BILLY AND ME AND OTHER STORIES

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The thesis begins with an introductory chapter that explains the problems that short story theorists encounter when they try to define the short story genre. Part of the problem results from the lack of a definition of the short story in the Aristotelian sense. A looser, less traditional definition of literary genres helps solve some of the problem.

Six short stories follow the introduction. "Billy and Me," "Queen of Hearts," "The Whiskey Man," and "Psychedelic Trash Cans" are representative of traditional short stories. "Mourning Coffee" and "Seven X Seven" might very well fit into other genres, but even these stories fit a loose definition of the short story genre.
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I appreciate my dad, who, among other things, taught me how to make both a long story short and a short story long.
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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

There is at present no single consistent use of the term "genre." The most one can say is that it always refers to a subcategory of some larger category (or subcategory) of literary works. Thus the genre of drama is a subcategory of literature, the genre of comedy is a subcategory of drama, the genre of farce is a subcategory of comedy, and so on. The fuzziness of the term arises not just from its being applied at different levels, but also from its being applied according to different criteria. Genre distinctions are based variously on subject matter (detective story, artist novel), narrative situation (confessional novel, dramatic monologue), surface linguistic form (sonnet, prose poem), effect sought in audience (tragedy, melodrama), mode of execution of text (drama) and so on. (175)
Susanne C. Ferguson talks about the problems particular to the short story genre in her essay "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form." She discusses the critics' struggle to define the short story as a particular literary genre:

"Intuition" or even "experience" may tell us that the "short story" exists, but defining it has proven surprisingly resistant to critical effort. A 1976 anthology, Charles May's *Short Story Theories*, demonstrates the problematic situation. Short stories are defined in terms of unity (Poe, Brander Matthews, and others), techniques of plot compression (A. L. Bader, Norman Friedman, L. A. G. Strong), change or revelation of character (Theodore Stroud), subject (Frank O'Connor), tone (Gordimer), "lyricism" (Moravia), but there is finally no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that critics agree absolutely distinguishes the short story from other fictions. (13)

The problem critics recognize is that there is no authoritative definition of the short story. While many contemporary short story theorists might point to Brander Matthews's "The Philosophy of the Short-Story" as one of the first essays attempting a definition of the short story,
they often do not consider his definition adequate for contemporary short story theory. Matthews says,

A true Short-story is something more that a mere story which is short. A true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression. In a far more exact and precise use of the word, a Short-story has unity as a story fulfills the three false unities of the French classic drama: it shows one action, in one place, on one day. A Short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation. . . . The Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained, while the Novel is of necessity broken into a series of episodes. Thus the Short-story has, what the Novel cannot have, the effect of "Totality," as Poe called it, the unity of impression. (52)

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

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

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

The concept of literature as an art is easier to deal with than the concepts involved in its subdivisions. We can set literature off from life, as well as from the other arts, more clearly than we can set off its branches from one another. Indeed, this is precisely the problem many short story critics have in trying to define the genre. How can we talk about something before we know what we are talking about? Don't we have to mark off our field of inquiry before studying it? Isn't it better to interpret and evaluate any
given work relative to its kind rather than applying a single universal standard to all kinds? 
(14-15)
Likewise, it may be helpful to define what genre one is writing in before one begins. I speak in terms of writing a short story; in his essay "On Defining the Short Story: The Genre Question," Austin Wright discusses this issue in terms of defining the short story:

Efforts to define the short story run into a chicken/egg problem. We must decide: Are we trying to articulate a concept already intuitively clear (trying to find terms to mark off this already understood entity?), or are we trying to establish a new category? Are we trying to rationalize our belief that X is a short story and Y is not, or are we creating terms to give a name to X and Y? Again, would my inclusion of a story by Boccaccio in the ranks of the short story precede my attempt to define the short story, or would it follow my establishment of a definition? 
(47)
I would argue that attempts to categorize fiction in the short story genre follow attempts to define the short story, just as attempts to write short stories follow attempts to understand the genre. At minimum it is necessary to understand a genre's limits in order to participate in it.
Although knowing the genre and recognizing boundaries, even loose boundaries, between the genres is not all that is required for one to write good short stories, it does provide necessary tools--the teachable tools. Presumably, anyone can be taught to write a short story, but managing a good short story is another matter. Even writers who have "talent" (or whatever the undefinable quality is that separates those who can write good stories from those who cannot write good stories), need to learn the techniques of the craft of writing to develop their abilities. These techniques include a clear understanding of what constitutes the genre.

This brings the problem full circle, because understanding exactly what forms a short story is difficult because of the diversity of opinion among short story theorists. Attempts to define the short story as genre range even in depth. Some critics' attempts are as simple as Friedman's definition: "a short fictional narrative in prose" (29). Johannes Hedberg gives what he calls "a brief definition" in his essay "What Is a 'Short Story'? And What Is an 'Essay'?" He says, "a short story is the name of a story with fully developed theme, yet shorter than the kind of story that is called a novel" (113). Other critics provide elaborate discussions, demonstrating differences between the short story and another genres, frequently comparisons between the short story and the novel.
In her essay "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It," Mary Louis Pratt provides this type of elaborate comparison. She compares the short story with the novel, establishing differences between the two on the basis of eight propositions. Her first four propositions revolve around comparisons that involve the short story as less complete than the novel:

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

(182-86)

Her last four propositions "relate to [the short story's] status as minor and lesser genre with respect to the novel" (187). These propositions are subject matter, orality, narrative traditions, and craft versus art (187-91).

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

The problem seems to be that no one is able to expose exactly which elements have continued to distinguish a short story from other prose genres--what, in short, makes a short story a short story.

For example, Welty's *The Ponder Heart* or McCullers's *Ballad of the Sad Café* could fit into either category. These two works have elements that meet some of the criteria for the short story and elements that meet some of the criteria for the novel; however, they do not meet all the criteria for either genre. It becomes apparent in works such as these that a strict definition, a definition that forces works in mutually exclusive categories, a purely Aristotelian definition, is not plausible.

Austin Wright recognizes this problem. He says,

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

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

My own sense of the genre--based on what I know, organized by critical distinctions that I find useful, but not tested by any systematic survey of the field--includes such tendencies as the following: 1) The short story tends to be between five hundred words long and the length of Joyce's "The Dead" (we have here a difference between the normal upper limit and an absolute one: "Heart of Darkness" is exceptional). 2) It tends to deal with character and action in its fictional world (this is more specific than my outer-limit designation of, simply, a fictional world). 3) This action tends to be externally simple, with few developed episodes and no subplots or secondary lines of action. . . .

