feelings. He seemed genuinely sensitive, and this was long before it was popular for men to be openly vulnerable. He paused for a long time, then apologized for acting so silly. I didn't think it was silly at all, but I tried to keep him from feeling embarrassed.

"You ready to go to the Dairy Queen?" I asked after a while. I looked over for a response, and he said he felt stupid, so he wondered if I would take him on home. He told me he was sorry about the date, admitting that he didn't know about stuff like that.

"It makes me nervous, and when I get nervous, I drink,

and when I drink whiskey, I turn into the Whiskey Man," he said, laughing.

That was two years ago--our first date. Well, quasi-date. I've since discovered the man didn't live up to his legendary title. In fact, his personality was sort of the antithesis of his reputation. Well, he'd been in a couple fights and wrecked a few cars and threw lawnmowers and telephones into the street, but nobody's perfect. And usually those type of wild events happened when he was sober.

I found out he hardly ever got drunk, but he did drink a lot of strawberry milkshakes. The first time he pulled in the Dairy Queen and ordered a strawberry milkshake, I thought for sure he'd mix it with something to make some sort of weird mixed drink. But I was wrong--he just drank the shake. Plain and simple, and maybe a little too normal for me. Strangely enough, I wished he did live up to his reputation as Whiskey Man a little more. Something about it seemed kind of enticing.

So when he asked me to marry him, I decided this was a good opportunity to at least try to make him into a sort of legendary person. I chose Heracles, because he's so strong and daring. Well, that and the fact that Roger already had one thing in common with Heracles: They both won their first wives.

I tried to concoct something comparable to the Twelve

Labors, but I couldn't think of anything so dramatic; so, I decided my request for "the rock" would have to suffice. It was a big enough challenge for Roger.

I felt kind of bad about it. I mean, I knew he didn't have much money, but that was why the feat was challenging--it worked as an heroic test. But I disguised my motives to Roger, explaining that I planned on getting married only once; therefore, this diamond was forever, and I wanted something we'd both be proud of for eternity.

"But that isn't really the point," I added to my argument. "I want to see how much you love me." I said that maybe if I made him earn my "immortal hand," he'd appreciate me more. Or at least I'd know he was serious about the vow.

I even suggested he engrave "From Roger" in little letters on the inside of the band. I pretended it would add romance to the wedding ritual, but really I wanted to make his trial a little more daring.

"No problem," he said. "I'll be back tomorrow with the biggest diamond you ever saw."

I wondered if maybe I'd made the test too easy. Maybe he had money I didn't know about.

"You will?" I questioned.

"Yeah, I'll get the money."

"Well, don't win it playing poker."

"I don't have any money to play with."

I tried to think of a polite way to ask him how he had enough money for the ring. The kind of ring I had in mind cost a lot more than what he needed to get in a poker game. Then it dawned on me that he might get some fake diamond or something.

"And I'm taking it and having it checked. I want a real rock." I could tell by his expression that I'd insulted his integrity.

"I'll bring you an appraisal. What kind of a man do you think I am?"

A normal man, I thought. But by the time I got through, he'd be a hero. "I was just kidding," I lied.

"Okay, I'll be back tomorrow. I want to hurry, before you change your mind."

"Goodbye, Odysseus," I mumbled as he walked out the door.

I was curious as to how he was going to accomplish this feat. I knew he couldn't get money from the bank, because I remembered him saying he had bad credit. Then I worried he might go to one of those places that advertised no credit--no problem. No, he'd never done that before. As the day went on, I started getting excited--maybe he'd rob a bank or a 7-11 or make counterfeit money. Whiskey Man style; yeah, Whiskey Man.

By the next day, I was dreaming about how good that ring was going to look on my finger. Although materialism

wasn't my primary motive, I couldn't help but imagine the rock--yes, the rock, right there on my finger, with a red fingernail.

I couldn't stand it anymore. I kept waiting for the Whiskey Man, imagining the grin on his face as he put the ring on my finger. I put fresh paint on my nails and everything. Then I decided to dress up and curl my hair in case he wanted to take me somewhere to propose officially. I got my camera out, read the instructions on how to get it to take a picture by itself, then sat on the couch and waited for my hero.

It seemed like it took forever, and I found out real quick I had no patience. I don't see how Penelope survived twenty years. But I endured.

A faint knock on the door woke me up. It's him, I thought. Late as usual. It was 11:30. Oh well, he got back the next day like he'd promised. I opened the door, and I could smell it on him. He had strawberry milkshake on his breath. I looked for a gift-wrapped box as he walked to the couch.

"I'm just a screw up," he said.

Did you get the ring, I thought. Hell no, he didn't get the ring. He did not have the face of a happy man. He failed the test. What a dud. A flop. A klutz. Here I'd sat half the night, expecting a hero to come bouncing through the door, fall down on his knees, and slip a diamond

on my finger. And there he sat, fidgeting with the straw in his McDonald's cup.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

This better be good, I thought. I glared at him. Now my dress was all wrinkled; my hair a mess. He took a sip of the milkshake. Right, I thought, the Whiskey Man. He looked like a poor excuse for such a grandiose title.

