

SHORT STORIES

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This collection of seven representative original short stories will include four short stories relating to a fictional location in Dallas, the Starry Skies gay country-and-western dance hall. Three short stories set in fabulous, sometimes absurd settings, will follow. A preface dealing with the nature of fictional place and non-fictional place in fiction will precede the collection of short stories.

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PART I

TENSION OF FICTIONAL AND REAL PLACE NAME IN FICTIONAL NARRATIVE

One of the oldest extant narratives of literate culture presents, early on, one of the most common devices of fictional narrative: the placement of geographical features with fictional names (here, the Rivers Pishon and Gihon, the Lands of Havilah and Cush, and the Garden of Eden) adjacent to places with real names (the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates and the region of Assyria).

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden from the east, and He placed there the man whom He had formed . . . And a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it separated and became four heads . . . The name of one is Pishon; that is the one that encompasses all the land of Havilah, where there is gold . . . And the name of the second river is Gihon; that is the one that encompasses all the land of Cush . . . And the name of the third river is Tigris; that is the one that flows to the east of Assyria, and the fourth river that is the Euphrates (Genesis II: 8,10,13, 14).

Whatever purpose may have initially inspired the canonical written version of this ancient story, the result enchants the modern reader, creating a place that is both real and not real at the same time. At the same time, this mythic geography provides a fascinating tension at the point of contact and transfer from places with real names to places with fictional names, as for instance, at the entry to the Garden after the expulsion of Adam and Eve out of Eden into dangerous reality: “He placed at the east of the garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way to the tree of life” (Genesis III: 24).

This technique—the placement of places with real names next to places with fictional names—has enriched countless other pieces of literature at many levels, and continues to provide a powerful tool for the creator of fiction.

All places in fiction are fictional. Though this assertion may seem self-evident, the reader and the critic naturally and rightly suspend disbelief when entering a work of fiction through the act of reading. During the act of reading, the reader willingly positions himself in places that he knows do not exist, ranging from Tolkien's Middle Earth to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. But the scholar and critical reader benefit, at least on reflection, from remembering that even places that have virtually all the characteristics of a real place—for instance, the New York of Tom Wolfe's *The Vanity of the Bonfires*, or the Atlanta of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*—are still fictional places. They may have many aspects of reality, including name, imposed on them. But ultimately, though Wolfe's New York and Mitchell's Atlanta are very much like the real New York of the 1980s or the real Atlanta of the 1860s and 1870s, they are fictional.

Viewing the matter from another direction, though there is huge variety of fictional place, all fictional places fall in one of two large categories: those, like Mitchell's Atlanta or Wolfe's New York, that bear the names of places from the real world, and those that have fictional names. More often than not, the places named for real places own so many of the aspects of the real place for which they are named that the reader readily identifies the fictional place as the same as the real place. This is an obvious and useful tool for the writer in her goal of luring the reader into suspension of disbelief. The degree to which one place or another resembles the place for which it is named may

vary hugely, however, depending on the goals and needs of the writer in his journey toward meaningful narrative.

The second type of fictional place, those places with fictional names, varies even more widely, from the very realistic setting of Yoknapatawpha County to places so fantastic—Oz, Lilliput, Middle Earth—that the reader has no qualms in dismissing them once he closes the book. Although comparisons of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County to the real Lafayette County in Mississippi, and of the Yoknapatawpha's county seat of Jefferson to the real city of Oxford, Mississippi, are meaningful and interesting, Yoknapatawpha County and, indeed, the United States in which it is located, are as fictional as Oz or Narnia.

Obviously, places with fictional names are frequently located next to fictional places with real names—as in the placement of Yoknapatawpha County within the state of Mississippi and the United States. This placement is one of the most intriguing, valuable, and commonplace aspects of narrative, as much today as it was for the creators of the narrative of the Garden of Eden. And the boundary and intercourse within fiction between places with fictional names and places with real names continues to provide a challenge and opportunity for the creator of narrative.

In his novella *Candide*, Voltaire introduces his eponymous protagonist in a fictional baronial estate (Tunder-ten-tronckh) inside a province named for a real region (Westphalia). From Tunder-ten-tronckh, Candide travels to places called Spain, France, Portugal, Peru, England, and Venice, all obviously named for real places, as well as to the mythical city of Eldorado. The common level of ridiculousness in all of the places in *Candide* contributes to Voltaire's meaning: people in Tunder-ten-tronckh are

deluded and foolish to the point of hilarity, but hardly more so than the residents of Spain and Peru a few pages later. By introducing his indictment of human behavior in a place with an invented name, then transferring it to places with real names, Voltaire clearly reminds his reader of the ludicrousness of human behavior everywhere.

Often, the transfer of characters from a place with a real name to a place with a fictional name requires a violent threshold or tumultuous point of contact. Voltaire's contemporary Jonathan Swift took his Gulliver from eighteenth-century Britain to a fantastic world of small people, large people, floating cities, and intelligent horses in *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift sometimes goes so far as to give these places actual locations on the globe, and to put them on maps with real places (such as Sumatra and Diemen's Land, or Antarctica). But Gulliver, in order to reach these countries, almost always has to pass across wide oceans and through violent events including storms, attacks by pirates, and mutiny. The places Gulliver arrives at, while outwardly outlandishly different from the real world, are, of course, actually representative of the human condition and the sociological and political state of eighteenth-century British and European society.

In L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, protagonist Dorothy Gale begins her journey in a fictional place named Kansas, closely resembling the rural middle west in the late nineteenth-century. (It has been pointed out, however, that Baum's Kansas more closely resembles South Dakota, where he spent a good deal of time, than it does Kansas, where he spent little time.) (*Annotated Oz*, 15).

The place that Dorothy arrives at, Oz, is so different from her place of origin that she must pass through a destructive storm to arrive there. During the course of the

“cyclone,” she demonstrates bravery and patience (24, 25); that she falls asleep and awakens before she arrives in Oz hints that the story may be a dream. Because of Oz’s huge outward difference from Kansas or any part of the American middle west, Baum was able to create a world that, just under the surface, bore numerous resemblances to the America of Baum’s time. More important, he captured the longing for adventure and newness that coexists in the American psyche with an equally powerful longing for home and stability, thus creating one of the most enduring and powerful of American epics. Read on the level of political satire or allegory, Baum’s Kansas and his Oz are the same place. By creating an outlandishly fantastic setting, Baum simply provided a new and obviously enduring way for America to look at itself.

On the map that Baum supplied, in 1913, for one of the sequels to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Oz, with Emerald City at the center, resembles a midwestern county, nearly square, with the county seat at the center. Unlike American counties, however, Oz is surrounded on all four sides by “Impassable Desert,” “Deadly Desert,” “Shifting Sands,” and “Great Sands,” which may or may not be metaphor for rural isolation in America. Even beyond these isolating regions, Baum placed still more fantastic countries, such as the Kingdom of Ix, the Land of Ev, and Boboland. One can apparently only arrive in Oz via dream or cyclone (*Annotated Oz*, lxxxvi, lxxxvii), since it is surrounded by impassable wilderness and, beyond that, more fantastical countries not on any globe.

Mark Twain took an almost ambiguous approach in giving a name to a principal site of two of his greatest works of fiction—so ambiguous, indeed, that one may well speculate that he might almost as well have chosen to leave the site in question

nameless. Most of the action of the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* takes place in a riverside village which apparently closely resembles Hannibal, Missouri, in the 1830s and 1840s, while the principal characters of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* depart on their adventures from that same village.

