“DISTANCE” AND OTHER STORIES

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“Distance” and Other Stories is a collection of four short stories and a novella that explore the themes of isolation and personal revelation. The dissertation opens with a preface which describes my background as a writer and the forces that shape my work, including science fiction, technology and the internet, cultural marginalization, and Joseph Campbell’s hero’s motif.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRETCHEN AND FRANK</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIGHT AND DARK</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE QUIET GAME</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RETROMORPHOSIS</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISTANCE</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

When I was a child, my favorite writers were Stanislaw Lem and Isaac Asimov. Lem had written two of my favorite books, *The Star Diaries* (Translated by M. Kandel, Seabury Press, 1976) and *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (Translated by M. Kandel and Ch. Rose, Seabury Press, 1973). Asimov had written other influential works, notably *The Foundation Trilogy* (*Foundation*, Gnome Press, 1951, *Foundation and Empire*, Gnome Press, 1952, *Second Foundation*, Gnome Press, 1953) and *I, Robot* (Gnome Press, 1950). But more than just being an author I could look up to, Asimov became for me someone to emulate. He was said to be the only writer to have a book in every classification of the Dewey Decimal System. He had given up a career as a biochemist to write full time when his income as a writer surpassed his salary as a professor. He was smart, and I wanted to be just like him. For a long while I wrote science fiction and science fantasy, using Lem and Asimov as my mentors and guides. Lem’s *Star Diaries* was the first work of science fiction and coincidentally the first work of satire I had ever read. The work is reminiscent of *Gulliver’s Travels* in that it is the collected accounts of the character Ijon Tichy’s travels through space, the planets he visits, and the political situations he finds there. Tichy’s solo journeys, much like Gulliver’s, mirror the child’s journey through life and the isolated individual’s encounter with society. Asimov’s works also served the same purpose, as his robot characters tried to gain equal opportunity in human society and as the society of the Foundation worked through its struggles.
Science fiction is about isolation, alienation, marginalization. It pits everyman against the unknown. Ultimately, we learn more about ourselves, when it is done well, than we learn about the fantastic worlds or creatures in the stories. It mirrors our own experience of society. Contemporary marginalization as we experience it in society is an isolation of the individual by technology, information, and pluralism combined with social and political isolation in many cases. The growth of technology has caused us to live in a society in which human contact is increasingly mediated by machines. Cellular telephones, beepers, computers, and the like have further distanced us even as they promise to bring us together. Increasing amounts of our work and play are spent in solitary and near motionless interface with one or another article of technology. When that isolation is combined with social or political isolation due to, for example, ideology, culture, or race, hypermarginalization is the result. This is often described as being a double or triple minority, where a black person is in the minority, a black woman is a double minority, and a black woman lesbian is a triple minority, thrice cursed (or blessed, as you will). The human support networks a hypermarginalized person might have had within his or her own community may no longer exist. All other contact may be mediated by machine—a virtual closeness compromised by actual distance. In literature, a marginalized character gives us the opportunity to examine the culture through the eyes of someone who does not take the cultural norms for granted. Hypermarginalized characters may function in much the same way as technology does for the reader: because

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1 Martin Heidegger expresses this idea in his work “Question Concerning Technology.” He explains that man surrounded by technology fails to see himself as anything other than the attendant of that which he has created. As such, he misses the opportunity to see himself in relation to his world. (Heidegger 308-9)
of their inherent distance, they may bring a reader closer to seeing a truth.

Technology impacts our lives in the way that we communicate. The way characters communicate shapes the way character is revealed. In the same way that the widespread use of telephone communication has rendered the epistolary mode obsolete, the sophisticated note passing that is email and chat may revive it. The epistolary novel, most popular in the eighteenth century, gave its readers a sense of immediacy and verisimilitude. Each letter progressed both plot and character development. The reader was able to know the mind of more than one character without a sometimes unnatural-feeling third person omniscient narrator’s intervention. But as people write fewer and fewer letters, and as letter writing itself faces obsolescence since the writer may see, call, or email the person long before the letter arrives, it becomes hard for a reader to find believability in the form. With the advent of computer communications, we interact on a daily basis, form and break relationships, with people we may never see in person. Those we do see, we also communicate with online through electronic mail, messages, and chat. A significant portion of our contact with others has become mediated by electronic means. Thus, the email or chat window may be as revelatory of character as the letter was a few centuries ago. It may even be more revelatory, because, more than with letters, the presence one creates online becomes more than just a placeholder for a person; it becomes a functioning agent.

The hallmarks of the epistolary form associated with women’s fiction—obsession, love, privacy, and intimacy—are transformed on the Internet. What appears to be private
is too easily intercepted or made public. Intimacy swiftly won becomes fraudulent. Identity becomes fluid and contingent. Gender becomes mystery. To use an avatar as a representation or interpretation of the self on the Internet is to use the Internet as a tool of metaphor. An avatar expresses an aspect of the self in metaphorical terms in order to communicate. To be sure, the entire net and computer world is built on metaphor. We chat in “rooms;” we open “windows” or “files;” we shop online using virtual “baskets” or “carts.” Identity can also be a metaphor, a representation of self. On the Internet that identity can be further complicated by layers upon layers of metaphor. The avatar a person creates on the Internet can never really be that person, but is one aspect of that person. The person can create different avatars to represent different aspects of personality. The name of the avatar may have some other associations. That, too, is another aspect of personality. But on the Web, they exist together.

I have mentioned two types of alienation: one that is caused by technology and one that is caused by other social or political factors. Isolation caused by technology may also be called “urban isolation.” This isolation is related to the large and impersonal communities in which we live and work which give the impression that one is “only a number,” a sense of diminished importance and nullified individuality or identity. Technology is also often represented as a barrier between the known and the unknown, in which the isolated individual is a questing figure in a foreign place. A literary example of this is Ishmael’s visit to the Spouter Inn, in Melville’s Moby Dick. The Inn is a space that is decorated with the implements of the whaling trade and populated by its veterans. This technology is a concrete representation of the new world Ishmael is about to enter.
Science fiction has always capitalized on this theme, from Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* to George Lucas’ *Star Wars*, notably, the scene at the barrier city Mos Isley. In earlier literature, monsters often sat at the barrier between worlds or between that which humans knew or possessed and that which they desired to control or possess. These “monsters” often represented something that was not aligned with the society or something over which the society desired control. Because the monster “resists” societal norms, it is alienated or isolated and marginalized. Thus, the monster in literature represents that which society will not accept. They reveal or show (Latin: mostrare) what society is not willing to see.

While the hero’s role is to seek adventure and defeat monsters, it becomes the monster’s role to be shunned by society and then to fight and perhaps die for home, honor, or property. For example, Humbaba, a monster of the forest in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, stands at the boundary between man and nature. Gilgamesh and Enkiddu kill him, securing society’s access to the natural resources of the forest. However, Gilgamesh’s entry into the forest represents an intrusion by society on Humbaba’s domain. Humbaba’s monstrous nature is attributable to his resistance of society. In the *Aeneid*, the title character faces several “resisting” monsters. His battle with the harpies, birds with the faces of women who drip foul discharge, is an attempt by society to deal with feminine mystery. However, it is Aeneas who first invades their territory and causes them to resist. Similarly in real life, societies characterize as monstrous those people who fail to conform. Social and political forms of marginalization exclude individuals from a society’s definition of what is acceptable or important. Because these forms of
discrimination have a long history, marginalized groups have established literary traditions that seek to validate their experiences and identities. It is from within these contexts that my stories come, but the alienation my characters face may come from any number of sources, even the self.

For every definition of the short story, there are many exceptions. Suzanne Fergusson makes the point that after literary impressionism, the difference between longer and shorter fiction is that shorter fiction is better able to capitalize on the aspects of impressionism: subjectivity, fragmentation, discontinuity, and stream of consciousness. She argues that these aspects become that much more integral to the way meaning is expressed (219-20). Thus, the short-short story may be more impressionistic than the short story; the novella, while being less impressionistic than the short story, should be more impressionistic than the novel. Fergusson also explains that knowledge of traditional modes of storytelling must be a prerequisite to the impressionistic short story (229).

So, what about the contemporary story? Fergusson contends that “instead of asking the reader to measure a subjective view against a traditional, ‘realistic’ view, postimpressionistic fiction denies the existence of the latter altogether” (224). I cannot say that contemporary innovations in fiction do that, in general. I do agree with her that the novel and the short story of today express the same characteristics, but the form of the short story highlights the impressionistic in much the same way compression makes lyric poetry different from narrative poetry. The contemporary short story is doing less than being rebirthed by postmodern aesthetics, now. It is only building on what came before it.
To be sure, postmodern writing is even conversive with itself. The elements Fergusson describes are apparent in most short stories we see today. One asks oneself what risks a writer takes when presenting a story such as Mark Leyner’s “Fugitive from a Centrifuge,” which appears to deconstruct itself as it goes along. The easiest answer to that question is that the author risks being read by an uneducated audience. Far from the time of the template stage of story telling in which so much was explained that no one could be lost, these stories presuppose the reader’s foreknowledge of theme, symbol, motif, and the ability to recognize and decode “clues.”

I had always viewed the short story as discussed in these articles, which I will call Traditional--realistic or naturalistic, objective, with beginning, middle, and end all in the proper places--as a precursor, a template for the impressionistic story, a basic form upon which “art” is superimposed. I had always seen impressionistic stories as traditional. Most of the stories I read, modern and contemporary stories taught as “literary” or “artistic,” built upon a foundation of impressionism, in fact, presupposed the knowledge of impressionism in its audience. Based on that presupposition, they were able to break the so-called rules in order to create new meaning.

The impressionistic short story is built upon the presupposition that the reader knows and understands the rules and concepts of the Traditional story. The contemporary short story depends upon the presupposition that the reader knows and understands the rules and concepts of the impressionistic. Contemporary innovations in fiction work against or reinterpret current literary theory and the reader’s expectations for a story in order to generate new kinds of texts. Thomas Leitch describes this as debunking. He
writes, “the structure of these stories is based on the process of unmaking or unknowing the stable, discrete self defined in opposition to the world of other selves and experience” (134). Austin Wright talks about the short story as being recalcitrant, which is to say that the story resists form and by doing so, reinforces form (117). This is yet another way of saying that the forces in fiction that we see as disruptive cannot and do not exist without form and again, that form must be a presupposition of our understanding of the story. Thus it is traditional today in literature to be anti-Traditional. A modern or contemporary short story is disruptive, recalcitrant; it debunks; it is all of the things the Traditional short story is not.

Despite the literary penchant for disruption, the narratives we use to define our lives generally take the form of myth. I look at myth in terms of story. The differences I see between story, myth, legend, and religion are merely the values assigned to them. Perhaps this comes from being exposed to the ideas of Joseph Campbell at too young of an age. I first heard of his ideas at a time in my life when I was coming to terms with the inherent differences in aspects of my identity and the religion I had been taught. The movie Star Wars and its successors were popular. People said they were Christian allegory, Buddhist allegory. They were compared to many myths. Campbell had worked with George Lucas to tailor the narrative. His theories on myth had made Star Wars a film that related to people on the same level as did the Iliad or stories of Christ or Akhnaten. In Bill Moyers’s interview with Campbell, “The Hero’s Journey,” Campbell talks about how the stories that each culture tells of a hero character--Hercules, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, Akhnaten, Odysseus, Gilgamesh, Quetzalcoatl, and so on--are really
the same story. They share elements in so many areas that it is as if humanity were crying out in many voices reaching for the same essence (Campbell). Each story has markers on it for each particular culture, but the motives and message are the same. A story is a way of explaining something. As individuals and as isolated cultural groups we assign meanings to stories in such a way as to suit us and/or our politics. This is the way that myth and history and religion become dangerous. One group after another has told its followers that its method of faith is the right way and as a result, people have gone to war, killing and torturing over the right to one story. Campbell’s theories allow one to recognize that all of these many tales are just different ways of seeing the same thing.

The drive to see it comes from something deep within humanity—Jung’s collective unconscious, perhaps. Imagine that a god wants to talk to a group of patriarchal shepherders who are enslaved by other races in their history. This god might communicate best to them by using patriarchal shepherd metaphors and promising them deliverance. A god who wants to communicate with a tribe who has philosophies of being one with the natural world might communicate with them in terms of nature and through nature. Alternately, if there is nothing out there, no supreme being, no prime mover, but only the human essence that bonds us together, we express that essence through our culture and interpretations of our world to express and demonstrate that very human essence in everything we create. Even a history that seeks to deny one culture or another, shows the culture it denies more than it would ever care to because in telling a human story it tells the stories of all of us. Still—the true understanding of what it is to be human must come from the dominant and the non-dominant both seeing each other and
having the understanding, “There am I.”

Campbell said in his interview with Bill Moyers that myths are supposed to change to reflect the beliefs and attitudes of our culture. But that has not always happened in Western culture. The heroes of our popular fiction and literature have been overwhelmingly white males. That gives the rest of us who are not white and male the options to either take on the role of the white male as we read or watch, a subjugation of the self in order to identify with the hero, or we may identify with the character whose role seems closer to ours, defining the self in a non-hero role, another kind of subjugation. This leads women readers or non-white readers to become “resisting” readers (Fetterly). It is not that it is not possible to have the “there am I” experience, but when a culture continually privileges one motif over another it thwarts that revelation by replacing it with “there you are not.” Also, for the “there am I” to have social significance (assuming this is our goal or at least our desire), it must be experienced by all members of the society, dominant and non-dominant. For example, it is not enough for it to be acceptable for a woman to take on the traditional roles or markings of man. True equality exists only when it is equally acceptable, not a lowering of status or matter for ridicule or derision, for a man to take on the traditional roles or markings of woman. When our beliefs change in that respect, so will the myths and stories that illustrate our culture. Of course, myths do more than illustrate the culture, they also inform it. The myths that reflect a culture’s move from hunting to agriculture also train the next generation.

Campbell said that it is the writers and artists of a society who create new myths.

Some of the characters in my stories will come from hypermarginalized groups,
partly because of the way they represent the theme and partly because of my recent involvement in their communities. Some of the stories will also highlight the way technology affects individuals, how it structures their lives and how it can contribute to a feeling of alienation. The character Scylla and her girlfriend, Jill, are the first of my characters to be created with race in mind. However, they were not created to showcase a particular racial reality, but rather to represent the reality of social alienation in a more universal sense. Often I try to write characters so that one could not tell which race the characters are. While some characters will be multi-racial, and some will share my race, others will be (hopefully) neutral, their races not being an integral part of the story. The qualities that make up any specific racial or social perspective in a text are likely less particular to culture, but are instead important to a culture. The black perspective, the gay perspective, the woman’s perspective are more accurately described as a disenfranchised perspective or an underprivileged perspective and are more similar one to the other than distinct.

Gretchen, in “Gretchen and Frank” perceives herself as alienated from her world. “Gretchen and Frank” is written as a parable within a parable. When I was writing it, I was thinking about dreams and morals and how sometimes the inability to see becomes the reason for both opportunity and stasis. Gretchen is a character who has spent her life on the outskirts of things. This is evident in the way she appears to watch life go by without really interacting. She watches the people who walk by the coffee shop and in some ways she enjoys the ability to feel a bit superior to others. She puts on aloofness and is willing to judge others she is willing to criticize the girls’ clothes and she is
unwilling to engage in Frank’s storytelling. However, underneath that, she has a desire to engage. She wonders if she could be like the girls. Though she knows she doesn’t understand Frank, she still is intrigued by him but she fails to see his interest in her. In fact, she is a bit annoyed at the fact that he asks her to weigh in on the topic of “a girl he is seeing,” failing to see that that girl he is doting on is her. Regardless that someone is reaching out to her, she fails to understand what is before her.

The character Martin in “Retromorphosis” is disconnected with society because of his feral childhood. Upon integration into society, he becomes estranged from himself. Martin, in “Retromorphosis,” is a character spawned by my longtime interest in Kaspar Hauser Syndrome. This is probably related to my feelings of isolation as a child that also led to my interest in science fiction. After reading about textbook cases Genie (scientific pseudonym) and Kaspar Hauser, the question came to mind: what if there was a modern day Kaspar Hauser? Likely his case would be handled better and he might go on to lead a mostly normal life. But how would he see and relate to the world? In a short story, there must be some sort of conflict, too. I chose to have him come into contact with his past to bring to the forefront his feelings of difference. There is a conflict between Martin and his father. He doesn’t really see Martin as a son. He sees him as a project first, a patient second, and a son third even though he has formally adopted him. Often, the decisions he makes regarding Martin are not always in Martin’s best interest. This is a continuing source of confusion for Martin, who already has trouble understanding people. However, it is his interaction with John Doe that allows Martin to accept himself. It makes his past something real instead of a nightmare from which to escape. In future revisions, I
imagine this story will ultimately need to be longer. Perhaps it will even turn into a novella. Since this is a character study, the reader needs to spend more time with the main character in more situations. Martin will be portrayed with his peers, his family members, and in a number of other situations so that the reader may have more opportunities to see the world, his world, through his eyes. The conflict with his father will also be better demonstrated by showing contrasts between Martin’s interaction with him and other members of his family.

“The Quiet Game” is a story about people with a lack of connection. Kelly breaks ties with her family to embark on a reckless adventure of living with a man she does not know as well as she thought. When they are faced with infidelity, they both realize how limited their connection really is. The two differing perspectives in on a commonly portrayed event make up “The Quiet Game.” We see Kelly’s view, disjointed, emotional, angry, drunken, and vindictive. Jason’s perspective is emotional but in a different way. He is at fault and is trying to be both understanding and apologetic. His friend advises him, but he doesn’t listen. The quiet game is a game teachers play with elementary students in which the first person to speak is the loser. In the case, Nolan is advising Jason to avoid being the first to call; however, Jason is accepting being the loser of the game. Nolan alludes to this when he says, “When I play, I lose.” Nolan appears to have all of the answers, but Jason has all of the questions and no answers. He relives his infidelity to realize about himself that he did not care as much for Kelly as he had intended. Kelly, in the meantime, is finding symbols of their lack of closeness in the things they shared, their sex life, and in the painting. Destruction of it for her is a symbol
that she will not continue to be run over in her desires. Things will definitely be different.
Resolution for her is in her changed direction in life. Jason makes the resolute change in
his life that he now knows for sure that he wants to be with Kelly. When he moves the
remains of the painting so that they will continue to burn, he is symbolically privileging
her. One of the challenges of writing the character of Jason was how to make him a
sympathetic character. It is easy to villainize a character who has betrayed his partner. It
may be because of that that Jason’s character feels a bit thin. Since the reader spends so
much time with him, I will provide more characterization for him in future versions.

In “Light and Dark” the main character is a woman coming to terms with her
integration in to a world from which she had psychologically estranged herself. Hiding
behind her camera lens, she views the world at such a distance that she finds it hard to
properly process her experiences, both positive and negative. “Light and Dark” deals
with the concept that image can be more revealing than reality. The character uses her art
to both see the world and to distance herself from it. Importantly, she finds resolution
within herself. Revealing the rape to her partner is not a necessary part of this. Perhaps
she will, one day. What is important for her is that she is able to be an active participant
in her own life again. Even when she takes pictures at work, she gives over control of her
film to a man. Note that in her husband, she has chosen a man who is not weak, but who
will choose to bed to her, even though she felt that she was giving up or losing herself to
him. Maybe this is why she never tells him about the rape. Keeping it to herself is the
only control she can have over the incident. She has a pattern of hiding from her
problems in her art, as if her darkroom is like a cave in which she cocoons herself from
the world. The camera allows her to control the light that enters her world and which versions of it that she will accept. When she takes a series of photos of her husband, she is getting over her feelings of lack of control or helplessness with regard to her father in one sense and her rapist in another. She gains a feeling of control in her life that allows her to make reevaluations of how she will approach her life.

In “Distance,” Scylla tells her tale of self-estrangement and societal estrangement. At odds with society, religion, and herself, she at once resists and capitulates, leaving the reader to wonder which alienation is worse. Scylla’s story is about how a girl moves from a position of self-loathing isolation to become a self-loving member of community. It is conceived as a hero story in which her hero act is to save both herself and her girlfriend, Jill, and to create a place where they can be themselves in an otherwise hostile world. The novella as presented here only includes parts of that journey, but as such, it is about a girl’s journey from dependence to independence, though it ends on a note that is still rather shaky. Scylla’s story, in particular, blends epistolary, in the form of email, chat room, and journals with narrative and in its ultimate form will also include active Internet interaction and images. When Scylla chats online, she is the person behind the keyboard, she is the online character of Scylla, and she is the beast on the water. The meanings exist simultaneously for those who interact with her on the Internet. Thus, the Internet represents a blended space in which the multiple aspects of metaphor exist together. Scylla’s story will take advantage of the phenomenon that is electronic communication. But the story that is told is still one of an individual seeking a place, yearning for order. The story of Scylla is designed to be a heroine’s journey, but for readers who share her
political minority, she will represent a hero with regard to whom they need not be resistant. For the dominant culture, she will be an opportunity for revelation.

One challenge I have always had in my writing in general and in “Distance” in particular is getting a plot to move. My characters tend to be introspective and their conflicts primarily internal. This made it difficult for me to create movement in the story. In my earlier stories, action seemed to happen only as a means of changing scenery for the internal struggle or as a device to introduce a rather obvious symbol. None of the actions were necessary. I never felt that there was no other action that would suffice for one scene or another. This was not what I wanted for the stories. They seemed contemplative, but boring. After trying and failing to write the kinds of stories I wanted, I did what any clear-thinking and intelligent person would do: I gave up and started watching cartoons.

Cartoons, more even than plot-driven novels, have the interesting quality of constant kinesis. It is not just the images that move rapidly in cartoons; the plots also move rapidly. Most cartoons tend to have a large number of plot points that happen in rapid succession. Most American cartoons contain an entire plot arc within one episode that is 25 minutes or sometimes less. If there is action that is continuous from one episode to the next, it is only corollary to the primary action in the episode. It is more often the case that Japanese cartoons or “anime” have plot lines that extend over more than one episode. The episodes tend, also, to be dependent upon previous episodes such that missing one or two becomes almost as detrimental to the viewer’s understanding as would be skipping a chapter of a novel. So, rather than relying on short plot lines with
limited conflict, these shows must stretch conflict and suspense over days and weeks for the viewer, crafting the rising action in such a way that it raises the stakes for the main character but remains focused enough to keep the viewer in suspense. One such show is *Dragonball Z*. The anime is based on what we would call a comic but which the Japanese call a manga that ran for ten years in the popular manga magazine *Shonen Jump*. It has a hero’s journey plot structure and can carry one saga over more than 200 twenty-five minute episodes without much loss of suspense. As I watched episode after episode nightly after the news, I began to examine how the conflict was structured. In other shows that stretch suspense over a long period of time, like a daytime or nighttime television dramas, suspense is typically created by giving character secrets to keep from one another. The stakes are not typically any higher for characters as the plot progresses and moving back and forth from the danger of revelation creates the suspense. However, in *Dragonball Z*, as is in most Hero stories and in many Japanese animated series, suspense is created by a combination of increased danger and the addition of obstacles to the hero reaching his (mostly) or her goal. Perhaps this is nothing new. But I have seen works in which this strategy did not lead to an increase in suspense. For example, I once saw a movie in which the main character was beset by a number of unfortunate events as obstacles, each one worse than the next, each one keeping the character from her goal which seemed to be some vague notion of escape. But there was little suspense created in the film and for all the trials through which the character struggled, the viewer had little concern for whether she survived them. It was not good enough for the main character to simply be plagued with disasters. I noticed in *Dragonball Z* that whenever the stakes
were raised for a character or group of characters, it was signaled by one of the characters saying something to the effect of “this can’t be happening” or “unbelievable,” but the lines never seemed melodramatic or unrealistic. This was because each plot point that raised the stakes was chosen in such a way that it stood directly in the path of both internal and external goals for more than one character. It was the very thing that might be described, not as the worst thing that could ever happen, but as the worst thing that could happen for those characters at that moment. Their goals were clearly defined and the trials or obstacles refer directly to them. This is also simply illustrated in video games that are based on the hero cycle, such as Nintendo’s Legend of Zelda series. The trial your character undergoes bears a direct relation to the goal you must accomplish. So, if we follow the hero’s cycle, the protagonist must embark upon or be thrust into a journey that will involve the achievement of some goal, even if that goal is to return home as in the Odyssey or to protect one’s home and family as in Dragonball Z. In order for the story not to appear trivial by only having external goals, the characters must also have internal goals. In Dragonball Z’s “Cell Saga,” the character Gohan must undergo a coming of age transformation in addition to accomplishing the external goal of saving the world from the nemesis. The trials and/or obstacles affect both internal and external goals. Each obstacle is greater than the next, but they build on each other in a stepwise fashion instead of randomly, which is to say each is related to the other, proceeds from characters’ attempts to achieve their goals, and relates directly, not tangentially, to the characters’ goals. So, the plot or path of conflict can be seen as very like the logical syllogism. Imagine that primary conflict or goal is the conclusion. The events in the story
have to point directly at the primary conflict, as if the unfolding plot points are the premises that lead necessarily to the conclusion. From the standpoint of the writer, this is applied in reverse. A writer usually knows the character’s primary conflicts. In Scylla’s story, she has an internal conflict revolving around guilt and shame and a lack of self-acceptance. She also has an external conflict regarding her immediate self-preservation and later, the well being of her girlfriend, Jill. When writing her story, the things that happen to her cannot be chosen merely because they are exciting or interesting or titillating. They may be all of those things (it is more fun when they are), but they must be events or occurrences that relate directly to her conflict. While falling in the mud and breaking her leg might keep Scylla from being able to go home, that event would be irrelevant to her conflict. Being forced to have sex with a man decreases her feeling of self worth, a important part of her primary internal conflict, and endangers her physically, in reference to her external conflict, therefore it is a better obstacle for the story.

This is not to say that an obstacle has to be big and dramatic. Another problem I had with writing was that I worried that my stories were not important enough to write about or that what happened to the characters was not big enough to seem worth reading about. Unlike the ideas about conflict, I think I had been told this before, but I really learned it from cartoons. After watching so much Dragonball Z, I thought it might be fun to learn to draw comics. I bought a magazine called How to draw Manga, and this was one of the lessons inside. Force is not shown by the person applying the force but by the object’s reaction to the force. A very small character can deliver what appears to be a very weak punch, but if the character being punched flies 20 feet, we see the strength
behind the blow. So it is in fiction. If the character has a strong reaction to an event, it
does not matter that the event may seem small to others. It will appear important to the
reader because of the effect it had on the character. For example, one event I wrote for
Scylla worried me because it did not seem very dramatic or important and, with regard to
the stepwise progression discussed above, it did not seem to be a more serious event than
the one on which it needed to build. But I realized that the event need not be one that
would seem dramatic or dangerous to the average person necessarily, as long as it is a
problem that greatly affects Scylla in particular and points directly at her primary
conflict.

Scylla is a character that came out of one incident and several coincidences. A
few years ago, a friend “came out” to me. It was a male friend of several years and he did
not want to “come out” publicly without doing some exploration and my husband and I
agreed to support him in this. I accompanied him to some gay bars and let him use my
computer to visit gay chat rooms. But he was not my first gay friend. One thing I had
noticed regarding my lesbian friends was that there was a strong polarization in the gay
male and female communities. There is a discrimination against gay females that is easily
quantifiable upon casual inspection of the services and social venues available for gay
males as opposed to those available for gay females. It made me wonder as I followed my
friend from club to club and watched over his shoulder as he chatted: I wonder what the
women are talking about?

One day after my friend left, I ventured for the first time into the realm of lesbian
chat rooms. I had been using the Internet for some time, but had not visited a chat room.
My first task was to choose a nickname or “handle.” The name “Scylla” came to me because it had been a favorite from childhood. Reading mythology at a young age, I had thought it was a beautiful name and would have wished it were mine had it not been assigned to a horrible monster. Of course, not knowing any rules of Greek pronunciation, I heard it in my head as “sil-ah” as opposed to the ostensibly more correct “skil-ah” and I imagine now that readers hear her name as it pleases them and each interpretation gives its own color to her character.

I had no agenda when I first went into gay chat. I was only curious to see how the women interacted as opposed to the men I had been watching. For a long time I said very little, preferring instead to watch the conversation, a behavior known among chatters as “lurking” which is somewhat frowned upon. I found the women’s conversation to have greater content than the men’s on average. They were more apt to greet a new chatter with “Hi, how are you?” than with “Hi, a/s/l?” (a/s/l is an abbreviation for “age/sex/location”) The women were more likely to tell you about their day than to grill you for information to determine whether or not you were a potential sex partner. I began to see it as a way to learn ideas for stories as women told each other about events in their lives or asked each other for advice about problems. More of the women came into the rooms for a simple chat than were looking to score. It was refreshing and I began to make friends there. The problem was that I could not make these friends as a heterosexual married woman or even as a bisexual married woman. The prejudices endured by the lesbian community have resulted in an understandable but unfortunate suspicion. While lurking, I had observed women angrily accusing other chatters of being men when their
behavior was inappropriate. I had observed derision expressed with regard to bisexual women, especially those who were married. I had observed the room become rather cool when honest but curious heterosexual men or women politely identified themselves and asked for permission to ask questions. And so, when I did finally choose to speak, I donned sheep’s clothing. At first, it was easy. It was assumed that I was “family.” But as I got to know some of these women, they began to ask me questions about myself and as I created the answers to one personal question after another, I realized I was creating a character. I began to keep notes on Scylla’s details, her date of birth, her day to day life, stories she told to her online friends about her past experiences. The tale of her life was initially much simpler than it is now. But over time, her story took shape. I did not intend to write a novel. I was thinking of just one or two short stories. Perhaps that is the result of talking (chatting) too much.

One of the questions asked most of Scylla is, “What does your name mean?” For a while I tied my fingers in knots trying to efficiently type the story to a chat room audience. But in self-defense, I found a Web site that told the myth and began to direct people there. The version of Scylla’s story that can be found at Greek Mythology Link <http://homepage.mac.com/cparada/GML/Scylla1.html> showed me that Scylla’s name was actually metaphorical of her character. What I knew of the mythological Scylla was that she was a monster on one side of the strait of Messina and that she destroyed ships that drew near. This site told a story of a young girl who rejected her suitors in favor of the Nereids, sea nymphs. This extra information allows one to see Scylla as an example of the demonization of the female who rejects the male in favor of other females. Her
monstrous resistance may be construed as being directed at the intrusive desire of men. The monster in literature is a representation of what society fears or does not wish to tolerate. Thus, an unseen individual uses the avatar “Scylla,” which stands for the beast, which stands for the demonization of women (particularly women-centered women), to stand for her, a woman who has rejected men for women and as a result has been driven from her home. It may be easy to see, now, why Scylla had to become a hero character for me. The beast represented the ultimate in isolation.

I was drawn to science fiction when I was a child. But, in the world of science fiction, women were notably absent. There were few female writers in the genre and fewer female primary characters. However, females were often the object of action, and the objects of action were often categorized as female. As I emulated the style, I also absorbed what I later came to label as the male gaze that came with it: more empirical, less emotional, more about actions, less about introspection, more about things “away,” less about things at home, more about events, less about relationships. Later, I reevaluated this bias in my own writing. I began to look at fantasy fiction, a genre I had shunned for being too “girly” and not serious enough, and women’s writing in the literary genre. I found a style of writing that was often the very opposite of the things I had read before. The result has been a change in my own writing style that no longer devalues so-called feminine tropes, but which is (I hope) balanced between the two to emphasize focus on human experience.
Works Cited


She was watching the young girl walking by the window outside the coffee shop. She was wondering: did this girl look at herself in the mirror and think, “Yeah. Now I look just like Gwen Stefani. I can go out now.” She was old. The young woman walked past the window and back again, first with a boy in sagging jeans, and then with another girl who was dressed just like her. The old woman watched them and sipped her coffee.

There are some olds that attack the body: rheumatoid arthritis, bad knees and ankles that cause limps, failing sight and shaking hands, trembling fingers, meds against pain, forgetfulness, high blood pressure in arteries clogged from years of neglect and Big Macs and dinners with men at expensive restaurants who never called back even after a wonderful night or a wonderful morning and who left her childless too late to look good.

But hers was not that type of old. Or maybe it was, a little, but she chose not to think of it that way. Hers was an old of the mind that she had worn since she was a child and still wore today, an old worn from years of abuse, riddled with holes from moths and nails sticking out of walls and doorframes or boards, snagged and yanked back by one circumstance or another…so she sipped the coffee.

I wonder if I could ever look like Gwen Stefani.

Frank walked in, so she smiled and motioned toward a chair. He said, “Gretch.” She said nothing. Frank carried an air that Gretchen could not define. He seemed in utter contentment all the time, as if he had found religion. “I don’t believe in God,” he had
said, “but I do believe in Jesus. What I want to know is does Jesus believe in me?”

Today, Frank said, “I have decided to ask someone I’ve been dating to call it quits. But I want to tell you this story and if you think I should still see her when I finish, then that’s what I’ll do.”

Gretchen looked at her watch, then into her coffee cup, now empty. “I’ll do no such thing,” she said. Gretchen hated stories in which one was expected to draw a moral.

Frank said, “I know that.” He took her Styrofoam cup to the counter and bought her a refill. He sat the cup in front of her and sat down again. “So, here’s my story.”

Once upon a time there was a girl who had long flowing hair so beautiful that she received compliments everywhere she went. The hair flowed white like rivulets down a snow-capped mountain from her head all the way down to the floor and she loved the hair—so much so that she brushed it every day for several hours. Indeed, she had to, lest it become irrevocably tangled. Unbeknownst to her, a small rat followed her everywhere she went. The rat picked up and carried away hairs that fell from her head. She never had to clean her combs and brushes because the rat relieved them of any and all strands of long white hair that happened to be there. While the girl was sleeping, the rat would weave the hair into a tapestry. One day, her long hair became trapped inside an elevator door. She screamed and the rat rescued her by removing the tangled hairs and weaving them into the tapestry. On another day, her long hair became caught in a revolving door, but before the fear reached her lips, the rat removed the ensnared hairs and wove them into the tapestry. Again, she was free. Finally, the rat presented the girl with the tapestry
as a gift. The girl was surprised, but not disgusted by the rat, and she accepted what he offered. When she spread the tapestry, she found that it told of the events of the young girl’s life—but not the good things, only the bad ones, the tragedies, the failures. The rat said, “I have made this for you and I can keep it no longer. It is yours.” The girl admired the tapestry and its shining white forms. Then she held it in outstretched hands. “Would you hold this for me?” she said. The rat said, “No.” But nevertheless, the girl rolled up the tapestry and laid it across his back. The weight of it almost crushed him, but he at last managed to carry it. He continued to follow her, picking up lost hairs and weaving them into the tapestry, and she never spoke of it again.

Gretchen had finished her second coffee and was tearing the Styrofoam cup into tiny pieces while Frank spoke. As Gretchen set each little bit of white foam onto the table, Frank picked it up and put it into an ashtray on a neighboring table. At last, he took the ashtray and set it in front of her. He said, “So…what do you think?”

Gretchen studied the ashtray. Finally, she said, “I don’t understand the rat.”

Frank studied Gretchen, then, throwing the pieces of the dismembered cup into a trashcan, he said, “I know that.”
LIGHT AND DARK

Early morning light makes us look like photographs, gray and cold like the fog in your eyes when they first open.

Jacob's body is heavy against me and I can't move. I can't turn to see the clock. His cheek is against mine. His hair is in my mouth. My arms are pinned by his shoulders. I can't push him away. His skin is stuck to mine. Hot. His knees push mine apart as he shifts in his sleep.

This is what it is like to be raped. Only, where now he is limp, he would be hard. His relaxed muscles, instead contracted and tense. Where his fingers lie softly on my skin, they would grip painfully. The hand that rests innocently on the pillow would cover my mouth and--that man--no matter how I tried to pull away, he was inside me again and again and again and no one was around and I couldn't get away and I couldn't scream.

“Get off! Get off! God dammit!” I am shaking inside.

“Huh? What? Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?” Jacob is awake now and shifts his weight so I can breathe. One of his legs is still over mine, his arm around my torso.

“My leg was going to sleep,” I lie. He rolls onto his side. I sit up and rub my calf as if to wake it. I swallow back thoughts of the past and focus on now, right now.

He leans on one elbow and looks at me. “You're really sexy, Loren,” he says, smiling, “You're making me want some.” He slips an arm around my waist and pulls me to him.
“This early?” I don't want this.

“Yeah, don't you know anything about men?”

“No.”

“We're horniest in the morning.”

“Oh.” Right now. The past never happened. It doesn't exist. Right now. The light is changing. Yellow is replacing gray. The paisleys on the comforter regain some of their vibrancy. The world begins to smell alive. I shake my head. “We still have to go to work.”

“I know,” he says. He caresses me, soft as a piece of lingerie. His hands slide under my nightshirt along my belly to my breasts, and I undo the buttons because I know he wants me to and I want to feel that tingle under my skin, that tingle that means that something good is happening, is going to happen, not like before. He can make that go away. He moves over me. I wrap my arms and legs around him, pulling him to me. I close my eyes. I feel his lips on mine. Then, gently, as a part of me, he is inside. Jacob is warm, safe. I am cocooned, as in the womb. He is around me and inside, I am breathing his breath, drawing on his energy to stay alive. If not for him, it seems, I would drown, drown in reality.

I never told anyone. I said I got mugged trying to walk home. And, by the time I met Jacob it was safely buried. And it really is gone. It is. Except for gray mornings, unable to move.
We share a sink and mirror in the bathroom. He combs his dark hair back for a business look, otherwise, the bangs fall boyishly into his eyes. He uses my eyebrow brush the way I taught him to make his brow look less wolfish. I am brushing my hair. He stops for a moment and regards my reflection. “You look like a little girl,” he says. He puts his arms around me and rests his chin on the top of my head. I don't feel little. Jacob never notices this. I feel like a cow. I tell him so. “Stop talking about my wife that way,” he says, “I don't like it.” He goes into the closet. I look at myself, standing there in my underwear. My hair is black and lifeless. I pinch at the fat on my waist. He steps out of the closet in slacks and untucked shirt. “Cut that out. Help me with this collar.”

Jacob has to dress for work. He looks responsible, like he could take care of me. That was what Mom liked. She looked at him in his tuxedo the day of the wedding and felt confident that my future was secure. She doesn’t know about the tribal art tattooed on his back. And I was the princess, I am the princess, fragile and in need of care. He likes this role.