"I feel terrible," he said. "I'm a terrible son."

"Son?"

He explained that he'd gone down to his dad's in East Texas to borrow the money. That seemed simple enough to me.

"It was awful."

"Did you get the money?" I blurted out, without thinking.

"My dad took me riding around. We went squirrel hunting early this morning. He started telling me all his problems. He's having problems. His wife. . . . Can you believe he hasn't slept with her in two years?"

"Two years? Is that what he said? They hadn't had sex in two years?"

"Well, he said 'slept together,' but that's what he meant."

"That's terrible."

"He kept telling me how glad he was I'd come to see him. I feel awful."

I sensed that he didn't get the money, but I wasn't

certain. I was reminded of the scene in Casablanca where Ingrid Bergman points the gun at Humphrey Bogart and says, "Give me the papers. I want those papers." I started to pretend the camera was a gun and tell him that I wanted that ring. I could point it at his chest and say, "Give me the ring." I opted for silence instead.

Even if he did have the ring in his pocket or in his truck or at his house, I thought this was a strange way to propose. I was losing patience.

"I feel guilty," he said.

"It's okay," I lied, thinking he meant because he didn't get the money.

"I hardly see my dad, and the only reason I went was to borrow money from him."

"Yeah, and--"

"When I left he put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Thanks for coming to see me, son.'"

"Well, it's okay. He doesn't know that's the only reason you visited. So--"

"But, I know it, and that's what matters. I just couldn't. He acted so glad to see me and to talk with me. I didn't have the heart. I couldn't ask him. I guess I should've, but I didn't."

He kept sipping on that milkshake. Then he got up and stood by the door. He paced the floor, picking up little things off my coffee table and fidgeting with them.

"I'm useless," he announced.

He didn't look much like a hero. I wasn't sure if he felt bad because he didn't get the money or because he rarely visited his father.

"I kept waiting for the right time to ask him. He acted like he needed someone to talk to. . . . That's the only reason I went to see him. . . . He thinks I just came to visit."

"Well, you didn't ask him for the money, so that must not have been your only reason."

"Yes, it was. The only reason, and I'm a lousy son."

I felt bad for him. I tried to convince him since he didn't actually ask, he must've had other intentions. "Unconscious motives," I added to my case.

"No." He shook his head.

I wanted him to feel better, but I couldn't think of any comforting words. He had failed the test and wasn't a hero, but at least he was a nice person. It's endearing that he didn't want to hurt his father's feelings. I guess that's one of the reasons I loved him so much--he was always thinking about other people's feelings.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't ask him."

He just kept standing there, biting the straw, and looking down at his feet. Finally, he said, "I didn't have the guts. Now, I'm back with nothing." He held out his hands. "A hand full of nothing."

That's when it hit me. I forgot about Heracles and Odysseus. "Sometimes nothing can be a real cool hand," I declared. It would work. He was just like Cool Hand Luke. Although he'd never knocked parking meters off poles, I heard he'd had too much to drink one night and ran into two stop signs, bending the poles and thus destroying city property. He even had light brown, curly hair, like Paul Newman.

"I just didn't," he mumbled.

"It's okay," I kept repeating. "You're a good person." That motherhead didn't know you was fooling, I thought; but I didn't want to insinuate he only pretended to care for his father. Instead I said, "You're father's happy you came to see him. He doesn't know you wanted money."

"Yeah, but you can't kid yourself."

"No, that's the tricky part." You can't fool about something like that, I thought.

He kept shaking his head, and I wanted to help him get his mind off the day. I turned on the TV, and we watched old Dick Van Dyke re-runs. He finally fell asleep on the couch. I pulled his boots off of him, got him a blanket and a pillow, then kissed him good night. I felt proud of him.

"What you had, Whiskey Man," I said from the doorway, "was a failure to communicate."

I felt sort of bad about the whole episode. I'll probably feel bad about it for a long time. I mean, he's

not Heracles, and he's not even really the Whiskey Man. But I'm glad I found out, even though the discovery made me feel devious. No, he's not an heroic figure, at least in the classical sense. He's not a living legend, and I doubt he'll die a legend. No, he's not, but he is Roger; and I decided this incident helped me see the real Roger.

I also realized it was Roger I wanted to marry. He didn't have to be anyone more special than he already was. So I decided I'd marry him. Ring or not.

I knew he probably wouldn't feel comfortable proposing without "the rock." I was afraid he'd feel awkward even bringing up the subject again. So, I went and got a ring myself. I went down to T.J.'s pawn shop on my lunch hour and bought two wedding bands. They didn't match, but that was okay. None of the rings matched. I guessed it was because people usually hock rings when they lose their sentimental value--they get divorces or break up, so there's no reason to keep the rings anymore. But they only have their own rings.