However, Twain very nearly fails to give names to either the village—or, for that matter, the overwhelmingly present river adjacent to it. “St. Petersburg” is mentioned by name a total of five times in *Tom Sawyer*, and only twice in *Huckleberry Finn*, while the Mississippi River is referred by name only twice in each novel.

Twain’s decision, whether intentional or unconscious, to barely mention the home village of Tom, Jim, and Huck home village by its invented name, or to identify it as Hannibal, Missouri, which it closely resembles, contributes to an effect that Twain was surely reaching toward. By not naming the village as Hannibal, Twain gives himself greater freedom to invent and relocate material from the site that inspired the story. Also, the near namelessness of both river and village subtly contributes to the unmooring of both of those narratives from narrow time and place. The barely named village more easily becomes an “Everytown” to “Everychild;” the river on which Huck and Jim travel more readily becomes a magical element that carries Huck/Jim/Reader into the land of scalawags and colorful characters, and ultimately to freedom.

Twentieth-century American author James Thurber’s short story “The Catbird Seat” provides another twist on avoidance of giving name to a fictional place. Although Thurber packs the story with references to real smaller places that existed within contemporaneous New York City, such as Schrafft’s restaurant, Broadway, and Fifth Avenue (9, 12), he never names the city. However, he supplies us with a date for the

occurrences in the story (November 2, 1942, the date on which the story was published in *New Yorker* magazine), and, therein, hints at a different level of meaning. For, if this is New York City, as the detailed references suggest, it is a version of New York City untouched by war, or any of the current events of the day, even though the plot has been assigned a date during which the the real New York City was profoundly involved in war. In short, it is a New York of the mind, where people eternally attend Broadway shows and talk about baseball, and where draft-age office boys and other citizens go about their work unconcerned with international crises.

In interesting and telling contrast, one well-known twentieth-century American writer created an entire state with a fictional name for his realistic fiction, while one of his contemporaries, at least in the view of most readers in the early twenty-first century, was immensely more successful in creating just one meticulously detailed and chronicled county for his fiction.

Novelist Thomas Wolfe created the city of Altamont, clearly inspired by Asheville, North Carolina, as the principal site for his novels *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*. Wolfe clearly feared that the residents of his hometown of Asheville would identify the fictional site with their real home (Nowell, 137). Although he went to the trouble to rename his fictional version of Asheville, it is ultimately unlikely that any resident of Asheville who read the book would fail to notice the similarities between fictional Altamont and actual Asheville.

Though Wolfe saw Altamont as a fictional correspondent to a real place, he likewise clearly thought of Altamont as a place beyond reality: “A destiny . . . that leads from Epsom into Pennsylvania, and thence into the hills that shut in Altamont over the

proud coral cry of the cock, and the soft stone smile of and angel, is touched by that dark miracle of chance which makes new magic in a dusty world” (*Look Homeward, Angel*, 3).

Wolfe overreached himself, however, in placing Altamont in the state of Catawba, and in giving other places in the state of Catawba names that resemble place names in North Carolina. (For instance, the central character, Eugene, enters college at “Pulpit Hill” in *Look Homeward, Angel*, an obvious reference to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.) But places outside of the “state” of Catawba are given real names. In this reader’s experience, the presence of an entire, large state with a fictional name, mentally dropped into a map of the United States into which it does not fit, jolts the suspension of disbelief; the technique was probably carried too far in this case, and Wolfe might have done well to limit his name-making to the city of Altamont, and either left the state unnamed or named as North Carolina.

William Faulkner’s judgment in giving a fictional name to a smaller area—just a county—and relying on real place names outside of the county, proved much more sound than Wolfe’s creation of a fictional name for an entire state. Indeed, the creation of Yoknapatawpha County ranks as one of the greatest literary accomplishments of the twentieth century. Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County appears in fifteen of the nineteen novels he wrote between 1926 and 1962; he identified an astounding six hundred characters by name (Volpe, 13).

In 1936, Faulkner drew a map of Yoknapatawpha County in conjunction with the publication of his novel *Absalom, Absalom!* On the map, he supplied an

exact population of 6298 white and 9313 Negro residents, but winked at the reader and reminded of the fictional nature of the map with the inscription “WILLIAM FAULKNER, SOLE OWNER & PROPRIETER.”

Faulkner violates consistency occasionally but with no effect on his ability to lure the reader to suspend disbelief: on the northern parts of the map, he lapses into real place names, such as “Memphis Junction” and the Tallahatchie River. The name Yoknapatawpha derives from the Chickasaw words “yakni” and “patafa,” and might be translated as “Tilled Ground” (Kinney, 21-22); with the name Yoknapatawpha, Faulkner may well have been alluding, very subtly and indirectly, to Genesis IV : 2: “But Cain was a tiller of the ground.”

Thus Yoknapatawpha might be characterized as the land of the children of Cain, the first murderer and fratricide.

Faulkner realized, but his contemporary Wolfe did not, that a county is a manageable land mass as a fictional creation within a realistic narrative, but a whole state is not. Most readers do not know the names of very many counties, so it is much easier to suspend disbelief when reading about Yoknapatawpha County than it is to suspend disbelief when confronted with an entire state named Catawba. Within the reasonable boundaries of an average county, Faulkner was able to create a detailed history, borrowing freely from the real history of Lafayette County and surrounding regions, while relatively free to change, omit, or add details (for instance, the absence in Jefferson of any institution resembling the University of Mississippi, one of the dominant features of Oxford, Mississippi). The creation of Yoknapatawpha County within Mississippi and the

United States is one of the many elements in the monumental greatness of Faulkner's body of work; the journey of any character from Yoknapatawpha County to a point in Mississippi outside of Yoknapatawpha County or elsewhere in the world is always a momentous event.

The name Yoknapatawpha likewise evokes the name of an actual river, the Yocona, in southern Jefferson County; Faulkner thus at least partially appropriated and adapted a real name for his fictional geography.

Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s *Raintree County* (1948) provides an example of a novel of epic proportions (1060 pages) set in a county in Indiana which, like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, contains a large cast of characters and a detailed geography. Just as Faulkner drew much of his material from Jefferson County, Mississippi, Lockridge modeled his fictional Raintree County on Henry County, Indiana, the home of his father's mother, while drawing some elements from other parts of rural Indiana with which he felt connected. Time as well as place enters into Lockridge's complex narrative: the principal action takes place within the span of a single day (4 July 1892). Real place names intrude engagingly on Lockridge's map of Raintree County, but only in a two-dimensional, or linear form. The Pennsylvania Railroad crosses the county in approximately the same configuration as the real railroad with the same name in Henry County, Indiana, as does the old National Road. And Lockridge's map points "To OHIO" and "To INDIANAPOLIS."

Massive publicity on a level that none of Faulkner's novels enjoyed heralded the publication of *Raintree County* in 1948; ironically, the ambitious author, burdened with the idea that he was creating the great American epic, and encouraged in that

perception by a huge publicity machine, committed suicide a few weeks after the initial publication (Larry Lockridge, 439-48). In an odd reversal of fictional place and real, Lockridge's son reported in the biography *Shadow of the Raintree* that, at the time of publication of this biography of his father in 1994, at least one sign on the highway going into Henry County informs travelers that they are entering "Raintree County;" numerous businesses, including a bait and tackle shop, a beauty parlor, and an automobile dealership boasted the "Raintree" monicker (9,10) at that time. The publicity that surrounded the production and distribution of the movie *Raintree County*, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift, in 1957, may likewise have contributed to this whimsical claiming of the fictional name for a real site.