I have to reach high to fix his collar and tie. I am not dressed yet, and he lets his hands wander while mine are occupied. His touch is warm and for a moment it feels as if we were still making love, but I have seen myself now, and I can feel the fat cells under his fingers. They are myriad and he reads them like Braille. “Hurry up and get dressed before I start getting ideas,” he says when I finish his tie. He makes coffee while I dress. It seems funny to wear diamond jewelry with a T-shirt and jeans, but he doesn't want me to wear only the band. I worry that I will lose the stone. He says, “You won't,” he says, and kisses my forehead. We leave together. Jacob takes his briefcase. I grab a satchel of
cameras, lenses, filters, and film.

When I get to work, I don't speak to anyone, but go straight to the darkroom. The news desk is a cacophony of life, phones ringing, keyboards clicking, people coming and going, barking at each other and at equipment, wire service printers spitting out stories to be rewritten. The darkroom is mine, at least until the other photographers arrive, and it is quiet. I am always the first one there. Sometimes I sit in the dark and pretend I don't exist. I am saturated with the lack of light. I float up and dissolve into the darkness. Sometimes I believe I have gone.

I turn on the light and with it, reality. Most of the developing is done by machine anyway. But, I still do my best by hand. I look at yesterday's photos. The people in the frames look alive in a way that I cannot say I am. I know their names. They are people who did not want their images tied to text. They are people who craved it. I know their names.

I once saw a collection of photos, shots of landmarks, architecture, fountains, sculpture, urban landscape. In each, a tiny doll's head was visible, on a fencepost, on a stair, corner, center, edge. It was a mark, like a birthmark, a mark of identity, a name.

The princess doesn't have a name. She takes the name of her husband.

I detest early morning light in photographs. But much of what happens in life is gray-lit. And much of it makes the papers. The world sleeps as news is breaking. News
means nothing to the sleeping eyes of the sun. That morning I lay bruised and naked in a field while tires sped away, covering me with dust and exhaust, the bleary sun lit gray my skin. Just the same, the sun had barely awakened when my husband asked me to share his life. And even though we were happy, as a summer afternoon, he was gray-lit, and so was I.

I enjoy my job, even though it doesn't pay much. It's more fun than real work, and they know it. Each time the shutter clicks, a tiny sliver of the world is shaved away, slipped under a microscope for closer examination. If you had enough of these, maybe, examined enough from different angles, you could know something, you could figure it out.

When I was a kid, I angered my mother. Roll after roll of film, every conceivable angle of our patient and obedient terrier. It's been a long time since I've done anything like that. I remember who I was then. I was an artist. I took pictures out of love, no, obsession. I lived, for weeks at a time, in examination of the world. I was an explorer in a darkroom. Sleeping it, breathing it, until life looked more normal in negative than in the light of day. Mom worried. Once, I didn't leave my darkened bedroom for a week, only slept, developed film, mostly just sat staring into the dark. “I never should have let you buy all that--that--stuff!” Mom yelled through my locked door near the end of the week. “You're never going to make it in life hiding in there with those damned pictures! I called your father. He's coming tomorrow to talk to you. Maybe you'll have an explanation for
him.” I didn't answer her because I didn't exist.

But I could have saved her the trouble of calling Dad. I knew he wouldn't come. When he was living with us, he wasn't really there. After he left, there were Saturday mornings, seated, dressed nicely, in the living room, waiting, watching out the window, Saturday mornings that turned into afternoons, Saturday afternoons that turned into evenings, until there were no Saturdays at all, only days in the darkness and days in the light. Mom had given me old photos of Dad from before I was born. I studied them, looked for a trace of who he was, of who I was. But, what could they tell me? Smiling faces, straight into the camera, a smile, like mine, to hide everything that is behind.

But, Mom got her wish. Prince Charming came and rescued the princess from her dark tower. Prince Charming with a degree in business, not in art, and a job lined up. Now, every day, when I come home there is a husband there, my husband, and he is really there, for real, all the time. Sometimes, I don't know what to think. Sometimes, I don't understand.

It's a slow news day. The other photographers and I draw lots to see which beats we will cover. I draw downtown. It is not my favorite beat. There are too many spectacles, too many eye-catching sights to divert your gaze from a potential reality.

Someone passes around a memo. A national photojournalist organization is sponsoring a photo contest. The only other woman in our department comes up to me. “You really ought to enter,” she says. Donna is in her forties, I think. Her face exudes a weather-beaten youth. Her hair is brown, and pulled away from her face.
“Me? I don't know.”

“No, really,” she says, “I know you're the rookie, but your work is really good. Even the ones they don't end up using. I've been in this game a long time. I know talent when I see it. A prize from these folks could really make your career.”

I almost want to wonder why she is still at this lousy paper, but I don't. I know the reason. Donna has a husband, children. Her husband has a job, an important job that pays much more than she could make and will keep him in this city forever. She only does this part-time, now. She says that when her children are older, she will go back to free-lancing, odd hours, travel, excitement, freedom. For now, every day at a certain hour, she must go home to the man who takes care of her, her children. I put the memo in my pocket. I tell her I will think about it.

But I don't think about it. While I am downtown, I think about Donna, her husband, my husband, myself. I wonder if one day I will be trapped, as she is. I wonder if I am not already. I wonder if that was what I wanted the first time I said “yes,” the time I said “I will,” and the time I said “I do.” A man asks a question. For what am I asking when I answer?

I wear a beeper in case I am needed at the scene of breaking news, but it does not go off all day, and my beat is serene. I take “just in case” shots of important city buildings to be kept on file. I take a picture of a squirrel on a park bench. I capture one of a couple arguing in front of a newsstand. The paper can’t use it, so it is mine. His mouth strained open, shoulders and chest angled downward toward her; her eyes glaring, the sharp lines of her face, her arms angled upward against him. I go back to the paper in
the evening to turn in my film. I am not pleased with the shots and I hand the rolls to a coworker, Scott, a friend who loves to use the machines.

“What's in it for me?” he says.

“I dunno,” I say. I shrug and open the door to leave. A shaft of light slices into the dim room. His face is hidden in shadow.

At home, I push back the sofa, move the coffee-table. I spread all of my work on the floor. Frame by frame, I go through them, looking for something. I see shadows. I see images of someone I have been, someone I was in the past. Faces and facades are brought together in an effort to produce art. But what happened to the artist? I can't see her. I don't feel her presence. I am looking at the legacy of a missing person.

I take my satchel from the sofa and pull out camera, lenses, filters. I polish them slowly and meticulously. Then, I fit the zoom onto the camera. I focus on different things around the house, a table lamp, the fern hanging in the window, the doorknob. It turns. The door opens, I focus on Jacob. I focus on the corner of his smile. I hear him say, “Hey, honey, what's all this?” I focus on his hand. He is holding a rose with his briefcase. I hear the door lock. He transfers the red flower to his free hand and comes over to me. My camera follows him. “You forgot about tonight, didn't you?” He sits on the sofa. I focus on his knee where his hand rests, holding the rose. I take the shot and the flash startles him. “Will you cut that out? Look, I brought this for you.” He holds out the rose. “We were supposed to go out to dinner.” I focus close on the rose with his form fuzzy in the background. Its bloom is just opening. I turn it a little in his hand before taking the
picture. “Loren!” I snap his irritation. “Quit it!” He grabs my hands, bringing the camera down to look me in the face. “We're supposed to go to dinner.”

“I--I can't. I don't want to go.”

“Why?”

“I just don't.”

“I made reservations!”

“Well,”

“Loren, what's wrong?”

I shrug.

“Come here, sit here,” Jacob says. I sit next to him on the sofa. “Put the camera down for a minute.”

“No.”

“Loren--Okay, okay. Look, honey, I know something's wrong. It's been wrong for a while. I know when you're upset. You get kind of distant. We don't talk. That's why I thought if we did something special tonight, maybe that would--I don't know, maybe it would be better. But, now--I don't know. You don't like being married? Is it something I'm doing?”

I shake my head.

“Please don't say, `It's just me.'“

This makes me smile. I look up at his face. There is pained confusion there.

“Would you do something for me?”

“If it will help, anything.”
“Would you, just for the rest of the day, would you do everything I say?”

He looks at me for a long time before saying yes.

He helps me pick up the photos that I have strewn around the room and we put them on the dining table. I ask him to sit on a tall stool that I put in the middle of the room. He does. I pose him, raising his chin, moving his arms in the positions I want them. He complies, but his eyes are questioning. I stand back to look at him.

“Don't move.” I raise the camera. Circling him, I take photo after photo, every angle, close, distance.


“Look at me.” The muscles in his face take on a relaxed smoothness slowly, with the focus. The lips rest comfortably shy of a smile. Click. I pose him again. Click. Remove his shirt and tie. Click. Drag his hair into his face with my fingers. Click.

“Look up.” I tilt his chin down. Click. I take his eyes, shrouded by tousled bangs. I take the top of his head.

“Sit up straight.” Click. I circle. I shade the lamp. His skin glows warm. Click.

“Keep your eye on this spot.” Click. I take the tattoo on his left shoulder blade, a many colored tribal design, remnant of a college bet and proof that he is a man. Click. I part the blinds. Evening sun cuts across his back. Click.

“Stand up.” I undress him like a doll. He complies like a child, silent. I throw the clothes and shoes to the floor. Uncertainty creeps into the muscles of his back. I am about to pose him, but I step back. Click. Fear, a field of goosebumps. Click. Tension,
contracted in his calves. Click. Discomfort, an angled vein in his neck. Click.

Resignation, curled fingers against his thigh. Click

I stop to reload and set up the tri-pod. He sits patiently, but I can see questions forming behind his brow. He is doing that fidgety thing with his fingers, tapping them on his knee. Jacob asks, “Do you still love me?”


“Sit here.” I set aside the stool and adjust the focus of the camera. “Raise your hand. Lean back.” I set the shutter-release timer and join him on the sofa. My hand clasps his and two seconds later the camera flashes. I get up and undress. I re-adjust the focus again, and set the shutter release timer. I join my husband on the sofa, make a loose knot of our bodies seconds before the flash.

The study is my private haven from the world. The windows are blacked out. A light outside warns my husband when not to open the door, not to intrude, it is not connected to the safe light. I am afraid I might be exposed--all that I am, succumbing to darkness. Looking in Jacob's eyes through the viewfinder, I see what that light means for him. But I dress and take my equipment into the darkroom. “That's it. I'll be out after a while.” He sits motionless and naked on the sofa. I wonder that he will be gone when I come out.

I turn on the red safe light and know I am shutting him out. I am all the more desperate to find him in the film. I begin working on the first roll, hands shaking. I feel a
wetness on my face and realize I am crying. I try not to get tears into the solutions.

I work into the night on the film, until I have all of the negatives. I examine each one, not for flaws, but to see if I can see something, something I don't quite understand, but something that I need. I look at one of the last shots. It is an upper body shot--my husband and his wife in an embrace--him and me. Both wedding rings are visible, her left hand on his shoulder, his in her hair. Our eyes are closed. Our skin showing such an affinity one to the other that they might melt into one. I make an eight-by-ten and I compare it to the negative. For the first time, the negative looks less real. There is something in the photo that I have in my hands. Something real in time and space. I turn on the light. Something real. I go into the dining room and get my portfolio from the table and take it back into the study. I flip through the photos. They look different, somehow. I sort through and leave a few of them on top of the desk. I look at the memo, crumpled from being in my pocket all day. “Categories: Urban, Rural, Nature, Artistic, and Photomontage.” I get a manila envelope from the desk drawer and copy the address from the memo.

All light is out now. I go quietly into the bedroom and find my nightgown thrown across a chair. Jacob is not snoring. I wonder if he is awake. Is he watching me in the dark? Is he hating me? I change into the gown and slip softly into bed. As soon as I do, he puts his arm around my waist and pulls me to him, like a child with a security blanket. I ask, “Are you mad at me?”

“No,” he says. I feel a tension in his voice.

39
“I'm not going in to work, tomorrow. I want to work on those shots some more.”

“Okay.” There is a silence. “You know, if there's anything...something...you know you could tell me...” He pulls me closer, holds me tight.

I want to tell him. I do. I open my mouth to speak, but the images come. I see them behind my eyes, lit gray like the morning. The man kneeling over me, backlit by the waking sun, laughing, draping me in shadow, the rhythmic pain clouding my sight. I want to speak it, but his hand covers my mouth.

I look through the images at Jacob. He stares into my eyes as though he’s lost something. I want him to find them. I want him to look in my eyes and see what I can’t say. But, he can’t see.

I close my eyes.

The images disappear in darkness and I am still, alone. Am I breathing. Am I shaking. Jacob's arms surround me. He wraps me in his cocoon. He rocks me in his cradle and whispers into my ear things I already know because he is warm and dark.

They say that morning light is the best for photographs. I’ve never liked it. But maybe there is no such thing as good light or bad. Maybe it depends on what you want to see. Maybe it depends on the processing.
THE QUIET GAME

Jason had gone and the room was an empty vault, the treasure stolen. Or maybe it was still there. Maybe she was the treasure. Kelly looked around the room. A painting of a nude above the mantle. His. Jason once said with a lungful of breath, “Those breasts. Are they breasts or are they her eyes? I think they're her eyes.” Kelly tried to talk to him about this but he couldn't hear her; she couldn't hear him. Did he gaze at her that way, looking at her breasts as into the windows of her soul? Did he see it there? Did he think that's where it was? Was it there? She couldn't feel it anymore. She looked around the room. Dead fireplace embers, tech-black TV, cable accouterments snaking from behind like an umbilicus attached to the wall, a large glass vase on the floor beside, filled with dead flowers, preserved in delicate desiccation. The flowers wouldn't break if touched, only softly crumble.

She sat on the floor between the rattan and glass coffee table and the overstuffed white sofa, wrapped her arms around herself.

“Are you okay?” he had said.

She had said “No.”

And then he left.

The phone rang. It was Jason, she knew. The phone was on the end table. Kelly reached for the phone without getting up.

“Hello.”
“Kel, Kelly? It's me.”

“I know.”

“How are you doing, I mean, are you okay?”

“No. No, I'm fine.”

“Can we talk about this?”

“No. I don't want to talk to you right now.”

Silence.

“But I . . .”

“How do I do this?”

“It's right here.” Nolan took the cell phone, pressed the off button and put it back in his jacket pocket. “So, what'd she say?” Jason was tapping a quarter on the bar, staring into his bourbon, letting the smell fill his deep breaths. “You could crash at my place,” Nolan said.

“No, I just need to . . .”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing.”

“Australia,” Nolan said. Jason looked up, puzzled. Nolan pointed to the NTN trivia game on the TV above the bar. They waited a moment for the answer to appear.

“See? Australia.”

“How come you're not playing?” Nolan didn't have a box on which to key in answers.
“Whenever I play, I lose.”

Jason nodded, looked back into the bottom of his glass. The scent of the alcohol mingled pungently with the cigarette smoke. Maybe he would go home.

“Yeah, um . . .” Nolan said, “that really sucks.” His voice sounded like it was dubbed over the bar noise around them.

“Yeah, sucks,” Jason said.

“And you're not even married.”

“Yeah.” But it felt like it.

Kelly had accepted Jason’s words of explanation like bad business news, without emotion, a serious concern on her brow. And she felt good about her demeanor. Like a product failure at a trade show, she thought, like a downturn in regional earnings. Sitting on the sofa then, she leisurely sipped white wine as he assured her that he would never do it again, never even look at another woman. For long moments she had said nothing. Then, “I'm glad you brought this to my attention. I'm sure you'll understand if I can't talk to you about this right now.” He had wanted to know how she felt. And when he left, he closed the door delicately, gently so it would not be mistaken for a slam. At the sound of the latch, she slid to the floor, grimaced; she sat there, rocking back and forth, until tired and overcome with the futility of it, she stopped, reached for her glass, and downed the rest of the wine.

Kelly tried to think about Jason, but she was not thinking--feeling, reacting. She didn't know what his leaving meant. She hoped it was because he knew; he knew that she
would need to be alone. He knew that she couldn't stand to look at him. He knew that she
wouldn't be able to forgive him or even damn him until--but maybe it was something
else. Maybe he left because he was going to be with her. Going to be with her at the time
when she needed him to be wringing his hands in contrition, not spilling his soul into
bourbon at some bar not existing.

It had been a year. Jason had asked Kelly to move in because even though they
weren't seeing each other exclusively. He couldn't stand the thought that after her
graduation she would leave town. She had been excited. It was the middle of her last
semester. He had made room for her things in his closet, and as his friends were carrying
boxes from her car up the stairs to the apartment, she called her mother to announce that
she wouldn't be coming home after all. She had moved in with her boyfriend. He felt
strange upon hearing it. Boyfriend. It sounded committed, more committed than they
had been before. But, it felt good, like maybe that was what he had wanted after all. And
as she scooted around his place making it hers, putting knick-knacks here and potted
plants there, he felt at once violated and willing. He would have to move the couch, she
said. He did so without hesitation, savoring the pang of resentment it caused and loving
it, telling himself that maybe he really loved her and this was the sign. And when they
had finished restructuring and reorganizing their lives, she snuggled next to him on the
sofa, facing more toward the fireplace now than the TV. He put his arms around her and
looked at the closed-eyed contentment in her face, held her close and thought, this is so
perfect.
Kelly wondered but never asked—would never ask for fear of losing. Did she do things for him that Kelly couldn’t—wouldn’t. Did she wear the scratchy lingerie and fishnet hose? They're not comfortable, she thought. They leave marks on your legs and particularly on the soles of your feet. Men think women wear such things because we like them, she thought, but it's the men who like them and it's the men we like. We perform. They observe.

Silence.

"Kelly, remember when we were in college, how great it was--"

“When we were in college, I slept with you and I didn't even know your name.”

“But you know me now!”

“No, I don't.”

“Kelly,”

“Gastropod,” Nolan said. They watched the screen. “See, I told you: gastropod. I never know this shit when I'm playing.” Jason smiled and nodded. The screen went to black and the words “We'll be right back” scrolled across it. “You should get a box,” Nolan said, “then I could tell you the answers and then we'd win.” Nolan waved for the bartender. “Two more over here,” He called. Jason took the cue and finished his drink. Advertisements for alcohol played silently on the screen. A salt shaker and a lime danced by in stop-motion. A busty, tousle-haired blonde pouted into the camera with the caption
“Smooth.” The bartender sat the drinks down in front of them. Nolan took a swallow.

“So, you did it with Martie, huh?” Jason gulped the bourbon, swallowed hard. “How was she? Was she good?”

“Fuck you.” Jason fingered his glass, stared at the TV screen. “What do you get if you win this game?”

“Points.”

“Then what?”

“If you get enough points, they send you a catalogue so you can buy stuff.”

“So you get nothing,” Jason said.


“Yeah,” Jason said.

“Yeah, I've been looking at her,” Nolan said. “You should never have told Kelly.”

“What?”

“Why'd you tell her? “

Kelly had asked Jason the same thing. Why are you telling me this? Why are you doing this to me? As though she wouldn't have said the exact opposite if he hadn't told her and she had found out some other way. “I don't know,” Jason said, “She would have figured it out anyway.”

“That's cause you're weak,” Nolan said, “Nineteen-seventy-nine. You should
have lied and saved your ass. Hey, only three people knew that! When did you hook up with Martie anyway?”

“That day we were supposed to work late but we got off and came over here instead, remember?”

“Yeah, but I left before you.”

Jason sighed. “Yeah, well the rest of us got pretty drunk. Me, Jeff, and Martie stayed the latest. I offered to take Martie home since she lives on the way. And she invited me in.”

“Damn! I shoulda stayed! I coulda taken her home.”

“I wish you had. Dude, she started it. I was so drunk I didn't even think about it until later. I mean, Kel and I used to see other people all the time.”

“But you're more serious now. Or—she’s serious?”

“We were serious. We weren't, but we were. Are.”

“Hockey,” Nolan said, “So, you think she's going to take you back?”

“Let me use your phone again,” Jason said. He dialed again, but the line was still busy. He put the phone down and looked at the NTN game.

“See, I told you.”

“She still hasn't hung up the phone.”

The apartment was quiet. Kelly emptied her glass and poured another. From the kitchen she could still see the painting of the nude—a woman lying on a bed, nestled in white sheets, painted as if the artist were hovering over her, her arms, relaxed, inviting,
her legs slightly apart, bent at the knees, her hair an auburn aureola, her face melted into a
smile of anticipation. Nice enough, she thought, if you want to have sex with her. Why
am I supposed to like it?

He found the painting at an auction. A Saturday outing together, she was
looking for an antique lamp or vase, or a nice sculpture for one of the end tables. They
had planned to spend no more than three or four hundred dollars. She looked down row
after row of antique furniture and artworks displayed in a haphazard, anachronistic
fashion. He followed, sometimes vaguely interested, other times bored. The place was
crowded with people examining the items and scribbling down lot numbers. Others
seemed to be there just to look. She wrote down the lot number for a Tiffany lamp. He
said, “An auction is just an elaborate shopping game. It turns it into a sport so men don't
have to be embarrassed.” Suddenly he was taken. “This. This is it. We have to have it.”

She turned from a collection of jewelry to focus on what he had seen. “Oh, that's
awful!”

“It's gorgeous,” he said, “It's so real.”

“It's almost pornographic,” she said.

“I thought you were the one who was supposed to appreciate art,” he said, “Look
at how the light hits her. Look at the way he makes everything look so soft like you could
just--”

“I don't like it.”

“What?”

“I don't like it! I don't want to look at that. It's disgusting.”
“Look,” he said, “You were the one who wanted me to get more involved and then when I do, you say what I like is disgusting.”

“When I look at that, I feel like 'blecch' and I don't want it around,” she said.

“But look at it. It's almost like these are her eyes,” he moved his hand in front of the painting slowly. To her, it looked like a caress. “And here, it's like her mouth, where she can breathe life into the world, like a kiss.”

“Stop it!”

“It would go perfect above the mantle.”

“I don't want that in my house!”

“What's the lot number?”

“Would you listen to me?” She raised her voice. A few people turned to see what was going on.

“No,” he said quietly, “you're thinking about it all wrong. When we get it home, you'll see.”

The bidding went over five hundred for the painting. He took it for $550.00. She had sat stony faced during the bidding while he, a little too excitedly, raised his card. Now she said, “Let's go.”

“Why, what's wrong?” The flush of elation began to dissipate.

“You got your damn painting. Let's go.”

“But, what about your lamp?”

“I only wanted to spend $400,” she said icily.

He fidgeted boyishly with his card. “Oh, I'm sorry.”
“Right, well--”

“But we could still get it. We have enough--”

“I don't want it anymore. I just want to get out of here.” On the way home, he tried to persuade her of the merits of the painting. Once there, she sat dejectedly on the sofa while he scrambled to hang it.

“See! It's perfect,” he triumphed.

“I hate it.”

“Aw, come on, honey. Look at it. It's beautiful.” He sat next to her. She got up to leave, but he caught her arm and pulled her back. “You're just mad that we didn't get that lamp.” She glared at him, jerked her arm away and got up. “Honey, come on!” He tried to catch her again and missed. He laughed. “Come on, honey!” He got up to follow her, but she had gone into the bedroom and slammed the door.

That night he had wanted to make love. He pulled her to him, pawed her gently under the covers, slipped his hands under her gown. She shrugged him off. But he persisted, whispering in her ear, “Come on, honey. I'm sorry. I love you.” She relented, rolled over for him, and as he played on her and inside her, she wondered if he saw her that way. Did he caress her to blind her while he stole his most intimate kiss?

Silence.

“Kelly...”

“...what?”
Jason looked around the bar. People were smiling, drinking, laughing, playing NTN. He thought about Martie's crooked grin, her features fluid with drunkenness that night. She was short, 5'3" to be exact, like a wind-up doll. She had stood on a chair in order to muss his hair. As the black strands fell into his eyes he had laughed, couldn't stop laughing. She laughed too, so hard that she lost her balance and almost fell, splashing tequila all over herself. Jason had caught her around the waist to keep her from falling. He took the glass from her and she licked the alcohol from her fingers and the back of her hand like a cat and stared at him seductively and yeah, he was turned on and he didn't even think about Kelly for a second.

Jason had tried to tell Kelly he was sorry. She had become very cold. She didn't want to talk to him about it. She said that if her were sorry, he wouldn't have done it in the first place, which didn't make sense. But as he remembered everything now, he thought maybe he could understand. He wasn’t sure if he could possibly have said no to Martie, even if he had thought of Kelly.

She thought about him. Kelly had assured her doubting parents that he was the best thing in the world for her. That was a year ago. But now--maybe she had done something wrong. She stood up, grabbed her wineglass and went into the kitchen. The wine bottle had been left on the counter and his glass, the one she had gotten out for him before he said, “there's something I have to tell you,” sat untouched next to it. She took the bottle and tugged halfheartedly at the cork. A sensation in her stomach told her she was either about to cry or get an ulcer. She winced, yanked out the cork and filled her
glass. She tried to think of a time she might have made Jason angry, ruined the laundry, burnt a roast, all of those things her mother told her to be careful about because men always seem to love women more for what they do for them than who they are. Did you please him? She had worn fishnets and teddies because he wanted her to, because he liked the look, liked to run his hands over and under them. She wore them even though the material scratched and chafed against her skin; because he wanted it. She had done such things for a while, because she thought she should. But lately . . . and she never cooked. The refrigerator was filled with old cartons of leftover Uncle Chang's Kung Po chicken and Mu Shi pork, doggie bags from Matt's El Rancho, Spaghetti Warehouse, Del Frisco's, IHOP. He seemed to like it that way--at least, he didn't complain. He did the laundry. Maybe she wasn't enough woman for him; she didn't keep house. But she had never wanted to be a wife. It wasn't what she signed on for.

Silence

“Kelly . . . are you there?—Kelly?”

“What.”

“I didn't mean to hurt you.”

“Oh.”

“I could come home and we could talk. I could explain. I mean, whenever you're ready. I could come home.”

“No . . .”
“Buddhism,” Nolan said.

“Let me use your phone again,” Jason said. Nolan handed him the cell phone. He dialed. After a few seconds, he hung up. “Busy.”

“Who do you suppose she's talking to?”

“Nobody,” Jason said, “She never hung up the phone.”

“When?”

“Before when I called. She dropped the phone on the floor. I heard it fall.” He slid the phone toward Nolan.

“Oh,” Nolan said.

“I think something might be wrong.”

“No shit,” Nolan said, “Desi Arnaz.” They waited for the answer. “See, I told you. Actually, it’s a good thing for you she did.” Jason looked up, confused. Nolan said, “Dropped the phone, dude. Best thing she could have done for you.”

“Why?” Jason said.

Nolan motioned for him to be quiet. “Just a second…” he said. “Ecuador… See…you don’t know the rules of the game.”

Jason shook his head. “What rules?”

Nolan turned to Jason. The look on his face was serious and he spoke as if he were in a pre-game strategy session, like a briefing before a tactical mission. “She’s giving you the silent treatment, right. Never be the one to speak first. You gotta make her come to you. You go to her first—you lose. It’s all on you now. Be cool. Wait it out.”
Jason said, “But I already called her.”


Silence.

“Kelly, I can expl--”

“I burned your painting.”

Silence.

“It doesn't matter. I don't care about the painting, Kelly. I care about you . . . Kelly?”

“What?”

Maybe she had been cold. Maybe that's why he needed someone else. But she didn't care. She didn't have to understand. Not anymore. She closed her eyes to the painting, swallowed the rest of the wine, turned away, poured another glass. The wine tasted like sweetened pain. It warmed her. She no longer felt like crying. She smiled a little. Laughed. It was all her fault. She let him screw her over. She laughed more. Right. It was her fault. She could have taken care of this a long time ago. The bottle was almost empty. She topped off her glass and threw the bottle at the trashcan. She missed. The bottle hit the rim of the white Rubbermaid can causing it to rock back and forth then clattered loudly onto the floor. She was surprised that it didn't break. She reached for the cork but hit it with the tips of her fingers and it rolled along the counter until a wooden knife rack stopped it. She looked at them, pulled out the largest, a carver.
Yes. She should have taken care of this a long time ago. With her other hand she grabbed her glass and took it and the knife into the living-room.

She stood before the painting, examining it. Of course it was beautiful. Come to me, it said. She laughed, put the knife and wineglass on the coffee table, turned, lifted the painting carefully off of the wall. She lay it on the floor and stood over it, looked down on the willing sacrifice, the flesh offering. She could see why he liked it. The woman must have been that way for him. Why couldn’t he see why she didn’t? She grabbed the knife, knelt before the painting. It was a nice frame, after all. Carefully, she drew the knife along the perimeter of the painting until it completely separated from the frame. She pushed the frame aside, rolled up the willing woman and lay her in the fireplace. She looked at the roll on the empty fireplace grate. It rocked a little as the paint tried to force it back open. She took a long match from the fireplace tools, turned on the gas jet under the grate and lit it. Flame burst up and engulfed the roll. A sudden wall of heat hit her. The gas was on too high. She used the key on the side of the fireplace to turn it down. It crackled like winter in the quiet. She took her wineglass, turned out the lights, reclined on the sofa and watched the painting burn.

When the wine was gone, she threw the glass into the fireplace. It shattered and the shards scattered across the floor in front of the fireplace. She laughed softly, lay down her head, wrapped her arms around herself, watched the flames. She could smell the burning paint and canvas. A strange smell, different. She felt sleepy. Jason, the painting, everything seemed very far away. She thought about the glass on the floor. Yes, tomorrow would be a good day for cleaning up.
Silence.

“Kel . . . honey, we need to talk.”

“. . . talk tomorrow.”

“Kelly, are you okay?”

“Talk tomorrow,” she said. She tried to hang up the phone but it slid off the receiver and onto the floor. “Kelly? Kelly? Are you okay? Kelly--pick up the phone!”

Jason said, “Let me use your phone again.”

Nolan watched the game. “Louisiana.”

“Nolan,”

Nolan motioned to the bartender. “Two more.”

Jason winced. “Nolan, come on!”

Nolan smiled. “Mary Tyler Moore. Dude, just say no.”

Silence

“Hello?


. . . I know you can hear me . . .

. . . Kelly . . .

. . . pick up the phone . . .”
Jason pulled out his wallet and tossed some money on the bar for the drinks. “I gotta go.”

“Aw, man. You going home?”

“Yeah.”

“What're you going to do?”

“I'm going to try to be sorry,” Jason said.

“Good luck,” Nolan said, “Don't forget. Call me if you need to crash.”

“Yeah,” Jason said.

It took Jason twenty minutes to get home. It had been over an hour since he spoke to her, almost three since he left. He turned the key in the lock slowly, deliberately. He took a deep breath and walked in. “Kel, honey?” He looked around. All the lights were off. A warm glow came from the fireplace. Kelly was asleep on the sofa. Just as he thought, the phone was on the floor, off the hook. He went to hang it up, crossing in front of the fireplace. His shoes crunched on broken glass. He bent down and picked up the shattered remains of a wineglass. He looked at her with confusion and concern. She didn't stir from her slumber. He looked in the fireplace. There was more glass inside along with the smoldering remains of a roll of material. It looked like canvas. The painting. She really had burned his painting. The roll of canvas was burned through until it lay in the fireplace in two pieces while the gas jet beneath the grate sent forth a mild but steady flame between them. He turned and saw the empty frame lying on the floor with a kitchen knife.

She had always hated the painting, said it was pornographic: a nude, nestled in
white sheets, an inviting look on her face like if you so much as touched her, she would come. He just thought it was beautiful. It reminded him of how Kelly herself looked at him sometimes. He looked at her now, lying on the sofa in her troubled sleep and thought of all he would give to have her look at him that way now. He wouldn't miss the painting, or the money, if only Kelly would wake up and see him and smile.

Jason took the knife back to the kitchen. He got the broom and dustpan, swept up the glass from the hearth and put it in the trash. There was an empty wine bottle on the floor by the trashcan. He tossed it in. He went to the bedroom to get the comforter off of the bed. It was the one she had bought for the bed they would share. He hadn't had one when she moved in. He brought it to the living room and covered her with it. She turned a little in her sleep, but did not awaken. Then, he brought in some firewood from the patio. Using the fireplace poker, he positioned the remaining half-burned rolls of canvas above the gas jet flame and stacked the firewood around it. The canvas caught quickly. It would not be long before the wood got going. He turned down the gas.

Jason went to Kelly, tucked gently in her blanket. He lifted her a little and sat down carefully next to her such that she could rest her head in his lap. It was at this point that she awoke. She made a fist and jabbed at him weakly, barely grazing his arm and chest, falling lightly against his thigh.

“I hate you,” she said and fell back asleep.

He stroked her hair and whispered softly, “I'm sorry, I'm sorry.” He lay his arm along her sleeping form, rested his head on the back of the sofa. “I'm sorry.” He watched the flames and the smoke rising into the chimney.
I used to dream that I was kidnapped, snatched up and taken away from all I knew by strange beings all in white. I was taken to a place of bright stinging light, acrid, confusing scents, alien noises, and pain. I would awake in a sweat, trying to scream, but unable, wrestling with my bedclothes, snapping and tearing at the air with my teeth. My mother, my foster mother, would rush to me and hold me in her arms. “Hush, Martin. It's okay. Be a big boy. It's only a dream.”

But it wasn't a dream. It was a memory.

* * * *

I was supposed to be studying, but snowflakes were falling silently outside my window and they transfixed me. I wanted to stretch my hand out through the glass and let the delicate frozen lattices light gently on my skin. I imagined that I could hear each one as it landed on the sill outside. I strained my ears in the silence, but the flakes built up before my eyes, inaudible. I wanted to take it in my hands like I did as a child, to smell it, to taste it, to rub it on my face until I could feel winter creeping through my entire body. Snow coated the world outside. It gave the world a glow, a sheen, stinging white. Suddenly, I no longer thought of crystal lattices and crisp winter, but of cold hospital rooms and fluorescent light.

I turned away from the window and back to my books. Abnormal Psychology,
Psychology of Communication, Human Development. One at a time, I thought, one step at a time. It was still early in the semester. I would just read the chapter assigned for this afternoon's class. I was sitting at my desk. It was really too small for a man my size. I moved my coffee cup and computer keyboard in order to be able to open my textbook and still have room to rest my elbows. I remembered from the syllabus, Abnormal Psych. chapter 4. I flipped open the book and skimmed the chapter. Childhood dysfunctions: phobias and neuroses, hyperactivity and attention deficit, delinquency, autism, then Kaspar Hauser Syndrome, my father's picture, my foster father, distinguished in suit and tie, clean shaven and impeccably groomed, and mine, one of my first childhood photos, matted hair, barefoot, in a hospital gown, crouched in a corner chewing on my hand. The caption read, “Dr. Dan Ellis and his patient John Doe #6, abandoned in deserted homeless camp.”

I shut the book. A wave of nausea came over me. I rubbed the palm of one hand on the desk, feeling the wood grain beneath the finish. They don't know me, I told myself, nobody knows me in there. They couldn't possibly guess that was me. I grabbed my coffee cup and went into the kitchen to refill it. I thought about skipping class.

By the time I poured the coffee, my phone was ringing. I went back into the living room, sat on the couch and grabbed the phone off of the coffee table.

“Martin?”

“Hi, Dad. How's it going?”

“Just working, always working. And you?”

“Yeah, working. I just saw your picture. You're in my Psych book. I am, too.”
“Oh.” He sounded concerned. “How do you feel about that?”

“I don't know,” I said. There was a long pause.

“Did you get my email?”

“No, I didn't check it.” I put down my coffee and walked over to the desk. I turned on the computer and called up my mail.

“I sent you something to read. I guess you haven't caught the news, either.”

“No,” I said. The snow gleamed white through the window and I felt acutely fortunate not to be cold.

He said, “I have a new case I thought you might be interested in.”

“I've got it,” I said as the text came up on the screen, “do you want me to call you back after I've read it?”

“No, I'll hold.”

The text was a recent newspaper article. A child was found a couple of days ago in New York. His parents are unknown. He was living alone in a condemned apartment building with a large golden Labrador retriever. Many of the buildings in that area had been abandoned. The city had only recently set aside the funds for the area's urban renewal--an area that had been a wasteland for at least eight years. The child was discovered when demolition crews went in to clear the building of stray animals and vagrants in preparation for its destruction. Workers saw fleeting glimpses of a tiny form darting around corners and hiding underneath stairwells. The idea that it could be a human being was the furthest thing from their minds. Animal control was called in--a necessity after recent complaints about demolition from the Humane Society.
They found the child huddling in a corner, in front of him the lab in a protective stance, growling, unapproachable. They thought at that time that the dog was protecting a puppy. The dog was neutralized with a tranquilizer dart. Workers said that when the dog went down, the child rushed to its side from the shadows. That's when they realized what they were dealing with. The shape of a child with matted black hair, naked except for the layers of grime that made his ethnicity indistinguishable, whimpered over the unconscious dog. He licked the dog's face and eyes, whimpering and howling. One of the men caught the child up in his arms. The child fought and even attempted to bite the man, but the man's wore protective clothing designed to withstand such an attack from even a large animal, and he was able to hold the child fast until he tired. As I read, I could feel it happening, it felt like it was happening to me, happening to me again. The crew restrained the boy by placing him in the carrier that would have held the dog, and they took him to the nearest hospital. As one of the few specialists in the country in Kaspar Hauser Syndrome, Dr. Ellis was called immediately. Kaspar Hauser Syndrome used to be called closet child or feral child syndrome. It described children who were raised in isolation by being abandoned in the wild or imprisoned by abusive caretakers. It described what I used to be. Dr. Ellis flew to New York and personally supervised the transfer of the patient back here, to Woodson Children's Hospital in Washington D.C.

The boy was about ten years old, but is small for his age. His growth was probably stunted due to malnutrition. The dog apparently kept the boy fed on garbage scraps and small rodents. At least, this is all they can figure. They named him John, from "John Doe," but as of yet, aside from eating, he remains in a deep depression and
basically unresponsive. I can remember that feeling.

“Why are you telling me this?” I said.

“I thought you could help out, Martin. You've been through this before. You've been in the place where this child is and you came out of it. You succeeded.”

“So what?” I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to look at that child and see what I used to be. “It just seems like if I go back there--”

“Look, I know. But you've got to look at it differently. Here is something you can do that nobody else in the world can do. You can relate to this child in a way no one else can. You're studying psychology now. Isn't that why?”

No, that isn't why. It was just for myself. Just for me. Just so I could look at myself, and look at other people and say 'Yes, I am one of these.'

“Martin?”

“I'm here.”