I was proud of the rings. Mine had a wide, white gold band. His was white gold too, but the band was narrow, with a thin embellished edge. I vowed they'd never end up in a pawn shop again. I got the rings, then I went straight to the jeweler and asked him to engrave "To Whiskey Man" on the inside of Roger's ring, but he said that was too many letters. So, instead, I had "To W.M." engraved in little

gothic-style letters. Then, I had "From W.M." engraved on mine, so at least the insides of the bands would match--sort of.

(BROKEN) PROMISES

No more drinking--not even beer--not even on Wednesdays

No more snoring

No more throwing whites in with reds in laundry

Pick up all clothes from cleaners--even yours

No more gambling--not even lotto tickets

No more all nighters

No screaming

No cussing--no saying, "Fuck you"--no "Fucks" either.

No more speeding tickets

Mow lawn every Saturday in summer

Pick up after myself

No smoking pot

Empty ashtrays

Don't empty ashtrays just before bed

No leaving lights on

No turning lights on when you're asleep

No fighting in front of friends

No fighting

No nagging

Cook supper on my days

Wash dishes

Won't throw Jack-in-the-Box wrappers on car floorboard

Won't run out of gas

No losing tools

No losing control

No losing mind

No fucking other women

No thinking about fucking other women

No fucking other men

No lusting after whiskey

Committed

Never leave you

Never think of leaving you

MOTEL (WO)MANNERS

Leave your house an hour or so early, allowing plenty of time for flat tires or other road emergencies. Since, for once, you're half prepared for minor road disasters, you probably won't have any; therefore, you'll spend an hour waiting at the airport for his arriving flight. Look at the schedule to see if his flight is on time. Look only at the arrival schedule; don't review the schedule that lists his departing flight for later that evening.

When he gets off the plane, meet him halfway on the plane's exit ramp, hug him, and wait for him to kiss you. Kiss him lightly. Pretend you just arrived at the airport yourself. Avoid gestures or mannerisms that might reveal anxiety. Act cool. Carry one of his bags for him and lead him outside to your car. Nonchalantly get in the car, and he'll do the same. Buckle up, don't speed, and obey all other traffic laws. Little souvenirs like traffic tickets leave the type of hard evidence you might find difficult to explain.

If you've absolutely got to have a drink, pull out a bottle of scotch from under your seat and use cups from a fast-food restaurant, something like McDonald's or Jack-in-the-Box.

When he looks at you and asks where you're going, tell

him you think a Sunday drive in the city might provide adequate amusement. He'll probably inform you that he hates Dallas, everything about Dallas: the Cowboys, West End, and the Dallas skyline. Offer him some more scotch, then head for the mix-master that leads to Irving, Richardson, and Plano.

Light a cigarette and play a cassette. Avoid listening to cheating songs or Sunday morning preachers. Look at him and smile. Hand him your cup, and ask him if he'd mind pouring you a little more scotch. Thank him with a grin while you watch him pour the scotch. He'll ask if you remember the Jack Nicholson quote he told you to remind him to use on you. Laugh, but say you don't recall the line. "This is gonna take <u>a lot</u> of drinks," he'll say.

Then he'll hand you your glass, full of scotch. Tell him you asked for a <u>little</u> more, and ask him what happened to the ice. He'll say it's melting. Don't say something stupid like "Yeah, it's melting, melting just like my heart." No, don't say that. Just look at him and smile. He'll probably stroke your arm and look at you. Keep your eyes on the highway.

Don't ask him where he wants to go, giving him the opportunity to make further suggestions. Hold your cold drink between your legs and start to fidget with the radio. When he gently takes your hand, don't pull away. You'll want to stroke his leg or make suggestions yourself, but

resist. When he strokes your hair, you'll love the feeling. Still, at this point, it's best to resist. You need to resist.

He'll probably know you love his touch, but try not to act affected. When he suggests you take the next exit, look at him and pretend he's an alien. Don't look at him too long. Carefully avoid direct eye contact. Recall what, time and time again, Ann Landers says about infidelity. She always advises Tempted in Texas or whoever that "golden bands" on left-hand ring fingers should shine like bright red stop lights, indicating unavailability. Look at him and say, "Fuck off, Ann Landers." If he says, "Huh?" just laugh and say, "Nothing." Quickly ask for more scotch, changing the subject.

Go ahead and take the next exit but plan to drive around greater Dallas awhile. If you're spatially dysfunctional, ask him where you are. You'll be somewhere near Irving or some other city in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex. Look for a restaurant. Ask him where he wants to go for lunch, subtly reminding him that he'd suggested getting together for lunch.

Most likely, he'll leave the decision to you, especially if it's the first date. He'll say, "I don't care. Wherever you want to go is fine with me" or something to that effect. "We can do something else if you want," he'll probably add. Most likely, he'll start stroking your

hair again and maybe caress your leg. Then he'll suggest you go to a motel.

"'For lunch,'" he'll probably say, pretending he's kidding or maybe pretending he's not kidding.