... 4) the short story . . . tends to be more strongly unified than other short prose narrative
forms. . . . 5) [Intensity in] the preference in short stories for plots of small magnitude, plots of discovery, static or disclosure plots, Joycean epiphanies, and the like, as well as in 6) the tendency, especially in modern stories, to leave significant things to inference. (51-52)

Wright bases his defining propositions on the assumption that the elements of the short story are tendencies and not absolutes. The key word here is "tendency." Therefore, Wright's final explanation allows a much looser boundary between genres. Although this type of explanation does not provide a definition in the Aristotelian sense, it provides enough information to allow one to recognize the basic elements of most (but not all) short stories. Wright's "loose" definition allows one to consider literary works that might not fit in a strictly defined short story genre as short stories.

To understand these basic elements of most short stories and to comprehend when a particular literary work excludes elements that most short stories include or includes elements that most short stories don't include, it is necessary to read short stories. Reading short stories, especially evaluating them critically, allows one to grasp, even if it is only intuitively, the elements of a "typical" short story. To understand these tendencies even more deeply and to become more capable of reading short stories
(or any piece of literature) productively, it is also necessary to read criticism of short stories. In creative writing workshops, studying the short story form involves just that—reading short stories, (good ones and bad ones and learning the difference between the two) and studying others’ analyses of short stories.

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

It is equally difficult to define a personal essay as it is to define a short story. Like the boundaries between poetry, short story, and novel genres, the boundary between short story and personal essay is indistinct. The genre question also arises in critical discussions that elaborate on definitions of the personal essay. Whereas many theorists use distinctions between the novel and the short story to explain the short story, they use distinctions between the first-person short story and the personal essay to explain the personal essay. The same types of questions arise when trying to define the essay that arise when trying to define the short story.

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

Chadbourne repeats Hernadi's "quandary," which paraphrases the "chicken/egg" problem both Wright and Friedman point out in their discussions of the problems involved in defining the short story genre. Again, I think it is important first to know the genre, in this case the essay, before one can understand what literary works to include. And again, I think it is important to read personal essays and to read criticism that analyzes personal essays in order to suspect the genre's field of possibility. Fortunately, there are essays that are firmly distinguished as essays, so it is possible to gain knowledge of the genre first. Those seeking to understand the elements of a personal essay first need to recognize the literary works that well-established critics consider as personal essays in order to develop a sense of the genre.
There are many personal essays that are firmly established in the canon as clearly belonging to their particular genre. Larry McMurtry's collection of essays *In a Narrow Grave* provides a good example. The nine works in this collection are clearly essays. They are all first-person narrative accounts that reflect attitudes and opinions on various aspects of life in Texas. The collection of essays contains many factual details, yet many details that could be either fact or fiction. They are presented with a warm, personal, and often humorous voice.

One essay in McMurtry's *In a Narrow Grave* that may appear as a quasi-scholarly essay instead of a personal essay is "Southwestern Literature?" But even this essay is presented as the narrator's reaction to having read three Texas writers: Bedichek, Webb, and Dobie. The essay does not present these three writers in the way a scholarly essay would; instead, the writers the narrator discusses provide a background for him to tell of his own personal experience. His own experience when he realized that "The writer my age who wishes to write about this state [Texas] must relate himself one way or the other to the tradition" Bedichek, Webb, and Dobie promoted (34). The subject of this essay, then, is not these three early Texas writers, but the narrator's attitude toward them.

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

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

It [the essay] can be long or short, grave or gay, flippant or serious, personal or abstract, partisan or indifferent. The essay is, in short, a method of getting off our chests anything we have got to say on any subject or thought under the sun: for we can all write essays--short stories are more difficult to compose. The essay is, by its very nature, usually small-scale; yet it should, as far as possible, be a whole picture in miniature, not merely a detail of a larger picture--a complete work, not an extract. This dictum should apply to the short story as well. (120)

Douglas Hesse says Hedberg's claim that "essays differ from short stories in that they consist of facts sifted through the author's imagination and have unlimited scope in
terms of subject and form" is not correct (86). Hesse points out, in his essay "A Boundary Zone: First-Person Short Stories and Narrative Essays," Hedberg's conclusion "ignores stories which seem to meet both criteria and essays that are unabashedly fictional" (86). Hesse argues for the following similarities between a personal essay and a short story:

Their basic characteristics are a first-person narrator, the possibility and seeming actuality of a one-to-one correspondence between the works on the page and some actual state of affairs in the world, relative brevity, and the dominance of narration. If a first-person short story were "obviously" fiction, it would have no more place in the present discussion than an essay that contains no narrative. (87)

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

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

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

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

Hesse continues, saying, "For the most part there are
obvious differences between essays and short stories,"
(105), and he gives one such distinction: "The fundamental
issue is reference. Essays are supposed to refer to a real world beyond the page; short stories are not” (99).

Hesse continues, explaining that even this is not always so easy for readers to understand. He says that readers approach short stories and essays differently, depending on expectations of genre. He explains the importance of assigning labels to texts: “What happens when we ‘try’ the conventions of essay, and those of the short story? What are the relations between exposition and narrative?” (104).

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

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

A more complicated issue arises when the short first-person narratives are not traditional short stories. Two familiar short works of fiction provide good examples: Donald Barthelme's "The Sandman" and Frank O'Connor's "My Oedipus Complex." If the narrator's name were not explicitly stated as Larry in O'Connor's "My Oedipus Complex," this short story might just as easily be called an essay. One could argue that all the incidents in the first-person narrative are examples that support Larry's portrayal of his Oedipus Complex, his unconscious desire to marry his mother and to kill his father. Larry's attitudes toward the incidents are what are important, not the incidents themselves. However, one could just as easily argue that "My Oedipus Complex" reflects set-up, conflict, and resolution to suggest the theme of Larry's Oedipus Complex and how he overcomes it. Larry clearly identifies with his father at the end of the story, and his identification represents the end of the phallic stage of development in Freud's explanation of psycho-sexual stages of development.

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

However, Barthelme's "The Sandman" could clearly represent an essay or a short story. This is an epistolary narrative, so it is more complex to label than "My Oedipus Complex." One could easily argue that "The Sandman" clearly presents the narrator's evidence that his girlfriend, Susan, should quit therapy and buy a piano. All the summary, in the form of the narrator's letter to Susan's psychiatrist, supports this thesis. The narrator presents all the incidents as arguments to support his thesis. But we also discover a lot about Susan, the narrator, and the psychiatrist, which gives the work strong characterization. "The Sandman," like Updike's "A & P," is as much about the narrator as it is about his intended subject. The narrative reflects dramatic irony, plot, and scene—elements of a short story. One could argue that the conflict builds to the resolution that the narrator loves Susan very much or even that the reader increasingly discovers that the narrator may need a little therapy himself. Like a short story, "The Sandman" reveals many themes through the use of traditional short story elements. "The Sandman" can represent either a short story or a personal essay.