“I know this is a tough decision and I know you've spent a long time getting past this. I wouldn't ask you if I didn't think you were ready, or if I thought it could set you back.” I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. “Look, Martin. Let me send you some info. You look at it. You think about it. I'll call you in the a.m. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” I set the phone down. I thought about how this life seemed so natural now. It didn't feel like an alien world anymore, like living a foreign language, like it used to. I didn't want that to change. It had been almost twenty years since I was first admitted to Woodson Children's in much the same state as this “John” child. It had been about ten years since I left it. I suppose I never left the care of Dr. Ellis since he adopted
me and became “dad” instead. His wife, Joan, became “mom” and their children, Alice and Mike, brother and sister. At age twenty, I was a member of a family for the first time. My development was behind, but they raised this grown man as if I was one of their own children. And I guess I did succeed. I have been able to attend college--last spring I finished a year as the school's only thirty-year-old full-time freshman. I moved into my own place near the campus. It is paid for with student loans and donations that Dr. Ellis wisely invested for me from people who have followed my case since I was headline news twenty years ago--FERAL CHILD FOUND IN ABANDONED HOMELESS SHANTYTOWN.

I went to class, anyway. But, I worried. I kept thinking that someone in class would recognize me from that grainy photo in the text. I kept thinking about that boy at Children's and how he must be feeling. And I started to feel the way I felt when I was there, afraid, alone. I ducked into a bathroom outside the classroom as the students were filing in. I took off my hat, coat and gloves, and looked at myself in the mirror. Did he look like me, the boy in the photo? People moved in and out of the bathroom. I smoothed down my hair. They couldn't possibly tell my eye color, my complexion. It could be anybody. Then I noticed that my eyebrows looked the same. Thick and sharply arched, they had not changed since that day. I groaned inwardly. I checked my watch and hurried to class.

I must have been lucky. The snow kept a lot of people away. The auditorium was only half full. I took a seat at the back and Professor Briggs read tediously from his
lecture notes. With every syndrome he covered, I dreaded the next. I didn't want to hear that story which I had already lived. I didn't want to be reminded. Then I heard the words “Kaspar Hauser Syndrome” and I stopped taking notes.

“Of the few feral children that have been well documented in the course of history, few have learned even so much as speech.” Professor Briggs droned, “Studies done regarding Genie (her scientific alias), who was raised in a barren room, strapped to a potty chair until she was twelve, suggest that left brain development will not occur unless the infant hears human speech during a critical period of development. If speech is not heard, the left brain will never organize itself to perform a number of duties, grammatical speech being one of them. While Genie learned a few words, she was never able to master syntax. Neither was Victor, wild boy of Averyon, or Kamala and Amala, wolf-children in India. There are a few notable exceptions--Kaspar Hauser, raised in isolation in Germany, and Hellen Keller, whose blindness and deafness imposed sensual isolation upon her. Each of them had heard speech as infants--Kaspar, before he was abandoned, and Helen, before measles took her hearing as an infant. Each was later able to learn language complete with syntax. Each was able to gain education and to write the story of a life in utter isolation. The other notable exception is John Doe #6--”

I got up and left the class.

At home, I started another pot of coffee. There was a knock at my door, and when I answered it, there stood Lena, one of the nurses at Children's. She was just beginning as a nurse’s aide the year I left. I almost hated to go. She had a benign, soft-
spoken demeanor. When she was around, assisting the other nurses, or on her own I felt strange, a warmth like I knew her already, and yet a kind of fear. I had never felt close to anyone, before her, even though I didn't really know her, and I hadn't since. I missed her when I left, though I would still see her from time to time when I would go in for check-ups. Now she was an R.N. She wore her hair the same way as she did then, long brown tresses pulled away from her face and held at her crown by a suede barrette. Her brown eyes smiled warmly. She was holding two large files and a "New England Journal of Medicine."

"Hi," she said, "Dr. Ellis asked me to drop this by your place on my way home."

"Come on in. I can't believe he sent you so far out of your way in this weather. Do you want some coffee?"

She came in and I took her coat and the files. She smelled at once like new winter and warm honey. She was wearing a red cardigan over her hospital whites. I got that feeling again, like I knew her, like we were actually close. "It's not out of my way. Besides, it wasn't snowing yet when he asked me."

"Oh. Well, have a seat," I motioned toward the couch, "and I'll get the coffee. I always keep a pot going on days like this."

"Do you know what this is about?" I asked her as she sugared her coffee.

"No," she said, then admitted, "well, yes. One file is about you, and the other is John Doe's. The article in the 'Journal' is about Kaspar Hauser Syndrome." She set her coffee down and seemed to direct her speech at it. "I didn't know that's why you were being seen--I mean, I didn't know that was your diagnosis."
“Does that change your opinion of me?”

“No, it's just that--” she hesitated.

“What?” I was sitting in the chair facing her. I smiled and sat back, trying to look relaxed to put her at ease.

“Well, I used to see you around there a lot--I mean, after your discharge, when you would see Dr. Ellis, and I thought . . .” She was fidgeting and looked uncomfortable. All of a sudden, I didn't want to know what she thought.

“What do you think now?” I interrupted.

“I don't know,” she dismissed the issue, “I guess nothing really.”

My question lingered in the back of my mind, but I was more relieved to let it go. I flipped randomly through John Doe's file. “Have you seen him?” I asked.

“Actually, I'm one of his case workers.” She straightened proudly when she said this. I was surprised and glanced up from the file. “Well, I'm not his head nurse, but I am on the case.”

“So, you know why Dad, uh, Dr. Ellis, is asking me to participate,” I said.

“Yes.”

“And, you've read his file, and you've read mine.”

She nodded and inwardly I winced at the idea. To her, I smiled, sheepishly. “You saw those pictures?”

“Well, yes.”

I laughed uncomfortably, and she smiled.

I put aside John Doe's file, and opened my own. My first photograph stared back
at me from the cover page. It was taken the day I was found. I removed it from the paper clip that held it in place and studied it. I hadn't looked at it in at least five years, perhaps more. The child in the picture refused to look at or hold still for the camera. Gentle, but firm hands held the scrawny arms, forcing straight the stooped body. Curly black hair wildly encircled a small, angry face. The teeth were bared and the eyes stared, without understanding, into nothingness. It was hard to believe that creature was me. I tried to remember that day. The images were chaotic--fear, rage, foreign shapes, sounds, a feeling that my life was threatened. Only, I didn't know 'life' or 'threatened,' just a mélange of sensory information unstructured by the benefit of language. I couldn't put it together--amorphous dread and despair. I flipped open John Doe's file and laid the picture of my former self next to that of Dad's newest patient. Even though his file labeled him as Hispanic, and mine guessed at mixed heritage, the same unfocused eyes searched for a point beyond the photo's edge. The same tiny body was held erect by seemingly oversized hands. The same belly bulged its cry for nourishment. The same teeth snapped at the air, attempting to express the inexpressible.

“He's quite a handful,” Lena said.

“Uh-huh.” I had almost forgotten she was there. I was leaning over the table, feeling the curve of my back, remembering the pressure of the doctors' hands straightening my spine, attempting to teach me to walk upright. I was remembering the fear and confusion of having my hair combed and cut for the first time. I was remembering the feeling of being the only thing that existed in a world of nightmare visions. And I thought that somehow, if I had to touch this child, all those visions would
come back. I sat back in the chair. The leather made a scrunching noise. I heard the clink of her cup against the saucer as Lena set down her coffee.

“Martin, are you okay?” she said. I came to myself and realized I had been staring at the files, one hand over my mouth, the other clenching the arm of the chair.

“You know, you don't have to do this. I mean, if you're not ready to--”

“No,” I said, “I'm fine.”

“Really?”

I looked at her. What was she seeing in my face? She moved toward me and put her hand on mine. Unconsciously, I flinched.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“No,” I said, “I'm sorry.”

“You don't have to be afraid,” she said. I wanted to believe her when she said that. I did believe her, and yet I still was.

*                *                *

I was running through the darkness, pursued and yet pursuing. Black shapes brushed past me. Garbage swam around my feet and hands--old newspapers and cups, torn tarpaulins and cardboard boxes, beer cans, broken bottles that once contained cheap whiskey--the stench crept into my nostrils, familiar and nauseating. I was running on all fours, my naked skin pelted with rain. I looked behind me. The wild-eyed beast seeking to consume me neared, approaching with a lithe, tiger-like motion. I quickened my pace,
then saw a figure in the distance. If only I could reach that one, I might be saved.

Behind me, the beast gaining ground. All around me buffeted by unfathomable figures, the flotsam and jetsam of human society impeding progress. I falter, then fall on my knees, cut by broken glass. I try to scream, to yell for help, but my voice emits only a high-pitched squeal. The beast is upon me. I look with horror into my own face, teeth biting at air, hair like the mane of a wild animal. I am grappling with it, with me. I scream my high-pitched whine, unable to breathe, unable to move, until the alarm brings me into day.

*                        *                      *

I walked in the doors of Woodson Children's feeling like an impostor. Every other time, I had come here as a patient, but this time I was a man on the street, a visitor, a stranger. I almost expected the building to look different. But the rainbow of hope was still painted on the hospital lobby wall. The red, blue and yellow cushioned chairs were still arranged in a basic circle around a group of large stone animals for children to climb on. I remembered liking to pretend to ride, clinging to the neck of the giraffe, sitting astride the hippo. But that was when I was a child, dressed in shorts and t-shirt, or hospital PJ's. This day I was dressed in slacks and blazer, tie and overcoat, as if I were a man. I should be climbing on the back of the lion, holding on to his ears, laughing, ignorant of anything better to do. I stopped by the desk to say hello to the women who handled admissions. Some of them were new, but Rhonda and Kelley were still there.
Rhonda told me the meeting would be in room 318, but that Dr. Ellis hadn't come in yet. I knew I was a little early.

When I got to the conference room, there were already a few people there, going over their files. The room was typically uninspiring as were most of the offices in this hospital where business was to take place. Gray cushioned chairs surrounded an oblong dark wood table. The only color in the room was from the blue carpet, a drastic contrast from the cheerful furnishings of the children's areas. There was a blackboard at one end of the room and a dry-erase board at the other. The windows looked out on parking and the snow that blended into the overcast sky. Lena was there and motioned for me to sit next to her. She again wore her hospital whites, but this time complimented with a pink lab coat, embroidered over the left breast-pocket with her name and the hospital's logo—the word `children’s' and a spray of balloons. She introduced me to Karen Anderson, a psychological therapist, Joe Avera, a speech therapist, and Martina Cummins, head nurse. We exchanged greetings. Each expressed that I would be a big help with questions they had. I smiled and said I hoped I could, but I wasn't sure what they could want to know. They'd done this once before with me. Did they think something went wrong?

Lena touched my shoulder. I almost flinched, but managed to hold it in. “Are you okay?” she said.

I smiled nervously. “Yeah, sure.”

“You'll be fine. Dr. Ellis will be here, and I'll be right here.”

I had read both medical charts and the “New England Journal of Medicine” articles the previous evening, but I reread John Doe's history and physical while I waited
for the meeting to begin.

“John Doe presents as an actively uncooperative male of approximately ten years of age in approximately the twelfth percentile of height and weight for age group. Patient is alert and in no acute distress. Patient is generally unresponsive with the exception of violent reaction to examination. Patient will eat only when left alone in room with food left on floor in a flat plate. Patient has no toilet habits other than the occasional attempt to hide feces. Patient sleeps on floor in corner without covering. Attempts to clothe patient remain unsuccessful. Patient removes hospital gown at every opportunity. Patient neither produces, nor appears to understand human speech. Unable to obtain complete vitals due to resistance of patient, however temperature and respiration appear normal. Head: normocephalic. Eyes: conjunctiva clear, pupils equal, round, reactive to light. Ears: benign, no evidence of otorrhea. Nose: nasal septum intact, no rhinitis or epistaxis, no evidence of nasal polyps, however, consistent with history, patient is insensitive to strong smells. Throat: deferred. Neck: supple, thyroid normal, non nodular, non-tender. Lungs: clear to auscultation. Heart: within normal limits, no murmurs, thrills, lifts or gallops. Abdomen: distended, consistent with history of malnutrition. Rectal: deferred. Extremities: marked calluses on hands and feet, consistent with history of running on all fours, normal development of hands and feet, limited range of motion consistent with history. Back: Patient does not walk erect, but in a stooped position, no apparent tenderness. Skin: no petechiae or ecchymosis, consistent with history patient is insensitive to heat and cold. Neurological: deferred. Lymphatics: no evidence of lymphadenopathy.
“ASSESSMENT: Kaspar Hauser Syndrome, Psychological Dwarfism, Depression.”

Dr. Ellis came in flustered and apologizing for being a little late. Dad is a tall man, about 6'4". At 5'7", I sometimes still feel like a child next to him. He watches the floor when he walks, so he didn't see me until he sat down and started to address the group.

“Good morning, everyone. I tried to get hold of Martin this morning, but he wasn't--Martin!” He adjusted his glasses and the graying edges of his moustache tweaked up with a smile. “I knew you would join us.” He seemed proud of me and it felt good.

Each of the nurses and therapists gave their reports of their encounters with John, the methods they tried and their results. It was a litany of failure. I made some notes, but mostly listened, trying to become invisible. When the last had finished, Dr. Ellis began to talk about what he hoped to gain from asking me to participate.

“In almost every other psychological syndrome that we deal with, we have the benefit of the recovered patient. We can talk to the patient, gather information that helps us characterize the syndrome, not only by its objective symptoms, but by its subjective symptoms--that is, the patient's own characterization of his problem. By modifying our treatment programs using this information, we are able to significantly improve the efficacy of the treatment.

“When we treated Martin, years ago, for Kaspar Hauser syndrome, we only had objective symptomology characterized. All of our treatments were hit or miss, because
we had no idea of the mindset martin was coming from. We didn't know what he was thinking. That was then. Now, our little John Doe can benefit from Martin's experience.”

They were looking at me as if I were about say something, as if they expected something. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Dr. Ellis asked me if I had any observations after reading the files. I nervously began to speak. “I remembered, reading the files, what it was like to be there, in that situation, what I was feeling. What I mostly felt was fear, the feeling of being a prisoner in a nightmare. People would speak to me--I was afraid of the sounds. I was afraid of everything. The world of humanity was so foreign to me that I could barely see it as real. The only thing that I knew, that I could relate to as really existing, was myself. And these feelings were entirely new. I had never felt alone or abandoned before I was found. I tasted my first isolation surrounded by people. I . . . um, …“ I wanted to say, I feel like that now, right now. But I didn't. I just trailed off, and Lena patted me reassuringly on the arm. I looked at her and she smiled.

Dad spoke. “Martin, I believe you may be the closest link this child has between his world and ours. I'd like you to observe one of his therapy sessions, today. Then maybe--”

“No, no. I don't want to see him.” I suddenly blurted.

“Martin,” he said.

“Excuse me,” I said. I clumsily got up and stumbled out of the room. I heard my father, Dr. Ellis, telling me to wait, and someone else saying, no let him go. I stood outside the door of the conference room. I was sweating. I couldn't catch my breath.
What was happening to me? Lena came out of the room.

“Martin,” she said.

“No, I don't want to.” I hardly knew what I was saying.

“Why? What could possibly happen? Martin?” She turned me by the shoulders to face her. “Martin, look at me.”

“If I go in there, when I see him, I'll go back, It'll all happen again, stop, stop touching me!” I was babbling and she gripped me tighter and shook me.

“Stop it. Calm down. Listen. You are going to be fine. Everyone in there knows this is rough for you. They're all pulling for you. It's hard for anyone to look back at their past, even if it's not near as traumatic as yours.” She paused and I relaxed a little. I was listening. “You'll be fine.”

The meeting was adjourned, and Dad and I went to observe one of John's therapy sessions. We went into a room I had never been in before but recognized immediately. It was the observation area for the play-therapy room, what lay beyond the two-way mirror. I didn't know about the mirror in the days when I spent a portion of every day in that room. I thought that it, and everything else, existed solely for my benefit. I learned about it later, but never had I been on the outside looking in. It felt wrong, as though I should be the one sitting on the floor of the stark white room, picking telltale toys from the carnival colored box. Instead, Dad and I sat in a barren little room, in gray cushioned chairs at a table in front of the mirror. There were pens and notepads and an intercom on the table. I could see the child, John Doe, huddling in the far corner of the room. He
kept his face to the wall, refusing to acknowledge the world--a world where learned spies sit in dim clandestine rooms, ready to write the reality of a child as confessed by his very act of being. And I was the accomplice, the double agent, there to help interpret the cues. I wanted to go home.

Dad spoke in a hushed voice as we watched through the dusty glass. John was fairly cleaned up, compared to his picture. Under sedation, Dad explained, the child had been given a bath, full examination, haircut and nail trimming. He continued to talk of John's combativeness toward people. He wanted me to observe the behavior first hand.

“This way,” he said, “when you interact with him--”

“No.”

“But, Martin--”

“I don't want to.”

I knew Dad was looking at me, but I didn't meet his gaze. I was fixated upon the child, watching his animalistic movements as he crouched in the corner, scratching his hair and chewing on his fingers. Dad was trying to tell me that it didn't have to be today, that I might change my mind later. I didn't acknowledge his voice, torn between my fascination with the child and an overwhelming dread.

A woman walked into the therapy room. John did not respond to the sound of the door, or her presence. Her dark hair was pulled into a tiny bun at the back of her head. She had a serious look about her. She wore pink scrubs and a short white sweater. She carried a child-sized hospital gown, white with blue teddy-bears. Dad said that her name was Corinne and that since she handled most of his personal care, John was familiar with
her. She began by sitting next to John, speaking to him in kind tones, soft and high, a language he didn't understand. John turned his head away from her, toward the wall. She continued to speak to him. As she spoke, she took a few toys from the box—a clown doll, a stuffed dog. She held the colorful toys up such that he might see and touch them if he would simply turn his head. He would not. She continued talking and he raised his arm to shield his face and ears. He would not see her, but I saw her. I heard her voice in my ear like a memory—it was the sound of shod feet on pavement. It was the sound of sterile air rushing through vents. It was the sound of car exhaust and honking horns. Insistent. Unfathomable. With her came colors that didn't exist and sounds like cold thunder, that if I only knew what it wanted perhaps I could make it stop. And the feelings splashed like waves inside, untamable, grew and swelled. To be able to say “I fear, I hurt,” is to have dominion over them. Without that, they simply are, rising like the tides, pushing toward me the desire to escape. I wanted to go home. I watched the child as he cowered in the corner. I watched the tiny muscles in his jaw as he clenched and unclenched his teeth and realized that I was doing the same. The nurse was holding the little shirt. She took John's arm slowly and gently and began to put it in the sleeve. Suddenly, the child burst into action, struggling as if for his life, but without a cry. He pushed against her, scratched her, bit her hand. She did not scream, but continued to talk as though the warm music of her voice would lessen the fight in him. I could feel her hands on my skin as she held his arm. Let me go. I could feel the strange fabric against my chest as she slipped the gown on the struggling child. Let me go. I could taste her skin on my tongue as he bit her. I could feel her flesh between my teeth. Let me go. She wasn't able to
fasten the snaps on the back before the child broke away from her and ran on all fours toward me--toward the mirror. I stood abruptly. “I'm going home.”

“Martin, give us a minute. We'll talk.” Dr. Ellis pushed a button on the intercom and said, “Corinne, can you come in here for a minute?”

I felt hot, constricted. I took off my sweater. I saw the child, now alone in the room, struggling to remove the hospital gown. It felt scratchy and tight, like my shirt. I unbuttoned the collar. Dr. Ellis was asking me if I was alright. “I have to go,”

“Martin, what's wrong?” He put a hand on my shoulder. I drew back. He looked like a complete stranger. A woman came into the room. I couldn't recognize her. A feeling welled in me but I couldn't name it. I ran from the room. Once in the hall, I went into the first door I saw and shut it behind me. The walls were a bright white. There was a large mirror on one wall, and a box of many colors in the middle of the floor. Leaning against the wall, I slid to the floor. There was a strange covering on my body. I pulled at it until it was gone and lay scattered around me on the floor. I felt the familiar cold of the wall and floor against my skin. I stood on all fours. It felt right--natural. I looked around me. I knew this place. It was not home, but it was safe. There was a child here, huddled in a corner. I thought it must be me. I went to the opposite corner and huddled there, feeling the coolness of the wall and floor on my skin. I rocked back and forth and chewed on a finger. This was where I belonged. I sat there for a long time, my eyes closed, watching myself in my mind.

* * * *
I see myself running on all fours, naked, winter winds blowing bracingly against my skin. A small animal darts in front of me. Rapidly, I am upon it. I take it in my teeth and shake it back and forth. It falls to the ground and I take it in my hands. I tear at the skin and fur with my teeth. Its blood runs down my fingers. I hear a voice. It says, “No, no, no . . .” I don't know what this means, but I put the animal down and, licking my hands, watch its tiny eye turn to glass.

*                 *                *

I opened my eyes. The whiteness of the room was stinging. A voice was coming out of nowhere. I couldn't understand. I focused on a shape. The child, his tawny body in a crouch before me, sniffed at me. I didn't move. He touched my face as if to verify what he saw. His hands moved over my mouth, nose and eyes like a blind man searching. Then he took my hand in two of his and placed it against his cheek, on his forehead, over his nose and mouth, on the other cheek, then laid it in the same place on the floor. I looked into his face, but he didn't meet my eye. He scampered a few feet away where my clothes were scattered on the floor. The voice came again. It was coming from a speaker on the wall. It was talking to me. The boy picked at the clothes and sniffed them, watching me with his roaming eye in split-second intervals. I picked up my shirt, which was lying near, sniffed it as he had done, then laid it down. He sniffed at the mat the toy-box was sitting on, then at the hospital gown the nurse had left. I watched
him, moving little, saying nothing. The voice on the speaker was calling my name. Presently, he came toward me. He again took my hand and placed it on his face. Then he dropped it and ran away. He explored the room, seemingly for the first time. I looked up and saw myself in the mirror. I was naked. I became acutely aware and self-conscious about the probability that I had an audience. I wondered what Dr. Ellis and the nurse must have been thinking. The voice on the speaker, it was Dr. Ellis. I didn't know what to say to him. I picked up my shirt. The child--John--was still watching me. I put the shirt on slowly, leaving the buttons undone. John picked up the hospital gown, imitating my movements. He put an arm through a sleeve and pulled the gown futilely around his neck and shoulder. Frustrated, he bared his teeth and snapped at the air. I moved toward him, careful not to stand fully. I walked in a partial stoop, using my hands to balance. I crouched next to him and held the gown as I guided his other arm into the sleeve. The gown was inside out and on backward with the snaps in the front, but he was wearing it. He scratched at the gown and then at my shirt. I picked up the stuffed dog from beside the toy-box. It was a realistic-looking German shepherd. I held in both hands, sniffed it, then held it out toward John. He took the toy from my hand. He sniffed it and chewed on the dog's plastic ear. Then, for the first time, he looked me in the eye.

"Martin," Dad said over the speaker.

I said, "I'm here."
When he told me the answering machine had a message for me, I didn’t know quite what to think. I didn’t ever receive calls at his place. There was no one to call me. He sat with me while I played it. His curiosity about my past, I suppose, got the better of his usual courtesy. The voice on the machine was familiar, one I hadn’t heard for a long time. She said she was looking for me, and described me well enough that Paul had no question that this was not a wrong number. She called me by the name my mother gave me. Someone had given her the number, told her I might be here. She was staying at a motel not too far away from the university and said she would only be there for another day. She asked that whoever heard her message, if it was not me, would tell me if they could, that she was looking for me. She left phone numbers for her motel room and her cell phone. I sat, stunned and a bit shaken. It was the first phone call I had gotten in more than two years, and it was from the only person in the world who knew me well enough to know that I would never refuse her a reply.

“How did you know it was for me,” I said.

Paul did not look at me when he spoke. “Isn’t it?”

I said, “Yes.”

“So, your real name is Wendy.” Paul looked at his hands as he spoke.

“Wendelin,” I said. There was a long silence.

“You ran away or something,” he said.

“Or something . . .” I said. I had never imagined having this conversation with
Paul. I had been staying with him for about six weeks. His apartment was near the university. It had a soft sofa. Paul liked me enough to let me alone. He had accepted everything I had told him ever since he first met me, when he was still living in the dorms and I was alone on the streets. I had been sitting on a bench by the train station staring at the rails, clasping my fingers together in an ungraceful knot. He stepped in front of me, interrupting my stare, and said, “Don’t hold on so tight. You’ll break.”

I looked at him blankly. “What?” I could hardly see his face silhouetted in the evening sun.

“Your fingers,” he said, “they’ll break.” I untangled my fingers and looked at my hands, so thin and frail from lack of sustenance. Maybe they would break. He said, “Lemme buy you a cup of coffee? Something to eat, maybe?” I looked up at him. I don’t know what he must have seen in my eyes, what expression I wore. He said, “No strings! No strings! Just, you know, coffee and whatever, you know.” He motioned toward a diner across the street. I closed my eyes in resignation. There are many ways to be homeless, each with its own unique humiliation. I had lived that way long enough to know that for every gift there was a price, some worse than others, some given freely, others taken by force. I had also learned that those who live with hands outstretched did not have the luxury to choose the method of payment or the amount. And, I couldn’t remember the last time I had eaten. I followed him.

But Paul had been different from the others. He had never asked about my past, how I came to be where I was. He never asked why I called myself Scylla or why I did not want to sleep with him. I suppose he thought that I would tell him when I felt
comfortable enough. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust him. He had bought meals for me when I had nothing to eat, looked out for me when no one else would, and when he at last moved out of the dorms and into his own apartment, he gave me a place to stay besides the shelters. And of all those who claimed to aid me when I was in no position to refuse, he was the only one who exacted no dire service of me in recompense. I had no fear of telling him of my life before. But it all seemed very far away.

“Who is she,” he asked.

“Jill,” I said, “My—girlfriend, I guess . . .” I couldn’t call her an “ex” and yet it had been well over two years since we had spoken, since I walked away. Perhaps it had been longer, but I had lost time. Paul breathed hard. Perhaps this conversation should have taken place on a day when rain beat against the windows and darkened the sky, but it was another hot summer day and sunbeams cut across the room between us.

Paul said, “It must have been pretty bad . . . for you to run away, and all.” Perhaps it was. But then, it’s funny how things seem so much worse when one is in the moment and so much smaller the further one gets away. Still it remained something I did not want to think about. Perhaps that is why I did not reply. “Did you have a fight or something?” he said. It was the most direct question he had ever asked about me or my past. It demanded accountability. He deserved it. Yet still I sat silent, with my back pressed into the corner of the sofa, staring at the red light on his machine that blinked in rhythm like a metronome or a timer...one—two—three; one—two—three; one—two—three . . .three sets of three . . . three times . . . then he said, “You don’t have to tell me.” He was looking at me now. Paul had eyes that reminded me of my father’s. They were
calming. I believed that he meant what he said. And perhaps it was that which made me feel it was finally okay to say the things I would not even think about before.
Message 289 of 289

From: jillfalconer@hotmail.com
To: Wendygirl
Subject: Re: school tomorrow

Yeah...I'll bet. Just be there.

**smooches**

Jill

----Original Message Follows----

From: Wendygirl
To: jillfalconer@hotmail.com
Subject: Re: school tomorrow

dear jill,

**smile**
i won't forget. and i will meet you....i wont chicken out on anything this time....i promise.

w.

---Original Message----

From: jillfalconer@hotmail.com
To: Wendygirl
Subject: school tomorrow

Look. Don't forget about tomorrow. I was gonna call you but mom's leaning on me about homework and all. And if you chicken out—so help me. ;)

Luv ya,

Jill
There was no fight the day I walked away.

My mother was in the kitchen, predictably. It was a school day. I came home and told her hello. She was still in her suit from work. It was gray pinstripe. The skirt came below her knees. She was cooking. I don’t remember what. It felt like I was looking at an old photo, watching her that way. Something was about to happen, but she knew nothing about it. My mother was beautiful. But I couldn’t see that then. Her hair hung past her shoulders and gathered the soft light in its waves. She never smiled a lot, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t happy. You could read the history of the world in her eyes. I asked her if she wanted me to help. The sides of her mouth pulled slightly upwards. She said no, but that she would be done soon. I went to my room to change. My father was in the living room. I saw him as I passed. “Hey there Blue,” he said. It was a nickname he had given me when I was four years old, during a phase in which I insisted on wearing only clothes of that color. He was beautiful, too. He made objects dance around his fingers when he talked. Glasses made his eyes look smaller than they really were.

“Hey dad,” I said.

He scratched his thinning hair and glanced at me from behind his glasses. He was rummaging for something in his briefcase. He said, “Did you ask mom if she needed any help?”

I said, “Yes, she said no….”

He chuckled. “She threw me out, too. Just wait ‘til it’s my turn to cook.” I smiled at him, then went to my room. It was just what you might imagine a little girl’s room to be, only this little girl was sixteen: stuffed animals and lacy throw pillows, a
pristine white bedspread, a Mariah Carey poster on the wall—not because I cared much for her music, mind you, but that’s what everyone thought. Everyone except Jill. But I’m getting ahead of myself. I went to my room and sat on the bed. I kicked off the saddle shoes. She was all I could see as I sat there, pressing the pleats of my plaid skirt against my knee with my index finger and thumb.

I remembered the first time I noticed her. Seeing Jill sitting in student desks, finding myself staring too often at the place where the olive skin of her thighs disappeared into darkness beneath the plaid folds of her skirt, provided me with the my first certainty that I was going to hell. Jill was a lanky girl. The stretch of her legs had a way of making the Catholic school skirts look way too short. She wore her black hair in a cheerleader French braid most days. I don’t know how many days she watched me stealing glances at her legs during class, how many times she noticed my gaze pause at that strained third button of her blouse. But then, one day she followed my eyes with hers until suddenly I saw her. In that moment I knew she knew everything and I turned away, embarrassed. She laughed at me. There was a lot I didn’t understand. She taught me. For more than a year we played at being best friends. Typical girl activities let us touch each other in view of our parents and the sisters. I ran my fingers through her hair to braid it. She gave me manicures I didn’t need to hold my hand. Later she taught me to come quietly behind closed bedroom doors and was always ready to laugh just loudly enough at some imagined joke whenever her dexterity got the better of me. Jill would say, “You’re going to get us caught one day.” Yet she never hesitated to push me closer to the edge of my control despite my breathless whispers for her to stop, even when the sounds of
parental footsteps ventured near. During one frighteningly close call, she pressed one hand over my mouth and continued to compel me with the other, while calmly reassuring her mother through her darkened door that we had indeed finished our weekend’s homework and would definitely awaken in time make it to the school carnival fundraiser. I’d have told her how upset I was with her, but before I regained myself, she was kissing my anger away.
Wendygirl

New Mail--

Unread

Message 1 of 47

From: jillfalconer@hotmail.com
To: Wendygirl
Subject: today

Wendy,

I know it looks like things are gonna be bad, but it's not so bad that we can't handle it. We'll just stick together. Don't freak. It's probably just gonna blow over. You don't have to admit to anything. I'll handle it. If your parents ask, just tell them we were playing around. Well—I know you won't. Just don't say anything until I call you. I'll handle my parents then I'll call and we can handle yours. Just hold tight until I call. It'll be okay.

Love,

Jill
Jill would not be able to kiss this away. I don’t know whose fault it was that Sister Catherine saw what she did that day—that made her say to Jill and me, “Either you explain yourselves to your parents and have them meet with me first thing tomorrow, or I will call and tell them myself.” We struggled ridiculously to button and zip ourselves as if the speed at which we dressed might erase what had happened. I don’t know whose idea it was to sneak into the book room or how we went so far so fast. It seems silly now, to think of it, even amusing. Times being what they are, one might think—but, no. At this Catholic girls academy we had never known tolerance. The school stood proudly against the liberal tides of the secular world. The nuns and priests who taught us were the same ones who delivered the sacrament to our prayerful lips on Sunday. There would be no easy escape from this. And, my parents—if Jill had been a boy, they would have been mortified, but this would tear them almost to the core of their beliefs. It would show, more than anything else ever had, more than the color of my skin, or the curls in my hair, what had been clear to the rest of the world and to me from the very beginning: I was not their child. They were never anything less than loving. But I could see it in the eyes of strangers before I even knew a word for race or for adoption. I could see it in the number of times they had to say, even to family, “Yes, she is our daughter.”

“No matter what anyone or anything else says, you are our daughter.”

How they lied for me. But, I knew it wasn’t true. I was the child of two people who didn’t want their children. Or perhaps they had children, but this one…this one…they knew before anyone else what everyone would see. They saw sin and put it behind them. One day, in elementary school, I told some kids on the playground that I
was adopted. Cindy Preston said, “Adopted kids go crazy when they grow up and kill their parents.”

I didn’t know how to tell my parents. I changed clothes, leaving my button-down oxford and plaid skirt on the bed, and put on jeans, a sweater, and sneakers. I came downstairs. My father had managed to get my mother to let him help with dinner. They were both in the kitchen. My father was tossing a salad. Mother always liked to have salad with dinner and it was about the only thing that she would let anyone else prepare when it was her turn to cook. She said, “Ready to eat? I’m almost done. Just browning the rolls.” She had made baked chicken breasts in some kind of sauce, asparagus, which she loved, and scalloped potatoes. I watched them together. They looked like a family by themselves. Dad bumped her playfully as she passed by on the way to put the vegetables on the table. She laughed. I felt numb, like I was watching a movie, as if I weren’t even there.

I said, “I’ll be right back.” I walked toward the door, but my mother stopped me. She asked where I was going. I told her I felt a little hot and I wanted to get some air.

She gently placed her palm on my forehead and then on my cheek. I almost cried when she touched me. “You don’t have a fever,” she said, “Are you feeling ok?” I assured her that I was fine. I was just going for a short walk. I’d be right back. Then I walked away.

I really thought I would be right back. I just wanted to walk the tears away, to walk into a way of saying what I needed to say. But, I never saw it, and I just kept walking. Soon the sun was down. I looked back. I couldn’t see my home anymore. I
couldn’t see where I had come from. It had been a myth, anyway. It hadn’t been real. I thought about Jill. I wondered what she was saying to her mother. I looked behind me. I couldn’t see a way back. So I walked to the highway and then south. When I walked away, I took nothing with me but the knowledge that every highway eventually meets another and that sometimes you can imagine an argument in your mind and know the outcome. The highway was remarkable in its barrenness: two cars, and a pickup, an 18-wheeler, horizon, sky, blacktop and white lines that stretched into the distance. I didn’t try to flag down cars. I didn’t want to hitchhike. I walked in darkness with a direction but not a destination. It did not seem long before the night reached its blackest and I was tired. I had left the security of city lights. The sky looked cluttered with stars. They were like salt crystals sprinkled on a dark veil. I stepped off the road to the edge of a large field and looked up at them. I lifted my hand and traced the constellations I could remember with my finger—Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Cassiopeia, Andromeda, Draco, Phoenix. So many stars—they almost seemed to be moving . . . and I felt as if I were drifting backward. And then my eyes were closed.
Message 4 of 47

From: jillfalconer@hotmail.com
To: Wendygirl
Subject: Ok to come home

Wendy,

I hope you’re getting this. I just wanted you to know that it’s okay if you come home. Your mom called and told us you were gone. I assume you’re just hiding out somewhere so I know you could get to the library or something to check your mail. It’s gonna be okay. The conference wasn’t so bad. It was, kind of. But the point is it’s over now. And your dad and your mom are pretty understanding. More than mine, anyway. So you could come home. You’re gonna drive me crazy if you don’t. At least call.

I love you, Wendy. It’s gonna be ok. I’ll make sure.

Jill
I was awakened by the sun, white morning light, and a breeze that chilled the dew on my skin. I imagine I could not be seen from the highway. The ground sloped down and away from the shoulder of the road. There was grass beneath my hands and in my hair. I was curled up on the ground just as if I had slept in my bed. I turned a blade of grass between my fingers and for a moment I wanted to be there…I wanted to be home in my bed, waiting for the smell of coffee to waft upstairs, waiting for my mother’s voice to call to me . . . my mother . . . now it would be all the worse, now that I had caused such a stir, such a worry. I could not go back. I could hear the cars on the road as they passed, feel the vibrations of the tires on the pavement. I lay there for a long time. When I rose, traffic was quite heavy. Strange, but at that time I did not think about whether someone would be after me, whether my parents might have sent the police. I walked oblivious to everything except the flow if the traffic and the direction of the road, and because of that, I guess, I walked unnoticed.

By midday, the traffic had slowed. The sun was high in the sky but it did not warm me. I noticed the cold for the first time since I left home. Instinctively, I folded my arms and held my head down. That is probably why I did not right away notice the car that slowed to a crawl beside me and the three women inside, one of whom was waving with her arm out the window. “Hey! Need some help?” I turned startled. “You got car trouble or something?” The woman was older, my mother’s age, I guessed. Her hair was light brown and teased into that style Jill used to call “Texas big hair”. The woman next to her in the driver’s seat smiled out the window. She looked just like the first woman, except that her hair was reddish, and not as long. The woman behind her
in the back seat was not smiling. In fact, she glared at me in a way I did not yet understand. She said something softly to the woman in the driver’s seat who dismissed her with a wave of the hand. The driver said to me, “Do you need a ride, hon?” I nodded. “Alright, hop on in,” she said and unlocked the doors. The car was one of those luxury models, beige with a tan leather interior. Inside, the car was warm and smelled like the inside of a purse—perfume and fine leather, lipstick and finishing powder. I sank into the seat and shut the door. The woman in the seat next to me gave me an uncomfortable glance. The driver pulled the car back onto the highway. “We’re just going right up here to the outlet mall. It’s just about 15 miles up the road, but you can use a phone there.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“What’s your name, hon?” she asked.

I hesitated. “Scylla,” I said.

“Scylla?” the driver said.

“Her name is not Scylla,” the woman next to me said sharply, “She’s making that up so we don’t have anything to tell the police after—”

“Oh shut-up, Lori.” The woman in front of me interrupted her and turned to face me. “My name is Jen and this,” she indicated the driver, “is Carol. And that, back there with you, is Doomsday.”

“Sure. Laugh later when ‘Scylla’ here has our wallets,” Lori said.

I said, “I don't steal,” and I looked at her. If Jill had been here, she would have said something witty, something to break the tension. If Jill had come with me, I would
not have to look into the acutely strained angles of this woman's face.

Carol said, “Of course you don't, honey.” I turned away from Lori and watched the prairie speed by changlessly outside the window. There was not a landmark to be seen. I thought, for all I had walked--for all I thought I had walked, I may not have gone anywhere at all. There was silence except for the radio, set on low, playing a slow ballad--a song about woman who had lost the man she loved.

I said, “Thank you for the ride.”

Jen said, “No problem,” and looked back to shoot a glare at Lori.

Lori said, “Hmph!”