Though Lockridge admirably followed Faulkner's example in creating a sufficiently large rural area to contain his vast fictional tapestry—larger than a town, smaller than a state—his relative posthumous obscurity, compared to Faulkner's continued elevation in the literary canon, may be a result of an emotional, self-conscious overreach that never afflicts Faulkner's output. While Faulkner modestly and fancifully inserts his name as "sole proprietor" on his map of Yokpatanawpha County, reminding the reader that this place is a fictional creation by one person, Ross Lockridge almost arrogantly invokes Raintree County, on his title page, opposite his map, as a place ". . . which had no boundaries in time and space, where lurked musical and strange names and mythical and lost peoples, and which was itself only a name musical and strange." [ellipses are Lockridge's]

The conceit continues on the copyright page, where Lockridge waxes:

Hard roads and wide will run through Raintree County.

You will hunt it on the map, and it won't be there. [italics Lockridge's]

For Raintree County is not the country of the perishable fact. It is the country of the enduring fiction. The clock in the Court House Tower on page five of the *Raintree County Atlas* is always fixed at nine o'clock, and it is Summer and the days are long.

Although Lockridge's quasi-poetic ravings are, in retrospect—and in light of his relatively minor status in the canon of fiction fifty years later—almost embarrassing, he successfully sheds light here on one of the aspects of the realistic place with a fictional name, surrounded and sometimes penetrated by places with real names. In a setting such as Raintree County or Yokpatanawpha County, the writer can not only fill his fictional place with characters of his own invention, but he can control the passage of time as well.

Contemporary American writer Annie Proulx took on another aspect of Faulkner's fictional naming process in the creation of the place Brokeback Mountain, in that she uses a place name that resembles a real place (just as the name Yokpatanawpha County resembles and was probably at least partly suggested by the real Yocona River); in the process, she achieved a remarkable level of tension and meaning. In the short story "Brokeback Mountain," she places a city named for a real place (Riverton, Wyoming) next to a fictional place with a name—Brokeback Mountain—that closely resembles several real place names, but does not exactly duplicate any. There is no actual Brokeback Mountain in Wyoming according to the USGS Global Names Information website; however, there is a real *Brokenback* Creek/Narrows/ Reservoir about 100 miles northeast of the real Riverton.

Proulx herself recalled in an interview with Matthew Testa in *Planet Jackson Hole* on 7 December 2005 that, “There is, on a map I once saw, a Break Back Mountain in Wyoming which I have never seen.” Her memory in this instance was apparently faulty, for there is no Break Back Mountain in Wyoming.

Given the remarkable relationship of geography, sexuality, and psychology that pervades Proulx’s work, one might well conjecture that she may have been partially inspired, possibly even subconsciously, in naming “Brokeback Mountain,” by the homosexual character nicknamed “Brokeback” in Carson McCullers’s novella “The Ballad of the Sad Café” of 1951. Proulx has declined to respond to the inquiry I sent to her via her agent concerning this possibility; the coincidences of both the homosexuality of McCullers’s character Brokeback and the exploration of the nature of love against a backdrop of poverty and suffering in “The Ballad of the Sad Café” indicate a subject worthy of further scholarly pursuit and critical exploration.

At any rate, Proulx created in the fictional place Brokeback Mountain a spectacular site, isolated and yet connected to a realistic world, to delve into emotional suffering and the nature of love and sexuality. The characters and the reader attain, only at widely isolated intervals and through some suffering, the ability to travel to Brokeback Mountain; like love and human sexuality, it is a place packed with beauty and danger that the principal characters approach with some difficulty (as represented by the elaborate preparation for their summer on Brokeback Mountain) yet out of dire necessity (the need for both to earn money).

One might also well admire Proulx’s selection and adaptation of a word rife with onomatopoeic quality—dense with hard, crackling consonants—and inherently painful

meaning. In the late twentieth century, Proulx produced, through a fictional name placed next to a real name, a level of engagement and meaning equal to any of her predecessors since the creation narrative Genesis.

The exact relationship of places with invented names and places with real names in fiction is a subject for endless examination; other fascinating examples worthy of further exploration include Charles Baxter's Five Oaks, John Updike's Brewer and Tarbox, "The Shire" of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis' Narnia—not to mention the admirably complex interrelationship of fantastic and realistic worlds in the interwoven yet impressively consistent universe of Stephen King.

Crossing the boundary from the real to the fictional is a constant in the act of reading fiction; crossing the boundary within fiction from places with real names to places with fictional names is an equally magical process worth the attention of the reader and writer. And it is an issue that emerged again and again in the writing of the short stories included in the following collection.

Four of the stories included in this thesis contain reference to, and are frequently at least partially set in, "Starry Skies," a fictional bar and country-and-western dance hall, catering principally to a gay clientele, in Dallas. The creation of this fictional place followed a definite pattern that was not necessarily clear to me at the time, but which emerges in retrospect.

My first attempts at writing fiction as a serious graduate student of creative writing were inspired by events I witnessed as a patron at the Round-Up Saloon, a busy bar and country-and-western dance hall in Dallas. Even in the first of what I have come

to think of as “Starry Skies stories,” I was concerned with the passage from the place with the fictional name to and from places with real names.

I never seriously considered setting these stories in a place named “Round-Up Saloon,” and quickly discovered that I could draw absolutely as much or as little as I wanted from the real Round-Up Saloon when describing events at Starry Skies. Like Faulkner, Wolfe, and Lockridge in their larger geographical creations, I was able to use any material I wanted from the original non-fictional setting without having any obligation to use elements that were not useful to the narrative; I also had a free hand to change or rearrange. Just as Faulkner’s Jefferson, Mississippi, has no University of Mississippi in it, my Starry Skies can omit any features of the Round-Up Saloon that are not useful to my narrative.

In the first story in this collection, “Jeans, Boots, and Starry Skies,” Starry Skies is immediately introduced as a place in which the first-person narrator can suspend disbelief in his own hopeless state, give himself over to the magical combination of music and gay men, and “pretend I’m in love.”

With that special quality of place established, the narrator then returns emotionally to a mundane, slightly dangerous world of uncaring employers, debt, and disappointing material circumstances (house and car). He prepares himself, with special attire (western wear) with special rules attached (for instance, hat color attached to the season of the year) to leave the world of urban Dallas, to forget the unnamed place where he works (naming it at this point would permit it to intrude too deeply into the narrative), and to enter the world of possibility established by Starry Skies. Meanwhile, he crosses through a zone resembling his childhood home of Lone Oak,

Oklahoma, in that it is full of busy, active, people—except that the hometown he recalls is so thoroughly repressive of homoeroticism that he dared not even think of erotic possibilities with the handsome young men his own age whom he knew there.

Thus, a second place with a fictional name, Lone Oak, Oklahoma, is introduced to the narrative as a sort of support for the primary place with a fictional name, Starry Skies. During the composition, through the past two years, of the Starry Skies stories, of which there are now a total of ten, I experimented with several small town settings, initially creating a small town in Texas. I finally settled on Lone Oak, Oklahoma, a fictional setting very closely resembling the community in which I grew up in that it is a small, town in southern Oklahoma, isolated from the interstate highway by about twenty miles, and populated until recent years entirely by whites and people of Native American ancestry. A second location in Texas, the small town of Juneville, was invented to accommodate an African-American character who would have been impossible to place in the racially exclusive setting of Lone Oak. It also provides a place of origin for characters who need to come from a small town to Dallas and Starry Skies, all of whom can not reasonably be expected to have left the same small town in Oklahoma.