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

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

Most of the stories in this collection clearly represent fiction that is indicative of the short story genre. "Billy and Me," "Queen of Hearts," "The Whiskey Man," and "Psychedelic Trash Cans" are most clearly representative of the short story genre. I use third-person limited narration in "Queen of Hearts" and first-person narration in the other three stories mentioned above. These four stories all build to a climax, then move into a resolution. These stories do not have a thesis and can be interpreted in a number of ways. They all portray characters that perform actions that develop the plots. The incidents in these stories are not used as illustrations of any one controlling idea.
“Mourning Coffee” and “Seven X Seven” do not represent the typical short story as much as the other stories do. “Mourning Coffee” seems a bit short for a short story, and it contains a lot of dialogue. But it does have a sense of plot, and readers learn as much about the two characters who speak as they do about the incident the characters discuss. “Seven X Seven” can easily be called an essay. In this story, the narrator discusses several incidents that all portray her neuroticism. The controlling theme seems more important than the incidents. But it does have a resolution in the sense that the reader comes to understand that the character will probably never change.

Even though “Mourning Coffee” and “Seven X Seven” do not represent the short story genre as clearly as the other stories in this collection, they share enough similarities with the elements of the short story that they can certainly fit any loose definition of the genre.

None of these stories are intended to reveal their narrators’ specific attitudes or opinions in the sense that the narrators of essays express their personal feelings. But in case readers should detect attitudes or opinions on the part of any of the characters in this collection, the attitudes expressed are not necessarily those of the author.
BILLY AND ME

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

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

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

"Now, Ms., I mean Mrs., Klein, what are we going to wear tomorrow?" He mentioned the cut-offs and thongs I sometimes wear to his office.
"My wedding dress," I should've answered. Then he proceeded to tell me what to wear.

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

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

I sit down across from my attorney.

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

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

His words gradually start sounding like the clown at the Jack-in-the-Box drive through.
He pulls out one last "I have advised my client to __________, but she has instead chosen to __________" forms.

"Just sign here, Mrs. Klein."

I sign the form and give it back to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The door was locked," I explain when I return.
"What?" he asks.

"That's Billy's truck."

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

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

We walk in the courthouse, and I see Billy standing in the corner designated for smokers. He doesn't even smoke. He's just standing there, looking down towards his feet. He looks up at me, then walks toward us.

"Hi, Billy," I say.

"Hello."

"Billy, this is Mr. Timmons."

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

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

"Okay." I agree, but I feel terrible. I want to invite Billy. He probably doesn't even know the room number.

"Now, just say 'yes' to everything I ask you," Mr. Timmons had informed me. "Don't talk to anyone; don't say anything." I suddenly feel like the world's greatest conformist, and I guess I am a conformist. I don't know why, but Mr. Timmons suddenly has some sort of magical power over me, although I'm sure his instructions were only to make himself look good in front of the judge. He once told me he had "political ambitions," and I personally think he'll make
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a great Congressman. I look behind me, and Billy follows us. Mr. Timmons pushes the elevator button, and we all three stand waiting.

"You look nice," Billy says to me.

I smile, but he stands slightly behind me, so he can't see me. I hope the elevator is crowded, so I won't have to deal with dead silence.

The elevator approaches us, and we walk into an otherwise empty elevator.

"Nine floors up," Mr. Timmons says.

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

Mr. Timmons ignores him, but I laugh.

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

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

"Gremlins," he says, then steps in the corner across from me. "Remember the gremlins. Are they still in the house?"
I just smile. I notice how sexy he looks, standing there in his baggy, faded 501's. I decide I don't really want a divorce, but I can't think of what to do. I stare at Mr. Timmons; he's holding his briefcase--ready for business. I think of the money my sister sent me to pay him. All those mean things I exaggerated to my friends. Well, it's too late now, I decide. Not really, I think. Just tell Mr. Timmons. Just say . . . , but I think of no words.

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

"Uh . . . uh . . ."

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you hear James Brown got out of the joint today?" Billy asks, looking at me.
"Yeah," I mutter. I'm thinking maybe I should ask Billy how to get out of this. He thinks logically. I need some advice from someone who doesn't panic.

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

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

Billy looks at me and laughs. I grin and fight the urge to move next to him and talk about it.

We go in the room and sit for a minute. "Klein vs. Klein" Judge Bartlow summons.

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

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

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

"Yes ma'am," he answers.

I'm standing there in front of the judge, waiting for the opportunity to bail out. She's going through all the agreements in the decree, asking each of us if we understand and agree to the various clauses.
"Yes, yes, yes," I keep answering. I can't even understand her anymore, "yes" just keeps creeping out of my mouth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Look at the sunrise."

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

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

"Why was that weird?"

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

"Chaos?"

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

"Tell me what?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Tell me, dammit!"

"I don't wanna tell you."

"I've told you a hundred times. If you're not gonna tell me something, don't start it. You can't just leave people hanging like that."
"I'm afraid it'll upset you."
"You are upsetting me. Tell me."
"Okay . . . I was driving across the bridge." He points to the bridge over the lake.
"Yeah," she says.
"On my way home from the store. Yesterday, maybe the day before. I don't remember. The night we ate tv dinners."

She tries to make a joke: "Well that certainly narrows it down." That's supposed to be funny—they have tv dinners every night.

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

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

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

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

"Ha!"

They sip their coffee, and she tells him she loves him because he laughs at her jokes. He says he loves her because she listens to his stories.
“Okay, why did he wanta know if the boat ran?” she asks.

“This is a terrible story. Are you sure you wanta hear it?”

“Yes. You’ve already started it.”

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

“What did Mary Jo tell the man?”

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

“Where?” she asks.

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

“Really? Did you stop?”

“Yeah.” He slowly pours himself coffee. “More coffee?”

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

“You’ve told me nothing,” she says.

“I only got little bits and pieces of the story. Some from Mary Jo. The men at the store were talking about it.”
"Well, you tell me stupid things like the boat was plastic. You worry over details like the particular day and what the sun looked like."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Twins. The nineteen-year-old was driving across the bridge, and he saw a lady waving her arms and screaming for help."

"Who was the lady?"

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

"Poor lady. Can you imagine? At least she didn't have to make the choice."

"Yeah. What's bizarre is that he got one boy and put him back in the boat, and that's the one he didn't save."
"Oh, God. I bet that kid'll feel horrible when he grows up. I wonder where their father was?"