Carol looked at Lori briefly in her rear view mirror then adjusted it so that she could see me. Her eyes seemed to be smiling. I tried not to look at her. She said, “So . . . Scylla . . . did you have car trouble back there?”

“I didn't see any cars along the road,” Lori said.

I said, “I don't have a car.”

There was a pause, then Carol said, “Oh no--you’re not telling me someone left you out here?” Jen let out a gasp.

I said, “No . . .” I kept my face toward the window. Even though the ground sped by, the sky hardly seemed to move. I watched the clouds in an ice blue sky, they way they kept their distance from the flat plains horizon.

“Then how . . .” Carol said, “You walked all this way?”

Jen started, “Oh my god, Carol, she's a runaway.” Suddenly they began talking at once. I did not know what they were saying. I kept my eyes looking out. My breath
fogged the window.

“Scylla!” Carol said. I turned to face her eyes as they watched me from the rear view mirror. “How old are you, honey? Sixteen?”

I said, “And a half . . .” softly and without thinking. Immediately, I felt childish and embarrassed. A crinkle formed in the corners of Carol's eyes.

She said, 'Those halves are important, aren't they?’” Jen laughed with her. Lori said nothing, but pursed her lips and so I tried not to look in her direction at all. Then, Jen turned around to face me. She was smiling.

“What are you running away from, Scylla,” she said, “you in some kind of trouble?”

Lori said, “Trouble with the police,” and shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

Suddenly, I found a voice. “No I'm not! I didn’t do anything--” but of course . . .I had done everything wrong, and I cut myself short. Jen examined my expression.

“Lori!” Carol said, “How about a little compassion? She might have problems at home. Abuse--who knows what? You don't have to tell us, hon.”

Jen peered at me. “Hey . . . this isn't about a boy, is it?” I looked at her. She was being so nice, so understanding . . . I wanted to say something. But, why couldn't it have been about a boy? Why did I have to be this way? Why did I have to do this to my mother and my father? Why did I have to hurt them? And why couldn't I have Jill? Why did that have to be so wrong? Why couldn't she be here with me now . . . making this all go away? She could make it go away. Despite all I tried, tears welled in my eyes and I turned back toward the window. “Oh-h-h,” Jen said. She turned back around in her seat.
“Carol . . .” she said.

I heard Carol say, “Hmmm.” I did not turn toward them again. I stared unblinkingly out the window, trying hard not to let a tear fall. She said, “Well . . . I had my first boyfriend when I was sixteen. Not my first, but my first real boyfriend . . . if you know what I mean, and I think you do.”

Jen said, “Hey, you mean Bruce wasn't your first? Ha ha!”

Carol laughed. “Shut up Jen! No . . . really. His name was Steven Russell. He was so cute. He was a senior. He was eighteen. He had long light brown hair--just to his shoulders, but my mom was mortified! He wasn't in sports, but he wasn't nerdy, either. He was just a regular guy. But I really liked him. We went together for six months . . . and you know . . . that's forever when you're in high school . . . isn't it Scylla? Anyway, we had gone out one day. It was a Saturday night. We had just done all the usual hanging out kinds of things. We ate somewhere and we had to sneak into this club to go dancing because I wouldn't have been able to get in. You know, I always thought I'd remember everything about that night--every single thing--but now I can't even remember the name of that place. Anyway, after that, we were in his car and he had gotten some beer--I don't know from where--so we were drinking. And everything was so perfect, you know? You could see all the stars. So things started to get romantic. And we were kissing and going on, and finally things got to that point--you know?

“Now, all along, all my friends had been teasing me about being the oldest living virgin because I was the last one--I mean, in my group of friends. But it turned out that wasn't even true, because I found out later that a couple of them hadn't done it either. But
they were all teasing me about it. Especially Francine--you know Francine, don't you Jen? So anyway, Steven asked me if I wanted to do it. He told me that he loved me and that he never wanted to hurt me--you know, all the usual lines. But he meant it. He was really trying to be sweet. So I said yes. I was kind of scared, you know, but it wasn't that bad. And I was really excited about it until later on. You see, we didn't use any protection. And so a couple of days later, I started thinking I might be pregnant. I was so worried; I didn't know what to do. I thought I was going to have to tell my mom and that she was going to kick me out or make me get an abortion. For days and days I was just out of my mind. I was thinking of running away--I was really out of it. My best friend at the time was Tracy Overland. I finally told her about it and she went with me to one of those free clinics to get a pregnancy test. I have never been so scared in my life. You can't imagine how relieved I was when it turned out negative. And I never told my mom about that until years and years later.

“OK. Here's the funny part. Scylla, do you know what my mom said when I told her? She said, 'I wouldn't have thrown you out! I might have been mad, but we would have just worked through it. I can't believe you didn't let me help you.' So I went through all that stress and anxiety for nothing. She wouldn't have been nearly as upset as I thought she would have been.” Carol paused and I could feel her eyes looking at me from the mirror. I looked down at my hands. She said, “It probably would have been a lot easier if I had just told her . . . And as for Steven: we didn't break up then, but we couldn't have stayed together anyway because he had to go to college the next fall. We tried to keep it together, but I was still in high school and it just didn’t work out. A lot of
the things that happen to you in high school, Scylla, well . . . they just pass. And they're not always as bad as it feels like they are.” Carol paused again. I said nothing. “You know, I have two kids now. And I know if one of my daughters had a problem like that, I think I would be able to help her because I have already been through a lot of situations like the ones they're having now. Do you see what I mean, Scylla?”

I said, “I understand.” My voice sounded very small to me, very far away. I thought about what she said, but this was so different. I could not imagine that it would work out the same way for me. Jen said something softly to Carol and she responded, but I could not hear what they were saying. I watched out the window until I could see the flags of the outlet mall in the distance. Carol took the next exit.

Jen said, “Whooeee! There it is! I am gonna do some shopping today!”

Carol laughed. “You're lucky Ken doesn’t care how much you spend.”

Jen said, “He'd better not. I make more than he does!”

Carol laughed again and glanced at me through the mirror. “Real estate,” she said, indicating Jen. “When you get ready to buy a house, she's the woman to call!” Soon the car was pulling in to the mall parking lot. She parked in space near a bank of pay phones. There was a clothing shop on one side of it and a fast food restaurant on the other. They got out of the car and I followed. I looked around. There seemed to be hundreds of shops just on the outside of this mall and there had to be more inside. It was huge. I imagined that for this small town it must have been the main source of revenue. Jen called to me. She was standing on the sidewalk next to the phones. When I approached her, she took my hand and pressed into it a twenty-dollar bill. I tried to
refuse but she wouldn't hear of it.

She said, “Listen honey, I don't know what you planned to do. But I want you to take this money into that sub shop over there, get you something to eat. Then take the change right over here to this phone and you call your folks. Then you stay right here by the car until we get back, and we'll take you home. Okay? Actually, it's kind of early. You may have to shop with us for a little while, but then we'll take you home. We'll come back and check for you in a little while. But we're definitely leaving at five o'clock. So if you're not here when we get here, we're gonna have to go. Understand?”

I said, “Yes, I understand.”

Carol said, “We're just going to be in and out of these shops.” She pointed. They turned to go. I looked at the money in my hand. Then I heard Lori's voice. She had fallen behind them a few steps and turned toward me.

“Listen kid,” she said, “If you're really a runaway and you need a ride home, I don't have any problem with it.”

“Thank you,” I said, stunned.

Carol laughed. “Whoa! Alert the media! Lori's got a heart!”

Lori joined them. “Shut up,” she said, and then they were gone. I looked at the phones. It would be so easy to call . . . but I did not think it would be easy to speak. I took Jen's advice and went to the sub shop. I did not realize I was so hungry. After eating, I sat in the shop for a long time, trying to get up enough nerve to call home. But the more I thought about it, the more daunting it seemed. Anytime before, when explaining had to be done, if we had stayed out too late or had almost been caught together, Jill had done
the talking. She always knew exactly what to say. I thought, maybe if I called her--maybe she could teach me what to say. Maybe she could say it for me. I left the restaurant and dialed Jill's number on the pay phone. I inserted the requisite coins at the operator's request and then the phone began to ring. I did not know if she would be at home. School was not out, but I thought perhaps, with the trouble, her parents might have kept her at home. ... Or maybe we had been suspended. I listened to the reflected sound of people laughing and talking as they walked past and the sound of cars searching for parking in the space between each ring. I began to think that no one would answer. But then, someone did. It was her father. “Hello,” he said.

I was startled, but began, “Mr. Falconer . . .”

“You!” he said loudly, “You keep your god-damned hands off my daughter!” I could hear Jill shouting frantically in the background. I could hear her mother. I dropped the phone and stepped back almost involuntarily. It was hard to breathe. My stomach burned. I noticed my hands shaking. I could hear their tiny voices, yelling through the receiver. And I felt afraid. But they were far away. I backed away from the phone, away from that shrill noise. The operator would terminate the call. I walked away from the mall, past the car that had brought me there . . . Carol’s car. I touched it as I passed. The further I walked the safer I felt. And before long, I was on the highway again.

This time I walked along the incline of the ditch on the side of the road so as not to be noticed, although, there were times when the ground was too wet and I had to step onto the shoulder, and often the ground was level with the street anyway. My mother's words about accepting rides from strangers and winding up in ditch rang in my ears and it
made me laugh to think that I had somehow managed to do both of those things in one day—though not quite in the manner she suggested. I walked steadily and without stopping. Before long, it was night. I thought I could walk all night, but I became tired and my pace slowed. Passing cars were few at this hour, and in this area the road was unlit. This would be the second night I was able to see the stars. I came upon a guardrail where the highway became a small overpass, and I sat in the grass there, leaning on one of the posts and watched the night sky until I fell asleep.

Morning came with a new flow of cars and trucks. I looked up into a cloudless blue where before there had been stars. It looked so big at night and the stars seemed so close—I imagined I could feel safe beneath it. But this sky was distant and cold. It made me think of moving. That sense of urgency alone pushed me. I still had no destination. But I kept thinking that there would come a point at which I would know it was time to stop . . . time to go home. And so I walked though my muscles ached and my feet were sore because I knew one of those steps would show me what I needed to see. I concentrated on every step, trying to see if one of them felt more right than the one before. I couldn't say what time of day it was when I noticed my pace had slowed almost to stopping and nothing felt right . . . nothing. I became suddenly and intensely aware of everything around me. The cars were passing too close to me, the gravel on the shoulder of the road too rough beneath my feet. The air was too sharply tinged with the scent of exhaust, and whatever lay ahead was too far away. I spun around to face the direction from which I came and looked down the highway to where it disappeared on the horizon. In that moment I lost my breath. My stomach burned.
I don't know how long I stood there, looking into the oncoming traffic--past this rural area's conception of rush hour, past the moment in dusk when drivers turn on their headlights. The sun had not yet set; the orange glow of its struggle with the darkness was still visible. I could not yet see the stars. An approaching car was driving way too slowly. It pulled onto the narrow shoulder and stopped just in front of me. A man stepped out and walked toward me. He was taller than I was, but then, a lot of people are taller than I am. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his dark jacket. He said, “Hey--you looking for a ride?”

“I . . . Umm . . .”

He said, “It's getting kinda cold. Aren't you cold?”

“Umm . . .yes . . .” I said.

“Come on.” He started toward the car but for some reason I did not move and he turned to me again. “Come on,” he said, “I'm not gonna bite you!” I walked to his car. He opened the door for me. It was a two door sporty model. It could have been black or blue. I couldn't tell in the low light. I sat in the deep bucket seat and the thought crossed my mind that I should go home. I needed to be at home. He locked and closed the door. The door locked with one of those little pegs that disappear completely into a hole on the side. I looked for the button to unlock it, but I didn't see it in the dark. He got in on the other side. Before he pulled back onto the highway, he said, “Fasten your seatbelt,” and smiled. Here again the highway was unlit and when darkness fell completely, there was nothing to see outside but the stars and his headlights. He told me his name was Allan. I gave him my name. “Scylla, huh. Is that some myth thing or something? Sounds like
something from high school lit class.”

“Yes,” I said, “It’s a myth.”

He said, “I thought so. I was pretty good in lit class.” He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. “Mind if I smoke?” he said. I shook my head. Allan lit one then offered me the pack.

“No, thank you,” I said, “I don’t smoke.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. He took a long drag. “So,” he said, letting the smoke trickle from between his lips when he spoke, “where you headed?”

I hesitated. “Just to the next town,” I said, not knowing what the next town was anymore, but I did not know what else to say.

“Got folks there? Someone expecting you?” Allan asked.

I said, “I have a friend there.”

“That’s cool.” Allan maneuvered into the passing lane to avoid a slow driver.

“Boyfriend?” he said.

I said, “No.”

“But you got one waiting for you at home, right?”

“No,” I said.

“No boyfriend?” he said, “You’re too pretty not to have a boyfriend.” I said nothing. Allan looked at me peculiarly, I thought. But it was hard to tell. It was very dark and I could hardly see his face in the dashboard light. We rode in silence for a bit. He opened the window to let some of the smoke escape. I looked out of the window at the stars. He said, “Must be pretty hard being on the road alone like that out in the
middle of nowhere.”

“Umm . . .” I hesitated. “My car broke down.”

Allan said, “Is that so . . .” He grinned. “I'm on my way to Oklahoma City. Friend got me a job lined up there. I was out of work for three months. I got laid off. Finally I called my buddy and he sets it up. Damn lucky. And it's not bad money either.” He lit another cigarette and took a leisurely drag. “I'd put on some music, but the damn radio's broken,” he said.

I said, “That's okay.” We rode further into the night. The exit for the next town passed before I noticed it. But, it didn't really matter, I thought.

Allan said, “You know, if you don't think your 'friend' will miss you, you should ride with me to Oklahoma City. I'll be making big money when I get there. You could find something easy, I'll bet.” There was another silence. He tossed the cigarette butt out of the window. “Sucks traveling alone.”

“Yes . . .” I said. The ride lengthened and I began to feel more comfortable.

Allan said, “You can sleep if you want.”

“Thanks,” I said. But, as tired as I was, I couldn't close my eyes. I felt slightly anxious for some reason. I thought I was being paranoid, that perhaps the lack of food and the unsettled sleep in the last few days was magnifying horror stories in my head. There were times I thought that Allan was looking at me when my head was turned, and I turned toward him only to find him watching the road. It made me feel silly and ashamed, after all, he had been nothing but kind to pick up a stranger from the road who had nothing to offer in return.
It was close to four in the morning, I guess, when he turned toward me and said,

“Not sleeping yet?”

I smiled and said, “No. Sometimes it’s hard for me to fall asleep in the car.”

Allan said, “I could pull over for a while if you want.”

I said, “That's okay. I’ll be fine. I guess I wasn’t really that sleepy.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. Allan took another cigarette from the pack but it slipped through his fingers and fell onto the floor. “Damn,” he said, “Lemme pull over for just a sec so I can find that.” I found it a bit odd that it concerned him so; it was not the last one. But I said nothing. Perhaps he was creating an excuse so that I would sleep. The car slowed to a stop on the shoulder and Allan turned off the ignition and turned on the overhead light. It was small and did not offer much light. He unfastened his seatbelt and rose up a bit in his seat as if to look for the cigarette. He said, “Do you see it?” I unfastened my seatbelt and leaned forward, looking toward the floor. Suddenly, he turned and in seconds he was on me, pressing his face to mine, covering my mouth with his--roughly, probing, suffocating--pushing my head and body backwards into the seat, leaning his body into mine, pinning me. He reached beside the chair and pulled the release latch letting him fall forwards onto me. I tried to push him away, but my left arm was caught beneath him and though I tried with my right, I couldn't budge him. Once the seat was back, he readjusted his weight on top of me, pinning my legs beneath his.

“Wait--no . . .What are you doing?” I pushed at him, tried to free my other arm. He looked at me, put a hand through my hair. I said, “You don't understand. I don't want this.”
“What,” He said. His other hand slid under my sweater. He pushed up my bra and roughly grabbed my breast. I kept trying with my one free hand to stop him, but I was too weak. A panicked cry escaped me. He laughed. “What's the matter, baby? This isn't what you were standing out there waiting for?”

“No!”

“Yeah?” Allen said, “What then?” His hands moved down and he unfastened my jeans, pressing his weight harder onto me, holding me down. I struggled frantically but it was of no use and shortly he had pulled my jeans and underwear down and was unzipping himself. Over and over again I said “no” but Allan seemed not to hear. He lifted his weight from me slightly for just a moment, trying to slide my pants down further and I tried to break free of him. I pushed and hit him, trying to free my left arm, but he ignored me. He pushed my jeans past my knees, then caught my right arm, gripping it tight. “Just calm down,” he said. I begged him to stop. He said, “I 'm not gonna hurt you.” In a panic, I kept repeating the word “no”. He used his knees to push mine apart. I could feel him hard against me.

“Please . . .please stop . . .”

Allan's eyes looked somewhere beyond me. He grabbed my hair hard, pulling my head back. Then I felt the pain--so swift, so intense--as if I was being ripped apart, he plunged into me. And I heard my scream from deep within wave after wave and in that moment the thought came to me . . .that maybe this was my penance, God's punishment for what I had done, for who I believed myself to be against his will. And in that moment, for me, everything stopped. Though I watched the ceiling of the car rock back and forth
for I do not know how long, and I was bathed in pain, everything stopped. And when he
let go of my arm to push up my sweater, it fell limp beside me, and when he lifted his
weight from me to catch his breath before having another go, and another, I could not . . .
did not move.

By the time Allan found the cigarette he had dropped, by the time he had finished
smoking it, light was creeping into the sky. I had not moved. My head was turned toward
the door and I lay there, exposed. He touched my face and I flinched. “Wake up,” he said,
“Come on.” I turned my head to look at the ceiling. It was still. “Ready to go?” he said,
“Come on, sit up.” He reached across me to let the seat up and I started to tremble. I
couldn't breathe. He did not notice. He started the car and watched for an opening in the
now busier traffic. He was about to pull out, but turned to me first. “Fasten your seatb--”
he started. Then, “Hey--fix your clothes. Pull your pants up!” I tried to do as he said, but
my hands were shaking, making everything difficult. He put the car back in park,
unfastened his seatbelt and leaned toward me. I began to shake even more and a tear fell
down my cheek. Allan said, “Hey--hold on . . . it's okay.” He pulled my sweater back
down, zipped and buttoned my jeans. Then he noticed that my bra was still out of place,
bunched under my sweater on my upper chest. He said, “Uh . . . that's not how that goes,
is it. You want me to--?” I just looked at him. He looked back at me hesitantly. “Uhh . . .”
then he reached gently under my sweater and carefully repositioned my bra. He neatened
the sweater, looked at me, and smiled. “That better? I'll bet that's better.” He reached
across me again and fastened the seatbelt. He saw my hands still shaking in my lap,
reached for them, but stopped. “Well,” he said, “You just need some quiet time, don't
you.” He pulled back onto the highway. “Yeah, that was your first time, wasn't it? I could
tell. It’s okay to cry if you want to. A lot of girls cry on their first time.”

I felt nauseated.

I looked out of the window. The world outside sped by. Something inside me
cried, “Get out”. I reached for the door handle and pulled it. The door was locked. I
kept pulling the handle, pushing against the door. Allan said, “Hey! Cut that out! You're
gonna fall out of the car!”

“Let me out,” I said.

“What?”

“Let me out,” I said, pulling on the handle.

“Wait a second, now.”

“Let me out.”

“Okay, just a second!”

“Let me out.”

“Okay!” Allan pulled over onto the shoulder, shut off the car and unlocked the
door. I got out of the car and staggered into the field on the side of the road. Allan
followed me. “Hey! Wait up!” I had not gone very far before I fell to my knees and
began to vomit. But I had not eaten in more than a day. My stomach was empty and very
little came up, but the pain went through me. Allan came to me and took me by the arm.
He helped me to stand, but I broke away from him. I tried to run, but was dizzy after just
a few steps. Allan caught me in time to keep me from hitting the ground, and took me
back to the car.
Allan was talking to me. He told me again to fasten the seatbelt. I did as he said. He pulled the car back onto the highway. My stomach burned and I could not hear anything he said. At times he seemed angry, at times, concerned. I watched the horizon line. I did not answer him. In the end, he stopped speaking. I do not know how long we rode in silence. There was a part of me that still wanted to escape, but another part of me knew that it didn't matter anymore. I could not go home now, and I did not see how I could get away from Allan. If he were to let me out of the car again, if I were to run, where would I go? And then, I thought, maybe he was right about me. I had never had sex with a man before. Maybe by standing there in need of a ride, I had been asking for this. Maybe this was something that straight girls understood. He began to talk about Oklahoma City again and I listened. I almost considered it a possibility. Before long, I had to go to the bathroom and I told him so. He said that he knew of a rest stop not too far away, that I could go there. The stop was a fairly large picnic area with many tables, water fountains, and restrooms housed in little brick buildings. There were a few large trucks there already when Allan pulled into the long drive that led away from the highway. He said, "Look now--don't go running off. You don't want one of these guys getting hold of you." He indicated two truck drivers who were standing and talking beside one of the tables. He brought the car to a stop next to the bathroom. It looked like a tiny house in the middle of nowhere. There was a men's entrance to the left and a women's entrance to the right. In front stood a row of water fountains. Allan said, "Don't be too long, now. I don't want to have to come in there after you." He smiled when he said it, and took out a cigarette.
I said, “I understand.” I got out and walked away from the car. Every step seemed a comfort for the distance it put between Allan and me. But still, I was not feeling anything, not thinking, not understanding. I walked all the way to the back of the restroom to the furthest stall from the entrance and shut the door behind me. The walls were an industrial gray. The lock barely worked. But, it was clean. It would not have phased me if it had not been. Nothing did until the moment I saw that tiny stain of blood in my underwear, and sitting there half exposed, all of the panic returned. An ache in my eyes and in my chest sank to my stomach when I failed to cry, and I could feel all of the soreness Allan had left in my body. I pulled up my jeans, but I knew I could not go back out there to him. I could not even bring myself to leave the stall. I sat on the floor in the corner, pressed between the toilet bowl and the wall, as far back as I could go, not that there was much room there, and pulled my knees to my chest. I do not know how long I sat that way. Once, I heard Allan call to me. I heard him tell me to hurry. But I did not move. I still had no plan of escape. I could not even imagine how it might be done. After some time, I heard footsteps coming into the restroom. They were quiet. I heard the door of the first stall open, then close. The footsteps neared. Then I heard the second stall door open. “Tsk,” I heard. The stall door closed. I could not watch the space beneath the door. I did not want to see his boots matching the step that I heard. I turned my face to the wall. The footsteps neared. I heard the door open, saw the light change on the wall. My chest tightened and I could not breathe again. I thought, but could not say, “Please God . . . no.” And then, I heard the voice, but it was not Allan.

“Good heavens, child. Are you alright?” she said. I turned quickly. The woman
was older, perhaps in her fifties. I gasped, then suddenly could not catch my breath. She said, “What's wrong? Are you sick? Did you hurt yourself?” I shook my head. “Do you need me to get your boyfriend? He was waiting outside when I came in.” Vigorously, I shook my head again. She said, “It's alright if he comes in here. I'll watch the door.”

“No, please . . .”

She crouched close to me, concerned. “Well, come on, now. You can't stay in here like this. Let me help you get up.” She took my hands in hers and began to pull but I pulled back.

“No, please,” I said, “Please don't. I can't go out there. He--” But, I couldn't say the words.

A strange look crossed the woman's face. She was silent for a moment. Then she said somberly, “Do you need me to call the police?” I didn't know what to say. If I told her yes, would they send me home where I would have to finally say to my mother that it was true what Sister Catherine had probably told her and my father. And Allan--would I have to face him, too, another day. And wouldn't they say this is what girls like you get for your arrogance--this is what girls like you deserve. She said, “If you want, I can make sure he's gone. Is that what you want?” I nodded. She stood and walked toward the door, then stopped and turned to me again. “Are you sure that's what you want?”

I nodded. “Yes, I am sure.” She left. There was silence for a while, then I could hear voices outside. I could hear Allan. His voice was at first questioning, later angry. A few moments later I heard the door of his car slam. Then the engine started and the sound of it grew fainter and fainter until I could not hear it any longer. Thinking that he was
gone lifted something from me. I got up from the floor and went to peek out of the restroom door.

Just at that moment, the woman came back in. I was startled, but she laughed.

“It's alright. He's long gone now.”

“How did you...” I began.

She said, “I had some help, to tell you the truth. But—first things first. You wait right here. You know, you had the only clean stall in here!” She went into the stall I had been in and shut the door.

I went to the sink, splashed some water on my face, and dried it with a rough paper towel. When I looked in the mirror, I hardly saw myself. I saw curly disheveled hair. I saw lips that were a little too full. I saw skin that looked more dirtied than darkened. I looked terrible, I thought. There was still grass in my hair from the day before. The curls were painfully tangled. I began to work through them with my fingers, trying to restore some sense of order. Then suddenly I saw myself. I thought, what am I doing. The woman came out of the stall and washed her hands in the sink next to me. She smiled at me. I took a deep breath. “Thank you for helping me,” I said.

“Oh, no problem” she said. She washed her hands briskly, like a hospital worker, and dried them.

“No . . . really” I said, “I know you had no reason to believe--”

She cut me off. “I have all the reason in the world. Right here.” She touched my face. I flinched unconsciously, but her hand was steady and warm. “That look you had on your face--I'd know that look a mile away.” I was confused and must have looked so. “I
used to work in a women’s center, in the clinic. I saw that look more times than I’d care to remember.” I did not understand why, but I suddenly felt embarrassed. She smiled. “Now, we need to get you someplace safe. Come on.” She started toward the door, turning to motion me forward when I did not immediately follow. She led me outside to a bench where a rather large man was seated. He looked perplexed as his eyes moved from her to me and back again.

He said, “So, do I get to find out what that was all about or is this one of them woman things?”

I thought that he was upset, but she just chuckled. “Oh you hush!”

He smiled. “Just kidding,” he said.

She turned to me. “This is my husband, Ranse. He's the one who chased off your boyfriend.”

Ranse stood, and offered his hand. He was so tall I felt as if I had shrunk. I could see that Allan would easily been intimidated by him. “Ranse Fielding,” he said, smiling. “Funny name, huh? It’s short for Ransom.” I shook his hand wordlessly.

She said, “What's your name, hon? I'm Liz.”

I said, “Scylla.”

Liz raised an eyebrow. Ranse just grinned and said, “Well, there you go!” He looked at his watch. “So, what's the plan, ladies?” I looked around. I could see the cars passing on the highway, no signs of town in the visible distance, no other buildings, just trees and road.

“How far are you from home, Scylla?” Liz said. I did not know. I couldn’t tell
how far I had gone. My family had never vacationed this way by car. The names of the
towns had all been unfamiliar. I noticed no landmarks I could identify. I shrugged
uncomfortably. Liz spoke to her husband. “She's gonna need to get to a shelter.”

Ranse said, “Yeah, okay. We've been making some good time. Once we make this
delivery we ought to be able to get her to a police station or--”

“No,” I blurted. Then, “I'm sorry. I don't want to go to the police.”


“That's all right, hon,” she said, “We'll just get you to someplace safe. Okay?”

She smiled warmly, putting a hand on my shoulder and I felt like a loose kite, adrift in
high winds, buffeted by a downdraft into her waiting hand. Where else could I have
gone?

Their truck seemed immeasurably huge to me. The cab seemed much larger than
average, and Liz explained to me that inside there was a bed and that I should sleep if I
needed to. She showed me where to step, steadied me with her hand at my back as I
climbed in. Once inside and sitting amid their belongings on their bed behind the driver
and passenger seats, I felt immediately wrong for invading this private world that was
their home--their clothes and linens folded neatly in shelves along one of the seatback
walls, a TV, pantry and small refrigerator along the other. Liz climbed in after me. Ranse
was already situated in the driver’s seat. She leaned back toward me before strapping
herself in. “Just you get as much sleep as you need, hon. We’ve got a ways to go and you
look like you need it.” I thanked her and cautiously lay may head on one of their pillows.
I closed my eyes. I heard the click of her seatbelt, felt the engine rumble to life and the
lurch of the truck as it moved forward. With the rocking of the cab, I felt as if I was falling, but I was not afraid, because I could still feel the pillow beneath my head and I was lying on a blanket for the first time in days. And perhaps it was Liz, too, who had caused my fear to leave me. I did not question her kindness. Her voice carried a benevolent undertone that soothed away doubt. She was right that I needed sleep. The previous night had offered little opportunity. I slipped rapidly into a trough of slumber, cresting here and there just enough for their conversation to filter into the space where dreams might have been. Though it seemed futile, part of me still tried to make sense of their words.

. . . some fourteen or fifteen years old. It don’t make sense. . . . Come on, now. She’s gotta be around sixteen at least . . . make this delivery . . . time enough . . . girls like that . . . drugs, could be anything. God knows . . . Yeah, but she don’t look like . . . places she can go . . . Interstate here . . . may have no choice . . . should be close . . . seen too much not to . . . you know . . . oughta call, see if there’s a report at least . . . plenty of time . . . they’ll know what to do . . .

The dark of my sleep was broken by a hand on my arm. I awoke almost in a panic, but then Liz said, “It’s just me, hon.” When I heard her voice and my eyes focused on her form seated at the edge of the bed, a loud sigh escaped me, but I did not remember drawing a breath. Liz said, “You okay?” I nodded. She said, “You’re probably hungry aren’t you? Come on. Let’s get something to eat.” I could see Ranse looking back at us from the driver’s seat.

“All set?” he said, “They make a mean burger here. You eat meat, dontcha? All
the kids these days are going vegetarian.” His demeanor reminded me of my father’s, a feigned brusqueness that melted into kindness with the slightest provocation. I offered him a small smile. He returned it.

The place at which they stopped was a restaurant and gas station just outside of a larger town. I did not know which city it was. There were a few other trucks stopped there and refueling. There were two police cars. I could see the officers seated at one of the tables and I became very frightened that Ranse or Liz would hand me over to them. I hesitated at the door, but Liz gently urged me inside. She selected a booth far from the officers and we sat down. The afternoon sun shined in the window, but the place still looked dimly lit. There was a counter surrounded by convenience store items on the far side of the room. The officers sat toward the back, near the kitchen, with a few other patrons at tables between them and me. I was grateful for that. We sat next to a window, closer to the door. Ranse said that he liked to be able to see the truck from inside when he ate. It was not long before a woman in jeans, a western style button down blouse, and an apron came to the table and asked us in a marked southern accent what we would like to eat. Ranse grinned up at her. “Well, we’re going for the burgers, but . . .” He glanced toward me. “I don’t know—you want to look at the menu?”

There were two folded paper menus against the wall behind the salt and pepper shakers. I shook my head, “No, thank you. I don’t mind a burger.”

“Burgers all around then!” he said.

The waitress winked. “Be just a sec!” she said, and walked away.

The table was oddly silent, as if no one knew quite what to say. Ranse and Liz
had pressed into one side of the booth, leaving me the other. My back was to the entrance
and I looked around nervously every time it opened. There was country music playing
faintly from a radio on the checkout counter. The officers laughed loudly, startling me.
My hands began to tremble and I clasped them hard under the table to get them to stop.
Liz must have noticed my discomfort. She reached across the table with open palms. I
put my hands in hers and she held them, smiling maternally. She said, “You’re going to
be alright.” More than I had ever wanted anything, I wanted to believe her. I hated to let
go of her reassurance when the waitress brought back the food.

The burgers came in little baskets with fries. When we had started eating, Ranse
said, “Good?” I smiled and nodded. He said, “They make the best burgers on this route.
We come here whenever we can—right, babe?”

Liz said, “You bet.” The food was very good, but I ate slowly and at times it was
as if I barely tasted it, bothered by noises around me. My head was throbbing, as if I had
been crying in my sleep. Liz spoke again. “So, Scylla . . . where are you from?” I glanced
up. They were both looking at me expectantly, it seemed. I looked down again into the
half-eaten basket of food in front of me. I cannot say what exactly made it difficult to
speak. Liz said, “You don’t have to tell me, honey.” She paused. “I’m from San
Antonio. Lived there all my life, until I met Ranse here.” She leaned into him lovingly
and he smiled. “Yep. By the time we got together, my boys were grown up and gone. I
was still working at the center. You know. Ranse had this route that was always taking
him through town and he always happened to stop by the same diner where I had lunch.
Finally one day, he works up the nerve to ask if he can sit with me—not that I hadn’t
already seen him giving me the eye, mind you!” She winked. “So, I let him sit with me and we get to talking. Pretty soon, we’re having lunch near once or twice a week. Then one day, he asks if I’ll go out on the road with him. I’ve got to tell you I wasn’t up for it at first. But after I thought about it, you know, I was living alone, kids gone. It was time for a change. I was about to retire anyway—not because of the girls hon,” she hastened to add, “Not that at all. I loved every one of those girls. Did everything I could for every one. But, you know, I was getting old. It was just time. So I thought what the heck! My kids thought I had gone crazy! Mitchell, my oldest, threw a fit.” She laughed for a moment. I glanced up at her, suddenly curious. I wondered what kind of mother she must have been; I thought her children must never have wanted for warmth. She said, “You ok, honey?”

“Yes,” I said, “I’m ok.” I made myself eat the rest of the burger and fries, finally relieved that Liz and Ranse were there and so kind. There was a long pause.

“Well . . .” Liz began uncomfortably, “To cut a long story short, we got married right after that and here we are.” She paused again.

“How long . . .” I said.

“What, hon?”

“How long have you been married?” I said.

Her smile brightened her face. “Just three years,” she said, “And still newlyweds, right Ranse?” He chuckled as she leaned into him again. “This is all old hat to him. He’s been married before, but it’s my first time.”

“Oh,” I said, “I see.”
Liz said, “Ranse has a daughter about your age. Isn’t Steffi about Scylla’s age?”

She patted him on the arm.

“Yep,” he said. Up to that point, he had watched her telling her story with a bemused but loving smile, as if just the sound of her voice moved him. And he had watched me with eyes that waited patiently for a sign, perhaps at some point I would be ok enough to say the things he needed to hear, to explain myself. It reminded me of the way my father used to look when he waited for this child to finally muster the courage to admit that I had broken mom’s perfume bottle, that I was the one who had hidden Julie Stevens’ doll at preschool, and that the real reason I needed a new computer keyboard was because I had spilled a soda on it and not because of some elusive short circuit. And when at last I said what needed to be said he would smile benevolently to let me know that I had done the right thing. I wondered if Ranse would have a similar response, and what I would have to say to bring it about.

When he talked about his daughter, Ranse’s eyes seemed to focus somewhere in the distance, as if there were something he was trying to find. He said, “She lives with my ex now, in New Mexico. Don’t get to see her too much anymore cause of the traveling, you know. She’s a good kid, though. Good grades. Sends me an email now and then. Made the swim team last year. Say, I think I got her picture somewhere.” He hunted through his pockets for his wallet, then pulled out a small photo. It was her school portrait from the year before. It dawned on me that I had left carelessly in my purse in my room at home a similar picture of Jill, and that now I would not be able to look at it, to pretend to ask her what I should do. Steffi was beautiful. She must have attended a public
school, I thought, because instead of a school uniform, she was wearing a green sweater that reflected in her hazel eyes. Ranse sighed. “Shame I don’t get to see her more. We may get to see her some this summer. And, we’re supposed to get down there next spring for her graduation. She keeps up these grades and she may have a shot at valedictorian.” I thought about school for the first time. I had been an ambitious student and had worked hard to be in advanced placement. And now, that would all be ruined—or, maybe it wouldn’t, but to save it, I would have to go back home. But then, even if I returned, I might have been suspended, or worse, expelled. So, what did it matter? None of it mattered anymore. I glanced toward the table across the room where the police officers were sitting. They chatted quietly amongst themselves. Liz looked concerned when I looked at them again and Ranse had a slight furrow in his brow. “Umm . . .” He put away the photo. “You know, it’s not like she never got into any trouble or anything. Like a year or so ago. She fell in with the wrong crowd for a while. I guess all kids do sometime. I know I did.” He chuckled again. I said nothing. “But you can get out of that kind of thing just as easy as you got into it. Like Steffi. She was hanging around these kids who partied all the time. Staying out all hours of the night no matter what her mother said. Next thing you know, one of her friends is on drugs. I mean, Arlene, her mother, was telling me all this, and we figured they had been drinking—but . . . Then on top of it, another one of the kids turns gay and starts bringing his gay friends around. But he gets them all thinking its ok. Nobody wants their kid hanging around that kind. It’s like Steffi just completely forgot any kind of morality. We didn’t—I mean, Arlene didn’t raise her to hang around people like that. So when she finds out about it, she starts putting her foot down. And it
took a while, but Steffi straightened up. Grades came back up. Everything. Just goes to show you: it’s never too late to turn over a new leaf!” They may have been watching me, measuring my reaction. I did not know. My eyes were fixed on the edge of the table. My fingers were wrapped tightly around each other and my stomach burned. Jill’s mother and her father—they must have been thinking the same thing as this man and his ex-wife, thinking that their daughter was too good to be around that kind—my kind.

The woman, Liz, said, “Scylla, you ok, hon?” I looked up at her and at her husband, these two, these strangers who had briefly taken me into their lives on the basis of my lie of omission. Her face showed confusion. I wondered if I deserved to respond. I looked across the room to where the police officers were leaving their table and moving toward the door. Just beyond their table, I could see the bathrooms, the kitchen, and a back door. When the officers had gone, I excused myself for the bathroom. It was small with only one toilet, and I locked the door behind me. And in that seclusion I began to feel the panic that had been brewing in me since he said those words. I looked at myself in the mirror, examined my face for traces that would give me away. Would they see through my silence and rid themselves of the undesirable—turn me over to the police who would send me home, and once there, would everyone see, would Jill see what I had let happen to me—that kind...is that what she would think of me as well? I felt ill. A cloud seemed to pass over my eyes and the sound of my breathing filled my head. I sank to the floor, pressed my eyes shut, and waited for the noise to subside. A few minutes passed before I could stand again. I mechanically went about the typical bathroom tasks, cooled my face with water and a made a futile attempt to neaten my clothes and hair.
thought that I should leave the restaurant through the back door, slip out of the bathroom and relieve Ranse and Liz of their misinformed errand. But as soon as I stepped through the door, Liz was standing there waiting for her turn and Ranse was motioning for me to join him at the counter as he paid for the meal. I joined him reluctantly. He asked me if I wanted a candy, but I politely declined. He made small talk while we waited for Liz. He said that we would make it to town soon and that Liz would know what to do, how to find a place where I could feel safe. I found it difficult to look him in the eye. I could not find the words to say that perhaps I should not go with them. I took a few steps toward the door and looked outside. Besides the two other truck stops that served as competition for this one, there was only highway and field and roads that led to towns far in the distance. I could no longer tell from which direction I had come, but perhaps it did not matter. I had no idea onto which highways they had turned while I slept. One way may be just as good—or bad—as another. I pushed the door open and walked outside. Ranse said something, I think, but I did not respond. I stood in the drive looking down the road, first one way and then the other. In the sky to my left I could see a bird circling in the distance. I thought it might have been a hawk. I began walking toward it, but Ranse caught up to me.