You'll drive around only a few minutes after this, then he'll point to a motel. If he's in a hurry, he'll take the first motel that doesn't have any Spanish words in its name ("Quinta" is o.k.). Make sure the place has parking in the rear. If it's the first date, he won't worry about the price and won't even ask for the commercial rate; if it's a subsequent date and you're not rushed for time, he may shop around a bit. You may want to make suggestions, something like, "Many gasoline retailers along our nation's interstate highways provide travelers' guides with convenient and economic coupons for lodging at some of the area's nicer establishments."

Pull in the parking lot, per his directions. Say that you've never done <u>anything</u> like this before, so you're a little fuzzy on the rules. When he arches his eyebrows and says, "Well, I've seen a lot of movies," laugh. Don't say, "Oh, Rhett, what am I going to do?" No, say, "Well, I ain't seen no movies," then quote something from a Woody Allen movie.

If he asks what bed arrangements you prefer, tell him to ask for a king single. If no king single is available, tell him to ask for a queen double. If no queen double is

available, tell him to take whatever is available except bunks. If nothing is available with a bed, take a meeting room, preferably with carpet, preferably one that doesn't have a Lions luncheon scheduled during your quality time. As a last resort, in an emergency situation, settle for an army cot or a beanbag chair.

Remind him not to use a credit card if the bill gets sent to his home address. Also, advise him not to write a check if he and his spouse have a joint account. Cash is preferable--small unmarked bills.

Tell him to carry a small piece of luggage, so he'll look slightly legitimate. He'll probably pack condoms in case you insist on "safe sex." Hope he brings the plain, filter-tip variety in earth tones.

Before he gets out of the car, kiss him. Kiss him like you mean it to make sure he'll come back and get you for more.

If the lobby smells like curry, he'll probably return to the car and suggest that you go to an American-owned motel. Tell him that you can always tell because the American-owned motels have signs that say **"AMERICAN-OWNED"** and the others have signs that say, **"WE HAVE ROOMS FOR NICE YOU, YES PLEASE."**

When he summons you to enter the room with him, do not say, "Goh-lee! You mean this motel ain't got no outside entrances to the rooms!" He might think he's in luck,

hoping he'll not only get laid, but also be able to unload some of those "lakefront" lots in the Okefenokee Swamp he bought a couple of years ago as a "tax shelter." If you refer to the swimming pool as the "con<u>creet</u> pond," he'll most likely return you to your car and settle for a good hour or so with 1-900.

When you get in the room, don't check to see if the Gideon Bible is in the nightstand. And do not, under any circumstances, invoke the name of Jimmy Swaggart, even in jest.

First, he'll probably set his bag on the dresser, then get the room-service menu and hand it to you. Lie on the bed, look at the menu, and ask him if he's buying. It's important that you ask <u>before</u> you order. When he says, "Yeah," toss the menu on the night stand, and say you're not hungry. He'll probably say, "I'm not either," then sit beside you on the bed.

Enjoy yourself. Pamper yourself. Take the stuff out of the little complimentary bottles and pour it all over both of you and enjoy yourself. Remember to remove your clothes first. Don't worry excessively about leaving the room the way you found it. In fact, be a slob. Relax, he's paying for this.

Hope that he remembers the old adage: Ladies first. If he really wants to make you his permanent love-slave, he'll let it continue to ladies first, second, third, fourth, etc.

Do it several more times just to get his money's worth and make sure he'll come back for more.

And when you're on top of him and you're fucking him, think about how much you love him. Let your hair fall all around his face and chest. Look him straight in the eyes and tell him you love him. Timing is crucial. Tell him you love you love you love him. If you really, really love him, you won't be able to control yourself. Most likely, you'll cry and lie snugly beside him, and he'll comfort you.

While he strokes your hair and your face, repeatedly tell him you love him. He'll tell you he loves you loves you loves you, and you'll sob more and more. He may wonder if you'll ever stop crying. You may wonder if you'll ever stop crying. Stop crying. Enjoy this moment. Think about how happy he makes you. You may come to some sort of realization, some insight. Maybe you understand love songs for the first time. If so, tell him he's unforgettable, then giggle. Stop giggling, but keep a smile on your face; let him know you're through crying.

Get a cigarette. If he takes matches off the night stand and lights your cigarette, remember to say "Thank you." Say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." He'll think you mean thanks for the matches. Tell yourself to remember to take those matches home. Such souvenirs are worth keeping, even if you do have to hide them.

Smoke your cigarette, but try not to regret that you

didn't paint your fingernails. At this point, he probably doesn't care if your fingernails are painted or not. Be thankful you wore the right shade of lipstick, shaved your legs, and wore sexy panties. Now it's all right to say something stupid, preferably something for comic relief. Ask him if he wants to see your trick. "I thought I already saw it," he'll say. Blow a smoke ring, and try to remember some silly saying from your early childhood, something like "Ugh-Neat-King-Oh!" As he watches the smoke rings rise toward the ceiling, say, "I know lots of tricks."