The name Lone Oak was inspired by a slowly withering black jack oak tree that grew on a prairie hillside near where I lived while growing up; in a screenplay class in spring of 2007, in which I submitted a script set in Lone Oak and featuring a marginalized, isolated gay character, at least one reader commented on the symbolic strength of the name and its indication of loneliness and strength. The name “Juneville,” in retrospect, may have been an unconscious reference to the annual

celebration of the emancipation of African-American slaves in Texas on June 17, 1865, which is designated “Juneteenth.”

In my own experience with fiction related to *Starry Skies*, I have discovered that the invention of fictional place names benefits from some working out on a subconscious level, without too much conscious thought. While writing the first *Starry Skies* story, I was aware that most gay country-and-western bars have names with greater sexual innuendo; however, I discovered in workshop that a more romantic name engages the heterosexual reader more readily, and likewise opens implications of a place with qualities and powers beyond the earthbound. Unconsciously, at least, I am now certain that I deliberately moved toward a name free from specifically sexual or country-western implications, toward one that allows a broader metaphor if the reader might so choose.

In “*Ondine*,” the second story presented in this selection, the only reference to *Starry Skies* arrives when Mundo, an undocumented worker from Mexico, who appears as a major character in the first story, ruminates via third-person limited narrative and wonders if he will ever see his closeted yardwork client at *Starry Skies*. Although the setting of “*Ondine*” never moves to *Starry Skies*, it is in the background as a place at which a psychologically homosexual but closeted individual might enter and reveal his homosexuality by his presence.

Starry Skies returns as a major setting in the first-person narrative of “*Way Too Neat*.” The main character, openly gay in all aspects of his life, expresses his compulsive orderliness in *Starry Skies* by cleaning up the bar area even though he

doesn't work there. For this character, Starry Skies is a place to escape from the trials of difficult relationship with a sexually appealing but disorderly, irresponsible partner.

In "On the Line," the fourth and final of the selected Starry Skies stories to appear here, Starry Skies exists in an unnamed but obvious reference when the principal character, a latent, guilt-ridden middle-aged married man, finally ventures into Dallas' gay commercial zone. This story is rife with references to real places in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, including Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, several major thoroughfares in Dallas (including University Drive, Royal Lane, Oak Lawn Avenue, and Cedar Springs Avenue), and Dillard's department store—as well as one recognizable artifact, a copy of *The Dallas Morning News*, the region's principal daily newspaper. The principal character, revealed through a second-person stream-of-consciousness narrative, arrives, after much conflict between his deceptive public persona and his hidden persona as a homosexual, in the neighborhood of gay-oriented retail establishments, restaurants, and bars that corresponds in real geography to a neighborhood that extends directly north of Oak Lawn Avenue on Cedar Springs Avenue. He sees Starry Skies but does not name it—he is not ready to go into the special zone—but assures himself that, "You've been down Cedar Springs Road before, just north of Oak Lawn Avenue. Really, everybody has. There's the gay saloon, the bars, the restaurants. After all, you don't have to be gay to go there."

While seated in an unnamed coffee shop just down the street from Starry Skies/Round-Up Saloon (there are two establishments in reality that match this description), this character sees two young gay men, obviously in love with each other, and wonders what he missed, and wonders what he might yet experience, if he has the

bravery. He is just a few feet away from Starry Skies, but he has not yet left the reality of the outside world to enter into the magical world of Starry Skies, where he would be allowed to be gay, and where he can allow himself to fall in love—or, failing that, pretend to fall in love, as the narrating character in “Jeans, Boots, and Starry Skies” does when real love is not available.

The remaining three stories (the last being a triptych of similarly-themed first-person narratives) set up fictional universes and treat real place name and fictional place name in different ways according to the demands of the narrative. In the first of these, “Losing the Lottery,” characters based on fairly well-known historical figures (two of whom, the two older children of Shirley Jackson, are still living) inhabit the village of North Bennington, Vermont, and New York, both obviously named for real places. The use of characters based on historical persons more dictated the use of real place names and a setting in keeping with the historical truth of the world of 1948, even when the story takes a sharp turn away from historical fact.

I visited North Bennington, Vermont, in the interest of an accurate depiction of the site of the composition of the short story “The Lottery.” Jackson did not give a name to the setting of “The Lottery” or the novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, but anyone who has read either can still, half a century later, experience an almost spooky sense of recognition if he visits the real North Bennington, not only in various buildings, but in the personality of the town and its inhabitants. Thus, inspired by Jackson in this experiment in appropriation of text followed by destruction of text and reader, I placed a real name on the site which she left unnamed. In “Losing the Lottery,” I needed to give a specific identification to a site; in “The Lottery,” Jackson wanted to give a sense of

universality to her setting, and thus left it unnamed, allowing the reader to set it wherever she wishes.

“Hunger in America” uses “America” as a template for a humorous dystopia—not, significantly, the United States, which implies a governmental reality, but “America,” that mystical entity “discovered” by Columbus, founded by “Founding Fathers,” and rescued by Lincoln, Roosevelt, and other various demi-gods. If the citizens of the United States have great affection and loyalty to the concept of “United States,” they have an even greater, more mystical connection to the term “America.”

No specific cities are mentioned in the story “Hunger in America,” though the difference in “red” states and “blue” states, and the possibly different reactions in the politically progressive and politically conservative regions in a post-famine culture is alluded. The principal character, Alexander “Sander” Overtop, works at Tudbury’s department store, named for the department store at which Blondie always shops in the classic comic strip. While “America” is already well-established as an unstable, mythic entity in our lives, “Tudbury’s,” a borrowed fictional place name for an arch-typical American retail establishment, becomes the place where Sander first gains empowerment in the new post-famine America.

Newly-formed sumo wrestling teams from USC and the University of Texas, two perennial powerhouses in real-life college athletics, compete in a post-famine culture obsessed with obesity as a positive element, and contestants from Indiana and South Dakota—randomly selected mid-continent states—are specifically described as they vie in a televised beauty pageant in which the ability to cook has become the most important signifier of erotic beauty.

In the end, two principal characters who can not function in the food-obsessed culture of post-famine America flee to a mystical version of “Canada,” named for a region that functioned in real American history as a new home for British loyalists after the Revolution, escaped slaves, and young men who chose not to comply with military conscript during the Vietnam War period (and, on the fictional level, as safe refuge from the oppressive theocracy described in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*). Fictional “Canada” serves as a place to put characters who have no where else to go; if it didn’t exist, it would be necessary to invent it—which is what Atwood and I have both done, in our own ways.

The final story, a triptych of narratives inspired by anecdotes in the Bible, cuts lose from any accurate geography or history while invoking real place names—a situation that has occurred again and again in Christian culture. In early medieval England, the Venerable Bede freely relocated incidents from the Bible into Britain in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*; Medieval and Renaissance art is rich in examples of Biblical (and, for that matter, Greco-Roman mythological) anecdotes visually reinterpreted in a contemporaneous European setting.

I emerged from a Southern Baptist Sunday School class one November morning at the age of six, thoroughly convinced that the Pilgrims crossed the Red Sea in flight from Pharaoh, boarded the Mayflower at some point, and landed at Plymouth to celebrate the first Thanksgiving (a confusion that, given the Covenantal tradition in American Protestant theology, was definitely not all coincidental or unintentional on the part of the perpetrators of the Sunday School literature). On a more literary plain,

Eudora Welty retold Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son as a narrative of dysfunctional family life in the short story "Why I Live at the P.O."