“Whoa there!” he said. He put a hand on my shoulder. “Truck’s this way, sweetie,” he said. I turned. He and his wife were standing there smiling at me. I took a step back, wondered if I should run. “Come on, now. We’re gonna just be on time.” He urged me forward. “Come on, now.” I went with them back to their truck. Liz said there would only be three more hours until they reached their destination and that when they
arrived, she would call someone she knew to get me into a shelter. I forced myself to thank her. As the truck pulled out of the drive, I thought about that hawk, and I wondered what it might have been looking for.

During the ride, Liz and Ranse continued to make conversation, asking me questions about my home and about my “boyfriend”. I evaded them as much as possible. Dusk was approaching. I watched the flat line of the horizon through the window. Before long, the landscape changed. The open fields gave way to businesses; the coming darkness was kept at bay by streetlights. I looked for a sign or a landmark to tell me what city I was in, but I there was nothing I could identify. Their destination was a warehouse on the far side of town. So we passed through much traffic and passed downtown before Ranse said, “Okay! It’s right up here. You’ll be able to stretch your legs while they unload.” He maneuvered the truck through narrow streets lined with warehouses, each of which looked the same as the others with the possible exception of the shade of brick or an awning above an office door. At last, he turned into a driveway and skillfully backed up to the loading dock. Ranse said, “Alright, here we go!” He jumped out of the truck and went to meet a man who was standing on the dock, holding a clipboard. Some other workers wandered out of the warehouse.

I had followed Liz out of the cab. She said, “Okay, hon. I’m gonna help Ranse get this going, then I’m gonna make that call. It should be okay if you want to hang around right here and stretch for a while. Then I’ll find out where we can buy a Coke. It’ll take them a good hour or more to get done.” She smiled.

I made myself smile back. “Thank you. I’ll wait here.”
She gave my arm a gentle squeeze. “Okay hon, I’ll be right back!” She went up to the loading dock and started to open the back door of the truck while Ranse and the man finished the paperwork. Before pulling it up, she caught her husband’s eye. He winked and nodded at her. She smiled back and pulled open the door. Some men approached the cargo with dollies. Ranse went to help them. Liz went inside the office. When I saw the door close behind her, I walked away. I do not know how far or for how long I walked. I do not know if they came to look for me.
Message 8 of 47

From: jillfalconer@hotmail.com
To: Wendygirl
Subject: Where are you?

Wendy,

It's been a week now. Where are you? I'm really getting worried. Your mom and dad are looking all over for you. If you're that scared, just write me back. Or call me. I could meet you somewhere. I promise it'll be okay. I'll make sure you're okay. I won't tell your parents if you don't want me to. Just let me know where you are.

Love,

Jill
After some time, I came to what I thought must be close to the center of town. I walked by a small chapel. It looked like a cathedral in miniature. In front of it was a statue, barely illuminated by the streetlights, of a man in flowing robes writing on a scroll. Next to him sat a winged lion. On the base of the statue were the words “Pax tibi, Marce, evangelista meus”. I gazed up at it in hope that I might see a glimmer of that peace in his face. The thought came to me that perhaps if I knelt before it at that very moment, the saint might intercede for me. And I dropped to my knees, raised a hand to cross myself—but I couldn’t . . . as if I might be burned by the touch of my fingers, the movement of my hand, the invocation on my tongue . . . as if to make that holy sign across this profane flesh were a sacrilege. My hand fell to the statue’s base and clung lightly to the edge. The stone was rough and cold and I realized then that he would not intercede for me. I deserved no absolution. I felt as if I couldn’t breathe. I leaned my head against the stone. Everything in me cried out for Jill—who could make everything right, who knew the words I needed, whose presence would wash away my fear, who had taught me that our love was not a sin, but—I needed her. I needed her to tell me again. I needed her to make me know with the steel in her gaze and the strength in her arms and the steadiness of her voice and the insistence of her hands. But she was not there, and I was alone. I thought that tears would cool my cheeks, which had suddenly become hot despite the cold, but tears refused to break through and I understood it was because there was nothing I could do. I stood and backed away from the statue, the saint, and from the chapel. I turned away and walked into the dark streets.
Message 32 of 47

From: jillfalconer@hotmail.com
To: Wendygirl
Subject: OPEN THIS MAIL--URGENT

Wendy,

I’ve been putting those “receipt” things you showed me on these mails so I know you aren’t opening them. You’ve got to come home. You’ve been gone a month now and I don’t know how many times I’ve mailed. Please just call me or call home. I don’t want to think something has happened to you.

Please come home.

Jill
I did not have to tell Paul the rest. He already knew how I spent my days wandering, my nights hiding in dark alleyways or parks, how I began to lose time and that but for waking up one day in a hospital, I remembered little of what had happened to me during the time before we met. What I did remember were only the shadows and fragments of my journals. I could not say how long I had been wandering when I first started writing it, but I wrote almost every day after finding that first book of blank pages.
In the Dawn

I found this on a library table, out in the open where anyone could see...a book of blank pages. At first, I left it there, browsed the stacks, imagining someone would pick it up, smiling and saying, “there it is.” I left it there and hid in the stacks until closing. When everyone was gone, and the security guard had gone downstairs...so glad he did not see me this time...I crept from my corner and took it. Its cover is a soft cloth, printed with flowers, pink...roses maybe, I guess...dark green leaves and vines wandering over its front, creeping their way to its back. It makes me wonder of the owner...probably a woman, pale skin and dark hair...oh so femme...immaculate, manicured nails, the kind of hands you imagine might melt like sugared candy in yours, the kind of delicate perfection I have always been afraid to touch. I held it to my nose imagining I could smell her faint perfume still lingering...but it was not so. I breathed in only the scents of inkless paper, cloth and glue...smiled a little at the things one can get away with, hiding in a library in the dead of night...and decided I would keep her...but I would have to make her mine. I found some brown paper underneath the librarian’s desk...packing paper, I guess...stole the scissors and the tape and retreated again. I covered her in brown paper, the way we covered our books at school with pre-printed ads and tape...covered her so she would fit in my hand...so when I look down and see her there, I know she is mine...not someone I found lying on a table. And now, it is just before dawn. I christen her with the tiny half of a pencil found by the computer terminal, sharpened to a fine point.
I do not know what day it is

I sit beneath bright light watching linguistic fingers fondling warm metaphors and slipping down wet slopes in the name of literature. People stare quizzically as I shift, nervous, on the stand. Ultimately they demur, losing interest, drawing the curtains around their fragile lives, blocking out the sun, burning my tingling fingers with a stinging urgency to rip away the shade and touch their quivering nakedness.

In a world more real, I would be blind.
What she whispers to you as her stardust wings brush softly against your cheek

Is a harmony for the resonance of a heartbeat

She is tiny royalty with eyes that speak false fire

Her journey takes her from cold grips, along southern highways

She drinks from leftover bud vases and rich pools of spilled soda,
Steals a hummingbird’s repast

Her grace is too dear for my rough hands

Her vital elan a many colored glass in rarified air, beyond my breath

Her curled tongue only accepts the sweetest things…

Her eyes blink slowly on wings that see land and sky as one
Today, someone who had borrowed it returned a Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry and so instead of eating lunch like real people, I read the words of Audre Lorde. I have smuggled them away and across the street. A friend once told me he would rather not eat than eat alone. I am not eating alone with Audre. The coffee shop was filled with smoke, as is usual, and through the open door I could see the academic fortress in which I hide. Its walls never really protect. I am reading Audre's wounds. We carry with us that from which we run.

I see you poring pensively over a text. I pause, considering your face, thinking, “If only I kiss her in just the right way, she might start quoting Derrida.” But I do not, and you do not. We both continue reading.

I see you standing triumphant on a hill, the world in your hand, its cares on your back. Rescue me.

I am waiting in a tiny cold box for the clock to strike three--but I will not hear it.

If ever there was a blue day, it is this one. Is it yet night?
and now for myself i create
a world where i stare again
at a group of girls and i alone
looking into the midst of the cache
knowing only this jury holds
my sentences in their fragile hands
and each sings in her own way
a siren's song . . . but not to me
like playground girls withholding
the right to jump from one in red
dress and saddle shoes . . . i will
never break their clapping circle; smoke
rising from within, blowing
nearer to my tempted senses
a taste of ecstasy
on my tongue
I stay in this coffee shop more and more.

A tale of day and night, less an offering than a request. When you must stay, not a visitor, barely a customer…it looks different than it might. It would be nice to say, I’m going home. Goodbye…goodbye…see you later…in a few days, perhaps. If only there were…someplace…They’ll have music again tonight. I’ll borrow enough for coffee.
today I listened to the tires on the pavement music in the background, instead of the other way around if there were a way to create, I would do it sound is like a mirror; it sees the way things are your voice in my ear, rich and steady romanticized and round like a lead weight in my hand can you see the starlings, the way they preen their wings they burn bright and die fast could I say it again? you could be a semiprecious gem at the bottom of a lagoon I could take a pilgrimage into late evening traffic, peripatetic chasing the monarchs that follow the highway isn't it cool and sensual they way they feel in your hand curled tongue tasting tender flesh looking vainly for nectar the huge bird crashes to the ground ablaze I'll not disturb the ashes see how she washes her tiny hands there is more in the making
it doesn’t always hurt to remember things

some nights hidden in the stacks, the cool air keeping the books safe, and me,
inadvertently. What a wonderful place to take such good care of books. Curled up in the
darkness I can see my mothers house against the side of the information desk, on the
half lit bathroom doors. The guard walks by and shines his light, goes into a room and
shuts the door. I open the door to my mothers house,
upon returning from a wedding

there is an accident on the highway that runs by my window
i can see the lights flashing blue red and blinding white
i am writing you a letter....
champagne glasses one after the other
it was a happy day in a garden
my stomach burns
the taste of it lingers on my tongue
a frothy haze in the front of my brain
like cheesecloth over a lens
are you there dear
the click-snap of the shutter
the flash
and they said i love you
and held each others hands
opiated by the fragrance of a hundred thousand
open blooms...a pheromone cloud around them
i can hardly speak for thinking it
they kissed and wept
my stomach burns
melty mints and cake
candles and crystal and hors d'ouerves
a wide eyed me smiling serene
around a table of borrowed emotion
and they ran away
leaving us to talk and sip
of X and G and the reasons
why sex can be so very good
and why we never and why
we always...always
to wash away the sweetness of the day
to turn the lights out on the world
until it passes
into reruns
I own nothing but sleep. When day awakes, the light steals my dreams, but I can keep them here…

young boys asleep in a tent
darkness all around
they awake
to find the ground covered in something
when they slept, they were as spoons in a cutlery drawer
now they are separate and distinct
and lost
dark clouds in a black sky
standing over your shoulder
draping you in a warm blanket
a beautiful woman walking
with a bag in one hand
promising to show me the way
she has long brown hair
the man is saying...”ohh i feel like an imbecile” with his head in his hand
a man and woman humor each other in bed
about what they will name their child...
and with nothing to fight about except the game,
you would think they would behave differently
wooding hill is near here
when we were children, we used to tell our dreams...
each moment when i close my eyes, they walk past like tv images
the thing that is interesting is that when you hear--you think you hear the whole chord but you don't...you only hear half of it...the mother nods, her child is missing
you've been taking all those pills all this time---
she lays on the floor and looks though the peephole
do you think daddy will give a shit about it?
the waters are a murky green
she touches the x-ray with her fingertips
the doctor explains what they will do to her
they kneel and whisper at the altar...but they are not praying
seems like i gave them all i had
i went to a good school i promise i did
only two people in the world can beat my record
we are slaves and we are showing how militant we can be
coming far
with chains on our necks and feet
clouds open up

how near that dream is to me

rick, why don't you sit over here with his wife

in the bishop......where the sol system was

he dives at her from across the room and hits the floor “what the fuck” he says

and i don’t ever have to see you...if i don’t ever see you

she says i am making you a college student

i said...take a left at the painting...the painting was black

a train is coming

red

and rachmaninof

playing

hanging upside down

it's alright mom

i can find it from here

a baby reaches out

what--i don’t understand

can you hold her up to your ear and hear inside

baby crying

he went out into his spaceship and disappeared--he went into the yard see him running

there is a black place

inside the baby--black velvet pouch tied tight and empty
nightmares
i saw
in a trashcan
insects
jill…
i can’t breathe
close my eyes
want to run away
i cant
can you see me...a tiny circus performer...sliding down...it must be nice
running away
stop all your cussing
a thread through a needle to save the world
and dirty white linoleum
then he started crying
he had been screaming in a cave
chill money
you treat me like i'm a baby
well would you calm down
jill…i am in blackness
jill…
worldmyers cleans up the world, don’t forget
that’s what its like to be...and i have forgotten
three triangles
you can’t really say “sex”
you will start monday
this is my uncle’s house
everything is red here
it came to pass...sitting on her lap
little red
i can’t anymore
when i close my eyes
and think of you
i see sunlight
It’s your company
They have been playing here for months, they say. I see her and wish she could hold me in the palm of her hand like a dime…hide me in the folds of her blouse. I am never so transparent as when she looks my way. What shall I do but watch her.

He called her Michelle.

She called him darling.
Music beat against me pressed deep into my chest where it quivered and cried.

she…tingled against my skin as they walked past and I wished I was invisible, a lie.

faked a smoke... laughed when she shouted “where the girls at...” slowly unconsiously
licked my lips too far away to see, but I--still sober, cannot pretend to be free and filled
with the ecstasy of being alive, disembodied.
sleeping on backsteps after closing during the dark of winter

Could not prepare me for this cold. When I see her standing there

Looking like someone I’ll know well tomorrow and from every

Image of the two of us together I edit myself out

Erased from my own portrait, an extraneous word, weedy, dull

Inaccurate to the season she represents

My weather is inclement inside.
I walk in and out of coffeeshops and newstands, libraries and pharmacies all day. There was a time I was used to this. Today is different. I used to sit, cement beneath my palms, bricks stabbing into my back, staring at my own bare knees pointing at the sky, in this very alleyway. I remember a rain. I remember my grandmother saying “When I first got to Philly, I only had one dress.” I remember cold rain and water from the gutter drain washing over my feet. A voice in my ear, “you must be cold.” In this very alleyway. I remembered what it was like to be warm. A voice in my ear, “you can share my blanket…you are so cold.” I said, “am I…” in this very alleyway. It was a different way of being warm. A different way of being. I walk in and out of coffeeshops all day.
there is a strange formation of clouds ahead
i look to the east, to a break in the rain
where sunlight streams through in rays
cutting the mist and darkness
shining to the ancients, convincing them of celestial cities
and silver linings behind clouds thick and gray
the rain is like a painting golden lit from behind
when it washes over me i feel you
and i reach out my hand
each drop that runs down my fingers and hand, down my wrist and arm, a touch of you
the droplets splashing on my face and mouth, dancing on my tongue...a taste of your lips
and i am warmed in you, a golden rain i drink in
kneeling reverent, a sip from the cup, sweet
you heal me
cleansed in you
the air is thick with light
and i, covered in you, breathe it in
whispering words dreamed
a song composed in a reverie
its magical notes too fragile for day
decrescendo to the tiny patter
the gentle layering of mist, dewy on our skin
binding us together
so as one, we drift into the night behind our eyes
and linger there until the day
She makes strange overtures. Asks bouyant questions and then walks away…then from the tiny stage, sings words only to me veiled by his voice and the instruments. Perhaps I am dreaming. But I don’t want to think about that. She bought a bagel and left it on my table. She smiled at me and said, “Thank you for coming,” evaluating me as one does a puppy in the rain from the comfort of one’s livingroom. Her smile travels independently as her brow struggles with some seemingly weighty issue. Her fingers play one another, when they are not on the keyboard. Now she brings me what I need. I ask for nothing, but she knows.
She is a light on a darkened street blazing with
noble and brash iridescence. She tells me whatever
she thinks will please me and I am. She knows me as
A silhouette in a corner, a homunculus in an electron mist
She knows the toad dressed in lace can utter
Fancy phrases now and again and there she goes again
But she won’t press that clammy flesh to hers. She creates
Her own heat, a self perpetuating star around which this
Barren satellite revolves at a frigid distance, unable to see
For the light, unable to look out of blindness
you know I will make up frightening stories in my head
I think that is what you are waiting for, my malformed
Memories of things yet to be. How shall I begin?
In an enclosed silence spelled
With more S’s and H’s than are necessary
I fondle the polished brass knocker of this locked door,
The glittering crystal-like knob
You peek around the frame to see how long it will take
Before I learn to play alone with my own toys…
She showed me to a room, gave me a robe and a towel, closed the door behind her. I had
not been in a shower for days…the locker room at the college had closed for the holiday.
I peeled away the week I had passed and left it on the floor…made the water so very hot,
and stood beneath it. It was like breathing. And I stood there for a long time, letting the
water burn my skin, cut into my back. I would have scrubbed away my skin with the
day…but there was a razor… Slow strokes, between the soap and the blade and the
water and time…and when I was done, it was all gone…and the water splashed on my
hairless head and body like raindrops patter against a plastic overhang. The week went
down the drain. When I walked out wearing the robe, she was there waiting. Her lips
opened slightly into a voiceless “o”. I was afraid she would be angry. She came toward
me. I could not read her face. She touched my head with the tips of her fingers. A smile
flickered on her face…now here, now gone…she said, “Did you…” I looked down, then
up again… She closed her eyes…stood like a computer, processing. Her mouth smiled.
Her eyes looked at me differently.
this weekend, i did housework forever. also, after i built the bookshelf, chelle felt the need to show me her appreciation repeatedly, such that i had the distinct feeling that it had little to do with the bookshelf at all. she is in a rather interesting mood of late. it seems that if i so much as momentarily distract her, i pay for it and, likewise, i am paid. earlier, i went into the studio to ask her a question. she was playing the keyboard. her fingers moved across the keys with rapid force and her whole body seemed moved by the sounds in her headphones. when i caught her attention, she stopped and smiled. i spoke, but she did not hear a word i said. she came toward me. i was caught a bit off guard and stammered and stepped back. she caught my arm and pulled me to her. her hands were hot from practicing. she kissed me, tugging at my clothes until they fell away. then she guided me to the sofa. it is small, old and worn, covered in a coarse weave. the upholstery dug into my skin; she pressed in beside me, making every move a perplexing mixture of frictional abrasion and the gentle warmth of her body through her clothing. she kissed and touched me. she slipped inside and played me just as if i were any instrument in the room. she consumed me. and when she was done, i lay spent and drowsed. she moved back to the keyboard, turned on the speakers so i could hear, and played what she had just done to me. the sound filled me as she had, and i couldn't remember what i had wanted to ask or whether she had answered. i still don't.
When I was a child, they used to sing in the mass

o come…o come emanuel

and ransom captive Israel

that mourns in lonely exile here

until the son of god appear…

And here I find myself today, in captive exile,

Remembering xmas and trying to pretend it’s the most wonderful time of the year.

There are truths we do not always want to see.

I know I am blind.

What response

She gives me so many images…

Sometimes I don’t know what to think of them…

They are images of upheaval--sometimes they are images of pain.

Sometimes the images are of immense beauty and power.

I feel like I am living in a movie when I read them

They are so crisp and clear…
A digitally enhanced life
Precise in its high definition.
School is starting soon.
I have spent a long time in a cloud.
It was comfortable there…
But, now it is time to re-enter the rarified air of reality
I am thinking of her images now.
She weighs truths with metal scales.
What do you make of it?
How many times could one be hit…how many lives could one watch blossom and die
Before one’s blade becomes dull…not unable perhaps
But unwilling to anymore pass
Between what is and what ought to be
Her blade remains the edge by which I see…
To me, it appears as a glint of light in the distance…
Like a lighthouse on a dark horizon…
Reminding me there is an elsewhere…
there is such a cold inside me
i barely feel the heat of day
if only there were some way for me to know

i close my eyes
yesternight
the most bitter taste of humanity
on my tongue and crashing in
waves against my innermost
how can i exist

once there was a warm that is you
fed my days and nights
and i imagined myself alone

now adrift
now enslaved
i thirst desperately
for one moment
tomorrow is diverged

she puts no offense
the rest was to show
in words, the woman
in cities, in homes
her seas are broken
in cities and towns
tomorrow to diverge

and so each man takes justice
the lesser man, the passing man
and i am really about the same
hands to land
tomorrow diverged

she dons no offense
nor rests to show
the woman; in words,
in homes, in havens
my seas are broken
in backrooms, in homes
tomorrow diverges

and each man takes his justice
the quiet man, the empty man
and i am unmoving, just the same
hands in land
tomorrow diverged

each man takes his justice
i offer no defense
where did she go
did she ascend did she dissolve
are the moments of her ending dust
what is the sum of her and her dear children
I imagined her a saint and a prophet
An impermanent idol
When we kill our gods what is left
But the crumbs and fragments of their broken arguments
“Federal authorities may have finally solved the case of the 1995 disappearance of Atheist leader Madalyn Murray O’Hair and her two adult children. Investigators report new evidence that seems to indicate the family was murdered and dismembered.”

I will always remember what I was doing the moment I heard the news that Madelyn Murray O’Hair was dead. My eyes had been fixed on the computer monitor as I manipulated images for Michelle and Cass’ Web page. It was not my first try at Web design, but remarkable to me because in the next room the droning TV suddenly became alive to her with the news. My head snapped around and I went into the living room with the TV in time to see government officials scouring a field for the woman’s body and those of her family members. I had always imagined that Madelyn had run off with the money and was living it up in Tahiti or somewhere like every other evangelist even though hers was a faith of not having faith. And now to find her brutally murdered, her money stolen seemed like an act of a vengeful god, tired of having his toes stepped on by a puny and insignificant woman who could rant and rave against the best of the frothy mouthed theists. It made me momentarily afraid. I watched the rest of the news with my knees clutched to my chest, curling my toes around the edge of the sofa cushion like a cat pondering a sudden empty place inside me. The news anchor dynamically wrapped his voice around each following story, but the words did not reach me and I sat that way until
Michelle came in the front door with a grocery bag. This was remarkable because
Michelle almost never bought groceries—not since she began to insist that I come home
with her and her husband Cass from time to time after their gigs. I would stay there for a
day, maybe two or more. I would give her what she wanted, and I could imagine that I
was safe for a while. Then, they would have to go out of town, or I might wander away,
afraid that my welcome had been worn out. But now and again, she would notice me in
the crowd, and, if the timing was right, I would have a place to sleep for at least the night.

Even in a large town, there is a limit to the number of places in which one can sit
and nurse a coffee all night long while pretending to read. But when you have no where
else to go, you find them all. I met Michelle and Cass at a coffeehouse and restaurant
where they played their quirky blend of alternative keyboard and guitar songs almost
every Friday and Saturday night. I was almost always there before they began to play
and stayed long after they bid adieu to the dwindling crowd of the wee hours and were
relaxing over breakfast. I always ordered the same bottomless coffee, paid for with
money borrowed earlier from some pedestrian or passing car. I kept my eyes hidden
behind a book or magazine until the music began. Then, my gaze was fixed on Michelle.
I do not suppose it was long before Michelle and Cass noticed this attention. I once
thought she heard Michelle ask one of the staff about me and heard him answer, “The
manager said not to worry about it.” Not long after, Michelle first spoke to me.

I raised my eyes to greet Michelle as she came through the door. Michelle was
almost always smiling, and as she came in her eyes flashed with a little girl’s excitement.
“Look what I got,” Scyl, she said, “Ice cream.” I smiled and waited to hear the flavor.
Caramel or any other flavor indicated a whim, but chocolate of any kind meant a bad day. It was a code Cass had told me about. Michelle went straight to the kitchen and came back with only a spoon and the gallon tub of triple dark chocolate fudge. She sat down next to me and pulled off the lid. I wondered whether to ask what had happened. Michelle plunged the spoon into the center of the ice cream and drew out a large dollop, which she held out to me to taste. I licked some of the ice cream; it had a rich flavor and I held it on my tongue for a moment. Michelle was watching me. I closed my eyes and swallowed.

“Mmmmmm.”

Michelle smiled and licked what remained from the spoon. In this way we shared the ice cream until the tub was half-empty. Michelle dropped the spoon on the coffee table. I watched her movements. Michelle’s body strove to appear relaxed, but her hands were shaky from the stress and tension her face so adeptly hid. I moved even closer to Michelle, stretching one leg on the sofa behind her. Michelle stared blankly at the spoon, clenched her fists and slowly released them. “Chelle,” I said. Michelle turned to me and smiled benignly. She slipped an arm around my waist, gently pulled me close, and kissed me. My body bent toward Michelle like a ragdoll’s and, as easily, I acquiesced to her trembling hands tugging open buttons, pushing beneath fabric, to calm themselves on my skin. Tabloid news blared in the background.

“Today’s hottest new stars grace the cover of Entertainment Weekly—find out who’s hot and who’s not this season! The Madalyn Murry O’hair mystery heats up in Texas. Could the outspoken atheist leader really be buried on that remote Texas ranch?”
And look at this cute face—can you guess the celebrity parents of this mystery baby?”

Cass came home at 6:45. I heard the segueway just after the click of the lock. I opened her eyes to see him step through the door into the living room, smiling, about to speak. But he stopped. Cass watched the two of us. Perhaps we appeared awkward on the narrow sofa—my lips at his wife’s breast like a child, cradled in her arms, her fingers playing me from within. I shut her eyes to his gaze. For long moments we continued that way, the sounds of our breathing and the melodic intonations that marked Michelle’s pleasure somewhat muted by the brassy tabloid news theme. Cass’ presence unnerved me, as it always did at times like these. His stare made me feel naked in a way that I never did with Michelle alone. But I could feel Michelle’s body relax and I knew their eyes had met and love was exchanged in smiles; Michelle literally warmed to see him. I opened my eyes to see Cass picking up the ice cream from the coffee table and, spooning it into his mouth, walking into the kitchen. Michelle stroked my hair and I closed my eyes, imagining that I could disappear in the palm of Michelle’s strong hand.

When Michelle finally stood and walked away to find her husband, I lay unmoving. Somehow always spent after they had been together, as though Michelle had sipped away my energy with touch, I drowsily closed my eyes halfway. I watched the curve of Michelle’s back through a blur of lashes as she walked into the kitchen, casually readjusting her clothes. I closed my eyes, listened to my breathing, felt the rise and fall of my chest with each breath. A chill traveled over my skin from the air conditioner. I could hear them in the kitchen. He had started to cook. Their voices were warm and quiet. I imagined he was probably touching her now. He was holding his wife now, I
imagined, pulling her close to kiss her, tasting me on her lips. I shook my head. I didn’t want to think of it. I slid deeper into the cover of sleep letting my mind peruse itself. It took me to Mass at St. Catherine’s; I was twelve years old. I was staring at the pictures on the walls, letting the images lead me with sweeping upward lines to cast my eyes toward heaven. I followed Mary’s flowing robes from where they caressed the ground, up in waves of blue and white, to where they draped around her arms outstretched toward her dying son, a golden aureole around her head, a mixture of determination and pain in her benign face as if by virtue of the reach of her delicate fingers she could take all his pain away. And I thought, surely this woman is the divine mother. The priest’s words were a blur in my ears until suddenly I remembered to pray. I knelt in the pew and recited with my family and the congregation:

“Lord, I am not worthy to receive you,  
but only say the word and I shall be healed.”

And in that moment, I knew He did not say the word for me. I did not awaken until Michelle touched me again to tell me dinner was ready.
hearing them together through the walls

I place my hand against the plaster and eggshell paint
to see if I can feel her
hear her muffled cry
and I hear his voice…
I want to pull away but I don’t
Trying to understand her love for his maleness
That finds me now so utterly alone
“There are some inherently crazy subsets of ideas. God was sitting on his a*% in Nowhere, since at that time there was not even a universe, for hundreds of millions of years without an idea in his head, picking his nose and farting, when suddenly he became bored one moment in particular and said, in clear Hebrew, “From nothing I will create something,” and he created the entire universe (whatever that may be) for the express purpose of creating you in his own image, complete down to the belly button.” (Madalyn O'Hair, Fundamentalism, Oct 22, 1986)
“Federal investigators continue to search for the bodies of Madalyn Murray O’Hair and her two children. The bodies are thought to have been dismembered, put into 55-gallon drums, and driven to a remote burial site. An FBI spokesman declined to comment on the investigation.”

I remember watching Madalyn’s “church” services on Sunday evenings on cable access. At first it had frightened me, the way the woman raged against the world, against my tender faith. But evenings of morbid curiosity and popcorn in front of the TV soon brought me to be accustomed to the rant and I began to hear the lyrics above the noise. Madalyn’s vitriol began to seem sweeter. I began to see the folly of believing in a god who didn’t believe in me.

Dr. Augerson placed his notes on the overhead projector for his students to copy, yet he still seemed to direct his speech more toward it than them. I put pen to paper and mechanically copied the notes as he lectured. I thought about Michelle. In 1071, the Seljuk Turks under Alp Arslan took Jerusalem, successfully defeating the Byzantine army. It was clear to me that Michelle and Cass were deeply in love. When they came together they were as two waves so perfectly in phase that the amplitude of their happiness was doubled. Still, Michelle was always beautiful to me. It was not so much a beauty of the eye, like one sees in magazines, but a beauty of being--the way she never quite said
anything directly, the way she nonchalantly brought her hand to her chin when angry, the
way she blinked very slowly at things she didn’t understand. *Pilgrimages to the Holy
Land increased during the 11th century because of deepening Christian sentiment,
however the Seljuks were increasingly hostile to these usually unarmed travelers.* When
I first met her, it seemed that Michelle never looked at me. Michelle sat next to me,
bought me coffee and blintzes and looked out into the room or down into her cup. Cass
lingered on the other side of the room passively watchful, like a commuter on a subway
platform. Instead of regular conversation, Michelle made odd comments like, “The
pattern on this carpet seems like it could be moving,” or “Yesterday I got seven calls
from telemarketers in one hour.” When the blintzes came she pushed the plate toward me.
She said, “One day I was served a cannoli filled with cottage cheese.” *Pope Urban II
called for Christians to recapture the Holy Land from the Moslem Turks: Synod of
Claremont, Nov. 1095.* I watched Michelle intently when she spoke, responding when I
felt it appropriate, memorizing the curve of her jawline, the delicate lay of her fingers
around her cup, as if I would never see her again. So, it came as a bit of a surprise to me
when Michelle said into her coffee, “Are you coming with us?” *Deus lo vult.*
This day, Michelle drove me to her house after my class. I noticed out her car window a cathedral rising above the other buildings. I could see its arched windows of stained glass above the streetlights. I could see its spires reaching beyond nearby trees. She rounded the corner and it turned to frame itself in the misty sunset, shining like a grail.
Today I remain to sit and spin. And i wonder why i am still so afraid of the needle. i close my eyes and dream about frightening blue eyed actresses and their mothers on talk shows. a man comes into an office screaming about agility of language, a tiny man claws viciously at his back. children's toys try angrily to force their way through--its me...its me...its me...its me...insects fly around my room at home; i am screaming. i am climbing up a steep slope, almost vertical, barely making it over the edge.

it is not the subject matter that frightens me. it is that my words, when they come, will not be adequate. and having nothing left to me but them...what then, if they are not enough. if i gave away their quivering vulnerability, would you murder it...

so we pour our souls out to one another. once covered, each of us, with the others flotsam and jetsam what will we see when we gaze across the sea but ourselves?
she holds her hand up to the light and comments, “sinister…”
the lessons she gives me are clear…i am not to look away
her moves are like the ocean
a blanket of brine that covers me
an unnoticed S.O.S., black waves and cloudless sky
colors flash on a palette made by closed eyelids
a darkness and light she wrests from inside me
i want to imagine it is her heart screaming behind my ribs

i cannot put my arms around what i feel…it eludes my grasp
my heart is tired
trying to hold a handful of words
they trickle relentlessly through my fingers
i cant i cant i cant

tell me what to write
teach me about the air
how to smile
what it is like to taste the summer rain

to feel tropic ocean waves lapping against your feet

to look into the clear sky and breathe deeply

i am not

can you see me

i cannot see myself

but i feel darkness...

and it is not cold...

i dreamed she cut me from my belly to my throat and opened me up like a satchel...

there was nothing inside...

and i didnt even feel it..

it was very dark

and i imagined i could walk into that darkness, down winding steps, to the bottom

i could feel my footsteps in my chest

hear how they echoed

i wonder what she thought of me...

walking into myself like that....

she was watching me,

but she never tells me what she thinks....

she always says something other...

but she held the way open for me...

i guess that is something interesting
and in my dream encountered
woman of such permanence
melted my need
cut my tangled woods
to ashes and left me
resting an action so pure
waking could not blur with dark noise
She was walking in the corridor. I was seated on a bench. She was waiting for a class. Her hair was a deep black, curled to bounce around her neck and shoulders. Her skin was smooth and pale and it was only deftly applied makeup that kept her from looking wan. I imagined that in repose she might look almost ghastly, almost as if she were dead. Immaculately manicured fingers held her books and tiny purse close to her; now and again they swept her hair away from mascara-laden lashes; now and again they adjusted the collar or tugged at the hem of her tailored blouse. And I, as I watched her, fingered a knot in my hair earned in a restless night on a park bench—concern for where I laid my head as yet sometimes eluding me—and I was remembering my mother’s manicured fingers loosening my childhood tangles with slow and gentle method, her patient breathing, her body warm and close, the low ring of her voice . . . “almost, dear . . . just a little more” . . . her fingers in my hair. And this woman, this girl, I could imagine her fingers, the impeccably done nails, glistening red, weaving through my hair. She paced, a little less than restless. I could hear the clicks of her heels. Perhaps I stared. When she turned to me her face looked almost puzzled. I opened a book I had in my hand and flipped through the pages as though searching for something, hoping my gaze would be interpreted as the idle glance of one lost in thought. In a moment she was sitting next to me. She smiled and said hello. I looked at her and smiled in return. She asked me for permission to ask a question. I shrugged.

“Do you know Jesus?” she said.
I didn’t know quite how to respond. Certainly I hesitated, glancing briefly around the empty hall. “We have been introduced, yes,” I said.

She said, “So, you’ve been saved?”

“Saved . . . I . . .uh . . .”

Her smile spread over my stammer and quieted it. “When the one true and living God sent His Son to die for us on the cross He freed us from the bondage of our sin and cleansed our souls. And by asking Jesus into our hearts we are saved from the fear and despair of sin and delivered into the joy and abundance of God’s love.” She recited her well-rehearsed lines with an innocence of belief that fascinated me. I watched the moist rims of her eyelids. I watched her lips part and close. She spoke of hope and of faith. I might have told her that I was Catholic; I do not remember. I might have told her that I lost my faith in an accident. But I told her that it had been more than a year since I had been to a church. And when she asked if I was looking for a church home, I told her no. She told me she was a member of a Christian group on campus, that they held meetings every week at which they shared, prayed, supported each other in trying times, and brought others to know the beauty of oneness in Christ. I smiled, watched the way her smile clung to her lips and rode on her words. She wore a mantle of naïve fearlessness whose power she directed at me through dark unblinking eyes. And for these things, I almost wanted to believe her every word. I wanted to rest in her innocent bliss.

Presently the hall filled with students. They poured from the doors of classrooms all around. Voices and the sounds of footsteps washed over us. She looked a bit lost. Her lined eyes looked at me expectantly, as if by force of her conviction I should suddenly
repent. “I have to go to class,” I told her. I did not know what else to say.

She laughed nervously. “Me too,” she said. She looked down at her hands and then up again, as if searching her mind for a solution. She said, “If you want, I could call and let you know when we have our next meeting and you could go with me.”

Her kindness was both alluring and unsettling. It gave me a strange desire to escape. “I don’t have a phone,” I said. I refrained from telling her why.

“Oh,” she said.

“I’d better get to class,” I said.

“Maybe we can talk about this again sometime?” she said.

I smiled. I said, “I suppose…” I stood, and turned away. I walked into the classroom. It seemed that I could feel her eyes on my back until the moment the door closed behind me.

The auditorium was small, but full of students. Philosophy was not a popular class, as far as I could tell, but it fulfilled a requirement so it was never short of students. I sat in one of the rows closer to the back of the room. The professor came in and opened up his notebook on the podium at the front. Students around me pulled out pencils and spirals, poised for note taking. I rarely took notes. The locker that held all my belongings was small. It barely held my one change of clothes and a few books. Instead, I listened intently, trying hard to remember every word. This day he began with existentialism. A philosophical movement in the 19th and 20th centuries, he said, its major themes included the idea that existence precedes essence, moral individualism, choice, anxiety, absurdity, nothingness, death, alienation. He went on, describing the life...
of Jean Paul Sartre. It was just then that I heard the door to the classroom open. I turned
to see the girl to whom I had spoken outside peeking through the doorway. Her eyes
searched me out and when they found me, she smiled. In her hand she held a folded
piece of paper. She stepped into the classroom. The professor continued lecturing. He
was saying something about being and having. I was watching her negotiating the few
steps to the end of my row, making what seemed almost like a genuflection, and asking
the guy sitting in that final seat to pass me the note in her hand, indicating me with the
stretch of her fingers. He nodded and passed the note to his neighbor, who in turn passed
it along. She watched each transfer and did not turn to go until she saw my hand close
around her note and until I smiled to her my acknowledgment. She smiled at me in return
and walked out of the room. For a moment I stared at the folded paper in my hand. The
professor was talking about problem and mystery. I slowly unfolded the page. The
words were written in pencil, in a style of graceful arcs and curves that seemed to befit
her delicate fingers. This is the letter she wrote me:

Dear

You did not give me your name, but I felt it was important that I talked to you a
bit more. Some things you said bothered me. I hope that you don’t mind. I think
that often when we are troubled, we forget that there is someone out there who
loves us more than we could ever imagine. That is God. God is always there for
us no matter what we do. Sometimes we think that God has forsaken us. But, just
think about Jesus. He died on the cross to save us all from the penalties of sin.
He did that for us even though we didn’t deserve it. And while he was suffering
and in pain, even he thought that maybe God had deserted Him. But God was there with him. God is there with us through all of our suffering. God knows that we are all by nature corrupted and it is only by His grace that we are saved. It is only by His love that we can be kept from the despair of living in sin. That is why when you said you weren’t looking for a church home that I couldn’t bear to let things go at this. I can see in your eyes that there is something missing in your life. And that emptiness can never be filled by the secular world alone. One of the reasons that God admonishes us to congregate for worship is so that we can give each other help and encouragement and so that we can as an active body bring more lost souls to Him. How long will you wound yourself by wandering lost in the world without the love and comfort of the Lord and His people? I wish you would let me help you to see. I should have told you earlier, but I didn’t think about it. But we are having a meeting tomorrow. Rev. Lacy is going to speak to us about how to handle stress at school and then he is going to pray with us. Afterward, there are usually cookies and soda, or something like that. It is in the Union, room 312, at 9:00pm. I really hope that you will come. It would mean a lot to me if I could just have the chance to speak to you again and maybe, if you could see how life could be so different, maybe you would understand. Please come. I promise you won’t regret it.