As you're standing near the entrance ramp, when it's time for him to board his departing flight, he may sing Sinatra or Nat King Cole lyrics or hum a country tune. Or he might recite poetry for you. If you're lucky, you'll recognize the words and won't have to concentrate to comprehend; if the words are unfamiliar to you, don't try to understand what he says. You won't be able to perceive the words.

Your mind will focus on other thoughts, not really coherent conceptions. No, you won't concentrate on anything; you may believe your mind's dead--you've lost your mind. But you haven't. You're experiencing some sort of high or maybe your thoughts are clear and coherent, but they focus elsewhere. You'll think of how much you love him, and you'll probably feel sad that he's leaving. If you think he surmises your emotions, say, "I feel weird." Leave it at

that.

It's best just to look at him. Look him straight in the eyes, while he sings songs or recites poetry for you. Don't, whatever you do, make stupid jokes. Don't say something stupid, something really stupid like "If that plane leaves and you <u>are</u> on it, you'll live to regret it. . . . Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. . . ." No, he'll know you're just trying to evade serious conversation.

When he says he'll call you in the morning, turns his back to you, and walks toward the door, don't say "goodbye." In fact, avoid the "G" word all together. Don't stay and watch out the window for the plane to take off. No, turn and walk out of the airport. Try to remember where you parked.

And when you're in your car and you're driving home and you think about how much you love him and you're crying and crying and you can't stop crying? Make a mental note to yourself--a note to remind you that when he calls in the morning, you won't tell him you cried all the way home. No, you can't tell him that. He might misunderstand.

YARD SALE

Debbie sits on the front porch, waiting for Tom to get home. He's supposed to help her look around their house for stuff to sell at their garage sale. Tom's having a garage sale for the little league baseball team he coaches. She feels uncomfortable sitting in the broken patio chair. Even though the road is far from her front porch, she recognizes the headlights of Tom's truck moving toward the driveway. He gets out of the truck, carrying a grocery bag.

"Where did you go? I thought we were going to clean off the patio and find stuff for the garage sale," she tells him while he passes her and goes through the screen door.

"Yeah, garage sale," he mumbles through the screen. "Damn little league."

"I saved you the good chair," she says when he returns to the front porch.

"Thanks," he says. He sits down beside her and hands her a beer.

"What's this?" she asks. "I thought we quit drinking." She opens the beer and starts drinking it.

"Well, what can I say? It's Wednesday night. We'll only drink on Wednesdays."

"Wednesdays? I don't think this will work," she says.

"Yeah it will. I got depressed, so I went and got some

beer and I've been riding around drinking. I had a few beers already. I feel a little dizzy."

"What? My God, that's so sneaky. Have you been sneaking around drinking all month?"

"Of course I haven't. Have you?" he asks.

"No, I haven't had a drink all month. Just like I promised. I don't hide my drinking. I'm not that far gone yet. My God, what kind of a question is that, anyway? Why would I hide my drinking?" she asks.

"Why would I hide mine?"

"I have no idea, except I'm the one who said we should quit drinking in the first place."

"Oh well, what the hell," Tom says. "It's only one night a week. It won't hurt anything."

"What if we get depressed and it's not Wednesday?" she asks.

"Well, we won't drink. Absolutely. From now on, we only drink on Wednesdays."

"Okay," she says. "But for real. Only on Wednesdays. No more sitting out here every night. No more getting drunk at parties."

"Well, we can still ride around every once in a while on Fridays like we used to. Can't we? Just every once in a while on Fridays," Tom says.

"No, I don't think that's a safe thing to do," Debbie says. She finishes her beer, goes in the house, and returns

to the front porch with two more beers. "Why were you depressed?"

"This garage sale thing. It's making me nervous. God, Debbie, I'm embarrassed to admit it."

"What? Embarrassed about what?"

"I haven't called the parents and told them about the garage sale yet."

"Are you kidding?"

"I'm dead serious."

"Well, you have to call them. You have to call them tonight. The sale starts Saturday," Debbie says loudly.

"You wouldn't want to call them, would you?" he asks.

"Me? I don't even know them."

"Yeah. Come on, you're better at stuff like that than I am."

"Why haven't you called them?"

"Well, I wasn't sure if everyone wanted to have the sale. They didn't seem too interested at the meeting."

"Oh, Tom. You can't even get two parents to agree on who should play first base. How can you expect to get them all to agree on anything?"

"Well, I was just thinking that I should have discussed it a little more or something."

"Just call them. It's no big deal."

"Please, Debbie, call them for me," Tom says. He goes in the house and gets them another beer. He walks down the

porch steps and stands on the front lawn. "What do you think? We could set all the tables and stuff out here, couldn't we?"

"Yeah, that would be perfect. But I'm not calling all those parents. It wouldn't make any sense. Just call them and say, 'I decided to have a garage sale to raise money for our team. If you want to donate anything, drop it by my house tomorrow or Friday.' That's all you have to say."

Tom still stands in the middle of the lawn, pacing between the trees. "We could hang a rope between these two trees for clothes," he says.