Having grown up in a culture in which the ancient scriptures were, against all logic, urged on modern readers as infallible guides for daily decision-making, I decided to create a lavishly anachronistic world in which shopping malls are adjacent to slave markets, in which Tulsa and Babylon are just a few miles apart—a universe in which the assassin of an enemy general is clearly destined to become a mass media superstar, and a marginalized, impoverished housewife can be abducted from her home in a small town in Oklahoma by space aliens and finally arrive in a version of Biblical Bethlehem complete with fast food restaurants, pick-up trucks, and fundamentalist churches, there to play out the role of the Biblical Ruth.

In all of these stories, anachronism of products and artifacts supports geographical displacement, giving me the opportunity to play out the kaleidoscopic confusion of Biblical and contemporary identity, still present in our culture, that I experienced as a child. The place names themselves are relevant only in that they provide an anchor for the subverted plotlines. Only in the retelling of the story of Ruth was I compelled to create a fictional name ("Brownhill, Oklahoma") as a point of departure for Ruth, since I wanted to place her origin in a setting that suggests contemporary small town America. Unconsciously, I selected a name that, in retrospect, is immediately suggestive of drought and infertility, with possible scatological implications.

And, ultimately, with the third segment in the set, “Jesus and the Centurion,” I aimed an irony at myself as reader/author in that I arrived at the conclusion that the ancient scriptures are indeed, relevant.

Whether in the realistic realm of the Starry Skies stories, or the gently dystopian world of “Hunger in America,” the alternative but very realistic reality of “Losing the Lottery,” or the jumbled, deliberately disassembled universe of “Bible Stories,” I constantly discovered and rediscovered the power of place name in fiction, and the significance of motion between places with fictional names and places with real names.

Moving from Lone Oak to Dallas, stepping from Cedar Springs Avenue into Starry Skies, or driving from Babylon to Tulsa can hopefully be laden with multiple meanings and constant engaging tension for the writer, the narrator, the characters, and the reader. The goal, which will certainly never be attained, but which I as a writer must always seek to reach, is to inspire in the reader with the same chill of wonder that our forebears in the wilderness of pre-literate Asia experienced when they envisioned Adam and Eve leaving the magic of Eden and stepping into the reality of Mesopotamia.

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PART II
SHORT STORIES

Jeans, Boots, and Starry Skies

Sometimes, when a twangy, meaty, country-and-western tune beats in time with my pulse, and the lights flash over the dance floor in just the right tempo, and the man I'm dancing with moves in perfect unison with me—sometimes, for just a little while, I can pretend I'm in love.

One Friday night, not long ago, I pretended to be in love with Pete.

It had been a particularly bad week at work. Joanie, my boss at the insurance office, had once again declared that sales were down and claims were way up. Our jobs were all in danger, she said, and we were none of us worth the space we took up.

During the eighteen years I've worked for Joanie, we haven't once had a good week. We've always paid out too many claims, and always lost money—at least according to Joanie.

Joanie has gotten fatter and pastier during those eighteen years, but her helmet of blonde hair has remained the same. Every slick, shiny strand was in place when she left in a rush at 4:15 and peeled out of the parking lot in her Lexus, which had replaced her Camry, which had replaced her Dodge. Joanie's always the last to arrive in the morning and the first to leave, which is all right with the rest of us, since it means less time that she's there.

I stayed behind to lock the door of the office, taking, as usual, a minute or two to plan what I'll tell Joanie on the day that I finally get up the nerve to quit, and another minute to fantasize about letting the air out of the tires of her Lexus, and how I could do it without getting caught. Just for fun, I took another minute to imagine Joanie getting hit by a stray space shuttle sometime during the weekend, or abducted by aliens.

But I pushed those thoughts out of my mind, because I'm a nice guy, and nice guys don't wish death or destruction on other people, or tell people off. I learned, early on, in my home town of Lone Oak, Oklahoma, that you don't do things like that. Yes *ma'am* and *yes sir* to your betters and elders (though I dropped the *ma'am* and *sir* when I moved to Dallas), always smile, and always say hello to everybody. After all, in Lone Oak, you'll see the same people every day for the rest of your life, as sure as you'll smell the stink from the petroleum refinery, two miles north of town, on a windy day.

The lock on the door of the office clicked behind me, and I slid into my two-door Honda (finally paid off, after five years, last Christmas), and headed home to my not-quite-paid-off two-story, two-bedroom townhouse in a neighborhood that had seemed a lot nicer when I moved in, fifteen years ago.

By the time I got home, I was ready to jog up the stairs, two at a time, and slip out of those tiresome pleated khakis, kick off those carefully polished tasseled brown shoes, and tear off my official insurance-company-approved-for-Friday-complete-with-company-logo royal blue golf shirt. I squeezed into one of my eight pairs of jeans, tugged on one of my three pairs of boots, and snapped up one of my six George Strait-style western shirts. I splashed on a dash of not-too-cheap, not-very-expensive cologne and carefully took my beige palm-frond cowboy hat—just like Kenny Chesney wears—down from its spot on the closet shelf. (It was still too early in the fall for the black felt.) I checked myself in the bathroom mirror: fly zipped, belt buckled, hat pressed low.

And I said to myself, *Not bad for 39*. Black hair mostly still there and mostly still black. Waistline absolutely not bad at all for 39, thanks to nights spent dancing at Starry Skies country-and-western dance hall.

The clean, cool air of early autumn reminded me of Friday nights in Lone Oak, as I walked from my parking space through the crowded neighborhood of gay bars and restaurants and bookstores. I remembered football Fridays, with clarinet-playing girls sweating in band uniforms, giggling cheerleaders, cool football players in pads and jerseys, and handsome farm boys in blue “Future Farmers of America” T-shirts—boys that I didn’t dare let myself fall in love with, no matter how sweetly their blue jeans hugged their butts.

It was the sort of night when people are sociable and maybe a little romantic, whether in Dallas or in Lone Oak—so long as you follow the rules.

But I forgot all of that when I opened the heavy glass door of Starry Skies.

“Hi, Al,” the swarthy doorman growled, barely looking up from checking the drivers’ licenses of some barely-legal kids. For a joke, I asked him why he wasn’t checking mine, and he told me he was afraid to find out how young I really was. I dived through the heady mist of cigarette smoke and country songs blaring too loud on giant speakers, into a cloud of testosterone drifting on a perpetual barroom twilight.

I pushed my way past groping couples, frowning young Hispanics, and eager young Anglos just out of college, mingled with schoolteachers and accountants and lawyers trying hard to look like cowboys. Incredibly tall versions of the latest female sitcom stars, and drag queens uglier than your ugliest great aunt, spiced the mix.

Leonard was there, of course. Leonard, who can program a computer, bake a pie, and tell a joke, and who follows so beautifully on the dance floor that you don’t notice that he’s thirty pounds overweight.

We chatted and gossiped while we danced. We chuckled at the scared young black guy in his neatly ironed shirt, obviously a first-timer, looking as if his Baptist grandmother might show up at any minute and grab him by the ear and yank him away. We sighed over Joey, bald and black-bearded, totally handsome in a tough sort of way, feet astride, looking as if he were some horny straight boy who had accidentally wandered into a gay bar and was determined to make the best of it.

Opposite side of the room, Ted, brown-haired and small but drop-dead handsome, looked like a miniature version of a Hollywood star. Twenty years younger than his newest boyfriend, he was already shamelessly checking out everybody else in the room except for his boyfriend, who stood patiently next to him. I had danced with Ted a few times, joked around and flirted, but never got anywhere with him—and was probably lucky that I hadn't. Boys like Ted can run up a credit card bill real fast, before heading for the next victim.

I don't mind saying that Leonard and I were the best dancers on the floor at that moment, in spite of our uninterrupted stream of bitchy gossip and snide comments that nobody else heard.

"Why don't some of these people learn to dance?" I asked.