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

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

She reaches over and unplugs the coffee pot. He pours a little more coffee in each of their cups, emptying the coffee pot.
Darlene hates it when her husband and her lover get together, especially when the occasion calls for her presence as well. She thinks the acquaintance between Wayne and Johnny is peculiar. Her affair with Johnny must be the result of some sort of mystical magic in order to transcend tense situations.

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

Of course, these romantic feelings are only magnified by her habitual reading of romance novels.

Johnny, she thinks. She imagines his big, broad, muscular shoulders: Johnny standing shirtless, with baggy Levi's hanging loosely around his hips. Although she'd always been embarrassed to try, she calculates that the jeans might be precisely loose enough to enable her to pull them off him without dealing with zippers--too practical, sometimes awkward, and always boring.

She has more enticing things to do, like running her fingers through his thick, black hair and feeling his muscular arms around her. He stares into her green eyes with those incredible brown eyes of his and gently swings her long, auburn hair away from her breasts.
"Forbidden fruit," he once whispered ever so softly into her left ear, while gently massaging her breasts.

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

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

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

Darlene knows Johnny wants her to divorce Wayne, and she's trying to devise a scheme that will keep everyone happy. She sometimes feels like an evil person, so she's extra careful to keep Wayne from finding out. This way, she
thinks, nobody gets hurt. Lately, however, Johnny’s putting pressure on her. She’s noticed he’s been acting weird when he gets around Wayne, and she wonders if what appears to be Wayne’s suspicion is merely her own guilt or imagination.

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

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

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

“What?” Johnny asked from the living room.

“You bit my ear.”

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

"No," he said apologetically.

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

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

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

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

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

She and Johnny get together every Friday night, while Wayne plays poker over at the one-bedroom apartment A. C.
and Ted rented for gambling and such. She’s busy fluffing the pillows on the bed, when Wayne walks in the bedroom.

“Have you seen my plaid socks?” he asks.
Darlene sits on the bed. “What plaid socks?”
“My poker socks?”
“No, I haven’t.” She gets up and searches in his top drawer. “Umm. Maybe they’re dirty. How about these?” She tosses a pair of red socks on the bed.

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

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

“I think so. Yeah, I remember. I did.”
“I’m lucky.”
“Yeah, you are.” He repeats his request.
She thinks Wayne’s invitation for her to join him sort of strange and worries he might be suspicious if she doesn’t agree to go.

“It’ll be fun,” he says.

“I don’t know anything about poker,” she argues. What about Johnny, she thinks.
“Just go this once,” he pleads. “Besides, I might win enough to take you to Galveston.”

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

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

“Johnny, we can’t meet tonight.”

“Okay, I need to work out anyway...”

“I know you’re disappointed.”

“Darlene... there are other Fridays, you know.”

“Wayne wants me to go to the poker game—”

“Poker game. What poker game?”

“The one at A. C.’s. I’m afraid to tell him no.”

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

“Poker game. Yeah, I’ll go!”

Darlene gets the mascara and starts toward home. By the time she gets home, she convinces herself that Johnny said he’d go to the poker game or anywhere else she wanted him to go. She assures herself he insisted, despite her persistent objections. He just can’t resist her. He’s even willing to subject himself to an uncomfortable situation.
“No,” she now remembers him saying. “I can’t miss my Friday night with Darling Darlene.”

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

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

“I’ll take a beer,” Red Wright says.

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

Darlene moves to the living room and listens to the men. Wayne stops by on his way to the rest room.
"You okay?" he asks.

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

"Yeah," he answers, but he isn't. He's one pay check down and one on tab. He sits beside her on the couch.

"Red's trying to piss me off," he says.

"Really."

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

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

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

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

"He can bet more."

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

Wayne goes back in the other room, and Darlene pretends to watch television. There's some guy on Sally Jessy Raphael who claims he can save marriages. He instructs viewers to put their wedding rings on the coffee table, then
he will perform the ritual. Darlene's interest elevates, but she doesn't see a coffee table.

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

"Nothing," Darlene answers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Five hundred," he says with a smile.

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

"A hundred."

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

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

"No," he whispers. "Red's left, A. C. fell asleep, and Johnny can't play poker. Ted and me can get his money."
Ted deals the cards, and Darlene looks at the three men. Johnny has a lot of chips, but Ted keeps borrowing from Wayne.

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

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

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

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

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

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

No. Time helps Darlene think up other conditions that caused the breakup between her lover and herself. She
thinks she may even write a story about it--one of those "based on personal experience narratives." She ponders the closing line:

"When propelled in the position of seeing him compete with someone she only thought she loved, Charlene realized she loved her husband. She had no choice but to break her lover's heart. She remembered the ring, still lying on the coffee table."
I told Roger I'd marry him--flat out said "yes, I will; I do. But," I added, "you'll have to come up with the right ring, of course." I told him I didn't want just a piece of the rock--I wanted the whole rock.

"Till death do us part?" I asked.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Otherwise, what's the point?"

Then, I tactlessly reminded him that he'd been married once before. One night when I first met him, he got drunk on whiskey and told me all about it. He had a reputation around town for drinking whiskey and doing all sorts of wild things. "The Whiskey Man" they called him. I'd heard tales about the Whiskey Man, and I admit I was curious to witness this transformation from human to beast.

He'd come to my apartment to pick me up.

"Let's do it like a real date," he had suggested.

"Sure, why not?" I asked. Right, a real date; then he showed up twenty minutes late.

"Little late," I said when I answered the door.

"Well . . . uh, I guess so." Then he looked down at his watch and said "eighteen and a half minutes."

I had a good mind to tell him I'd made other plans, but he waltzed right in my door and sat on the couch. Started rattling on about how he liked to be a little late when he
picked up a girl for a date.

"That way, she'll have plenty of time to get ready and everything."

"And everything?" I asked.

"Well, you know, getting her lipstick on and all that stuff. So, where would you like to go? I'll take you anywhere you want."

He started naming all these places down in Dallas, but I stopped him mid-sentence.

"Dairy Queen."

"Dairy Queen?"

"Yep." I had a look that dared him to suggest anything else. Then, I asked him if he won any money playing pool at the V.F.W. I knew he'd been there because I had driven by a couple of hours earlier and had seen his truck in the parking lot.

He admitted he'd been there, so I figured I'd at least give him credit for honesty. I pulled the keys out of my purse and said I'd drive.

"Would you pull over next to my truck?" Roger asked.

I parked next to his truck, and he got out and reached under his seat, dragging out a bottle of whiskey.