Yours in Christ,

Rachel
Her words made me uneasy. What had she really seen in my eyes? Was her innocence really capable of divining some dark and empty place inside me? I felt somehow violated, somewhat threatened, and yet, a bit intrigued. But I put it out of my mind. The professor was still lecturing. He said that according to Sartre, the measure of a man is what he makes of himself.

That night I spent in a carrel in the law library, the only one on campus open all night. It was easy to sleep there, looking as if I had simply collapsed during a long night of intense study, heavy tomes of carefully chosen case law stacked around my head. There were no resident assistants to angrily awaken me, demanding to see proof that I lived there, as happened in dormitory TV rooms. No security guards prowled for trespassers as they did after hours in other libraries and in the Union. And the maintenance staff had the strange but fortunate habit of vacuuming the gray carpeted floors at around 6:45am, which served as an effective wake up call. It let me slip out of the building unnotice by shift-changing staffers and make it across the street to the dorm cafeteria for breakfast, one of the two meals per day on the meal plan paid for by my student loan. I could dash in and stand in the line with the other students, just as if I had slept in one of the dorm-room beds they so often complained about, as if I had awakened with a pillow beneath my head and a blanket wrapped around me, risen from my cushioned mattress, and thrown on clothes enough to wander leisurely downstairs to my waiting meal. For some reason, the dorms were all filled when I applied with my tuition paid by loans and no where else to go. But, I was able to get a meal plan. Standing there
in line, I remembered how liberating it had felt not so very long ago when in high school, I told my mother “That’s Ok…I’m skipping breakfast,” and instead of saying “you come right back here young lady,” she had said, “Alright, dear. Make sure you eat a good lunch.” But now, after almost two years of waking up hungry and without an option, that once dreaded morning meal had become a luxury. It meant that I did not have to be hungry that day.

I went to my classes as was usual and though my day was strategically scheduled to keep me busy, I still managed to think of Rachel and her innocent plea for my soul. It made me think of Jill, my first and up to this time last girlfriend, not because Rachel was anything like her, quite the contrary. But I wondered if Rachel’s wide-eyed innocence looked the same to me as my own must have looked to Jill what seemed like a lifetime ago. Jill had known the answers to questions I didn’t even know I had, and I must have looked at her with even more naïveté and wonder in my eyes than this Rachel with her religious dream. Rachel’s innocence was steeled by faith. She was grounded in the confidence that her god was her sword and shield, and because of this she was free. On my first encounter with Jill I had no such faith. I had already learned where lay the loyalties of religion and it was Jill I held onto, who I watched with a combination of lust and reverence as she walked calmly forward and let Father Daly lay the sacrament on her tongue, then crossed herself with the same hand that just the night before had lifted me from within and set me on a new path. I missed her acutely. I thought perhaps if I called her, heard her voice again—but no. She would tell my parents, anyone searching for me, where I was—if anyone still was after all this time. Despite Jill’s lack of respect for
authority, she held deep compassion. She would not be able to tolerate whatever pain
might be in my mother’s face or even her own parents’ accusations if she knew. Besides,
I wasn’t ready to face her and what I’d left her to deal with alone—or to tell her what had
happened to me since. Still…
When I look into the darkness, it peers again into me…

I cannot close my eyes. It would be better to stay awake.

I don’t want to think about it.

A voice in my ear, “you can think of a way to help me forget…”
crawl into the corner to watch silently from the safety of distance.

I will not go to sleep.

She will call him brother but he will not call her

Sister

I can see the fire, the light

Dancing on the wall

But I cannot feel its warmth

Certainly I doubt if I can see myself

Why smile at shadows

They are all I have

Here is a reluctant

Pacing in a crowded room

Overcome, in a crevice

Costumed, exposed

To such quiet
As evening approached, I was thinking of Rachel again. I thought that perhaps I should attend her meeting. I was shamelessly intrigued by her, and the prospect of late evening snacks was appealing. The cafeterias closed at 7:30 and it was rare for me to eat any later. And, I thought, if the meeting ran late enough, it might be easy for me to linger in the conference room and avoid the notice of security for the night.

And so at 9:00 my wandering left me at the student union. It was not as crowded as earlier in the day, but students came and went in small groups or singly, all on their way to or from someplace, and today I was one of them, yet feeling a bit strange for having, for once, a destination at this hour. I took the stairs to the conference room on the third floor. I could see people going in the open door. I could hear their talking and laughter, and for a moment it seemed I could never go in that door. A barrier formed of the sounds of their voices and I could not walk through. My hand touched the doorframe and I leaned there looking in. Rachel was there. I could see her sitting in the front row of chairs, talking to another girl. They laughed, and when she laughed she tossed her head forward so that her dark hair fell over her face and then parted like a curtain when she looked up again. She sat sideways in her chair, her legs crossed at the ankle, her fingers resting on the back, her nails pristine and painted pink. Soon her eyes looked beyond her companion. She saw me standing in the doorway. She called to me and waved. Her face brightened and I watched the gentle movement of her hand back and forth as if it were in slow motion. And so it was a moment before it dawned on me to acknowledge her. I smiled. She motioned for me to sit beside her. I crossed the room and sat in the chair.
next to hers. She smiled. “Hi,” she said. Then, to her friend, “This is the girl I was
telling you about.”

The friend greeted me. “Hi, I’m Gina.” She held out her hand. I took it.

“You can call me Scylla,” I said. A look of confusion washed momentarily over
her face. Rachel blinked then broke the moment to tell me about the speaker. Their
empty smiles returned.

“Rev. Lacy is great. I think you’ll really like him. He’s a lot like my youth
minister back home. He really knows how to get to what’s really important. He’s really
cool. He’s going to talk about handling stress at school. After that, he’ll pray and if you
want, you can ask him to pray for you.” She smiled at me eagerly. I returned her smile.
The animation in her face very much reminded me of something Jill used to say to me.
She used to say from time to time, “You look like a little girl.” The Reverend took his
position at the front of the room. He was young for a minister, I thought. He was
wearing a sweatshirt with a slogan on it about being in the “son”-light. He, too, wore the
same broad smile of his followers. But his seemed warmer, and more sincere. He
motioned for quiet from the room. He said a brief opening prayer and then began to
speak. Rachel seemed to almost snap to attention, facing front in her chair and clasping
her manicured fingers in her lap. As he spoke, she listened with taut muscled
attentiveness. Her lips moved slightly, a shadow of his words. She clenched and
unclenched her fingers. Looking at her hands made me take an involuntary breath. It
surprised me, and I smiled. Rachel, hearing, turned to me and grinned broadly. I was
almost embarrassed, but then I realized that she must have thought I was responding to
the minister. I had been so transfixed by the glint of her nails and the way her smooth fingers moved over one another that I had not heard anything he had said. By the time I at last caught the gist of his speech it was almost over. His remedy to stress seemed to rest in close friends and prayer. He spoke about oneness in the body of Christ. He lectured on the importance of their mission to bring others to Christ, especially at a college campus. He spoke of it as helping someone in need, for what greater good can one soul do for another but to show him or her the way home when they are lost, reciting:

> Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me, I was sick and ye visited me: I was in prison and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger and took thee in? or naked and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick or in prison and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matthew 25:34-40)

Then, just as she said, he began to pray. The room of students stood, bowed their heads, closed their eyes, and reached out to one another, clasping hands tightly. Rachel took my hand and I followed suit, taking the hand of the girl next to me. The Reverend began his prayer by thanking God that we were all there. While he spoke, some of the students punctuated his words with “amen” and “yes Lord”. He thanked God for the
blessings that we had—that we all had warm places to stay, food to eat, and clothes to wear. He asked God to ensure that each of us took something from the words he had offered. And he asked that God would move the heart of anyone visiting or who needed to rededicate his or her life to pray with him, silently or aloud, the words he was about to speak. And as he said them, many in the room repeated his words:

“Lord, have mercy on my soul. I know that I have sinned and fallen short of your grace. I believe that you gave your son Jesus to die for my sins. I believe that He rose from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit and now sits at your right hand, waiting for me to repent and give my life to you. I know, Lord, that I am powerless and only you can remake me by your loving grace. Lord Jesus, I ask you now to come into my heart. Cleanse me of all my sin, Lord. I give to you, Lord, my solemn vow to dedicate myself to you and to sin no more. I ask it all in Jesus’ holy name. Amen.”

They prayed in earnest; they prayed aloud. They prayed with clenched hands and eyes shut tight. They prayed without crossing themselves. They prayed with the intense expectation that all in the room shared in their reverence. And I—I remained silent, watching. When the prayer was finished, Rachel squeezed my hand. I smiled at her. Then, the Reverend spoke again. “Okay! Let’s do some fellowshipping. There are chips and cookies and punch in the back, there. We can thank Sister Jones and Brother Elvin for that.” The group turned to the pair, who were standing by the snack table, and clapped. “So, everyone help yourselves and with God’s blessings I’ll see you all here again next week!” The group broke free of the enforced order of the chairs and moved about the room, some greeting each other with warm hugs, others heading for the snack
table. Rachel asked me to wait for just a second. She went immediately to talk to the Reverend Lacy. And so I stood there like a surveillance camera, taking in the laughter, smiles, and pleasantries, and for a moment I felt rather comfortably detached. Rachel beamed as she talked to the minister. She looked like a child who had just caught her first fish, and now she was bringing her father to see, hoping that he would be proud. But imagination is always better than reality, and I felt bad that there would be no real way I could ever cause her to smile that way. They came toward me. I smiled politely when she introduced me. He greeted me warmly. When he shook my hand he held it tight and did not let go, patting it softly as we spoke. I gave the requisite answers to his questions. Yes, I lived close by. No, I had not decided my major. Yes, I found the meeting interesting. No, I did not have a church home. Yes, I may come again. He told me that he had an office in the union where he would be happy to see me if I had any questions at other times during the week or if I needed to talk about anything. I smiled, told him thank you, told him I would remember. He smiled his more sincere smile and Rachel smiled her innocent one, but their eyes looked at me the same way. It was like there was something they expected of me...something I should have said that I hadn’t or perhaps something I should have done. I imagined they expected me to break down and repent on the spot, as if they were waiting for some bizarre and remarkable transformation to burst into being before them. I felt inadequate to the task and fell silent. Before long, Reverend Lacy excused himself to speak with some of the other students but not without reminding me to return. I said that I would, to be polite, but in all reality, I did not think that I would. Rachel suggested that we get some of the snacks at the back table. We walked in
that direction, but there was still a crowd milling around the table. I felt somewhat
daunted. Rachel became distracted by a friend. I backed away, putting some distance
between the two of us. I waited until the group around the table thinned then I ate from
what remained. It was good to have an evening snack, but I almost regretted the price. It
was not that these Christian students and their warm words and smiles seemed in anyway
disingenuous. But, their earnestness was disconcerting. It made me afraid that I might be
pressed to keep my shallow promises. Rachel was still talking with her friend, but I
noticed that her eyes wandered now and again until they found me. I guessed she did not
want me to leave without speaking to her again. That had not been my intention. But, I
had also hoped that she would leave too early to notice me lingering. I had counted on
being unnoticed for long enough to hide for the night in the conference room after
everyone else had gone. But by this time, people were putting away the leftover food and
cleaning the table, students were leaving, and Rachel was still there. Perhaps it would be
better, I thought, to find another place to loiter. I headed for the door. Rachel caught my
eye, but I nodded and waved politely. She smiled and waved back. There was a group of
sofas and chairs not too far down the hall from the room. I had once spent a night there,
avoiding security and janitorial staff by hiding behind a rather large potted ficus and an
overstuffed chair in a corner. I thought I would sit there quietly reading until the last of
the students left—they would likely leave in the opposite direction—and then, once they
were gone, I’d crawl behind it and pray that I remained unnoticed until morning. I angled
the chair just enough to obscure the view of the main hallway. It was a huge chair, large
enough for two people. I felt like a child sitting in it. I could hear the voices from the
meeting growing more and more quiet as one by one people left. I pulled a handout from philosophy class out of my backpack and began to read--essays and excerpts we were to study, some explanatory digestions by the professor. The first one was by Sartre.

...man first exists, that is, that man first of all is the being who hurls himself toward a future and who is conscious of imagining himself as being in the future. Man is at the start a plan which is aware of itself, rather than a patch of moss, a piece of garbage, or a cauliflower; nothing exists prior to this plan; there is nothing in heaven; man will be what he will have planned to be...

Then I looked up and she was standing in front of me. She said, “What are you doing over here by yourself?”

I said, “How did you know I was here?”

She said, “I didn’t. I was just wondering where you had gone, and something told me to look over here.”

“Oh...”

She was smiling again. The ottoman that went with the chair was nearby. She pulled it closer and sat down. I watched her like a movie...the way she pressed her knees together when she sat, the way her hands rested on her thighs, the way one of her shoulders was slightly higher than the other and the way her hair fell against it as she tilted her head slightly. She leaned toward me. I could smell her perfume. “What are you reading?”

I showed her the handout. I said, “It’s for philosophy class.”

“What's it about?” she said.
“It says that we are thrown into the world without a purpose,” I said.

Rachel said, “God has a purpose for each of us.”

I said, “It says we have to choose for ourselves what we will become.”

“But if we make decisions outside of God's plan for us,” she said, “nothing good can come of that. Good things only happen when we do the things that God wants for us. Right?” She waited for me to say yes. I said nothing. I was thinking of the last good things I had, and how I had asked Jill almost the same questions...is this what God wants...and she had said, you tell me...tell me by how you feel when I touch you whether God has made you for this...and when she touched me, I believed he had...he must have.

I watched as Rachel's eyes searched my face for a sign of solidarity. Her thickly lined lashes blinked at least three times at me before she became uncomfortable. She leaned back a bit on the ottoman and wrapped herself in her arms. “It's pretty dark in here,” she said, looking around, “and kind of chilly.”

I said, “They turn the heat off at night.”

She looked at me strangely, cocking her head like a confused puppy. But then, she found her smile again. She said, “Well, I guess we'd better get going. It's getting late. We don't want to get locked in here do we?”

I said nothing at first. Of course, I couldn't. I tried to think of something I could say that would encourage her to leave without me. I could hear the distant jingle of keys from a security guard on another hall. Reluctantly, I acquiesced. “Yes...you're right.”

We walked together through the deserted building.

Outside it was dark and cool, unpleasantly so. I had spent worse nights, to be
sure, but this night...it seemed that the cold went through me. Rachel had brought a
jacket and she pulled it tight as she walked. I stopped walking a few yards away from
the door of the union. She noticed, turned to me and said, “So, which way are you
headed?” I didn't know what to say. I don't know why at that moment the urge to keep
her in the dark was so strong in me. Perhaps it was because I didn’t really want her help.
Perhaps it was because if she offered, I knew I would have a hard time saying no. I
looked around. The physics building was near. I had once spent a night there making
myself look deeply engaged in study in a student lounge. They tended to stay open late.
Rachel said, “Do you live in the dorms?” The education building on the other side of the
square had carpeted floors in most of the rooms. If there was a night class, I might have a
chance to slip in unnoticed. Rachel said, “Oh, you have an apartment, then?” The wind
was starting to blow. It cut through my thin sweater. The coffee shop across the street
was open and fairly busy--too busy to notice if I nursed the same mug all night long.
Rachel said, “Scylla...” I couldn't see her. I was watching the cars on the street. It would
be a long walk to the law library. “Don't you have anyplace to go?” she said. I didn't
answer. “Oh . . . you don’t, do you? But, how--I . . . you really don't have anywhere to go,
do you?”

“No,” I said. Then, “I mean...I don't have an apartment.” The wind tossed leaves
around between us. She stared at me for a long time. I was about to tell her goodbye, to
turn and walk away.

She said, “God works in mysterious ways, doesn’t He?”

I hesitated. “I don't understand.”
Rachel smiled widely. “My roommate—well, my ex-roommate—left to move in with her boyfriend. Her room is paid for the whole semester and it's too late for her to get the money back. They haven’t assigned anyone else to the room yet--they don't even know she left--so it's like I have the whole room to myself, only there's this extra bed. You know...you could stay there for a while, if you wanted.”

It was not the first time that someone had offered me a place to stay. It was the first time in long time that someone had done so without questionable intent. Still, I thought, just tell her no. Sleep in the library again. Don't get too close. She was smiling again.

She said, “Oh come on. It'll be fun--like a sleepover. And the RA doesn't have to know--the resident assistant. She doesn't even know that Linda moved out. “

I was fidgety, looking at the ground. “Your roommate, “I said, “what if she returns?”

“She won't. Besides, this would be so much better. “Rachel’s face took on a hope filled expression. “Linda and I never had anything in common. She was always bringing her boyfriend in the room and letting him stay all hours of the night. She didn't care that we could have both been kicked out if she was caught.”

“Wouldn't you be kicked out too,” I said, “if I were discovered there?”

She laughed. “I don't think so. I could just say that you were a friend, and that's the truth now, isn't it? The worst the RA could possibly do would be to say that I couldn't have visitors past a certain hour and ask you to leave. I mean, it's not like we would be doing anything inappropriate or immoral!
I smiled, more at the ground than anything else. “Yes . . . of course.”

“Come on,” she said, “my dorm is this way. I’m in Chesterton. Come on . . . come on!” I followed. We walked most of the way in silence, though I do not think it was because Rachel had nothing to say. Her soft brow was tense in a way that made her look deep in thought. She noticed me looking at her once, and smiled. “It's just a little bit further!” I wondered what she was thinking. The way she walked made me smile, so I stayed a step behind her as she led me across campus, through the building to her door.

Rachel's room was not surprisingly small; the university provided furniture was predictably stern and nondescript. Her roommate's side of the room was noticeably empty. But her side was warmed by ruffled throw pillows and comforter, stuffed animals around the bed, a porcelain figurine of the cross on her bureau and another of praying hands on her desk, and on the walls poster prints of sunsets and waterfalls captioned with Bible verses. She said, “What do you think? I have an extra blanket and pillow you can use.” She began to look through one of the small bureau drawers. “And I have some pajamas you can use.” She loaned me pajamas and a towel to use in the shower. She insisted that I shower first, but I insisted the opposite. She was lucky to have gotten a room with a private bath. I guessed that her parents had paid extra for their daughter's luxury. She showered quickly while I looked out of the narrow window into the dimly lit courtyard. I had spent a night there, once, almost just beneath her window on a warm fall night. If she had been looking out of her window at just the right moment, she would have seen me, awkwardly trying to settle on the bench, trying to look as if I had fallen asleep while reading.
Rachel came out of the shower wrapped in her bathrobe, smelling sweetly of steam and jasmine. “Your turn,” she said. Her shower was much better than the ones I had used in the athletic center locker rooms. The showerhead sprayed with a steady and even pressure; the water was hot. I washed my hair with her shampoo...washed away the days outdoors, untangled the knots. I felt like a snake shedding its skin. When I came out of the shower, she was sitting on her bed in her pajamas--little pink shorts with small lace ruffles and a matching top, loose fitting, button-down tank top style that let me see her shoulders and the slope of her neck. She looked up from a book she was reading. “I gave you an extra pillow I had and a blanket, but I haven't washed my extra sheets yet, but I'll wash them tomorrow. I hope that's okay. Can you sleep on just a blanket tonight?” I looked at the bed across from hers--a bare mattress with a blanket draped across it and a ruffled pillow at the head. To me, it was exquisite. Surely it was the most comfortable thing I had the opportunity to sleep on since the shelter.

“It's perfect,” I said. I sat on the bed and, feeling a little naked in the pajamas she loaned me, a set like the ones she wore--only green in color, I wrapped myself in the blanket. It was soft and warm, smelling faintly floral--of whatever detergent she used--and far from the harsh odor of whatever industrial solvent was used by the shelters to detoxify their coarse wool blankets, it felt like home. I enveloped myself in that feeling, pulling my knees to my chest and holding the blanket tight around me.

“Are you cold?” she said.

I said, “No.”

“Oh, because I could turn up the heater.” “Everything is perfect,” I said, “Thank
you, Rachel.”

She smiled. “This is going to be so fun! You want to see what I’m reading?” I nodded. “It’s my daily devotional. I get it in the mail once a month. My mom sent it to me. It has a bible verse and a devotional prayer for every day of the month. Isn’t that neat?” I nodded. She was so pretty when she spoke of what she loved. Clean eyes brightened naturally. Skin, free of makeup, flushed slightly with her excitement. “Come sit over here,” she said. I obliged, keeping the blanket wrapped around me. She held the tiny book so that I could see between fingers so delicate I worried the paper might cut them. She turned the pages to the devotion for today. “See?” she said. “It’s so perfect. Proverbs 3:5-6: ‘Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding / in all thy ways acknowledge him, and He shall direct thy paths.’ You see?” I shook my head. “It’s perfect. By us trusting in God, he directed us here. He brought us together.” She looked at me hopefully.

I said, “I think I trusted in you.”

She looked confused at first, and then laughed. “That’s funny,” she said. “Seriously though, after you read the devotion you’re supposed to pray. Will you pray with me?” She offered me her hands to hold. I put my hands in hers. She bowed her head and closed her eyes, and as she prayed, I tried hard not to think of the first time Jill held my hand. Instead I listened to Rachel’s prayer, to the soft honesty in her voice as she gave thanks to God for all He had wrought.

The next morning I awoke warm and with a feeling of security that I had not felt in a long time. Rachel had been awake for some time and was already dressed. She
offered to loan me a change of clothes, but I assured her that I had more clothes in my locker. I dressed and folded the blanket on the bed. We went together downstairs to the cafeteria. This was not one of the dorm cafeterias I had visited. It was much bigger than the one at the dorm across from the law library. The lines were long. Rachel said, “Hey, I know. Why don’t we go to ‘Daily Bread?’ It’s a Christian coffee shop near here.” I must have looked skeptical. She said, “It’s not far. And I’ll buy.” I nodded my agreement, and followed her out of the dorm. She took me across the street from campus where stood a row of stores I had seen before. Rachel pointed out a narrow corridor between two of the stores. I followed her through it to a tiny courtyard decorated with English ivy that climbed the walls. There were a few other shops along the courtyard walls. On an ivy covered awning in the back I could barely see the words painted in a light script “Daily Bread.”

The scent of coffee was strong beyond the doors. The hardwood floors were worn. The walls were adorned with cheaply framed posters of forests, waterfalls, and mountains captioned with bible verses, much like the ones in Rachel’s room. We stood in a short line in front of a counter. There was a large case full of pastries and sandwiches. Rachel asked me what I would like, but I told her I would have whatever she suggested. It did not take long for the woman at the counter to hand us each a latte and a breakfast sandwich. We sat at one of the tables by the windows. I started to eat, but noticed that Rachel was praying. I waited patiently. When she finished, she looked up at me and smiled. “I always say grace before eating.”

I smiled back at her. “Of course.”
Rachel looked at me expectantly. “You don’t say grace?”

“I . . . umm . . .” Her eyes made me want to do something she would like. I began to cross myself then remembered that Rachel and her friends did not cross themselves when they prayed. I folded my hands in front of me, the way she had, and tried to remember a prayer my mother had taught me to say before meals. But the words wouldn’t come, and I didn’t know what else to say. My hands lowered to my lap. “I don’t really pray . . . anymore.”

“Why?” Rachel said, “But you prayed with me last night.”

“I listened to you pray,” I said.

“But--” Rachel seemed to be at a loss for words. It was as if she felt she couldn’t touch her sandwich unless mine had also been blessed. At last, she said. “Just say ‘Jesus wept.’” I watched her eyes as she waited for me to speak.

“Jesus wept.”

Rachel’s smile at my words did not give me the good feeling I imagined it would. “You see?” she said, “That wasn’t so bad. You have to pray sometime.”

When we finished eating, Rachel made me promise to meet her back at her dorm for dinner. Then she looked at her watch. “I’ve only got ten minutes until class. I’d better get going. I have to go all the way across campus!” She shouldered her bag and made a move to stand.

“I have a little time, actually. If you don’t mind, I think I’ll stay here for a while.” Rachel looked disappointed for a moment, then recovered. She reminded me again about dinner and I promised her I would be there. When at last she turned to leave,
the relief I felt surprised me. I watched her through the window as she left the courtyard.

I thought I would use the time before class to read my handouts or do other homework as I usually do, but I was taken by the atmosphere in the coffee shop. Sitting alone at a table while others chatted with friends was not unusual for me. But these people, all of them, were like Rachel, her friends, the women who worked at the shelters. And their voices tranquil and low seemed to envelop me in a blanket of acceptance that I might have much desired were it not for the feeling of being an imposter—among them, but not of them. And as I sat there watching them in their placid conversations, the sun seemed to blaze through the window with more intensity. Feeling overheated and a bit overexposed, I decided to move to the other side of the table to the chair in which Rachel had been sitting, where the wall cast a cool dark shadow. On the wall next to the window frame hung a poster of a mountain scene. Barely visible was a tiny climber in the midst of a vast expanse of icy grandeur. The caption was written in fancy script: “Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.”—Saint Augustine.” It reminded me of something Rachel’s minister had said, about being powerless, that only God could remake us. I looked around the room at his handiwork, and then I took my handouts out of my bag and began to read. It wasn’t long before I came upon the very words I had heard in class, the words I had read in my handout that Rachel had contradicted in favor of her God—that man was the author of himself. And if that were true, then what of this God I once loved, who Rachel still loved, who loved her and remade her into this dream, . . . who had made me into something he could only despise—or had I done that to myself?

I went about my usual schedule that day—Pre-Calculus, American History. My
other classes displaced all thoughts of God and man so that by the time I saw Rachel again, it was with an easy smile that I greeted her. She had found me again just before philosophy class, waiting on the bench for class to begin. Her hair was still immaculate, as it had been that morning, even though it was late afternoon. She sat with me, folding her perfect fingers in her lap. I could smell her perfume, sweet and faintly floral.

“So, how is your day going?” she said.

“It’s going well, thank you. How has your day been?”

She perked up. “It’s great! I told Rev. Lacy about how God led us together. He said it surely was a blessing. He said that when we follow God’s plan we’re just pushing Satan away. And it’s so true! I was almost late for my second class, but I had to tell him. I just think it’s so exciting!” She went on to talk about how wonderful it is to see God at work in one’s life. I remembered a similar speech given by a volunteer at one of the homeless shelters. I remembered how it rang so false there—though, I did not doubt that it was God’s hand that directed the penance I paid when most of the workers went home and the lights went off for the night, knowing I could not repent for the sins that put me there. I thought about Jill, wondered what she was doing now. I wondered if she was happy. Rachel’s affirmations draped about my shoulders like a yoke. I felt weary.

“Scylla?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Rachel. I guess I was thinking about my class.”

She smiled. “That’s ok. I guess it is getting to be time to go. What class are you going to?”

“Philosophy. It’s an intro to philosophy, really.” I said.
“Oh yeah, you were reading that the other day.” She looked thoughtful. “It must be hard. I don’t know anything about philosophy.”

I smiled. “It isn’t too hard. What class are you going to?”

“French. It is hard. I just can’t say all those words.”

“We’d better not be late,” I said.

“Right. Don’t forget—dinner at six!” I watched her hurry down the hall with light rapid steps until she disappeared around the corner. Then I went into the auditorium. The professor lectured about Nietzsche. He said that morality of the slave is self deceptive, reactionary, directed at other persons or other worlds; the morality of the master is directed at self and at this world; it is proactive, and it is self aware.

That afternoon, I studied in the law library until it was time for dinner. The cool air, the silence, and the smell of the books felt safe and familiar. I didn’t have the math book, but the boy who sat next to me in class let me copy the homework problems from his book. I set about working them. I liked doing them. It let me imagine that everything was in its place. I worked through them once and then again to check myself. And then, with no reason to occupy myself further with them, I somewhat reluctantly set them aside. I had reading to do for my history class, but I had left my book in my locker. My English class was progressing slowly enough that I had no work left to do for it. I had taken enough Latin in high school that, as I expected when I registered for it, I did not have to study for this first year class. And so I found myself reading more of the handouts for philosophy class. The passages the professor excerpted iterated what he had described in class. The noble or strong create for themselves a definition of good whereas the
common or weak determine evil as an other who acts against them, and unable to act in their own defense, they invoke god as an other on whom to place their hopes.

*And when the lambs whisper among themselves, “These birds of prey are evil, and does this not give us a right to say that whatever is the opposite of a bird of prey must be good?”* there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such an argument—though the birds of prey will look somewhat quizzically and say, *“We have nothing against these good lambs; in fact, we love them; nothing tastes better than a tender lamb.”*

And I began to imagine, as if watching from below, a large raptor circling in a clear sky.

I met Rachel in the cafeteria for dinner as she had asked. She seemed almost as bright and cheerful as she had at the beginning of the day. Almost immediately, she apologized for being a few minutes late. “My study skills tutoring thing ran late,” she said. We waited in the long cafeteria line. “Study skills?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s from the learning skills center.” Rachel said. “My mom wanted me to take it since I’m the first person in my family to go to college. She’s scared I’ll flunk out.” She laughed. While we waited, Rachel told me about her home town. It was a small place, so small that everyone there knew everyone else. She had graduated high school with the same classmates with whom she had started first grade. By going to school so far from home, she had left lifelong friends and she had yet to make new ones.

I sat across from her at a cafeteria table and watched her as she laid her napkin in her lap, closed her eyes and folded her hands in front of her. I watched her raspberry
glossed lips move softly as she prayed, “Bless us, oh Lord, and these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive . . .” I thought . . . gifts . . . this is a gift . . . Her heavy lashes lifted and she seemed to evaluate my gaze. Embarrassed, I attended to my plate.

We went to her room after dinner. She still had some studying to do. It crossed my mind to wonder how she had spent her day, as all she had talked about at dinner was her small town home, her Southern Baptist church that she attended every Sunday without fail, her friends—so close they never got into trouble, how she missed them. I took out my history book that I had retrieved from my locker on the way to Rachel’s dorm for dinner, and I studied with her for a while. She sat at the built-in desk; I stretched out on her roommate’s bed to read, feeling it very much a luxury. But the reading did not move me and I found my mind wandering. I wondered if Jill were sitting in some dorm room at the same moment. She would have probably have begun college the year before me—at least a year before, maybe two . . . how long had it been? I wondered what classes she would take, if she still thought of me sometimes, whether she was very angry at me for what I had done. And really, I had no doubt that leaving the way I did had at least hurt her. As much as I wanted to see her again, I could hardly imagine it—I couldn’t imagine facing her. I remembered one summer afternoon—it was a Saturday, so her mother was at home. Jill locked the door to her bedroom and loaded the CD changer with music we had just bought. We sat on her floor to listen. I began to leaf through the liner notes. She made herself comfortable leaning her back against her bed then beckoned for me to join her. I left the CD covers on the floor and went to her. She kissed me and held me. We talked a bit about the music, listened more. I rested my head on her chest, her arms were
warm around me, and closed my eyes to the sound of her breathing and the rhythm of her heart, just off the beat of the music. For a long time we sat that way. I looked up at her once to find her staring into space. She noticed and kissed me on the forehead. Almost three CDs passed before there was a knock on Jill’s door. “Jill? Jill, why is this door locked?”

“I don’t know, mom.” She held me tighter.

“I said, why is this door locked.” Mrs. Falconer sounded angry.

“It was an accident. I didn’t know it was locked,” Jill said. I felt her take a deep breath and her fingers grew tense.

“What are you doing in there?”

Jill said, “Nothing.” Her embrace became almost uncomfortable.

“Oh really?” Jill’s mother’s voice became terse. “Wendelin, what are you girls doing in there?”

Jill whispered in my ear and told me what to say adding, “And don’t you dare laugh.”

“We’re talking about boys.” I told her mother. Jill stifled a giggle when I said it.

“Talking about—Jill, open this door. And turn off that noise.” Mrs. Falconer said, exasperated.

“Okay,” Jill said. She let me go and reached under the bed. She pulled out a stack of teen magazines and spread them on the floor in front of us. I was dumbfounded, but she just opened one of them and handed it to me. She started to turn off the music, but stopped. “One more thing.” She shushed me with a finger over her lips then kissed me
again quietly, smoothing my hair with her hands.

“Jill!” Mrs. Falconer yelled.

“Okay!” Jill winked at me. Then she switched off the CD player and let her mother into the room.

Thinking about it again made me smile and for a moment it was as if it wasn’t really so far away, as if it—as if Jill wasn’t lost to me. I looked at Rachel sitting at her desk. Her ankles were crossed under her chair. She rested her head in one hand with her fingers entwined in her hair. She made a frustrated sigh and turned the page of the book she was reading. A few moments later, she picked up her pencil and began writing in her notebook. When she wrote, she sat up straight in her chair, like a teacher, or a model. I found myself watching her, the way one admires a painting or the first brightly colored bird of spring—an untouchable beauty.

“Rachel,” I said, “Would it be okay with you if I took my shower now?”

When I came out of the bathroom, Rachel was watching television, having given up on studying for the evening. She was watching a religious program. The host was just closing the show with a prayer. At his “amen” she unbowed her head, looked up, and smiled at me. She told me that she had made up her roommate’s bed with the extra sheets she told me about the day before. She had come back between classes and washed them. I thanked her. She left the television on when she went to take her shower. I sat on her roommate’s bed in the pajamas she had given me to wear. Another show came on. This one featured Christian music videos. I watched one after another with fascination. The singers all seemed to share the same peace that Rachel and her friends had. They
clenched their fists and creased their brows with emotion. They spoke of god as a savior, a redeemer—not god the vengeful. I let myself be lulled by the flowing melodies and placid images. But before long, the landscapes, sunrises, flocks of birds streaming toward open sky began to seem just what they were—flickering images, distant and false. The words emptied of their value. I found I had wrapped myself in the blanket Rachel had spread across her roommate’s bed. I closed my eyes. It was not long before the warm scent of jasmine passed over me. The bathroom door opened and Rachel stepped into the room. She said to me, “Are you cold?”

I said, “No.”

Rachel sat on her bed and got out her book of devotions. She began flipping through it, but stopped. “You know what?” She said, “I spent all day talking about myself, but I never asked about you.”

“I don’t mind. I enjoyed hearing about you.”

“No,” she insisted, “I should have asked about you. After all—I would like to get to know you better.” There was that same expectancy in her eyes that I had seen before. It made me want to do something to please her, to make her smile at me the way she had smiled at her campus minister.

I began to tell her about myself. I told her where I grew up. I told her that I was adopted. “Well,” I said, “There isn’t really much more to tell. I went to a Catholic school. And…umm…”

“You’re Catholic? Really?” she said, “They used to tell us that Catholics pray to idols, statues, I mean. Is that true?”
I said, “I don’t pray anymore.” She looked hard at me for a time. I did not say anything else.

“Let’s read the devotional,” She said. I wanted to decline, but she opened the little book and waited for me to join her. I sat next to her on her bed, still wrapped in her blanket. She read,

_Romans 12:2 “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of god.”_

_“Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)_

And as she read the explication that followed, I began by watching her and I tried to listen to the words she read, but my mind wandered just that quickly. I thought about another woman who had read to me that way. It was the winter before, in the Eighth Street Mission. She had found me in the corner after another bad night. I was the last one left inside and instead of telling me that I also had to go, she took me into an office, gave me coffee and leftover Christmas cookies. Her name was Rebecca. She had dark brown hair, long, and a funny way of smiling. Her eyebrows were heavy and dark, making her look somewhat serious, but her voice was more than kind. To me, then, it was like music. She read to me from the Bible. I never even listened to the words, only to her voice, the notes and phrases intoning, it will be ok . . . everything will be ok. I focused again on Rachel, on her dark hair, the way it draped over her pale shoulder like a curtain or a veil. For a moment I closed my eyes, hoping to hear some new song. But there was no music in Rachel. She read in the voice of a child reciting a favorite poem. I opened my eyes
just as she turned to me. “Isn’t it wonderful,” she said, “the way God works? It’s just like
Rev. Lacy said. We can push away evil by doing good things.”

“Good things . . . like what?”

Rachel beamed, “We’re doing it now.” I shrugged. “Being here together, reading
God’s word.”

“Mm,” I said, not looking at her.

“And, um…” She struggled to gain my attention. My mind was wandering
again…Nietzsche’s circling bird of prey…Jill winking at me in Latin class…the uniform
skirts we had to wear…how interesting she made them…Rachel said, “You can do it all
the time—in your everyday life.” I looked at her then. She said, “Overcome evil with
good.”

“By…?”

“Well, I …” Rachel fingered the pages of her devotional booklet nervously then
closed it and laid it in her lap. “I know,” she said, suddenly enthusiastic, “One thing I do
for God every day: I’m remaining a virgin!”

“Really…”

“Yes! I took a vow—we had this ceremony at church—and we vowed to remain
chaste until marriage. So, that’s like an everyday thing—keeping myself pure for God
and pushing away evil.” She smiled proudly.

“Hmm,” I said. I wondered what it would have taken for me to have told Jill no
the first time she touched me. “Is it hard?”

“Nope. Because I know that I want to keep myself pure for Christ and for the man
God chooses for me to marry.”

“Oh. You have . . . a boyfriend, I suppose?”

Rachel shook her head, causing her hair to fall toward her face. “No. I used to, back in high school, but he was just—well, you know.” She turned the devotional over and over between her fingers.

“Did he ask you to have sex?” I asked.

“Oh no!” she said. “We all took the same vows and all. It was just one of those things. I mean—you know how boys are!” She gave me a knowing look. I looked away, pulled her blanket tighter around me. There was a short silence. She said, “Oh, well…um, I guess you…?”

“No,” I said, “I’m not.” I could feel her eyes. I stared at the floor.

“Oh. So you had a boyfriend in high school, I guess?”

“No.”