"Look at that, Jim's doing the one move he knows," Leonard whispered in my ear.

"Those guys should get a slow-moving vehicle sign," I answered, while we swirled to the thudding beat of *I'm gonna get you*.

Leonard jerked his head around for a second look at one particular guy, standing on the side-line.

“Look at that,” he said, stretching a little for a better view.

“Don’t break your neck,” I cracked, then did a double-take myself, to catch another glimpse at the blonde hair, the biceps busting out of a tight blue tee-shirt, and the crotch-gripping blue jeans.

“I know that guy,” I bragged. “He’s the new nurse at my doctor’s office. He’s giving me a blood-draw on Monday morning,” I added smugly.

“Shit,” Leonard said. “Keep your clothes on, Okay? It’s just a blood-draw.”

Leonard wandered off after the song, and I started plotting ways to approach Pete, the nurse.

I loved the way Pete looked that night. Part daddy, part kid brother, his blue eyes catching the glow of his sky-blue, just-nice-enough T-shirt, his mouth poised halfway into a smile. Like he might suddenly laugh. Or smile all the way. Or, maybe, kiss.

Within a minute, Leonard had maneuvered over to him.

Grab somebody’s boyfriend, it’s time for a waltz, the voice on the speaker blared.

The waltz was *Rose-Colored Glasses*, a smooth, old-timey tune with just enough jerk in the melody to make a good dance song—not too slow, not too fast.

Usually, I won’t ask a guy to dance unless I’ve seen him out on the floor a few times; I like to see if he can follow, what moves he knows.

But I walked right up, ignored Leonard, and grabbed Pete by the hand.

That same faint, knowing half-smile flickered onto Pete’s face, as if he had been expecting me all evening.

We floated on the dance floor. I worked up my nerve and tried a fancy turn; Pete missed it, but just laughed. I tried it again, and we got it right.

Pete had grown up in a small town in Iowa, I learned, as we talked on the sideline after dancing. He had moved south to Dallas after high school, and had just finished putting himself through nursing school—and felt really lucky to have a job at Dr. Walker’s office.

“I haven’t seen you at Starry Skies before,” I said.

“I’ve been too busy with school,” Pete explained. He had learned to dance with a girlfriend at a straight bar when he first moved to Dallas, he said.

We danced more that night; I reminded Pete that I’d see him early Monday for the blood draw. Check cholesterol. Check for prostate cancer. Check sugar levels. What the Hell? All kinds of awful things can happen to you when you turn forty. Not to mention the HIV test.

Time to say good night. I dared myself, then leaned forward and kissed Pete on his smooth, fair cheek, just low enough to catch the pleasant sting of the faint stubble of his whiskers on my lips. I dared myself again and kissed his mouth. He didn’t exactly kiss back, but he didn’t exactly object.

“Coming back tomorrow night?” I asked, prodding a little, exploring.

“Nah, gotta go to the Aimee Mann concert with my lesbian girlfriend,” he answered.

Well, every gay guy should have a girlfriend, straight or lesbian, just to take his mind off of sex now and then, I told myself.

Then I dared myself to ask Pete to come over to my place, right then, that night.

But I didn’t take my own dare. That could wait, I thought.

* * * * *

Monday morning, no breakfast before the blood draw. Heavy traffic on the freeway.

Not much of a crowd in the waiting room. Normally, I'd be cranky with no breakfast and no coffee.

And, as I stepped out of the car and walked toward the doctor's office, I walked on air, in spite of no breakfast, bad traffic, and the painful reminder of encroaching middle age, knowing I'd see Pete again.

"You know you're in trouble when the magazines are older than the receptionist," I joked with Louella, trying to find something interesting in a two-year-old copy of *Out* magazine.

Louella's earrings jangled as she directed me back to the room where Pete waited to draw my blood.

He was in jeans and a T-shirt, just like on Friday night. Except now he also wore a stethoscope and a tag that said, "Pete Anderson, RN."

Who would have thought a blood draw could be sexy? I took off my shirt. He smiled.

His hands were warm. He patted my knee and winked.

I was so happy I didn't mind when Dr. Walker, bald and chubby and stately, shuffled into the room.

"All right, on with the exam," Doc said, in his calm, deep-South drawl—not quite the same as the southern Oklahoma twang I speak, and totally different from Pete's pleasantly clipped, Midwestern accent.

Pants down, butt out. Prostate check. Doc's finger up my ass.

He paused and clucked, "Sweetie, you've got an anal wart."

Another pause, Doc's finger still exploring. Maybe I had just imagined what I thought he had said.

"No," he corrected himself. "You've got several anal warts."

It takes about five seconds of unprotected contact with a partner infected with a genital wart to get anal warts. It can take weeks, maybe months, of treatment to get rid of them. And, sometimes, they come back.

"Might as well get started with the treatment," Doc said. "Keep your pants down, honey."

I tried to remember the very few opportunities I had had to get anal warts. Oh, yeah, that big, handsome 20-something guy. Big, yeah.

But this was *not fair*. All those times I was so careful. Didn't I get credit for that? And just once or twice, with a guy I was sure I could trust, I was careless.

"You've got to be more careful," Doc scolded. "You can get AIDS doing what you've been doing without protection."

Pete had left and come back with the medication. There I was, pants down, shirt off, on all fours on the examining table, naked butt stuck out while Pete and Doc delivered the stinging treatment from a little tank. Damn.

"Good to see you again," Pete teased. "All of you."

"Shut up," I said, wondering if this whole episode would make him hate me for obviously being careless—or maybe make him feel deeper concern—like, for a 39-year-old kid who needs a steady, firm hand to keep him in line.

I made an appointment for the following week, to pick up and go over the test results, and to get another of what would probably be several months of weekly treatments for the warts.

Back at the office, I decided to tell Joanie that I had a slight skin infection that the doctor needed to treat several times.

“You certainly seem to go to the doctor a lot,” Joanie said, frowning. “Is there some problem you need to tell us about?”

The blonde helmet caught a ray of sun, giving her a bizarre halo for just an instant.

I was already at Starry Skies on the next Friday night when Pete arrived, shedding boyish energy like champagne bubbling out of a glass that’s too full. Alice, his lesbian best friend, stood tall, blonde, lean, and beautiful. She’d do well with the straight boys, if she cared to. She wore tight jeans, a silky western shirt, and an extravagant collection of jewelry that would have looked tacky on a straight girl but was just right for a showy lipstick lesbian.

I had already danced with Ted and Leonard. Ted was single as of the previous Saturday, after a little spat with the most recent middle-aged boyfriend; I managed to get in a quick two- step with Pete, zipping through the frantic rush of *Nothin' to lose*, before he walked off to go to the restroom.

“God, Pete’s cute as Hell,” I said to Alice, as we both leaned back against the bar.

“And don’t think he don’t know it,” Alice said. She definitely outmatched me on the regional accent, throwing in back-country verbs and one-upping my stretched diphthongs. “He sure as Hell knows it, Honey.”

I wished that she would say that he had talked about me. I wished that she would give me a clue.

Pete was back, and we were talking about various aspects of gay country-and-western dancing, when Joey, bald, rough, and handsome as ever, waltzed by with a youngster in jeans and tennis shoes.

“Now there’s my type of guy,” Pete said, ogling Joey as Joey and his partner zoomed across the polished dance floor.

Oh, well, I thought to myself. Just keep being friendly. Keep smiling.

“Joey’s a nice guy, though I haven’t danced with him much,” I explained. “Tell you what. Next time he’s standing on the side, we’ll dance past him, I’ll make sure you face him when we’re close by, and you can make eye contact. If he smiles back, ask him to dance.”