"Won it in the pool tournament," he said as he returned to the seat next to me.

I drove to the car wash, explaining that since this was a "real" date, we needed a clean car. Roger got out and
washed the car, while I stayed inside, hoping maybe the mist would sober him up. But he was just as drunk when he got back in the car. I stopped at the convenience store and got two Cokes, handed him one, and opened the other for myself.

"I'm going to drive down the highway and dry the car," I said.

"Sure," he said as he opened the whiskey and took a drink.

"Ough," I said. "I don't see how you can stand that."

He just looked at me and smiled. Then he took the purple bag off the whiskey bottle and hung it on my rear-view mirror. "I like purple," he said. "But my favorite color's brown."

I thought that was strange. How much personality could a person whose favorite color is brown have?

"Brown?"

"Yeah, what's the matter, don't you like brown? Well, too bad. Brown, brown, brown."

That's when I realized who was in my car. It wasn't Roger; it was the Whiskey Man. I considered taking him to his house because I didn't really want to haul a drunkard around all evening. We were a few miles outside of town, approaching the bridge that crosses the lake.

"Go down that dirt road," Roger suggested, pointing to a narrow pathway just before the bridge that lead downhill toward the lake.
All of a sudden I had this funny feeling. What if he's planning on killing me, I thought. It was eerie.

"I want to show you something," he said. "It's a secret."

I was scared and curious at the same time. If I drove down there I feared my life may end. God, I reminded myself, he's not a murderer. So he's had a little too much to drink. Who hasn't at one time or another? I've dealt with drunk people before. Get a grip--this is life, not a horror film. I looked over at Roger. He was looking up at the stars through his window, his knees curled up, with his whiskey bottle leaning against the door. Now, really, how dangerous could that be? Come on. Besides, what's life without a little jeopardy?

"I wish life was like the movies," he said, just as I swerved onto the dirt road.

This is it, I thought. My life ends today. I started planning my funeral. I was driving down the hill, slowly following the curve in the road that went beside the lake. I thought maybe I should drive into the lake and take my chances. After all, sober people generally swim better than drunk people. I was somewhat embarrassed to ask him about his reputation, but I couldn't stand it anymore, so I decided to confront him.

"I heard you were the Whiskey Man," I said.

"Whiskey river take my mind," he started singing; then
he winked at me. "Don't let her memory torture me." I'm
going to have them play that song at my funeral. He held up
the whiskey bottle and offered me a drink.

"No, thanks."

He took another swig from the bottle, then rolled his
window down. He folded his arms across the top of the car
door and rested his chin on his hands. The wind was slight-
ly blowing his hair, and I suddenly had an incredible urge
to reach and stroke his back. I felt concerned for him in a
motherly manner, but I didn't know why.

"What you thinking about?" he abruptly turned around
and asked.

I thought about admitting that I was having maternal
feelings for him, but I was afraid he'd take it wrong. I
once dated a guy who got really ticked because I told him I
had maternal feelings for him. I had meant it as a compli-
ment, but he said it made him uncomfortable to think I felt
like I was dating my son. I was afraid Roger might have the
same reaction, and I didn't want to get the Whiskey Man mad
at me. Taking risks was one thing, pure stupidity an
entirely different matter.

"Oh . . . nothing," I lied. "Nothing."

"Must be nice."

"Yeah," I said, although it didn't look like he was
having a difficult time losing concentration.

"Let's stop here," he suggested.
I parked the car, and we got out. I followed him a few feet off the road, then he sat down on an old broken log that looked like it had washed ashore. Cigarette butts were scattered around.

"This is it."

"What?"

"My secret. I come here sometimes and sit."

He scooted over, and I sat beside him. I kept waiting for him to do something, but he kept sitting there, looking back and forth at the water and the stars. I kept trying to think of something to say, but I could only think of stupid stuff like commenting on the stars or talking about the temperature. I even thought about telling him my middle name, but then I remembered I didn't have one.

I started getting that creepy feeling again. I wondered if he was scheming. I decided my best defense was to go along with him, pretend I liked whiskey men.

"So, are you the real Whiskey Man?"

"Will the real Whiskey Man please stand up!" he shouted, then stood up, got his bottle out of the car, and started dancing around. "Roger T. Whiskey," he said. "That's what they call me. Once a respectable man..."

Then he sat back down and got serious. He told me about his divorce, explaining that his wife left him for no reason. I felt bad for him, but I had to be honest.

"No reason?" I asked. "They all say that."
“Well, okay, not a good reason.”

He said he would never divorce someone—he just assumed he’d be married for life.

“I won her in a poker game,” he claimed.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I was playing with some men who used to get together on the weekends.”

He said he had some hand, a full straight or something, and some guy he was betting didn’t have any money. So he told the man he’d go ahead and bet the money, but if the guy lost he had to introduce him to the blonde he’d seen him with the weekend before.

I didn’t know whether to believe him or not, but he acted like he believed it. I thought the story was kind of foolish yet endearing.

He told me all about how much he loved her, even if he didn’t always show it, and how he felt when she left him. How lonely he’d been all the years since. I couldn’t believe this man, who was practically a stranger to me, confessed his personal feelings. He seemed genuinely sensitive, and this was long before it was popular for men to be openly vulnerable. He paused for a long time, then apologized for acting so silly. I didn’t think it was silly at all, but I tried to keep him from feeling embarrassed.

“You ready to go to the Dairy Queen?” I asked after a while.
I looked over for a response, and he said he felt stupid, so he wondered if I would take him on home. He told me he was sorry about the date, admitting that he didn't know about stuff like that.

"It makes me nervous, and when I get nervous, I drink, and when I drink whiskey, I turn into the . . . the . . . the Whiskey Man!" he shouted as he reached over and picked me up, pretending he was a monster.

That was two years ago--our third date. Well, quasi-date. I've since discovered the man didn't live up to his legendary title. In fact, his personality was sort of the antithesis of his reputation. Well, he'd been in a couple fights and wrecked a few cars and threw lawnmowers and telephones into the street, but nobody's perfect. Strangely enough, I wished he did live up to his reputation as Whiskey Man a little more. Something about it seemed kind of enticing.

When he asked me to marry him, I decided this was a good opportunity to at least try to make him into a sort of legendary person. I chose Heracles, because he's so strong and daring. Well, that and the fact that Roger already had one thing in common with Heracles: They both won their first wives.

I tried to concoct something comparable to the Twelve Labors, but I couldn't think of anything so dramatic; so, I decided my request for "the rock" would have to suffice. It
was a big enough challenge for Roger.