“You didn’t? But . . .” Rachel paused. Then it came to her. She exclaimed with was a chilling note of anxiety in her voice. “Oh! Oh no…I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” But I didn’t want to talk about that. I didn’t want to talk about it with her. I didn’t want to think about it at all.

“I had a girlfriend,” I said. I had not wanted to mention Jill.

“What?” Rachel was stunned. “Why?”

“I loved her.”

“But…” I had thought Rachel would be shocked and possibly afraid of me. Perhaps she would even ask me to leave. It would have been just as well, though it had
been nice for a while to rest in comfort and safety, wrapped in her warm blanket. She spoke softly and carefully. “You know, for a woman to lie with another woman is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord.”

Yes, I know. I am an abomination. “Yes, I know.”

“So, you’re not doing that now, are you?”

I answered in truth. “No, I am not doing that now.”

Rachel gave a deep and relieved sigh. “That’s good. God forgives all sins.”

Happiness crept back in to her voice. “Hey, you can reclaim your virginity.” I was skeptical. “We have that ceremony at our church, too. You rededicate your life to Christ and promise to be chaste from now on. That would be something you could do to overcome evil with good.”

My evil desire overcome. “What good is there…” I didn’t mean to speak aloud. Rachel said, “What? What do you mean? God is good. His will for us is good.”

“No for me.”

“No,” Rachel said, “God’s will is good for everyone.”

I thought for a moment. “Who decides? Shouldn’t a person decide for herself what is good? Isn’t it the action of a slave or a servant to look to someone else for what is good?” I watched Rachel as I spoke. She stared at me in disbelief.

“What are you saying? We are all servants of the King.”

“Then what good there is…what good you do cannot be a virtue, can it. It is only something done out of fear, obedience.”

“Obedience is a virtue,” she said, uncertain.
“And even as you abstain from sex—it is not a free choice, not something you create for yourself. You cannot say no to what you have never been offered or reject something you have never had.”

Rachel became agitated. “No! No, it’s not like that. You do it yourself for God. Everything is for God because He’s the only good. He just is.” Her face was troubled. She didn’t look at me. There was a long silence.

At last I said, “Aren’t you tired?”

She turned suddenly and extended her hands to me. “Let’s pray.”

“Would it be okay if I just listened while you pray?” I said. She hesitated, then took my hands in hers and bowed her head. She closed her eyes and squeezed my hands as she prayed for strength, for my understanding, that God would show me His way, that I would see Him as she saw Him. And as she prayed, I watched her. Her face relaxed, almost as if she were asleep. I wondered what it would take for me to step inside her dream.

That night as I lay secure in her sheets and blanket I began to think of things I hadn’t before, things I hadn’t had time to consider when looking for a place to sleep and trying not to get caught. Earlier that day, Rachel had asked me about my major. She didn’t know hers because she had not quite decided what she wanted to do, but I hadn’t even thought of going to college in terms of a career or even as an educational opportunity. I thought of it the way I had thought of everything else for the past two or more years: as a way to get from one day to the next, hopefully without getting hurt quite so much as the day before. I thought about some of the things I could remember
happening to me, my penance. I wondered if they would be good in Rachel’s eyes, the
will of God.

The next day, Rachel was awake and dressed again before me. She offered me a
change of clothes, this time adding, “Are you sure? I wouldn’t mind at all.” But, I
declined. At breakfast I watched again as she prayed over her food, but she surprised me
by suddenly opening her eyes halfway through. She finished her prayer, watching me
watching her. She said, “You really don’t pray, do you.”

I said, “I think I like it better watching you.” A confused look crept into her face. I
said, “Maybe, you could pray for me?”

“I don’t know,” she said. She was serious and very quiet for the rest of the meal. I
thought that she might be displeased with me after our conversation the night before, but
after breakfast she made me promise again to meet her for dinner.
Because the words that follow would never do to explain

Callings do not always free

Because so many poems are about things

A day in the park making love to her in full view of stars

Hidden by sunshine diving into her smell of

Fresh cut grass on my tongue and children's laughter on my skin

Or some such thing--but not

The dark silence hidden in my breast pocket

Where I reach as deeply as I can and she is gone

Because I never told her his name or why I fear

The dark and who was that anyway, which one

And how many could I have counted through closed eyes

Because if you keep picking at that it will scar

It is a scar

Because I can't see her

Because if I cut of the beast's head and hide it under a rock

She will have no power over me

I know where she is--she says I am the stone

Because she leaves me every time I close my eyes

And says I am not leaving
Because her two hands dark and light might rescue me
And could one really, without the other
Because I need her fingers to breathe
Because she believes I am a nice girl
And if I said my name she might forget
I was relieved that day that Rachel’s schedule did not let us cross paths. After my classes, I studied again in the library until the time she would expect me. I read more of the handout from philosophy class. This time the passage was by Kierkegaard.

*What I really need is to be clear about* what I am to do, *not what I must know except in the way knowledge must precede all action.* . . . *The thing is to find a truth which is true* for me, *to find* the idea for which I am willing to live and die. . . . *What use would it be to propound the meaning of Christianity, to explain many separate facts, if it had no meaning for myself and for my life? . . . What use would it be if the truth were to stand before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I acknowledge it or not, and inducing an anxious shudder rather than trusting devotion? Certainly I won’t deny that I still accept an imperative of knowledge, and that one can also be influenced by it, but then it must be taken up alive in me, and this is what I now see as the main point.*

Even though I had read the words, I couldn’t really understand what he meant. Looking back on it now, perhaps I did understand the meaning but not the possibility of it. Still, the words for some reason stayed in my mind through the evening: “a truth for me.”

I met Rachel as we agreed for dinner. I watched her pray, listened to her day. She told me she had seen her Reverend Lacy again. “Really,” I said, “What did you talk about?”

“Oh,” she said, suddenly self conscious, “It wasn’t important. How was your day?”
“Unremarkable,” I said. She laughed.

That evening, Rachel had to go to a math study session. She let me stay alone in her room. While she was gone, I did things I had not done for along time. I turned on her radio and listened to music with my eyes closed. I turned on her TV, watched a sitcom, and laughed. By the time she came back, I was reading again. She said when she came through the door, “Gee. You really study a lot.”

I smiled. “How was your study session?”

She sat on her bed and tossed her books aside. “Well, we went over the homework, but there are still some of them I don’t understand.” She paused. “Have you taken this class—Pre-Calculus?”

“I’m taking it now.”

“Really? Do you understand it?”

I said, “I think so.”

Rachel suddenly became sheepish. She looked down at her hands and then at her book. “Do you think you could help me with some of it?” she asked meekly.

“I could try,” I said.

“Oh great! I’m so scared I’m gonna fail.” She gathered her books together again and sat down with them in the middle of the carpeted floor. She smiled almost gleefully. “Come on!” I sat next to her as she spread open her book and homework papers before us. She recounted what had happened at the study session and showed me the problems she still couldn’t do. I examined them.

“These problems are never really as complex as they seem.” I pointed at the
variable with her pencil. “This represents something you don’t know. The only way to understand it is to express it in terms of something that you already know. So first, I manipulate the expression like this . . . Now you can see what this means. And once you assign it value,” I plotted the curve on her paper, “Then you can see the shape of things.”

She looked thoughtful. “I think I get it,” She said slowly. Her eyes looked half closed and her brow was serious. I watched her eyes move as she looked over my equations. There was an unconscious drama in her long lashes. “Ok,” she said, “I want to try.” She took the pencil and began. Here and there she asked me if she was doing things right. I guided her. When she finished and drew her own curve, she asked again if she was right. I told her that she was. She checked the back of the book, and when she looked up from the answer section, her face held the same smile, almost as broad, as I had seen her give to her Reverend Lacy. I took an involuntary breath. “Oh thank you!” she said. “God sent you to me!”

She took her shower, and I took mine. She asked me again to read the devotional with her, and I could not decline. Again she sat on her bed and beckoned for me to join her. I sat, and she moved closer to me to be sure that I could see the book. Her arm and thigh brushed warmly against me. She turned the devotional pages with the lightest touch of her fingertips until she found the right page and began to read.

My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:26

As she read the passage that followed, I watched her as I had before. She had swept her hair off of her shoulders, this time. Her neck was long and graceful, like Jill’s,
but instead of the having the rich darkness that infused Jill’s skin, Rachel’s was almost pearllike. I followed a path of light and shadow from her collarbone, where the lacy strap of her pajama top rested so lightly, upward to the gentle slope of her jaw line, to her chin, and then to her lips, where I watched her words, flavored by momentary glimpses of her tongue. I remembered watching Jill that way—the day that it was her turn to recite a sonnet in English class. It was not long after I first learned that she noticed me noticing her. We had been studying sonnets for weeks and we were to choose one that we liked to memorize and recite in front of the class. Jill walked confidently past me to the front of the class when Sister Andrea called on her. She leaned back on one leg with her arms behind her back. She stared up at the ceiling for a moment, feigned nervousness, not very well, to cover any mistakes, then began:

*Is it thy will thy image should keep open*

*My heavy eyelids to the weary night?*

And as she spoke, I was drawn to watch her words, watch her lips part and close, her tongue touch her teeth. She spoke deliberately and with purpose, slowly and with dramatic pauses between phrases, until I was at last forced to shift my gaze to her eyes; she was looking directly at me. My face must have shown a slow awakening. She began to smile. I felt myself blushing and looked down at my desk. Jill finished her recitation and returned to her seat, letting her fingers drift across my desk as she walked past. When it was my turn to recite, I was too flustered to speak. I couldn’t make myself look up at the class, at Jill. I couldn’t remember anything after the first line. *Batter my heart, three personed God; for you . . . for you . . . for you . . .* Sister Andrea said that I could recite it
to her alone after school. I sat down, twice embarrassed. Jill told me later that it was all she could do to keep from laughing, in part because I was so visibly affected and in part because it relieved her so that I was. After school, she found me in Sister Andrea’s room again, reciting my poem. She waited, standing outside the classroom door until I was done and had been excused and fell into step with me as I walked down the hall and around the corner to my locker.

“Donne, huh?” She said, “What was that last part again?” I shrugged. “You know—take me to you, something.”

“Take me to you, imprison me, for I, except you enthrall me, never shall be free, nor ever chaste except you ravish me.” I don’t know why I was suddenly able to say it then.

“Really?” she said, “Ravish you, huh?” I felt myself beginning to blush again. I stopped at my locker and fumbled for the combination. Jill said, “Say it again.” I turned to her, surprised. She grinned impishly.

“No,” I said.

“Come on! You’ll never be free except . . .”

“No!” I looked around, embarrassed, but the hall was empty.

Jill leaned casually, with her back against the lockers. “Afraid you’ll get what you asked for?”

She was teaching me to know her.

Rachel looked up from her reading. “I just love this one,” she said. She turned to me with her broad smile, reawakening me to her presence.
“Oh really,” I said, “Why is that?”

Rachel looked at me, incredulous. “Because of what it just said!”

“Oh,” I said, at a loss.

She said, “Whatever happens, God is always there for you. Even when you can’t be strong or when you’re not sure what to do, He is there to help you and give you strength.”

“Oh, I see.” I tried to be accepting of what she said, remembering learning similar sentiments at school and in church. Still, I wondered what I should have done to gain that strength. Had He ever really been there for me? Did I somehow miss Him? Or, was that what I felt those nights, caught in the hands of someone more fortunate, before the shelter of school, pressed hard and cold against me, the power of God manifested in man? “He makes known his will.”

Rachel brightened. “Exactly! Even in the worst situation, if you just open yourself up to the will of God, He will show you His way and give you the strength to get through.”

So, I thought, I have been shown.

I looked at her. She seemed suddenly so distant, like the sun on a winter day. She said, “Umm, I think it’s kind of like what you were telling me yesterday, about what you used to do.” I didn’t respond. “With women,” she said.

“Oh.”

She began carefully. “I think it’s like, if you wanted to do something like that, you should open yourself up to what God wants and let Him show you the right way.” I stared
at my hands on my knees, without responding. Rachel said, “I talked to Reverend Lacy about it today. He said it’s a temptation of the flesh. He said it’s a perversion.”

“You told him about me?” I stood, took the blanket from her roommate’s bed, wrapped it around myself, sat on the floor, and pulled it tight.

Rachel said, “I’m sorry. But…it just bothered me. That and some other things—I just wanted to—oh, are you cold?”

“No.”

Rachel shook her head. “I’m sorry, Scylla. I hope you’re not too mad at me.” She looked at me innocently. I shook my head. She said, “I didn’t ask him everything I was thinking.”

“What were you thinking,” I said.

Rachel looked uncomfortable. “Well, I just couldn’t see why…why you would want to sin—with another girl.” She paused, and looked at me. I looked back, but said nothing. “I mean, girls aren’t—I mean, boys—boys are the natural partners for girls, so…And, you said you had sex, but a girl doesn’t have a—you know . . .”

“She has fingers,” I said, mostly into my lap, “and she has a tongue.”

There was a long pause. Rachel looked confused. “But how do you…?” For a long time I just watched her, wondering what I should say. Her expression was serious and patient. I began to describe the ways one woman could touch another, watching her carefully as I spoke. I wondered why she wanted to know. I wondered if I was being studied—this, a fascinating new chapter to add to her report. Intently, she listened, at one point moistening her lips with her tongue, at another, pressing her knees together tightly.
and crossing her ankles. “What does it feel like?” she said.

“Well, that is something better shown than told,” I said. At this, I thought I saw the blood rush to her cheeks, but she turned away quickly. I directed my gaze toward my lap again, thinking of the first time Jill really touched me—more than just kissing and fondling through clothes—her bold demand for closeness. We sat together on her bed. She said she wanted to see the daylight on my skin, and slowly, with her coaxing, I showed myself to her in light filtered through her window sheers. She looked, touched just a little, and then she showed herself to me. I was naïve; I had no idea what she was about to do. I don’t know that it surprised me—anything she did. My body seemed to anticipate her, to follow her experience blindly. Then when she said, “Now, you . . .” I followed her instructions with closed eyes, feeling my way led by the sound of her voice. It was one of the things I missed most—being surrounded by her.

“That isn’t sex.” Rachel spoke suddenly.

“What?”

Her voice became more confident. “Just kissing and feeling around—that isn’t sex.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is!” I said. “And, how would you know, anyway? You said you’ve never had sex.”

“Yeah, but I know what it is,” Rachel said, “You have to have a man to have sex, and what you said—that’s just feeling around and kissing and whatever.”
I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t explain myself and I was unsure whether I should try. At last, I said, “Then maybe . . . it isn’t a sin.”

She was silent for only a moment, shocked, it seemed that I would even suggest it. “Yes, it is! It is a sin.”

“Was it a sin for you and your boyfriend to kiss and touch?” Rachel said, “That’s different. And besides—,” she went on, but I was thinking about Jill and the things she used to tell me about why this wasn’t any different, why—for us—this was right.

I said, “For me, it’s not a sin.”

“What are you talking about?” Rachel said, “If it’s not a sin, what is it?”

I remembered what Jill used to say. “Grace.”

Rachel looked stunned. “That’s crazy,” she said, “That’s just crazy. It says in the Bible that it’s a sin.”

I knew what it said. I pulled the blanket tighter around me. There was a long silence. Finally, I spoke. “You always say the Bible says this or that, but you don’t know on your own. You don’t know what’s right or wrong. You just follow what other people say without thinking for yourself. You just wait for the Bible or Reverend Lacy to tell you what to do and then you just do it—like a slave.” I don’t know why I said it. I wasn’t sure I even believed it. But, Rachel reacted the way I thought she would.

“No, I don’t!” Her delicate hand formed a fist on her knee. “You don’t obey God because you’re a slave. You do it because you love him and you’re a faithful servant.”

“What is the difference between a servant and a slave,” I said, “You still don’t think for yourself.”

“You do what he wants or you go to hell. That is not much of a choice.”

“It is a choice,” Rachel said, “You choose what’s good.”

Deliberately, I said, “You only think you know what’s good because you believe what other people tell you. You’ve never done anything yourself, so you don’t know.”

Rachel pressed her lips together as if she would have pouted were it not that it might have satisfied me. Our eyes might have met, but hers were unfocused. I wondered if I had really angered her this time. She might ask me to leave. It might have been for the best. Maybe that was what I really wanted. As much of a luxury as her world had seemed, I almost wanted an escape. She looked at me seriously. She held out her hands, as if it were a demand. “I know because I pray.” When I didn’t move to join her, she stood, letting the devotional book fall from her lap, then she sat down in front of me, cross-legged and extended her hand again. “Give me your hands,” she said. I exposed my hands from beneath the blanket. She took them, held them firmly, and began to pray. She prayed for my forgiveness; she prayed that I would understand; she prayed that I would one day see the light in her message and overcome evil with good. And as I watched her, she seemed all the more beautiful for her fervor. The soft earnestness of her voice, the way her neck moved slightly with her words, made me want to touch her. She said “amen” and opened her eyes to me. “Why won’t you pray?” Her hands were so warm; I couldn’t answer.

That night wrapped in Rachel’s blanket, I dreamed for the first time in a long
time. I dreamed that I could hear Jill’s voice, telling me to wake up, not to be late. I
dreamed that I could feel her hands on my shoulder, playing with my hair, “Come on,
baby.” But then I remembered that I couldn’t, and I remembered why.
There is a room with yellow walls. There is a bed, and a table with a lamp. The floor is hard and wood. There is a worn rug with fringe. I am lying on it, with my face pressed into the threads, and one hand can feel the cold wood . . . it is so cold there. My face is hurting and wet and cold. My whole body is hurting. Someone is sitting on my back, holding me down. A man takes off my shoes and throws them away. I see the feet of another man walk past me. Voices. And it gets colder and colder . . . hard to move at all, anymore. They’ve taken everything now and I want to close my eyes, but . . . too many hands--pulling me by the hair, pulling me apart like an old doll, prying open my mouth to suffocate me from the inside—bodies pushing through me, cutting me open from one end and now the other, forging paths for those to come. He said, “This’ll make sure you remember.”
I woke up to bright light coming through Rachel’s window. I was still wearing her pajamas, still wrapped tightly in her blanket. Still here, still in her room, it was just a dream. But I was still shaking inside, an anxious quivering in my chest like a scream that had never come out. I told myself aloud, “Just a dream,” frightened suddenly that I might have been heard, but then I heard Rachel moving about in the bathroom. I sat up, trying to collect my thoughts, and waited for her to finish. I didn’t know why it had felt so real—not like a memory inside a dream, or even a dreamed memory—but real—as if it had just happened, or just happened again. But, I didn’t want to think of it. It couldn’t have been a memory, and I didn’t want it, if it was.
and so i wither like a succulent starved for water
a slow diminishment almost imperceptible
time tightens around me
and with each loss, dying a little
writing words to dreamgirls
apologies whispered into rare distance
hello
Rachel stepped into the room and offered a cheery “Good morning!” as if I had done nothing to upset her at all. The scent of jasmine followed her into the room. It made me smile and I began to let myself think of the previous evening and night as things of the past. I got up to get dressed. Again, Rachel offered me a change of clothes, a bit more insistently than before, but again, I declined. We went downstairs, waited through the cafeteria line, and sat down to eat breakfast. I waited before eating for her to pray. She folded her hands in front of her, but then looked at me. “This time, I want you to pray with me. Just fold your hands like this.”

“Oh…” I said. Her face was serious but not unkind. Still I said, “I would rather watch you, if that’s ok.”

“You need to learn how to pray,” she said, “And this is a really easy prayer. It’s just the blessing.”

“You could pray for me,” I said.

Rachel became annoyed. “No! You have to pray for yourself. Fold your hands like this; bow your head and close your eyes.”

Suddenly that feeling I had that morning, that shaky feeling inside, came upon me all over again—a pressing need to escape. “I don’t want to,” I said

“Why not? It’s just thanking God for the food.”

I couldn’t look at her. The feeling wouldn’t go away. “No,” I said. I wondered if she could see me shaking. I picked up my fork. My hand looked steady enough. I started eating, without looking at her. Rachel was silent for some time. Then, she whispered a brief prayer and ate. She picked up her tray and left for class without a word. I was sure
that I had crossed the line with her now. I knew that I would probably regret the loss of
having someplace to be. But, I thought, maybe not so much. The shaky feeling began to
subside.

I went to my classes that day and let them take my mind. I did not expect that
Rachel would find me again before my philosophy class. But, while I was waiting, sitting
outside the classroom door, I saw her approach me from the hall. “Hi!” she said. I must
have looked confused. “What’s wrong?” She sat next to me.

“I…well, I thought you were, maybe, angry with me for not praying,” I said.

She laughed. “That’s ok. We’re friends. We’re bound to have differences, right?
The Bible says we should forgive and forget.”

“Ohh,” I said. “Umm…Did you talk to Reverend Lacy?”

“I don’t have to talk to him all the time,” Rachel said, with a slight scowl, “I can
think for myself, you know.” There was a long, tense silence. “I just wanted to make sure
about dinner. Maybe we could meet at 6:30 this time? I have a few things to do and I
think I might run late.”

“Yes, that’s fine,” I said.

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise,” I said.

She was smiling again. “You know,” she said, “I know you don’t like to pray
now. But once you accept Jesus into your heart everything’s going to feel so different.”

“Once I what?”

Rachel was quick to qualify, “Oh I don’t mean you never went to church or
“Anything. But you probably need to rededicate your life to Christ.” She paused, looking at me. “You just have to open yourself up to him and let him come inside your heart. It’ll make everything better. I mean…well…that’s how it was for me.” She had that look again, an enticing, radiant innocence. And I might have been taken in, at least a bit, if not for the anxious tremors that began again in my chest. She said, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I guess I was just thinking about class again.”

She said, “Oh, it’s almost time, isn’t it. I guess I’d better get going.” She stood and shouldered her bag. “See you at 6:30,” she said, “Promise?”

“Promise,” I said, and returned her smile. She left, and I went into the lecture hall. The professor talked about Kierkegaard. He said that true faith could only be achieved by individual choice, not by adherence to dogma. He said that subjectivity is truth.

After class, I went to the library to study, but for some reason I couldn’t concentrate. I pushed myself through my math homework, but lost interest when it came to rechecking the problems. I tried to read for my other classes. I opened up my history book. But my eyes only dragged themselves across the page. My mind began to wander. I thought about the dream I had the night before. It had seemed so real and yet I couldn’t even call any of the images to mind. The feelings, though, had stayed with me. Just thinking about it brought them to the fore. I tried to focus again on the book, to get the dream out of my thoughts. I began reading again. But my mind continued to wander, away from freedom and slavery, war and reconstruction. I thought about Rachel. She would be expecting me soon, and I was not quite sure even why. Maybe it was her innocence that let her forgive my blasphemy so easily, so completely. I thought of her
smile that afternoon when she met me in the hall. Hadn’t I crossed a line? But she was just as friendly as the first day, eager to share herself with me—in one way, at least—the only way she would ever consent to, I knew, though she had been rather curious. I thought again about Jill, how she first came to me. Had I even had the time for curiosity before she showed me what I wanted? I couldn’t remember it. She told me later about the way she looked at me then, “I used to see you sitting there all prim and proper. You looked so pristine, so perfect and untouched. I wanted to corrupt you. I wanted to make you say ‘fuck.’” So much time had gone by. I looked down at my book. Would I ever get past this chapter?

I waited for Rachel in front of the cafeteria, as she asked. People crowded into the door, but I didn’t see her anywhere. I looked up at the clock above the service line. It wasn’t moving. It had stopped, probably a long time ago. I did not remember looking at it before. I wondered if it had always read 11:55. Then I saw her. She was almost running down the hall to join me. The excitement in her face and in her step, the way her hair was flung behind her, was buoyant, and made me overlook any concerns I had. She was carrying such a large handful of pamphlet and papers that she almost dropped them in her rush. “I’m sorry! I was afraid I’d miss you!” she called. I just smiled. Rachel hastily shoved the papers into her backpack. I was tempted to ask her about them, but she said, “Let’s get in line,” and moved toward the door. I followed. In line, she talked quickly and insistently, as if there were some urgency in her to tell me something. But nothing she said seemed very important. She told me about her day, about a cute boy in one of her classes who let her borrow a sheet of paper, that her mother used to make meatloaf every
Saturday, but never like this. I told her about my school at home, about how we always used to have fish on Fridays.

“Every Friday?” she said, “Why?” I shrugged. It didn’t seem worth the trouble to explain. But just then, I remembered Jill again, the lewd jokes she used to mutter every Friday as the cafeteria woman gave us each our rectangular breaded cod filet, and I almost laughed aloud, remembering the expression of mischief she wore, one eyebrow raised and her little half smile. She’d jostle me in line, whispering of our dark secrets and making wicked double entendres until I blushed. I was still smiling when Rachel and I sat down to eat. She noticed, looking at me with her own interested grin. She said, “You must be in a really good mood. I’ve never seen you smile like that—I mean I haven’t known you all that long, but…” Her eyes were inquisitive, like Jill’s often were, but more innocent. “What?” she said.

I turned my gaze. “Nothing,” I said. I picked up my fork to eat.

“No!” Rachel suddenly exclaimed. I looked up. “We have to pray first.”

“Rachel,” I said.

She was quick to explain. “I know you don’t like to pray, but it really isn’t that bad. You’ve just spent too much time outside of God’s love and it makes you feel funny about it. And we have to thank God for all he’s given us.” She reached across the table for my hands. I didn’t move. “Come on,” she said.

A queasiness grew in my stomach, then traveled upward where it became a tremble in my breathing, in my voice. “Rachel,” I said again.

Her brow tensed, eyebrows lowered. “Scylla, give me your hands.” I complied.
She prayed, “Lord Jesus, thank you for this day and for all you’ve given us.” She squeezed my hands tighter, as if I might escape, and as she did, I knew immediately how much I wanted to do just that. “Lord, bless this food that we are about to receive, and let us know and remember your glory as we partake of it. Amen.” With that, she released me. A satisfied smile spread across her face, but it did not feel the way I thought it might to make her smile. It felt like I had that morning, very wrong. I put my hands back under the table, hardly hearing her words of reassurance for the rush of blood pounding in my head. I couldn’t eat much of my food; my appetite had gone. Rachel talked incessantly through the meal. I nodded and smiled, but it became harder and harder for me to hear her.

After Rachel finished eating, she took me again to her room. “So, do you have a lot of studying to do?” she asked.

“Some,” I said, “Not too much.”

She smiled eagerly. “Good! There’s something I want to show you later.” I got out my books, but I didn’t really feel like studying. I was nervous in a way I had not been for a long time—like nights before when I had been alone, without the buffer of a locked door between me and the outside, as if suddenly it was no longer safe to sleep. I wished there were still algebra problems to do. I liked the way they let me set things right every time. There was always a solution. But that had been finished earlier, and now all I had was history and philosophy. I read what was assigned, but they each told me the same things. It wasn’t long before Rachel announced that she was done and went to take her shower. I tried to read further, to read ahead in preparation for assignments to come, but I
was distracted by the sounds coming from the bathroom as Rachel made ready for bed…
the shifting sounds of the spray as she turned under the shower head, the splash as she
rinsed the shampoo through her hair, the drips and trickles as she finished, and the
anticipation of the scent of jasmine. I remembered waiting for Jill that way, spending
nights at her house; she always smelled of fruit scents, berry and melon. She liked to let
her hair dry naturally and would raise her eyebrow at me when she came out of the
bathroom, toweling off her hair and saw me watching her so intently. “What are you
looking at?” she’d say. Then, she’d let me braid her hair in two French braids. I would
draw my fingers through the cool damp locks, breathing her after-shower scent. I would
close my eyes as if to concentrate the sensations. After a long while that belied her usual
impatience, Jill would say in a voice lulled, “Any day now…”
you run your fingers along the inside of the hollowed out rind that is all that is left of me and give me chills...

when i close my eyes i see nightmares

are you protecting me

i think i understand

i am afraid

i mean--you have read me

tell me where to be...

i dont know if there is enough of me left to place....

every distraction takes me away from myself

every touch diminishes me...every caress, even a smile, or a glance...but they never glance, they stare... i am lessened

but you can see me...

i am not completely gone because you can see me

you can

what do you see?

do you feel the pull of others on you when you close your eyes...that is what i feel...their hands on me...and you are like a comet...a brilliant and solitary push forward...the dust of myriad encounters trailing behind...alone or lonely...perhaps one and not the other...i dont know what i 'm saying anymore...i watch you blaze by from a hard ground....

very well...
i see...

...an old story...

yes...i see...

....anger, obsession...i can see them in my minds eye...but cant wrap my fingers around them tightly enough,

i dont know how to be different...

what shall i do?

you can probably guess the song that plays in my head again and again

until i play it myself
Soon enough, that jasmine scent wafted from the bathroom and Rachel emerged. Her hair was already dry, but she was pulling a comb through it as she walked, letting it fall like feathers on her back. She looked at me questioningly. “What?”

I shrugged. “Nothing.”

Again, Rachel gave me pajamas to wear. I took my shower and when I came out, she was sitting on her bed, ready to read her devotional as I expected. But this time, she had spread a large number of pamphlets and booklets on the floor in front of her—the papers I had seen her with before. I took the blanket from her roommate’s bed and wrapped it around myself. Rachel said, “Are you…” I shook my head and sat in front of the display she had set up. Each little booklet had a title in bold and alarming type, and whether of angels or demons, the images shared the same ominous quality. She said, “They’re tracts. Each one explains part of why you should follow God’s laws and show you how important it is to be saved.”

“Where did you get them?”

“Well…I got them from Reverend Lacy’s office.”

“I thought you said you didn’t see Reverend Lacy today,” I said.

Rachel became defensive. “I didn’t!” She paused. “He wasn’t there. But he had a bunch of these on his desk, so I just borrowed some of them.” I looked up at her. She was fidgeting with the pages of her devotional. “What?” she said, “I’m going to take them back.”

I looked down at the floor again. “Why did you want to show them to me?”

Rachel became pleasant again. “They’ll explain better than I can. That way you’ll
understand and you can accept Jesus into your heart.” I looked down at them. Some of
them were mostly text, but others were cartoons, little stories with frightening images:
Mary with a face full of despair, ashamed at those who adored her; a young girl, punished
with AIDS for her pleasures of the flesh; a faceless god on a huge white throne, banishing
gays and lesbians to hell. I read a few, and then set them down carefully as she had laid
them. She said, “What do you think?” I looked up at her. Her face was expectant. Her
eyes had that glow again. I looked into them. It was as if they had never known anything
less than high hope. And I began to imagine myself in her eyes because she believed I
was destined for those fires. In her eyes, I must have looked no different from the way
Sister Catherine must have seen me, the way, maybe, my parents saw me now—and Jill.
Did she see me that way too—not because of what we shared, but because I left her to
face the aftermath alone. Rachel said, “Did you see the part at the end?” I took one of the
tracts and flipped to the back. A figure knelt in prayer, rays of light shone down upon him
from above. Next to him were the words, “God is waiting for you.” As I read the passage
that followed, Rachel explained in words almost the same as those I read. “See, it tells
you how to accept Jesus into your heart. You just have to admit your sins and truly
repent. Then you say that you believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose again, and ask
him to come into your heart.”

“Then what,” I said, looking at the floor.

“Then you’re saved! You live your life for Jesus.”

“Like you,” I said.

“Yeah, like me…” she trailed off. I wondered about her expression, if she was
trying to ascertain whether her tracts had changed my mind. But my gaze remained trained on the floor. I heard her shift her weight. I closed the booklet in my hands and gathered the rest of the tracts together. Rachel said, “Don’t you want to pray? I’ll pray with you.” I neatly stacked Rachel’s tracts and set them away from me. I didn’t respond. “Don’t you want to?” she asked again. “You’ve spent so much time sinning. You have to let God into your heart so he can remake you into what He wants you to be.” A tremor began in my stomach. I pulled the blanket around me tightly. “Are you cold?” Rachel asked. I said nothing. “I just thought if you just think about God’s plan for you life, you know…you could…” She thought for a moment, and then began again with new energy. “Once you accept Christ, I’ll bring you to the next meeting and we can tell Reverend Lacy and everyone how you changed your life and you’ll be a new member! You’ll always have friends to worship and pray with and--”

“Rachel,” I said. The more excited she became, the more I felt as if something were closing in around me, as if her room was getting smaller and smaller, as if soon the walls and ceiling would be pressing against me and, just as in my dreams, there would be no way out. There was a long silence. At last, I said, “It’s getting late.”

Rachel said, “Oh, right.” She opened up her devotional and flipped through the pages. Then she looked at me and smiled. “Ready?” I forced a smile in return. “Come sit up here,” she said. I hesitated, feeling as if it would be an effort even to move. I looked at the floor. Rachel said, “That’s OK. I’ll sit with you.” She sat cross-legged on the floor before me. She began to read and I raised my eyes to watch her.

“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is
faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with
the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

(1st Corinthians 10:13)

Rachel read the explanation of the verse, but I could hardly listen to her. I didn’t
want to. I only wanted to hear the sound of her voice, brassy and unschooled, but
resonating with sanguine expectation. I closed my eyes, concentrating on the rise and fall
of Rachel’s voice and the warmth of sitting so close, and tried to let go of the quivering in
my stomach. I tried to think of a time when I didn’t feel this way. I remembered a time so
long ago, it felt, that it seemed like a dream…the first time Jill and I had felt completely
free. We had gone on an outing to the park on a Sunday afternoon. We promised our
parents that we would take along some homework to do outside on one of the first days
of spring. The sun was warm. There was only the slightest hint of a cooling breeze. We
walked along bike and jogging trails, searching for secluded picnic nooks tucked behind
hedges or stands of trees. At last, Jill found the perfect spot, just out of sight of the trail,
half in sun, half shaded, a semi-circular row of tall hedges, at one end, a tall live oak that
had just begun to shed its winter leaves. Inside was a manicured clearing, neatly trimmed
grass filled the area ending abruptly along an obvious line. Where city landscaping
ended, grasses grew to their potentials; bluebonnet and Indian paintbrush bloomed in the
underbrush attracting tiny white butterflies. Further in the distance, I could hear birds
high in the trees. We spread a picnic blanket and put down our backpacks. Jill stretched
her long arms then walked around for a minute or two surveying the area. I watched her
as she peeked around the corner from which we had come and then peered curiously in to
the wood. Jill was always beautiful to me, but on this day she wore her hair down. We
had gone to mass earlier that day and her mother had insisted that she have an
appropriately dressy hair style. The curls hung loosely about her neck, catching the
sunlight. It fascinated me that the highlights of her black hair were not brown as one
might expect, but the color was so deep that it seemed to absorb light and then reflect
back purely what it did not wish to hold.

“Say Wen,” she said. She was standing at the edge of that boundary beyond which
the native flora grew unfettered. “Come here,” she said. “Look.” I looked at her eyes.
They stared in to the wood. And when I looked, I saw the expanse of the vacant lot alive
with a world that had been excised from the park. I took a step inside . . . and then
another . . . until I was standing in their midst, the trees, flowers and grasses mingling at
will, the smell of their possibility palpable in the air. Jill reached across that invisible
barrier and caught my hand in hers. To my surprise, I had not gone so far. She didn’t
speak. I turned toward her. Then she kissed me in the open sun. She touched me in
defiance of the voices of children we could hear not so far away on the trail. And I
imagined that the air and sky, the trees and the grass were evidence of our express
permission to be, loving each other as easily and unavoidably as breathing.

Rachel said, “See?” I looked at her, tried to remember what she had been saying.
“God is always there for you, even when you’re tempted to sin. And He always makes a
way out so you never have to worry. You just call on him and He’ll come to you.” There
was a long pause. “What?” she asked. Perhaps my brow had furrowed. I looked down at
the floor. “Um,” she began again, “The point is that you never really have to sin, no
matter how strong the temptation is. God makes it easy for you to follow his laws.”

Her words reminded me of Sister Josephine’s religion class. She would always
tell us that God’s laws were evidence of the enormity of his love. And Jill would always
tell me after class, “Think about it. Is that really love—to make your children this way
and then deny them? Do you really think that’s love?”

“No,” I said.

“No?” Rachel was puzzled. “What do you mean?” Again, I had spoken without
thinking. I turned and looked at her. Her hair really was just like Jill’s, fathoms-deep
black. I had a sudden desire to touch it.

The urge startled me—it was so strong. I turned away from her. “What you said
about law,” I said, fumbling for words, “It’s as if you’re not really making your own
decisions.”

“No, you do make a choice,” she said, “You choose to follow Christ.”

“As a slave follows a master,” I said.

“No!”

“Because you can’t make your own decisions.”

“That’s not true!”

“And what if I say no?” I looked at her now. Her eyes were determined.

“Say no? To what?”

“To everything. To God’s law,” I said.

Rachel looked annoyed. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“What if I did?” I said.
Her face became both serious and confused. “The wages of sin is death,” she quoted.

I said, “Then, what kind of choice is that?” Rachel opened her mouth as if to speak, but she stopped. “Whatever you do,” I said, “You’re doing it out of fear, not because you want to, not because it’s who you are inside.”

“I chose to follow God’s laws.” She put her hand on her chest for emphasis. “I chose to live as free from sin as I could.”

“You don’t even know what sin is,” I said.

“Yes I do! It’s when you do something against…” she looked down at her hands, still holding the devotional.

“Yesterday,” I said, “When you asked me all of that stuff about …what I did…you didn’t know anything about any of it. You don’t know if it’s good or bad. You don’t know what it’s like. You don’t know anything.”

Rachel said, “Yeah, but that’s because I chose to stay pure. I made a vow to keep my body pure.”

“By hiding from things you don’t know anything about.”

“No! I know about sex.” She looked at me, her lips taut and defiant.

“Do you,” I said. I opened my mouth to speak again but stopped. I wanted to say…show me. I wondered--would she? There was no reason for me to think she might other than that I just wanted…something. I hesitated, and she spoke again while the words were still a thought behind the breath I took.

“I learned stuff in school. And besides, I had a boyfriend, and we talked about
Rachel’s voice suddenly softened. She was looking down. Her hands were crossed, one over the other, the devotional beneath them in her lap. The painted tips of her nails glistened even in the low dorm room light. She looked so… innocent. There was a silence, and I guessed she must have been thinking of him, missing her boyfriend perhaps much the same way I missed Jill. I felt suddenly very close to her.

“What did you talk about,” I asked softly.

“Oh you know… just stuff,” she said, “Stuff we wanted to do… you know.”

“And he never asked you; and you never asked him…”

“No! We made promises to God. Don’t you get it?”

“Well, yes…” I said. We sat again in silence. I wondered what it might have meant for me and for Jill, that kind of vow. Maybe if we had just done things differently… waited… this wouldn’t have happened. I could still be with her.

Rachel fidgeted. She ruffled the pages of her devotional then held it tight again.