Pete “hmmm’d” for a few seconds, then said, “Nah, I’m afraid to. I’d rather have my dreams for a little longer before I get disappointed.”

Thanks a lot, I thought.

A minute later, as Leonard and I ripped around to the smooth flow of *Beer for My Horses*—great dance beat, awful words—I spotted a cute young guy in a green shirt that said “University of North Texas” across the front chatting with Pete. I danced furiously, and threw every move I could think of at Leonard, who was just drunk enough

to dance really well. We looked great, I'm sure. Alice, meanwhile, had found an equally gorgeous brunette to shove across the dance floor.

We all spun and dipped and jostled to the tune of *Redneck Woman* and *Honky-Tonk Girl*.

Pete didn't notice any of it, because Pete and the guy in the green shirt were staring into each others' eyes. Then hugging. Then a long, drawn-out, shameless kiss, right there on the edge of the dance floor.

No big deal, it happens all the time at *Starry Skies* and at a hundred gay bars anywhere in the world on any Friday night.

I felt like going home. Who wants to stand around watching a bunch of pseudo-cowboys making out? Suddenly, it didn't seem like fun anymore.

"You're not leaving already, are you?" Leonard asked, when I turned toward the exit.

"Got to get up early," I answered. "See you tomorrow night?"

"Spoil sport," he said, pretending—or was he pretending?—to be miffed.

I wandered through the parking lot, trying to remember where my car was. Was my memory going already, at just thirty-nine?

Damn. Pete and the guy in the green shirt were locked in each other's arms, at the car next to mine. The guy in green leaned back against the car, and Pete pushed onto him aggressively.

No need to worry about either noticing me. They wouldn't have noticed a fire

truck, they were so deep into each other.

I didn't want to overhear. But I did.

Something about *My place tonight?*

I drove home, feeling like a lonely teenager.

The test results were satisfactory when I went back to Dr. Walker's office on the next Wednesday. Cholesterol good. Blood sugar levels good. Best of all, HIV negative. I decided to be a buddy, a comrade to Pete after the wart treatment. Pants back up, I stopped by his desk after scheduling my next appointment.

"So, it looked like you were getting pretty serious Friday night," I said, smiling nonchalantly.

"Well, maybe." For once, he seemed shy instead of sure.

"Hey, save a dance for me between your girlfriend and your boyfriend," I said, managing a friendly smile that I hoped didn't show my clenched teeth.

I never saw the guy in the green shirt again. Friday night, Pete was there with Alice, he in a plain white tee-shirt, she in outrageous red. I didn't mention the guy, and neither did Pete. When I asked Pete to dance, he said he was too tired.

Why in fuck did you come out tonight, I thought.

But there were plenty of guys to dance with, even before Leonard arrived. Then I saw Pete dancing with Alice.

Pushy lesbian, I thought. Doesn't she know that he's too tired to dance?

Whenever I danced past Pete and Alice that night, I danced a little better, showed off a little, pulled out my best moves. I don't know why.

Three weeks later, on a sunny autumn afternoon at the coffee shop, a few doors down the block from Starry Skies, Leonard and I finally discussed the whole situation.

“You know the rule of three,” Leonard said, stirring his extra-large double latte with knowing finality. “You've asked him to dance three times since the last time he said yes. He's said no three times. The first time is just no. He might really have been tired, or worried about something. The second time is just in case there was some other reason besides he didn't want to the first time.”

He tapped his spoon against the saucer.

“The third time is the clincher, just to make sure, whether you've been asking him for sex, a movie date, or to dance. He's turned you down three times. Show a little class, be polite and friendly. But don't ask again.”

I knew Leonard was right. For a moment, I hated him for it.

“But he's so friendly,” I argued. “We talk. He tells me about his job. Dr. Walker's sending him to Boston to a conference. I gave him the name of an old friend up there.”

Leonard just clucked and shook his head sadly, and sipped his coffee.

Meanwhile, I turned forty. Leonard didn't mention it, and I didn't bring it up; I had tried hard to ignore it, though Joanie had brought a cheap grocery store cake to work, and asked me, to my embarrassment, if I had big plans I had to celebrate.

My only plan was that I had decided not to take Leonard's advice, at least not entirely. Pete had been so friendly, I couldn't resist one last try.

Wednesday morning, I took the last treatment for warts, and Doc declared me cured, then added a stern little lecture about unprotected sex. Maybe even a hint about somebody my age knowing better. Wednesday night, I went to the Latino dance class at Starry Skies.

Pete was there, but I didn't ask him to dance. We talked, enough to remind me that I was still crazy about that wise, smart-ass little smile, about his sweet, boyish smell, about the way the muscles pushed out of the sleeves of his T-shirt.

Friday night, I pulled out the black felt hat, and selected a pleasantly fall-like shirt, a perfect match with the solid black boots and jeans.

When I got to Starry Skies, handsome young Ted was already scouring the room for a fresh boyfriend. Leonard hadn't arrived yet—but Pete had.

I walked up to Pete, listened to his latest news, took a deep breath, and asked him to dance.

He hesitated, as if pondering. Then, he said, "No, I'm kind of tired."

Where I come from, in Lone Oak, Oklahoma, you're friendly and polite, no matter how much you hate somebody. At that moment, I hated Pete.

But when Pete said no, in spite of Lone Oak rules, I said nothing. In spite of the way I had been brought up, I turned and walked away without speaking.

I was suddenly thankful for Ted, who was a little drunk, outrageously flirtatious, and eager to get out on the dance floor and be seen by whoever his next victim might be. Pete, meanwhile, oblivious to my transformation from small town nice guy to big

city snob, had finally worked up the nerve to talk to handsome, bald, bearded Joey, who was responding enthusiastically, about two feet back from the dance floor.

“Jeez, that bald guy's cute,” Ted said, turning his head, as we waltzed by them to the optimistic upswing of *It Feels Like Today*.

It meant nothing to Ted, of course, that Pete was already working on Joey.

Joey and Pete stepped onto the dance floor together. Pete's smart-ass grin was gone; he gazed at Joey with hopeless vulnerability.

Five minutes later, the music paused between songs; Pete walked away, I guessed to go to the bar to get drinks. I saw the opening, and took it.

“Hey, Joey, have you met Ted?” I said, leading Ted directly up to him.

That wasn't the look of love on their faces. It was lust. Pure, gay, glad-to-be-alive lust. Within minutes, they were out the door together. The lines at the bar were long; by the time Pete came back, holding two beers, Joey was gone.

Pete, looking surprised and disappointed, moved toward me, ready for a little man-to-man sympathy. I turned away as if I hadn't seen him.

At that moment, I knew what I wanted and started looking for it—and found it after a half-stroll around the edge of the dance floor. Hispanic, earrings, tattoos, tank-top. Tough-looking, macho, military haircut. As short as Ted, but totally toned.

The little guy had already found his quarry for the night—or so he thought—in a gray-haired man who, like Pete, made the mistake of heading for the bar to buy drinks. I moved in fast, and tossed out the little bit of Spanish I had learned for occasions like this, beginning with *Me llamo Al*.

He looked up at me and smiled.

Quieres una cerveza? I asked.

He answered, *Quiero whiskey.*

His name was Mundo, from some town in Mexico I had never heard of. I steered him toward the exit, glancing back just in time to see the gray-haired man, a beer in each hand, looking as bewildered and disappointed as Pete had a few minutes earlier.