"Yeah, I have a bunch of clothes to get rid of. In fact, we have a lot of junk to sell."

"What would you put the prices on with? Could we get some of those little stickers? You know, those orange round stickers you see at garage sales."

"Yeah," Debbie says. She goes in the house and gets them another beer. "But you need to call those parents tonight or tomorrow night," she says when she returns.

Tom steps back on the porch and sits down. "This garage sale is just too much. Would you take care of it for me? Please."

Debbie can tell Tom is getting drunk. "Honey, I can't. I don't know the parents, and it's no big deal for you to call them. I know you're embarrassed to call them. Or shy, or something like that. But you shouldn't be shy about it.

There's nothing stupid about it. You're having a garage sale. God, you're even having it for other people's kids. I think it's sweet."

"Yeah, but you know how people make me nervous."

"Well, they shouldn't."

"But they don't make you nervous, so why don't you just call them for me? Please."

"Tom, it would really be stupid if I called them. Now that's dumb. It just doesn't make sense. I'm going to go in the house and start dialing, then hand you the phone. Okay."

"Don't you dare. See, you're embarrassed yourself. You're too embarrassed to call them. Just like me. I knew it. You think it's stupid to have the garage sale. Admit it. You're afraid to call them."

"Tom, I think the alcohol is making you paranoid. Now if this little league is too much for you. . . . Remember what my brother told us he learned from A-A? Remember, he said, 'If something's cluttering up your life, you need to get rid of it.'"

"Yeah, he did say that."

"See, and he quit drinking. He knows about this stuff. I'm telling you this little league is causing you to drink. You need to give it up."

"No," Tom says. "Then what would I do to fill up extra time. How about we just don't have the damn garage sale?

Then neither one of us would have to call the parents."

"We can't do that. You already put the ad in the paper."

"So what?" Tom says, on his way in the house for more beer. "Last two," he says when he returns to his seat on the front porch.

"Thanks," Debbie says. "Well, people will be coming over to buy stuff. They'll say, 'I thought you were having a garage sale.'"

"So, we'll tell them we changed our minds."

"Tom, come on, we can do this. It's a simple thing. We're calling those parents tomorrow night. Besides, I already cleaned out all the closets. What would I do with all that stuff?"

"No, I really have changed my mind. No garage sale. Too much trouble. I'd worry I'd price everything wrong or use the wrong stickers or put up signs nobody can read."

"Okay, Honey, if it really upsets you this much. No garage sale. But I'm not getting up and answering the door Saturday morning."

"I'm not either," he says. "We'll just pretend we didn't put the ad in the paper. We'll get it in our heads that we really didn't do it. Must've been the neighborhood kids playing a prank. That's what we can say. That's a great idea, Debbie."

"Yeah," Debbie agrees. "That will work. You know, the

secret of lying is to pretend you're telling the truth. Look them straight in the eye and say, 'What? What garage sale? I'm not having a garage sale.'"

"Yeah, don't even mention the ad, unless they do. Remember? It's like your brother says, 'The guilty dog barks.'"

"Yeah," Debbie laughs. "He's always coming up with something." They both laugh.

They finish their beers, and Tom looks at Debbie.

"Let's run to the store and get some more beer," he says.

"More beer?" Debbie asks.

"Yeah, come on. We're out of beer."

"Well, okay, but this is it," Debbie says. "No more drinking. Not even on Wednesdays. No more. This is the last six-pack we're ever going to drink."

"Ever," Tom says. He pulls Debbie close to him and strokes her hair while they walk down the porch steps.

LISA AND HER BROTHERS

I'm driving down I-35, headed for home. It's hot, the windows are down in my Jeep Wagonneer, and my wife, Lisa sits next to me. I'm watching Lisa's hair blow all around her face. Her two older brothers sit in the back seat, arguing over money. I'm trying to drown them out with a Waylon Jennings tape. "Didn't we shine?" Waylon blares through the front speakers. Lisa starts giving me one of her looks again, the look that suggests she wants me to guess what she's thinking. I think her brothers are getting on her nerves.

"What is it?" I finally give in and ask. I know what she's going to answer.

"Nothing," she says. She shrugs her shoulders, pretending she doesn't know what I'll say next.

"No, come on, you're thinking about <u>something</u>."

"No, really," she says. "Nothing. I'm just sitting here, not really thinking about anything."

I continue my rehearsed lines: "Nothing. How do you manage to think about nothing?"

"Alcohol," her brother K.C. says from the back seat. He holds up a Coors and gives us all a lecture on the thrills of alcohol.

"Right on," her other brother, Randy, mumbles. Through

my rear-view mirror, I see K.C. roll his eyes at Randy.

"Oh yeah," Randy says, nodding his head and tapping his leg.

"Shut up!" K.C. tells him.

"Remember that Woody Allen movie Hannah and Her Sisters?" I ask Lisa.

"Yeah," she nods.