I felt kind of bad about it. I mean, I knew he didn't have much money, but that was why the feat was challenging—it worked as an heroic test. But I disguised my motives to Roger, explaining that I planned on getting married only once; therefore, this diamond was forever, and I wanted something we'd both be proud of for eternity.

"But that isn't really the point," I added to my argument. "I want to see how much you love me." I said that maybe if I made him earn my "immortal hand," he'd appreciate me more. Or, at least, I'd know he was serious about the vow.

I even suggested he engrave "From Roger" in little letters on the inside of the band. I pretended it would add romance to the wedding ritual, but really I wanted to make his trial a little more daring.

"No problem," he said. "I'll be back tomorrow with the biggest diamond you ever saw."

I wondered if maybe I'd made the test too easy. Maybe he had money I didn't know about.

"You will?" I questioned.

"Yeah, I'll get the money."

"Well, don't win it playing poker."

"I don't have any money to play with."

I tried to think of a polite way to ask him how he had enough money for the ring. The kind of ring I had in mind
cost a lot more than what he needed to get in a poker game. Then it dawned on me that he might get some fake diamond or something.

"And I'm taking it and having it checked. I want a real rock." I could tell by his expression that I'd insulted his integrity.

"I'll bring you an appraisal. What kind of a man do you think I am?"

A normal man, I thought. But by the time I got through, he'd be a hero.

"I was just kidding," I lied.

"Okay, I'll be back tomorrow. I want to hurry, before you change your mind."

"Goodbye, Odysseus," I mumbled as he walked out the door.

I was curious as to how he was going to accomplish this feat. I knew he couldn't get money from the bank, because I remembered him talking about having bad credit. Then I worried he might go to one of those places that advertised no credit--no problem. No, he'd never done that before. As the day went on, I started getting excited--maybe he'd rob a bank or a 7-11 or make counterfeit money. The Whiskey Man, yes, my Whiskey Man!

By the next day, I was dreaming about how good that ring was going to look on my finger. Although materialistic aspects weren't my primary motives, I couldn't help but
imagine the rock--yes, the rock, right there on my finger, with a red fingernail.

I couldn't stand it anymore. I kept waiting for the Whiskey Man, imagining the grin on his face as he put the ring on my finger. I put fresh paint on my nails and everything. Then I decided to dress up and curl my hair in case he wanted to take me somewhere to officially propose. I got my camera out, read the instructions on how to get it to take a picture by itself, then sat on the couch and waited for my hero.

It seemed like it took forever, and I found out real quick I had no patience. I don't see how Penelope survived twenty years. But I endured.

***

A faint knock on the door woke me up. It's him, I thought. Late as usual. It was 11:30. Oh well, he got back the next day like he'd promised. I opened the door, and I could smell the whiskey on his breath. I looked for a gift-wrapped box as he stumbled to the couch.

"I'm just a screw up," he said.

Did you get the ring, I thought. Hell no, he didn't get the ring. He did not have the face of a happy man. He failed the test. What a dud. A flop. A klutz. Here I'd sat half the night, expecting a hero to come bouncing through the door, fall down on his knees, and slip a diamond on my finger. And there he sat, fidgeting with the gold
cord around the purple bag that covered his whiskey.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

This better be good, I thought. I glared at him. Now my dress was all wrinkled; my hair a mess. He took a swig of whiskey. Right, I thought, the Whiskey Man. He looked like a poor excuse for such a grandiose title.

"I feel terrible," he said. "I'm a terrible son."

"Son?"

He explained that he'd gone down to his dad's in East Texas to borrow the money. That seemed simple enough to me.

"It was awful."

"Did you get the money?" I blurted out, without thinking.

"My dad took me riding around. We went squirrel hunting early this morning. He started telling me all his problems. He's having problems. His wife. . . . Can you believe he hasn't slept with her in two years?"

"Two years? Is that what he said? They hadn't had sex in two years?"

"Well, he said 'slept together,' but that's what he meant."

"That's terrible."

"He kept telling me how glad he was I'd come to see him. I feel awful."

I sensed that he didn't get the money, but I wasn't certain. I was reminded of the scene in Casablanca where
Ingrid Bergman points the gun at Humphrey Bogart and says, "Give me the papers. I want those papers." I started to pretend the camera was a gun and tell him that I wanted that ring. I could point it at his chest and say, "Give me the ring." I opted for silence instead.

Even if he did have the ring in his pocket or in his truck or at his house, I thought this was a strange way to propose. I was losing patience.

"I feel guilty."

"It's okay," I lied, thinking he meant because he didn't get the money.

"I hardly see my dad, and the only reason I went was to borrow money from him."

"Yeah, and--"

"When I left he put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Thanks for coming to see me, son.'"

"Well, it's okay. He doesn't know that's the only reason you visited. So--"

"But, I know it, and that's what matters. I just couldn't. He acted so glad to see me and to talk with me. I didn't have the heart. I couldn't ask him. I guess I should've, but I didn't."

He took another sip of whiskey, got up, and stood by the door. Then he started pacing the floor, picking up little things off my coffee table and fidgeting with them.

"I'm useless," he announced.
He didn't look much like a hero. I wasn't sure if he felt bad because he didn't get the money or because he rarely visited his father.

"I kept waiting for the right time to ask him. He acted like he needed someone to talk to. . . . That's the only reason I went to see him. . . . He thinks I just came to visit."

"Well, you didn't ask him for the money, so that must not have been your only reason."

"Yes, it was. The only reason, and I'm a lousy son."

I felt bad for him. I tried to convince him since he didn't actually ask, he must've had other intentions.

"Unconscious motives," I added to my case.

"No." He shook his head.

I wanted him to feel better, but I couldn't think of any comforting words. He had failed the test and wasn't a hero, but at least he was a nice person. It's endearing that he didn't want to hurt his father's feelings.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't ask him."

He kept drinking his whiskey, and his words were increasingly slurred.

"I didn't have the guts. Now, I'm back with nothing." He held out his hands. "A hand full of nothing."

That's when it hit me. I forgot about Heracles and Odysseus.

"Sometimes nothing can be a real cool hand," I
declared. It would work. He was just like Cool Hand Luke. Although he'd never knocked parking meters off poles, I heard he'd had too much to drink one night and ran into two stop signs, bending the poles. He even had light brown, curly hair, like Paul Newman.

"I just didn't," he mumbled.

"It's okay," I kept repeating. "You're a good person." That motherhead didn't know you was fooling, I thought; but I didn't want to insinuate he only pretended to care for his father, so instead I said, "You're father's happy you came to see him. He doesn't know you wanted money."

"Yeah, but you can't kid yourself."

"No, that's the tricky part." You can't fool about something like that, I repeated to myself.