“Still,” she said, “Even if we had done something, it wouldn’t have been anything like the way you sinned with that girl you talked about.”

“What?”

Her face became serious. Her brow furrowed. “That’s why you have to repent. Because that kind of sin is an abomination.” She spoke firmly, but she didn’t look at me.

“But,” I began, but I didn’t know what to say. My stomach began to tremble inside. I pulled the blanket tighter. “You can’t help how you feel— who you fall in love with.”

“That isn’t how you feel,” she said. “It’s just temptation.”
“That’s not true.”

“Yes it is.” Rachel was looking at me now. “You aren’t saved, so you’re a slave to temptation.”

“No.” I said. “I am not.”

“If you were saved, you wouldn’t have that temptation and you could be free.” I said, “Are you saying that you don’t have temptation?”

“Yeah. I’m not even tempted, because I know Christ is always there for me.” Her voice was confident.

I considered for a moment. “The other day, when you were asking me all those questions about what I did—that wasn’t temptation?”

“No!” she exclaimed. Her face flushed. “I would never do anything like that. I was just curious.” She paused. “Because it’s weird, that’s all.”

I swallowed at the word “weird,” the way she said it with such derision. My mouth went dry and I felt my stomach trembling more. I thought again. Then, “You weren’t even tempted with your boyfriend?” I asked.

“I told you,” she said, “He never asked me anything like that. He wouldn’t, because—” Maybe she stopped because of the look on my face.

“You’ve never had to say no,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re only a virgin because no one asked you,” I said, “Not because you were strong enough to resist. How is that a virtue?”

“Because I know I would say no if someone did ask me!” Rachel became
animated. The devotional nearly slipped from her fingers, but she caught it. “I know that
God would help me resist temptation.”

“You don’t know what you would do. It’s never happened to you,” I said.

Rachel was clutching the devotional so tightly that its cover bent and the pages
wrinkled. “I don’t have to know. I--,”

“You don’t choose for yourself. That isn’t virtue, and it isn’t faith.” I quoted, “I
know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold
or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my
mouth.”

“No!” She shook her head insistently. “All I have to know is that I can go to God
any time there’s trouble and He’ll tell me what I should do.”

“Like a slave goes to a master,” I said.

“No! Like a child goes to his father,” she said. “Sin is a debt you can’t repay and
God is there to pay that debt for you. That’s why you go to Him, because He is the only
way.”

“All you are saying is that you still have to go to someone else to tell you
everything. You never figure anything out for yourself, so you’ll never really know
anything on your own, from your own experience. Everybody else tells you what to do.
That’s being a slave.” I said the words with a confidence that surprised me. I wasn’t even
sure I believed them. But I knew that when I said them, the tremors inside me lessened. I
could breathe.

However, I could see the color rising in Rachel’s cheeks. She turned to face me,
putting the devotional on the bed. “You’re the one who’s a slave!” she said, “Sin is bondage. You’re a slave to your sin. That’s why—”

“At least I’m a slave to something real that I can see and feel and touch and taste, not to something that might not even—” I couldn’t even say it, but I didn’t have to.

Rachel was seething. There was a darkness in her eyes. I could see the muscles in her neck and shoulders tightening. Her fists were clenched. She took a deep breath and said her words carefully. “God is real. You can feel him when you pray.” She thrust her hands toward me.

Startled, I flinched. “No…”

“Give me your hands.”

“No.” I tried to back away.

“Give me your hands!” Rachel pulled at the blanket searching for my hands.

“No!” I said, but she persisted and despite my struggles managed to catch both of my hands. The blanket fell away from my shoulders and the cool air of the room chilled my skin. I felt my stomach trembling again, stronger now, as if my whole body were shaking. My breathing quickened. Images from my dream the night before flashed in my head. Why was she doing this to me? Rachel began to pray fervently, but her words were lost in the resonance of her voice and the blood pounding in my ears. I watched her lips part and close. I watched the subtle movement in the sleek veil of her hair as she accentuated her words. Surely she could feel the trembling in my hands. Surely she felt the weak tug of my arms against her grip. Let me go. I wanted to say—but I couldn’t…I couldn’t say…why…why are you doing this to me…why are you trying to take away the
only thing I ever…when all I wanted…all I wanted…

I looked at Rachel, at the soft skin of her neck, at her lips. I moved closer to her and held tightly to her hands. A smile passed across her lips. The tone in her voice lightened and she relaxed a bit. “Lord, give us the faith to see your will. Wipe the sin from our hearts, Lord. Give us the power to resist Satan and his evils. Give us the strength to hold fast to you.” I watched her say these words and more before I leaned close and kissed her. She paused, stiffened. I lingered, breathing her light perfume, and then I kissed her again. An unformed sound escaped her, then she pulled violently away. She tried to wrest her hands from mine, but I held tight and let her efforts pull me closer. I rose to my knees, almost close enough again to kiss her; behind her wide dark eyes, a million thoughts seemed to pass. Her mouth was slightly agape, her brows raised in question, in fear. I wondered if this was how I looked to the ones in my dream—not a dream. Was she really so afraid? I let go of her hands. She leaned back a bit, but didn’t move away. She wiped her mouth with her fingers. “No,” Rachel said plaintively, “I’m trying to save you.”

“You can’t,” I said.

“Prayer can save you. Just believe.” She sat up straight again and bowed her head tentatively, casting her eyes on me here and there to see if I might move. She prayed quickly. “Lord I ask you now to make Scylla see the sin on her heart. Touch her now, Lord. Soften her heart to let you come inside. Show her your glory.”

“No,” I said. The tremors had begun again. I moved forward again, pressing my body into hers. This time she fell backward, but she had been ready, pushing against me
with her soft hands. The touch of her skin seemed to quell me. I lay on top of her, despite her efforts, and kissed her neck, and behind her ear, and ran my fingers through her hair, and tasted the skin at her collarbone. Her body moved beneath me while my hands evaded her weak resistance; her breathing was rushed. I slid one hand under her pajama top. I could feel the strong and rapid beating of her heart. She gave a light whimper, then a cry when her taut nipple passed under my palm. “Stop!” she said. I looked at her face, but I didn’t move my hand. “I’ll scream,” she said.

“The R.A. will come.”

She sighed, frustrated, and tears welled in her eyes. “I’m not supposed to be having sex!” she said.

I began again, massaging her breast. Her pale skin flushed and her breast rocked a bit from the force of her breathing. I softly pushed up her top to see. “It isn’t sex,” I said, “It’s just kissing and feeling around.” Now her tears fell. The hands that had been pressed against my chest and shoulder became fists. For a moment, I thought she might strike me, but she only clenched her fingers tightly together. I continued to kiss and caress her. Excitement seemed to pulse beneath her skin, but I didn’t know if she relished my touch or if instead it was terror that I felt. I looked at her face again, and she opened her eyes to me. There swirled a puzzling mix of emotions. I couldn’t tell really exactly what it was. Had Jill seen my uncertainty this way? I asked her, “Do you want me to stop?” She opened her mouth to speak, but stopped herself and bit her lip. I did for Rachel what Jill had done for me. I kissed her tense lips gently until they relaxed then sought a taste of her tongue. She was surprised at first. She tensed again, but then she relaxed and let me in.
Afterward, I pulled back a bit to look at her and to let her get some air. She opened her eyes slowly. She was more calm, but still doubtful, I thought, or maybe it was something else.

She looked up at me. “Why couldn’t you just pray?” She had that look in her eyes again—that look that made me want to please her. But this time it was more in earnest, more desperate and …maybe…lost. I lay next to her on my side. She didn’t move. I draped one leg over hers, pulling her legs slightly apart. I continued to draw my hand across her breasts and stomach and then sent my fingers searching beneath the soft and satiny fabric of her pajama bottoms and panties. And as I did, I whispered into her ear the only prayer I could think of to give her, but for some reason, the words came out all wrong.

“I confess to almighty God, and to you, my sister, that I am sin through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, in what I continue to do, and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels, and you, my sister, to pray for me.”

Her breathing was heavy. My fingers were finding their way warm, easy, and smooth. Rachel said, “What are you doing to me…”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Feebly, half whispered, she said, “I think I understand now—I mean, you don’t have to—um—I mean…you could…”

“I can’t,” I said. She turned toward me. I said, “Pray for me.”

“Father in heaven, forgive us for our sins. Teach us to know your will. Lead us in a closer walk with thee…” She began tentatively, but continued with the fullest resonance
of her voice, faltering once when I took her breast into my mouth and again when my fingers at last teased their way inside her. Afterwards, her words came more and more sporadically until by the time I pushed aside her shorts and underwear, by the time I tasted the place where my fingers had been, she had stopped praying altogether.

I no longer felt naked.

When it was over, I caressed her still, and then I stood up and took off the clothes she had given me, folded them, and put them on her bed. I looked at her lying there. She seemed even more beautiful in this naked honesty than she did when I first saw her. I covered her with her roommate’s blanket. She pulled it tight around her. I put on my clothes, sat on her roommate’s bed, and watched Rachel’s body moving slowly under the blanket. Her head was turned to one side; her hair was spread around her on the floor, a raven aureole. Her eyes, half-open, stared at nothing for the longest time. Then they turned to me. I wondered what she was thinking. I wondered if she was very angry with me for what I had done. I wondered if I had hurt her. Had it been for her the way it had been for me in my dream—not a dream—or maybe…maybe…but…no…

Softly I told her, “I won’t stay.”

She looked at me, her eyes wide, and then she looked away. She turned her back to me and curled her body into a ball, cocooned in her roommate’s blanket. I picked up my backpack and walked away. That night, when I stepped into the open, for the first time in a long while, it felt good to breathe the air.

I went to the law library and browsed, choosing the books most suitable to my purpose, large, stackable. I brought them to a study carrell and piled them high around
me. One I opened as if to read and set it before me. I didn’t even glance at the words. I thought about Jill, the way we used to lie together after, how much I missed that. I thought about Rachel, wondered if she was okay—and that was when I noticed—Rachel. Her scent was still on my hands. I looked at them wistfully for a moment, and then I lay my head down, one hand shielding my face against the law, the other at my lips, and fell asleep like a child, with my fingers in my mouth.
If I could draw my broken pencil along the lines left by your fingers I'd know
I’d soon be lost. There was a time I followed to uncertain motion
Leaves and pleats, ribbons and saddle shoes. She showed me
A way out of myself. But I was playing a game, never knowing how far
Into those warm and placid waters I’d swum until the shore
Was so far away turning back seemed worse
Than falling forward. This time it is you I hear
Calling me, tracing your line in the sand, dividing
Me from myself, leading somewhere I can’t see.
When I finally stopped talking, Paul sat quietly without looking up. I looked at the phone. It had only been a few hours since Jill left her message. I knew that I should return her call right away, but I wanted to go to her. My mind was filled with questions to ask her. Yet, I was also afraid—afraid that what she felt for me may have changed, afraid that it would change once she saw me again. She would despise me for leaving her to take all of the blame. Or perhaps she would say that I did not trust her enough to handle the situation. And with that lack of faith went what we had. Or maybe it had just been too long, too much time alone for her to feel the same. Or maybe she had met someone else.

Paul said, “Don’t hold so tight.” I had not noticed that I was making knots of my fingers. I smiled at him. I got up to look for a pen and paper. He said, “Do you think you’ll come back?” I hesitated. I couldn’t know for sure what Jill might want of me. And I did not know how I would respond. Paul said, “At least just to tell me what happened. Could you?”

“I will come back,” I said. I replayed the message and wrote down the phone and room numbers.

Paul said, “You know, I never would have wanted anything more than you wanted to—I mean, I wasn’t trying to . . .”

“I know,” I said, “And thank you.”

He stood and gave me a hug, as if he might never see me again. “Good luck,” he said. Then he smiled. “Hurry.”
I knew the motel Jill had mentioned in her message. I had passed by it a hundred times. It was a three-story building near the highway. Blue and white chipping paint set it off from the buildings next to it. A city bus let me off right in front of its lobby doors. All of the rooms had a door and window facing the street. I could see the room numbers from the parking lot. Jill’s room was at the end of the building on the second floor. I crossed the parking lot and climbed the stairs. The blinds to her window were shut. I could not tell if anyone was inside. And though I prayed that I had not missed her, I was somehow still afraid to knock on the door. At last, I managed a few timid knocks, but the door was so hard I thought I might not be heard. I waited a moment or two, but no one answered. I raised my hand to knock again. Just as I did, the door opened. Jill was standing there, wearing a black muscle shirt tucked into jeans. Her hair was shorter, fashioned now into slender dreadlocks. For what seemed an interminable amount of time we looked at each other. I tried to speak, but only stammered, “I . . . I . . .” She grabbed me by the wrist, pulled me inside and shut the door. All of the lights were off except for the reading light next to the bed, and even though it was still day, the room was dim. Still holding on to my wrist, she looked at me. She touched my cheek, ran her fingers down the length of my hair. Then she raised my hand to her lips, closed her eyes, and kissed my wrist and palm. My breathing came in rapid gasps. “I . . .” I began again.

“Don’t.” Sternly she said, “Don’t cry.” But at the sound of her voice, the tears that had been welling in my eyes fell and my efforts to speak were garbled in sobs. Her brow furrowed. She said, “Oh baby…” and pulled me to her. She held me and stroked my hair. She said softly, “My girl . . . my girl Wendy . . . I should have taken better care of you.” I
didn’t know what she meant. But as she held me I let the sound of her breathing calm me.

Finally I was able to say, “I’m sorry, Jill. I’m sorry for leaving you.”

She stared at me in amazement. “What are you talking about?” She laughed the way I remembered, dropping her chin and closing her eyes. When she did, a tear fell. She brushed it away and said, “Now look what you made me do.” And the way she smiled at me, the way she held me made everything seem new, the way the world looks after a spring rain. And I let myself imagine that the time between had disappeared, allowed myself that unencumbered joy we once felt. I laughed a little at my own tears. She caressed my cheek, swept a finger across my lips, and said, “There's my girl. There's what I remember.” She kissed me with a gentle purpose far from the kisses I remembered. The first time Jill ever kissed me, she did so to show me what I wanted. Later her kisses told me what she wanted me to know. But this day, there was an earnestness in her movements and a hunger. And when the moment finally broke, she let go of a breath as if she had been holding it since the last time we touched.

I leaned into her, resting my head on her shoulder. “How did you find me,” I said.

“Your mother,” Jill began, “She—”

“How is she?” I blurted, “Was she very upset? And my dad? I mean, is she…” Jill was already shushing me.

“She seems fine. They both seem fine. Now, anyway. Now that they kind of know where you are. You applied to college, didn’t you? They sent for your records. Sister Ernestine told your parents.”

“And, they called you?” I asked.
“No, uh…” Jill said, “Let’s sit down for a second.” There was a little table for writing and two chairs next to the window. She guided me there, looking at the floor with pursed lips. We sat and a few moments passed before she spoke. “The thing is,” she started, then looked at me. “It isn’t the end of the world. You don’t have to be so—,” she made a circular gesture. I didn’t understand. “Why are you sitting like that?” I shook my head. “All on the edge of your seat like that. I’m just saying you could relax. It’s not that bad.” “Oh,” I said. “I suppose I just don’t like leaning back. It’s uncomfortable.” “Uncomfortable?” She looked at me peculiarly. Then she smiled. “It’s kind of cute, really. And the way your hair is all long now. You look like a little princess.” The way she looked at me reminded me of summer afternoons spent together in her room while her parents were at work, the way she looked at me then, just before she touched me or just after . . . but, she shook her head. “Right. The thing is I’m not supposed to be talking to your parents. It was part of the deal, kind of. I’m not supposed to be talking to them or looking for you or seeing you anymore if you came back. And…” She trailed off.

I said, “But, Jill…?”

She smiled. “Yeah, I know. This is what happened. You remember how I used to pass by you after communion? Well, your parents still sit in the same place. And while I was still at home, I used to pass by them when I got the chance, to see if they had heard anything. I would walk by real slow. Your mom always noticed. I don’t know if she was done praying already or if she was looking for me. But I would catch her eye when I passed and she would shake her head or say something like, ‘Nothing yet,’ so I would know.”

I thought about my mother, imagined her sitting there next to my father at Mass.
She probably had been watching for Jill. We had always sat in one of the front few rows at Mass while Jill’s family sat further behind us. It had become a ritual almost as important to us as the Mass itself, the knowing glance, the sweep of a hand as she passed, my head bowed in prayer, my eyes cast up to meet hers.

Jill said, “So there was that, and I would hear things around, you know, people talking. Like I heard at one point that they hired a private investigator but they couldn’t afford to keep him after a while.”

“A private investigator?” I said.

Jill said patiently, “Well, it turns out that once you turn 18, even if the police find you, they can’t make you come home. And they can’t tell your parents where you are, either, if you don’t want them to. A private investigator, I think, has a little more leeway. But they still can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“Oh,” I said.

“So, you don’t have to go home, baby. Not if you don’t want to.”

I said, “I understand.”

“Anyway, this last time I saw your parents was at Christmas Mass. I was home for the holiday. I took communion. Mom and Dad were walking ahead of me, as usual. I could have sworn your mom was watching me. I was kind of surprised, because usually, it was me looking at her. So, when I got close to her, I slowed down. She looked up at me and said the name of your university and the city. I just about stopped cold right there and I looked at her. Then your dad said, ‘Go on, now.’ He didn’t even look up. I turned around and my dad was glaring at me. So I went back to my seat. When I got there my
dad was growling, ‘What did she say to you?’ But I told him nothing. They didn’t believe me at first, but you know me.” She winked.

Maybe I looked worried. She took one of my hands in hers. “Babe. It’s all ok. I made some phone calls when I got back to school, made arrangements to come down here on spring break. And it took me the whole time to find you. Or—I guess you found me, didn’t you.”

I thought for a moment. “The whole time? Does that mean you have to leave soon?”

“Tomorrow.”

“But--”

Jill said, “I don’t have a choice, baby. My parents think I’m at South Padre with my roommate. She’s supposed to cover for me, but they’re checking up on me all the time. If I’m not back in that room by the time they call—well, you know how they are. And besides…”

“Ohh . . .” Jill’s parents were fiercely overprotective of their daughter, they claimed, because they had suffered three miscarriages before she was born, but Jill always thought of it as a kind of neurotic affectation. She made light of their strict attentions but was usually careful to avoid causing them to have an outburst and quick to try to contain them when they did. I said, “I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

Jill laughed, closing her eyes then opening them again slowly. “Please. Give me a break.” She paused and leaned back in her chair. “Listen.” She waved her hand dismissively. “I want you to tell me where you’ve been all this time. And why you didn’t call.”
I took a deep breath. “I tried to call once,” I said.

“I know that.” She sat without changing position or expression, a patient audience. And so I tried to explain as best I could, the way I had with Paul, what I had done. I told her about days alone, about days lost. I told her about the shelters, about meeting Paul, and about how finally a volunteer led me to a program to study for my GED. There were some things that I could not remember and there were others that were almost too hard to say under her serious gaze—like what happened with Allan, and other times, things I had never told to Paul, though he might have guessed. Jill seemed to understand the words hidden by my hesitation, urging me to continue when I could, telling me it was ok when I couldn’t.
your fondness does not for my absence pay
you come at length your wayward thegn to chide
and press me til i know not what to say
with politics at education's side
and curse obsession in whose womb i've lain
the binge that brings the ebbing of the tide
could logic parse the seasons of my wane
a formula for sophistry may wreak
a journalistic difference i fain
shall coarse reflection purge and make wounds speak
intended unintended acolyte
a child can understand what yet i seek
a rhetoric to twist my wrong to right
an ocean's wrath, a demitasse to fill
rewitness yesterday with clearer sight
now pen and sword dispar and pierce my still
unblind, unbind and thrust me into day
i will be good. i will, i will. i will.
When I finished, Jill was leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, hands clasped, deep in thought. She said at last, “Wendy . . . are you ok?” The way she said it put me at a loss. I shrugged and stammered in reply. She said, “Wendy, really. What about that Paul guy. Is he doing anything—is he hurting you?”

“No. He—”

“Don’t protect him, Wendy.”

“I’m not, really.”

“Why is he letting you stay there?”

“I don’t know. I—”

“Christ.” Jill put her head in her hands.

I said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Jill. I know I should have stayed. I should have stayed with you.”

“No, baby. No. That’s not what I meant at all.” She took my hands, gently untwined the fingers, and let them rest between hers. “It’s true--you probably wouldn’t have gotten hurt if you stayed. At least, not that way, anyway.” Her brow furrowed.

“Jill,” I said. She looked at me. “What happened after I left?”

She gave my hands a squeeze, then sighed and leaned back again. “Nothing as bad as all that. Like you thought, everybody was pretty mad. After you had been gone so long, your mom called our house looking for you. And right after that, Sister Ernestine called. She said that another teacher had caught us in a ‘sexual act.’ So I had to tell my mom and dad what happened. But I told them we were just playing around and that it
wasn’t anything serious. That made them calm down a little, because at that time, I think, they wanted to believe that more. Then your mom called again, because Sister Ernestine had called her, too. I didn’t get to talk to her, but I heard my mom telling her what I had said and that she shouldn’t worry, that you were probably just scared since you hadn’t ever been in trouble before. So, everyone figured you would turn up sooner or later.

“We were all supposed to show up for this conference at school the next morning. Only, your mom didn’t come because she wanted to be at home in case you called or came home. So it was me and my parents, your dad, Sister Ernestine, Sister Catherine, Mrs. Evans—she’s the counselor—Sister Beth-Anne, because I was late for her class, and you were late for Sister Christine's so she was there. Sister Ernestine started off like she always does, ‘As the principal of this fine Catholic academy . . .’ blah, blah, blah. And she told Sister Catherine to tell everyone what we were doing. I was all prepared to say that we weren’t doing all that much, just practicing kissing like we had seen on TV or something. But Sister Catherine went into all kinds of detail—where my hands were, where yours were, things we said, what it looked like I was about to do next. She must have been standing there for a few minutes before we noticed her. I thought about saying she was exaggerating. But . . . My dad turns to me, livid, and yells ‘Just playing!’ I started to say something but Sister Catherine was already saying things like, ‘If that was just playing,’ and ‘In all my years of teaching,’ blah, blah, blah. My mother started crying, saying, ‘How could you do this to us?’ But your dad hardly said anything. He just looked, I don’t know, kind of sickened. My dad started comforting my mom, telling her, ‘Don’t worry. It’s probably just a phase. They were probably just experimenting.’ I
started to say that yeah, that’s all it was. But Sister Catherine interrupted me again saying, ‘If that’s the case, why were they pledging love to each other?’ That set everybody off again, but that was when I really started thinking. Do you remember when I told you to meet me there in the bookroom? It was because I wanted to give you something, but I never did because when I saw you there I just wanted to touch you so bad. It was just a little necklace and when we got in trouble, I hid it. Now, I don’t know where it is. But I wanted to give it to you then and tell you that everything we had been doing all that time, it wasn’t just a game to me. It was real, and I wanted you to know I’d never leave you.

And I started thinking. After all of that, how could I say it was all just a game now? Why did I have to say that?

“Then all of a sudden, your dad said, ‘Jill.’ It breaks through everybody’s arguing. My parents even shut up for once. He says, ‘Are you in love with my daughter?’ And, I don’t know. It just cut through everything. I said, ‘Yes.’ I know it was probably stupid. It probably would have been better if I had lied. But I couldn’t. He wanted to know everything—how long it had been going on, if you felt the same way. And so I told him. Your dad’s a lot different from mine. He seemed really understanding. My parents just, kind of, sat there, horrified. Then, Mrs. Evans said, ‘Well that’s what I thought. A lot of people are just accepting sexual confusion as natural these days, but since we know it’s a sin, we have some different options. I know of several therapists who work in this area to reorient patients who have this kind of sexual confusion and I suggest that both girls get counseling right away.’ Then Sister Ernestine agreed, saying that the school felt that treatment is a much better option than punishment alone and that it would avoid
expulsion if we agreed to it. My parents were all for it. Your dad said that he and your mom would wait until you came home to make any decisions.

“So, the upshot was that we were suspended until further notice, pending beginning therapy. ‘Reparative Therapy,’ they call it. As if we’re broken. I fought it for a long time. But my parents were ballistic. After a while, I couldn’t take it anymore. They were out of control. I started thinking it would be better if they were quiet. Things are just better when they’re happy. So, I went into therapy with this woman who kept telling me that everything was related to my bad relationship with my mother. And I just went along with it. Actually, she almost had me there for a while. Mom and I don’t really get along.”

Jill was smiling, but her story had left me stunned. I wondered how my father had told my mother what he had learned, and how she reacted. I wondered if they would have put me in therapy, had I stayed. Would they have tried to “repair” me? And what about this therapy? Despite the way Jill had just kissed me, despite her protestations that she had only gone along with it, could it have really changed her? She went on, “Anyway, I got back in school and I just let everybody think it was a terrible mistake. They had the police looking for you by then. They ruled out foul play kind of early, I thought, but I guess that was because of the circumstances. I stayed in therapy—I was mostly good. I even got a boyfriend senior year to help it along. We went to the prom.”

“You had a boyfriend?” I said, crestfallen.

She was quick to correct me. “Just for show, baby. I had to make them think the therapy was working. They were already making me go to college in town so they’d be sure I went through the full course of treatment. So I got a boyfriend so I could go to the
prom and take the kind of prom pictures they wanted to see. And then I was just going to
go out with him till the therapy was over and I could transfer out of state. But last
semester he transferred to my school. It was supposed to be a surprise so we could be
together. So now that’s still an issue. But I don’t want you to worry about that. It’s all
under control.”

“Who is it,” I asked, staring down at my hands.

“Andy Wagoner. Did you know him? He went to St. Anthony’s.”

I shook my head. “Does he know?”

“Oh no. Everybody thinks I’m ‘back to normal’ now. He knows about what
happened. I think that’s what he likes. Says it makes me ‘even more exotic.’”

I still had not looked up. I said, “Does he—do you let him touch you?”

“Oh baby,” she said. She knelt in front of me, took my hands, and cocked her
head a bit to catch my eyes. “I don’t let him touch me, baby. Not too much. After all,”
she grinned mischievously, “I’m a good Catholic girl.” I laughed, and when I did, she
gently brought a hand to my face. “There’s my girl,” she said. She leaned into me, took
my smile between her lips. Her hands searched for the edge of my shirt and found their
way underneath, and I gave her what she wanted, what I had wanted to give her for so
long. She said, “I didn’t come here just to—”

“I understand . . .”

“I just . . .”

“I know . . .”

She lifted off my T-shirt over my head and then reached around to unfasten my
bra. But it was another of those garments given to me by one of the shelters, old and worn, the clasp broken. I had clumsily held it together with a safety pin. She stood, guided me to follow, and turned me around so that she could see the pin. She started to undo it, but stopped. “Wendy, what is this?” I didn’t know what she meant. She opened the pin and slid the bra off of my shoulders. “There’s a . . .” She led me to the bedside, next to the reading lamp. I could see myself half unclothed in the mirror. I could see Jill, a worried crease on her brow, angling the light to look at something on my back. I couldn’t think of what she might be talking about. “There’s a scar here, or something. Wendy, what happened to you?”

“I don’t know.” Suddenly I became frightened. I had lost a lot of time along the way. I didn’t like to think of it. “What does it look like?”

“Well, it…” She began to trace along my back with her fingers. Close to my left shoulder, an arc down, below it an arc upward, and traveling downward, smaller lines and arcs, a stepwise path that ended just above my right hip. Some of the areas hurt when she ran her fingers across them. It made me flinch, and each time I did, I could see—rain, a dark street, feel the startling warmth of my blood running from the wounds, my arms held back, exposed as now, a weight bearing down on me—I didn’t want to think of it. I didn’t want to remember. Jill said, “You’re shaking. Baby, tell me what happened.”

I turned to her, but I couldn’t look into her eyes. “I don’t know.”

She took me in her arms and I lay my head on her shoulder. Her shirt smelled faintly sweet and of her skin. She said, “Baby, we don’t have to do this now. I don’t want to hurt you, and I’ve already—”
“No,” I interrupted her. “You never hurt me.”

She looked at me strangely. “Wendy?”

“I want to,” I said, “Please.” It was the first time I had ever asked her. She seemed to search my eyes for understanding. “I’m sorry. I—”

“Shhh.” She slid her hands from my shoulders over my breasts and to my waist. I let her finish undressing me, and then I sat on the bed. I remembered a time when Jill would undress me that way while her parents were away, and then while I watched, she would undress in front of me teasingly and join me in her bed where we would touch and kiss and play. But this day she did not. She knelt in front of me and by her caress, led me to open for her. I lay back. She said that I didn’t have to, but I told her that I was ok. She kissed the inside of my thighs on one side and then the other, then rested her cheek against one while her fingers moved over me.

Suddenly I became self-conscious. I looked up at the ceiling—a flash of other ceilings in other rooms, other places, flashes of night sky, some I could not even remember where I had seen them or when, imprinted on the back of my eyes. It had been so long since she had seen me, and so much had happened, that I was certain I could not look the same, may not feel the same. I wondered if she had noticed. I wondered if she perhaps would not like what she saw. Nervously, I began, “Jill? Do I look—?”

“Beautiful.”

First I felt her tongue, with a warm and familiar movement, then her lips soft and insistent. I closed my eyes and let her make everything go away until there was nothing left but her earnest movements and the feeling they sent through me. It was more than
just the pervasive tingle of stimulation. It was solace and ease, as if for every sensible aspect of my being, Jill’s touch meant home. She told me she loved me. I could feel her warm breath; I could feel her lips moving against my skin. She said the words as if they were a discovery. But her persistent fingers did not let me respond in kind. I cried out involuntarily, then immediately apologized.

“That’s alright, baby,” Jill said, “We don’t have to be quiet anymore.”

For the rest of the evening and into the night Jill made me forget and she made me remember. She finally doffed her clothes. We drew the bedcovers around us and let our skin drink in the memories of our proximity. She cradled me to her while her fingers danced in me and with her body consumed my every ecstatic movement. And that night, by the grace of her touch, I slept a deep sleep of childhood awash in redelivered happiness.

“Oh where have you been, Wendy-girl, Wendy-girl? Oh where have you been charming Wendy? I have been to seek a wife; she’s the joy of my life. She’s a young thing and cannot leave her mother.”

So long ago, Jill had taken the children’s song and changed it to tease me. Now she sang in half whisper, coaxing my eyes open. I turned to her. The sun through the blinds cut parallel paths across her skin. I traced them with still sleepy fingers. For a long time we lay there, looking at each other, touching. I remembered an afternoon after
school. We sat on the steps in front of the school waiting for my mother to retrieve us. She was late. It was a Friday. Jill was going to spend the night. The grounds had just about emptied. We sat just close enough to touch, our eyes trained on the street. Jill leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. Her face was serious and thoughtful. She made a pyramid of her fingers and lightly tapped at her chin. “Do you know what I wish?” she said quietly, “I wish that we could—no, we are going to do this one day. One day we are going to go to bed together, make love till we fall asleep, and wake up the next morning holding each other. And I’ll be able to see you in the morning with the sun coming in the window—for real, not like stupid sleepovers. I’d wake you up with a kiss. No one to walk in on us. No sneaking around. One day we’re going to be together for real.” I had looked at her, a little stunned, a little enamored. She had chuckled. “Quit it.” I had believed everything she said. Somehow, I had forgotten—until today. The sunlight traveled across the bed and she followed its path across my skin now with her fingers.

“Did she ask you to come in, Wendy-girl, Wendy-girl?

Did she ask you to come in, charming Wendy?”

I thought of times before. I used to blush at the impish leer she gave when she sang it. This time there was no leer—only a wistful look as her eyes followed her fingers.

I said, “How long?”

She sighed. “Not long enough.” Her brow furrowed. She turned to look at the clock on the bedside table. “Ok,” she said, “A couple of hours at least.” The reality struck me suddenly that soon she would be gone. I would be alone again. I could not follow her, and she could not stay. Jill seemed a little worried, a little annoyed. She sat up and
stretched, her arms reaching upward, her body like a tree whose strong branches might
wrest all light from the sky. She took a deep breath and let go of her tension. I could see it
leave her as her arms lowered, her shoulders came to rest, her breasts gently settled. She
leaned back on her elbows. I had never seen her quite so relaxed, so powerful. She stared
up at the ceiling for a moment. I could not tell what she was thinking. Her eyes looked as
if they were following calculations in her mind. She turned to me and smiled. She lay
back again and pulled me to her, positioned our bodies so that our breasts pressed one
against the other’s, pressed tightly together. She smiled and then she kissed me, one hand
behind my head, entwined in my hair, and I held on to her. For the time that remained, we
kissed and touched, afraid almost to waste a moment in separateness. She said to me,
whispered in my ear, “Wendy, my girl Wendy, I want you to know, no matter what
happens, this is the only thing I will ever really need—us being together this way—you.
You are like the antidote to my life.”

Jill took me with her in a taxi to the bus station. She bought me breakfast in the
café there. The station was full of people. A voice over a loudspeaker was announcing
arrivals. People were moving toward the queue areas. We waited in the café, listening for
her bus to be announced. She scribbled her email address on a napkin and gave it to me.
She insisted that I take the rest of the money her parents had given her to spend on her
trip. It would look better, she said to quell my protests, if she had spent it all. “Really,
Wendy,” she went on, “I mean how are you going to live? What if this Paul guy goes bad
on you? Who’s going to take care of you?”
“Well, I guess I—,”

“No. I don’t want you doing something that might get you hurt like before.”

“I understand,” I said.

“Promise me you’ll try again to get in the dorms.”

“I promise.”

Jill thought for a moment. She watched the people milling around the station for a moment, and then turned back to me. “Wendy,” she said softly, “Did you ever consider going home? I mean, I know you have a commitment to school now, but…” I was shaking my head. “I can’t.”

“They might be able to help you. Your parents are different from mine. They won’t react the same way. From what I can see, they’re just worried about you.”

“I don’t think I can face them,” I said.

“They already know, baby. It’s not like—,”

“But what about everything else? The things I let happen to me?”

“That isn’t your fault!” She took my hands. “I would say you don’t have to tell them, but I know how you are.”

I nodded. “I couldn’t keep it from them. And what would they think of me?”

“Wendy…”

“And wouldn’t they want me to change?”

“You’re nineteen now, Wendy. They can’t make you do anything you don’t want to. It wouldn’t be the same as before,” Jill said.

“But…they would want me to,” I said. “I can’t.”
“I can’t pretend,” I said. “I’m just not strong enough. Not like you.”

Jill began, “I don’t think that—,” but the announcement came across the speaker that her bus had arrived and would be departing shortly. She raised an eyebrow. “You still might think about it. Or just call even. Just to let them know you’re ok.” I nodded, but felt doubtful. She said, “Listen: I’ll tell them, somehow, when I go home for Easter.” I was worried, but she continued, “I’ll just tell them that I saw you and you’re ok. I won’t tell them where you are. After all, who knows how long you can stay with that guy. You really need to call them at least, though.” She glanced at the crowd forming around the bus she would be taking. “I’d better get in line.” We stood to go and as we left the table, Jill took my hand in hers.

“Jill!” I said, astonished.

She smiled. “I’ve always wanted to do this.” We crossed the waiting area and stood in the line with the other passengers. I held tightly to her hand. If people noticed or were upset I did not see. It was the first time Jill had held my hand in public and I was enthralled by being so close to her. But the line began to shrink as passengers boarded the bus one by one, and it became clear that it would not be long before I would have to let go. Jill would be going back to school where her roommate would vouch for her to her parents and to her—boyfriend—that she had indeed gone to South Padre. Andy Wagoner would be waiting for her, and her parents would be happy. That would be her reality and this—just a dream. And I—where would I be without her? Panic began to grow in my stomach. There were only a few people ahead of her. She turned to me and said, “Well, this is it. Let me see that smile once more before I go.” But I couldn’t do it. I could feel
tears pressing their way forward. I tried hard to hold them back. She said, “Baby…”

“I don’t want you to leave me,” I said.

Jill looked at me for a moment. “I’m not leaving you,” she said. Tears collected in my eyes. “Wendy,” she took my face in her hands. “I am not leaving you.”

The driver called out to see if anyone else was getting on board. Jill kissed my lips and my forehead. Then, she turned quickly and got on the bus. I could not see her once she went inside. The driver made one last call for departing passengers, then climbed in and shut the doors.

People had already begun to line up for the next bus as Jill’s bus began pull away from the curb. I followed, uselessly looking in the windows, as it crept along avoiding pedestrians and waiting for a chance to exit the drive. An older woman brushed by me, waving at someone inside the bus. When she saw me, she stopped and said angrily, “You know, you people ought to at least have the common courtesy not to come around decent people with your—,” I turned to her, but her face was a blur. I wiped my eyes, but she didn’t continue. She looked shocked, stammered something I couldn’t understand, and then hurried into the station. I followed after Jill’s bus, walking along the driveway behind it until it pulled into the street. I followed it on the sidewalk as it slowly put distance between her and me until I couldn’t see it anymore. I turned and walked in the opposite direction away. I thought about Jill; I wondered if she had found what she was looking for.

276
We stared in opposite directions supposing silence.

She opened her mouth to speak, but there was no sound to be heard.

We were static in a Brownian haze of smoke.

It was very much like this.

I imagined her thoughts would spill onto the table before me

like savories from a boiling pot.

I reach for them and burn my fingers.

Instead, I saw her as from a distance,

Alone in my body, different than in hers

Where I rocked myself into a lucid dream oh my sister…

Hiding ineptly like a child

You were so very kind to pretend you did not see

It frightened me so

Now I can see that door closing so soon it disappears

A shaft of light sweeping across a room
With the money Jill had given me, I could have easily gotten a taxi, but I felt for some reason like walking. It took me almost three hours to make it back to Paul’s apartment. He wasn’t home, but I used the key he had given me and went inside. I sat on the sofa, lay my head on the arm, and stared out the window at the setting sun. Paul returned an hour and a half later. “Scylla! Um…Wendy—Wendelin, you came back! Are you asleep?”

“No.”

“Why are you sitting in the dark? Mind if I turn on the light?”

“No.” I sat up and averted my eyes against the glare.

He sat next to me on the sofa and waited for my eyes to adjust. I turned toward him. Paul said, peering at me, “You’ve been crying.”

“Yes.”

“Did something bad happen?” He said, concerned. I shrugged. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “I’m not going to cry anymore. I’ve got it under control.”

“Right. Ok,” he said. He took my hands from my lap and gently untangled the fingers. I had been gripping them so tightly that my fingertips had fallen asleep. The blood rushed in to wake them, and tears fell rapidly and involuntarily down my cheeks.