"Well, I'm going to write one called Lisa and Her Brothers." I'm trying to get a laugh out of her, and she laughs real loud.

K.C. rolls his eyes again, and Randy says, "All right. Kick ass."

K.C. needs a car, so I told him I'd help him get one. He demanded we go to one of those "we-tote-the-note" places, even though I told him those places are rip-offs. Now Lisa swears over her dead body will K.C. pay way too much for some Silverado pick-up with 80,000 miles.

"And that's miles showing," Lisa says. "No telling how many real miles. Any moron knows that means 180,000 or God knows how many real miles."

"So what," K.C. keeps repeating. "It's my money."

"Right on," Randy mumbles.

I think about setting K.C. straight, reminding him it's my money, but it's starting to get real loud back there, so I figure I'd better keep my mouth shut. I ask Lisa if she'll reach back and get me another beer. I tell her I'm

scared to stick my arm back there. Lisa reaches back and gets me a beer out of the styrofoam cooler.

Lisa's got four big brothers, and I learned a long time ago that the way to survive in her family is to fight my own battles but avoid getting in family squabbles that don't involve me. I just turn Waylon up and start singing "Didn't We Shine," even though that song isn't playing anymore. "Didn't we shine, didn't we shine?" I sing.

Lisa and I got married thirteen years ago. She divorced me three years ago, and now we live together. Weird, especially when I have to explain it to someone. Simple census surveys and stuff like that used to be so easy. Here lately, the marital status question throws me for a loop every time. I was putting "married" until Lisa caught me. She saw it on my life-insurance policy and said I was into "wish-fulfillment" or some weird psychology stuff. Probably some idea she got from a talk show.

"Well, what do you want me to put?" I asked, thinking she might at least be thankful I was making her my beneficiary again.

"'Divorced,'" she said, then gave me that suspicious look. Of course, I went through my routine again, but this time she convinced me she really wasn't thinking. No, she wasn't thinking at all.

"Or 'single,'" she suggested. "Put 'single.'"

"'Single?'" I asked.

"Yeah, or leave it blank. Don't answer that question. It would be kinda funny. Who cares if they can't take a joke."

Yeah, easy for her to say. Lately, I'm beginning to wonder if the joke's on me. I mean, I moved back in with her a year ago, and she may not know it, but I think we are married. We're legally married, I think. I'm not sure.

I don't remember exactly how or why I moved in with Lisa. I know one thing: she left me, and I wanted her back. Real bad, I wanted her back. At first, I'd call her, and she'd just answer direct questions or mumble or say she had ironing to do and couldn't waste time talking on the phone. I guess I sort of left my shoes over at her house one day, then kind of moved my tool box over there. Finally, as she says now, I "caught her at a weak moment."

"No," I always correct her, "I caught you at a strong moment." She always agrees, so I figure I'm in like Flynn. Now we live together, but she still won't say I'm her "husband." She always introduces me as her friend or sometimes her boyfriend or every now and then she just calls me by my name. When she does that, I always quote David Allen Coe. "You don't have to call me Darling, Darling. . . .," I say. Gradually, I've worked my way up to where I sometimes call her "my wife," and she doesn't say anything.

When I pull off the interstate, onto the service road,

Lisa points to the video store.

"Want to watch a movie tonight?" Lisa asks.

"Okay," I say, and it does seem like a good idea. I switch from Waylon and start singing Hank. "I got a hot rod Ford and a two dollar bill," I sing. I pat Lisa on the leg and tell her how pretty her hair looks blowing all over the place.

"Man, you and Randy don't know nothing about used cars," K.C. says real smart ass like, directing the comment at me. Randy still sits tapping his knee and nodding his head.

"Oh yeah," he says.

I'm not even expecting any trouble. I swear, I'm just sitting in the front seat, singing to Lisa. All of sudden, K.C. starts in on me. He goes on and on about how I didn't help him like I said I would.

Luckily, Lisa chimes in and puts in a good word for me. She says, "Yeah, K.C., he <u>is</u> helping you. He knows about that kind of stuff. He doesn't want you to pay too much. Face it, it's a waste of money."

"Yeah, well, it's <u>my</u> money," K.C. keeps saying.

"Right on," Randy mumbles.

Finally, I can't help myself. I have to set him straight. "No, K.C.," I say, "It's <u>my</u> money." Then, of course, Lisa has to put in her two dollars worth.

"Our money," she says.

"Well, yeah, our money," I agree.

K.C. gets real mad; I just laugh, thinking he's drunk. But I get a little worried when Lisa and K.C. start yelling at each other. Now Lisa's making faces at K.C. I turn around and see K.C. making faces at Lisa. This should be funny, real funny. I don't think it's even about money anymore. If Lisa wasn't so mad, I'd tell her that I think this is something more serious, something left over from childhood. She'd get a good laugh if she could see herself.

Randy keeps saying, "Right on" and "Oh yeah," every chance he gets. Lisa looks at Randy.