He kept drinking the whiskey, until he finally passed out on the couch. I pulled his boots off of him, got him a blanket and a pillow, then kissed him good night. I felt proud of him.

"What you had, Whiskey Man," I said from the doorway, "was a failure to communicate."

I felt sort of bad about the whole episode. I'll probably feel bad about it for a long time. I mean, he's not Heracles, and he's not even really the Whiskey Man. But I'm glad I found out, even though the discovery made me feel devious. No, he's not an heroic figure, at least in the classical sense. He's not a living legend, and I doubt
he'll die a legend. No, he's not, but he is Roger; and I decided this incident helped me see the real Roger.

I also realized it was Roger I wanted to marry. He didn't have to be anyone more special than he already was. So I decided I'd marry him. Ring or not.

I knew he probably wouldn't feel comfortable asking without "the rock." I was afraid he'd feel awkward even bringing up the subject again. So, I went and got a ring myself. I went down to T.J.'s pawn shop on my lunch hour and bought two wedding bands. They didn't match, but that was okay. None of the rings matched. I guessed it was because people usually hock rings when they lose their sentimental value—they get divorces or break up, so there's no reason to keep the rings anymore. But they only have their own rings.

I was proud of my ring. It was a wide, white gold band. I vowed it'd never end up in a pawn shop again. I got the ring, then I went straight to the jeweler and asked him to engrave "To Whiskey Man" on the inside of Roger's ring, but he said that was too many letters. So, instead, I had "To W.M." engraved in little gothic-style letters. Then, I had "From W.M." engraved on mine, so at least the insides of the bands would match—sort of.
One of the worst things about getting a divorce is that it causes feelings of confusion; everything seems chaotic. The amount of disruption seems to be positively correlated with the number of years, or even months now days, that the marriage lasted.

My sister was once married for only five weeks. She had the marriage annulled, and she continued her daily routine as if nothing had ever happened. She continued to live in the apartment she rented before the marriage and kept the job she'd had for four years. In fact, she didn't even tell me about her "brief union" until three years after the marriage had dissolved.

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

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

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

"You worry too much," she accused.

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

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

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

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

I decided it was time for more therapy. This time, I bought a three-volume set of self-help books. Because I wanted to speed the journey towards my arrival to "emotional health and stability," as the author claimed on the dust jacket, I skipped the first two volumes. According to the
third book, *Getting To Know Me*, one who desires to enhance one's life needs to take that crucial first step: defining priorities. I had a hard time deciding, so I skimmed volume one, *Getting To Be Me*, but didn't find the answer. I scanned the chapter entitled "priorities" in volume two, *Getting to Like Me*, and found the answer. On p. 132 was a questionnaire. It depicted a highway and the road signs represented questions printed in big, bold letters. The question on the last road sign asked, "What should be most important in your life?_________." I turned the book upside down, found the answer that corresponded with the question, and read: "myself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Johnny said he'd rather wait. Yeah, he thought he'd slide one right by his old lady. Nope, not his mom. At exactly 9:10.3, I flicked the tube off.

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

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

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

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

I had my pile to the "H's". Ricky Henderson to be exact. I pondered how I refused to allow any more weeks like the one prior to this one. My brother's children had been staying with me, and my relatives stopped by one by one. It was a close call; I feared I'd never return to my 49.7 with Johnny, but we escaped via a quick trip to the park. I sat on the swing beside Johnny. We sang to the rhythm of the motion and played word games. This went on, of course, for 49.7 minutes--dizziness was no excuse.

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

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

"What?"

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

"I thought we were putting them in alphabetical order," I said.
He said he liked to organize his autographed cards according to value. It bugged me. There were all those cards, and although they appeared neatly stacked, the order seemed random. Besides, what if the values changed? They'd be out of order.

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

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

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

I admitted that I'd gotten confused.

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

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

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

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

"We'll get them organized right," I promised.

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow, during our 49.7. Yeah, we'll do it."

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

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

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

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

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

Ten o'clock came. Johnny assembled the scattered cards into a pile and stacked them at the end of the table.
"We'll do Topps tomorrow," we said simultaneously. Johnny grinned and said, "Owe me a Coke."

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

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

Then I tip-toed into Johnny's room and kissed him on the forehead.

"You can go skating tomorrow night," I whispered in his ear. It's kind of like he'd told me: a parking-lot full of parents couldn't be all wrong. Face it, it was true--other
kids went skating on Friday nights.

As I lay in my bed, I looked forward to watching Johnny skate around the rink. I imagined him skating around and around. I just hoped he didn't fall--too hard.

It was difficult at first, but I'm weaning Johnny from his 49.7. I've also taken my sister's earlier advice and have found a job and an apartment. I'm reading new self-help books, and I've discovered I may have obsessive-compulsive tendencies. I'm now reading a book that promises to remedy this mental disease. The author compares life to a Pee-Wee Herman show and says obsessive-compulsives worry too much.
Mom painted the trash can psychedelic; it clashed with the soft, pale green wallpaper in the kitchen.

"Whose turn to wash dishes?" she'd look down at me and ask. "'Not I,' said the little red hen," she always answered herself but continued the chore.

She sang to me when I was a kid.

"This is the way we wash the plate, wash the plate, wash the plate." She'd hold the dish way above the sink and move the sponge in perfect harmony with the tune.

"So early, each and every morning." I knew there was something off about that part of the song, but I didn't know exactly what. I was tempted to correct her--tell her the song goes, "So early in the morning;" but I never did.

Years later, when I studied poetry in high school, I learned about meter and remembered that song. Even then, I considered telling her she couldn't go around adding syllables and accents at whim--it messes up the rhythm. Although I had outgrown fear of retribution, I had developed adequate social skills about common courtesies and offending people for no reason. After all, she was my mother; what difference, in the greater scheme of things, did it really make if she couldn't get the rhythm right?

I remember when Dad drove her away for the first time.
I was eight years old. It was pouring down rain. She sat in the back seat drawing circles on the inside of the fogged windows. “Frontwards, backwards, reverse, around,” she mumbled.

I remember thinking it was silly that she was explaining how a circle is the same whether you draw it backwards or forwards. I never thought about a reversed circle, and who cares, anyway? But, I didn’t say anything; I feigned interest. Oh well, it’s been so long ago, I may have been interested; besides, I was probably having fun drawing on the windows.

Then she started singing about drawing and crying in the rain, and that’s when I knew. Yeah, that’s when I figured out she knew I thought she couldn’t sing. And I wondered if that was why she was going away. She stopped singing, and glared at me. “Sing to me, Mom,” I said.