"What are you on?" she asks him. "Get a life," she tells both of them, rolling her eyes. Randy ignores her, acting like he doesn't know what's going on. Maybe he really doesn't know what's going on.

"Fuck you," K.C. tells her.

"What's the problem, Lisa?" I ask. I'm starting to get a little ticked off myself.

"Hey, don't talk to my wife like that," I tell K.C..

"Wife?" K.C. asks. I look at Lisa, and she doesn't say anything.

"Shut up, Asshole!" she turns around and screams. For a minute, I wonder if she might jump over the seat and go after him.

"You shut up!" K.C. hollers.

I know they don't mean all this, and I'm hoping I can

keep out of it. It's getting hard, though. They're screaming at each other. I can't even understand them anymore. I'd sing Waylon again, but nobody could hear me.

"Everybody shut up!" I finally yell.

"You shut up!" K.C. screams at me. "Shut up. Shut up, Mother fucker!"

I understand that. Yeah, I understand that too well. I slam my jeep in park, not even thinking to stop it first. Everyone sort of wobbles around in the car for a few seconds. Before I think about what I'm doing, I'm diving over my seat, punching toward K.C. I get him down on the back floorboard, and I'm laying on top of him. Lisa opens the back door and starts pulling on my legs. She grabs my shirt, trying to pull me off K.C. K.C.'s punching me in the gut, but I don't think I can feel the blows. I'm trying to get a grip around his neck, and finally I do.

"You're in the middle of the road, for Christ's sake," Lisa says. "Stop, dammit!" she says, but nobody's listening to her.

I feel someone jerk my arms and pull my hands behind my back. It's not Lisa because whoever it is seems strong like a man. Whoever it is forcibly yanks me out of the jeep, and I feel myself sort of flying all over the street. I hear a man's voice say, "You're under arrest," but he's got me from behind, so I can't see him. He throws me against the jeep, tells me to keep my arms up, and pushes my hands against the

jeep.

"It's a cop," Lisa shouts.

I see Randy run over to Winn Dixie, and Lisa and K.C. stand on the other side of the jeep, talking to two cops. By now, I know the guy behind me is a cop, and I feel sharp pains in my calves. He's yanking my arms behind my back, pulling them almost out of socket. I think maybe he's going to beat the hell out of me. He keeps kicking and kicking me. The gathered crowd just stands there in the middle of the street, staring at the show. I see Lisa look over toward me. She runs around the jeep, screaming something. I can't really make out what's happening. All I know is I'm getting the shit knocked out of me. I make a mental note never to help anyone buy a car. Lisa's always telling me that nice guys get nowhere.

"What are you doing?" I hear Lisa ask the cop. The cop immediately stops kicking me. Thank God. He lets go of me, and I stand there looking at Lisa. I notice beer cans scattered around the jeep.

"Excuse me, Miss?" the cop asks.

"I said, 'What are you doing?'"

"Who is this man?" the cop asks.

"That's my husband," she says and looks me straight in the eye.

I can tell by the look on her face it takes her a few seconds to realize exactly what she's said. I wait for her

to correct herself. I'm thinking that any second now she's going to correct herself. She'll say, "Ex-husband, I mean that's my ex-husband," but she doesn't. She comes over and asks me if I'm all right.

"Husband?" I ask, not really wanting to push my luck but unable to resist.

"Yeah," she says to the cop, "That's my husband, and I saw you kicking him."

"You're both drunk," the cop says. "A & M, Alcohol and Muscle," he shouts to the other cops, who are still talking to K.C.

"I'm not drunk," Lisa says. Then she moves closer to me and tells me to pretend she was driving.

The two other cops come around to me, and they put me in the squad car. K.C. tells the cops to take him instead, and Lisa says she was driving.

"It was my fault," K.C. tells Lisa.

When the squad car starts rolling, I figure K.C. has failed to convince the cops to take him instead of me. Oh well, at least I know we'll be friends when I get out of jail.

"Here, take these," I hear Lisa screaming.

I see her running beside my window, holding out a pack of cigarettes.

"I'll come get you out of jail," she hollers as the car turns the corner.

So, here I sit in my cell, knowing Lisa will come get me any minute. Any second, she's going to plow through the jail-house door and take me home with her. I can't wait. I look over at the guy next to me.

"What did you do?" he asks.

"Nothing," I lie, giving him the standard jail-house answer. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," he says.

"My wife's coming to get me," I say.

"I wish I had an ol' lady to come get me out," he says.

"She's coming to get me, and I bet she's going to say, 'What kind of bird don't fly?'" The guy's just looking at me like he thinks I'm crazy. "Yeah," I say. "Her brothers are always going to jail, and when they get out, I always say, 'What kind of bird don't fly?' Course, they always laugh. Yeah, they laugh because they're out and flying by then."

I look at the guy, and he doesn't think it's too funny. It hits me why he doesn't think it's funny, and I wish I'd never said it. I try to think of something else to say to him, so I tell him about the cop beating me up. I roll up my pants leg and show him my swollen red ankles. "It don't even hurt," I tell him.