She pulled me next to her and stroked my hair. “You have pretty blond hair,” she said. She put my head in her lap, and I lay across the seat, tapping the window with my foot. “Hush little baby, don’t say a word. . . .”

“Thing’s will get better,” Dad promised. “We’ll go to baseball games. You can have friends over.”

Dad took me to the mall. We ate our lunch at the bench near the fountains, and he bought me new clothes.

“Nice shorts,” Mom said. It was her third time to go to the hospital, and I was twelve years old. “Pretty blue
... the sky's blue."

"Yeah," I answered.

"That's like that story I read you that time. Remember, 'The Sky is Blue'?"

"You mean 'The Sky is Gray'?"

"No, Bo, I mean the one about that little boy with a toothache."

It bugged me. Why couldn't she get things right? I wished I had a normal Mom.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "That's a good story."

We got things ready for her to come home one Christmas. Dad bought a huge fir tree. We got the ornaments and lights down from the attic. "Family heirloom," he said, while he attached the faded white angel on top.

The house was spotless. I know because I had to scrub the commodes. We worked all week. I marched around the house singing, "Order! Order! Order in the house!"

On the drive home Dad said something about all the Christmas lights. "Huh?" I asked.

"Excuse me?" Dad asked.

"Huh?" Well, I couldn't hear him. Mom was sitting beside me pointing to the different colored Christmas lights.

"House 1--red, green, red, green. . . . House 12--all red. . . ." She was naming them out loud, while she wrote the list down on a Big Chief tablet.
"Not 'huh',' Dad demanded. "How about a 'sir'? I'd like a little respect."


Years later, I was home on Spring break from college. Mom and Dad were getting ready to go on a trip. I offered to drive Mom downtown to the bank.

"Responsibilities, an opportunity to allow her to care for herself." My dad repeated the doctor's orders.

We sat across from the lady at the desk. "Lucy." Her nametag said "Lucy." Mom had three bank books in her hand. She explained that she wanted to take 1000 dollars out of each account. She held out three 100 dollar bills and one of the bank books. "But I want to make a deposit in this account."

"Mom, it'd be easier just to keep that money and withdraw 700 dollars from that account."

"No, no, honey. You don't understand. It's because this account pays interest."

I shut up and let her work it out with Lucy. She began signing the traveler's checks. They were for twenty dollars each.

She slowly separated each one from the pile and signed her name. Her shaking hands scribbled her signature.

"Now, you'll probably need some I.D. when you use these," Lucy said.
Mom quit writing and looked at me. Her voice was shaking. "Bo, Bo-Boy. I need some I.D." No one had called me Bo-Boy in years, and I was somewhat embarrassed at Lucy’s stare.

“What do you usually use for I.D.?" I asked.

She started digging in her purse. A wadded Kleenex, a tube of lipstick, and a butterscotch candy fell onto the desk. She told me she remembered she had an old driver’s license in her safety-deposit box.

Lucy got up to get the safety-deposit box key. Mom quit signing the checks and began counting them. "Twenty, forty, sixty. . . ." She was speaking loudly, and people were staring. “Here, Mom, I’ll count them." I took the checks. “. . . one hundred. Umm . . . something’s not right”

“What is it?”

“Just a second, Mom. I’m trying to think.”

“Is it right? How many should be there?” She began counting on her fingers. She stood up and hollered “Lucy!”

“It’s okay, Mom," I said. “She’ll be here in a minute."

“Lucy!”

“Mom, the lady’s busy. She’ll be right back.”

She was walking around the bank with the checks flapping in her hand. I suddenly knew why Dad was “too busy” to take her to the bank.
Lucy came back with the key in one hand and some traveler's checks in the other.

"Miss, Miss. I think--"

"She knows, Mother. She's taking care of it."

"Excuse me?" Lucy asked.

"Oh, it's okay. We just wondered why there weren't enough checks," I said.

"Oh, yes, I had to go get some 100s. Didn't you say you wanted ten 100s?" She handed them to Mom.

"Uh . . . yeah, oh yeah."

Lucy handed me the key, and I quickly made my escape to the back room. I could hear my mother talking, and I was glad to have a retreat.

I opened the safety-deposit box. Everything was neatly placed inside. There was some tissue paper wrapping some of the things. I saw Dad's basketball medals, old pictures, some jewelry. I found an old Valentine card I'd made Mom. The driver's license was wrapped in tissue. Mother looked really young. So innocent. Pretty. Behind it was an old picture. It was Dad, Mom, me, and Jenny. I turned it over:

Family--1969
Bobby--age 2   Jenny--age 4

I was surprised to find the picture, because I didn't think we had any pictures left. The pictures are how Dad first found out something was wrong with Mom. I was only seven
when it happened, but Dad told me he came home from work and Mom was sitting in the middle of the living room floor, surrounded by pictures she'd taken out of photo albums and scattered around the room. He was picking up the pictures, when he noticed she'd scribbled cusswords across our faces, cut me out of some, Jenny out of some, and both of us out of others. There were little faces all over the floor, and Mom just sat there holding her sewing scissors.

He said he tried to comfort her, but she started rolling around the floor, chanting "I hate God." He described it as a breakdown, a total collapse, right in front of him.

Dad and I will always silently feel responsible for what happened to Mom, but for me to admit it would imply that I equally blame my father. That would be ridiculous, because it was me he saved. Mom had gone grocery shopping the day Dad took Jenny and me to the lake. I must've been in shock, because I don't remember the details. Dad said the current sucked the raft out from under us, and he instinctively grabbed for Jenny and threw her back on the raft. Then he headed toward me. I guess he couldn't recall the details either. He just said he'd already pulled me to shore, before he noticed Jenny was no longer on the raft.

Lucy came back in the room.

"Did you find it?"

"Yes," I answered.

"You can just put the box back in the slot when you're
through. Just bring me the key."

"Uh . . . okay . . . Uh, I think my mother may be a little confused. Did you explain to her about the checks? She may need some help."

"Yes, we got it all worked out."

Lucy left the room, and I put the stuff back in the box, except for the picture and Mom's license, which was sort of senseless, because it was too old to use for I.D--she hardly looked like the same person. I put the picture in my billfold.

I met Mom at the desk with her driver's license.

"We're cooking with grease, now," she said with a smile.

"Yeah, Mom," I agreed. "We're cooking with grease!"

On the way home from the bank, a car ran a red light and pulled out in front of us. As I brought the car to a screeching halt, I quickly swung my right arm across my mother's lap.

We met Dad in the driveway. He was busy replacing the windshield wipers on his truck. "Daddy-0, Daddy-0!" I teased from my car window. Mom laughed.