Down the sidewalk, in the little bar next door, a very bad singer was doing karaoke to Cher's *Song for the Lonely*. I made sure Mundo stood beside me, though his eyes wandered, as I bought him a shot of scotch. I didn't bother with a nice brand; he was already drunk and ready to go. I gave him a kiss, and he kissed back, just a little sloppy.

I asked him if he'd like to come over to my house that night. He answered, softly, *Si.*

I pondered whether I would bother to be safe when we got to the point we were headed toward; there was a new box of condoms in the nightstand drawer, but drunk young Mexicans might not necessarily care. I decided that I certainly wouldn't bother to tell Mundo I had recently had anal warts. He probably wouldn't know what I was talking about, anyway, I assured myself.

I saw Leonard leaving *Starry Skies* as I guided Mundo down the sidewalk. He caught my eye and shook his head, silently.

"By the way," Mundo said, tugging the sleeve of my shirt.

I knew what was coming, in whatever variation he might care to put it.

“I’m a little behind on my rent this month,” he said. “Think you could help me out?”

“How much?” I asked.

“\$150?” he inquired, not quite sure of himself.

“How about seventy-five?” I retorted.

He pouted, then smiled.

“Fine,” he said. “Let’s go.”

He nagged me about the money as we drove down the street. I was beginning to wonder if I had made a mistake. I stopped at the 7-Eleven, took my keys in with me to the cash machine, and drew out five twenties. I didn’t have any small bills, so I handed Mundo four twenties and decided to forget the difference. His hands were warm and eager, inviting me to anticipate how they would feel on my legs and chest and all over my body after we stripped down and started exploring each other.

But his English slurred. He started talking about his roommates, Roberto and Alex, and then about home, in Mexico. After a few minutes, he spoke entirely in Spanish, almost crying. We stopped at a red light. He opened the door, leaned out, and vomited on the street, sitting back up and slamming the car door shut just as the light turned green.

“I’m okay,” he volunteered, trying hard to be convincing.

Two stoplights later, six blocks from my house, he repeated the scene, this time making a nasty retching noise.

I pulled into the garage, and considered leaving him in the car for the night. But he was still awake, so I half-carried, half-dragged him into the house and up the stairs.

He was still clothed as he passed out on the bed; I pulled off his work boots and wiped his face, softly, with a damp cloth. I stripped down to my underwear, and stretched out on the bed next to him.

I reached over, and pulled him into my arms, as he snored the gentle, sighing snore of a young man. I stroked his head for a minute or two as I fell asleep. That's all.

I asked Mundo if he wanted anything to eat the next morning, but he was in a hurry to go to his yard work job. He made a call on his cell phone; ten minutes later, a red pickup truck pulled up. He smiled, let me kiss him on the cheek, and was gone.

I went out to Starry Skies again that night, and danced and walked past Pete several times without speaking. Sunday, I slept late, bought groceries, vacuumed, skipped cleaning the bathroom.

Someday, maybe someday soon, I'll quit my job at the insurance office. Goodbye, Joanie, goodbye helmet hair, goodbye claims and claim forms and rejection forms that have come to smell as bad to me as the petroleum refinery back home in Lone Oak, Oklahoma.

For now, I'll do whatever Joanie tells me to do. I'll try to look appropriately remorseful and apologetic when she has a tantrum. She's bought a new BMW, so she's in a good mood this week, though she says that sales are down and claims are up, of course.

So, thank God for Starry Skies and Friday nights.

Thank God for Leonard, who dances with me just about whenever I want. Thank God for handsome young men who can't wait to have fun, and sweet old men who have

learned to be patient. Thank God for butch lesbians and lipstick lesbians and boys in their twenties in tight T-shirts and boys in their thirties with thick, hard muscles. Thank God for jeans and boots.

I go to a different doctor now, since Joanie opted for a new health plan that costs the employees a lot more but saves the company money. I haven't spoken to Pete since the last time I asked him to dance with me, the last time I gave him the chance to say no.

But whenever I see Pete—and I see him a lot, at Starry Skies—for some reason, I dance a little better, show off a little more, try a fancy move or two, whether I'm dancing with Leonard or Ted or somebody else. Can't help myself. Sometimes he looks like he might like to talk to me. Sometimes, I want to. But I won't let myself.

Last Friday night, as the wise, danceable melody of *Nothin' 'bout Love Makes Sense* pounded through the warm, smoky air of Starry Skies, I scooted across the dance floor with Leonard. We laughed when we screwed up a turn, we joked about cute butts and tight jeans on the hot young men we danced past. We bitched about all the bad dancers on the floor.

Then that song ended, and another began. I nearly bumped into Pete as I walked off the crowded dance floor. He stepped back, almost smiled, and let me step in front of him.

Ondine

Elizabeth has just finished playing Ravel's *Ondine* for the first time for Dr. Richards. The thousands of tiny black specks on the page poured through her eyes, into her brain, then down through her arms to her fingers and onto the keys of the piano. A cloud of glittering music filled Dr. Richards's living room, then floated through the tall glass windows to sink into the blue swimming pool beneath the hot, yellow sky.

Now she looks at Dr. Richards, loving his perplexed smile, and the way he runs a hand through his brownish-blond hair, trying to decide what to say next.

"You've certainly got the notes, dear," he says.

He always calls her dear. "But do you understand what the piece is about? Have you read the poem? It's here in the front of the score."

A few weeks ago, before the really hot part of summer, Dr. Richards and his wife, Mrs. Louise Richards, asked Elizabeth to go to a concert with them. Elizabeth's father was gone on a business trip, so her mother didn't have to worry or pray about it, and let her skip church that night.

She rode to the concert in Mrs. Richards's clean, shiny white car. They ate pasta in a restaurant, near the tall buildings, then crossed the street to the concert hall, to hear a man with a funny French name play *Ondine* and lots of other pieces by Ravel and other composers.

Of all the music, she especially loved *Ondine*. As they rode home, she told Dr. Richards that she wanted to learn to play it.

At first, she pronounced it *Own-Dine*. Mrs. Richards corrected her.

Awn-Dean, Mrs. Richards had said, *Awn-Dean*. By Ravel, pronounced *Rah-Vell*.

Mrs. Richards is not a musician. She is the vice president of a bank. She is tall and always carefully dressed in smart suits and fine, expensive blouses. She always smells like the roses Elizabeth's mother grows in the back yard. She sometimes looks at Elizabeth as if there is something about her that she would like to change. But she always smiles, eventually, and always compliments Elizabeth on the way she plays the piano.

"Well, there aren't many pianists who dare to try *Ondine*," Dr. Richards had said, that night. "Particularly at seventeen. And there are even fewer who should."

He and Mrs. Richards laughed when he said that.

Elizabeth asked him if he had ever played it, and he sighed, his smile drooping a little as he explained that, "Once upon a time, dear, I thought I would conquer the world with that and a few other pieces."

Three years ago, when Elizabeth had been fourteen, Mrs. Chandler, her first piano teacher, had announced that she had taught Elizabeth all that she could, and that it was time for her to take lessons with someone else. Mrs. Chandler and Elizabeth's mother and Elizabeth all went to Dr. Richards's house together, where Elizabeth had played Chopin and Mozart and Bartok for him on the beautiful, black grand piano in his living room, overlooking the green lawn and the flower beds and the swimming pool. Dr. Richards had said that she had great potential, and that he wanted to start working with Her right away.

Then Elizabeth's mother had looked worried, and fumbled with the little gold cross she always wears on a thin gold chain around her neck. She embarrassed Elizabeth a little by saying she'd pray about it. Dr. Richards said that she could pay

whatever she could afford for the lessons—*Perhaps whatever you pay Mrs. Chandler?* he had said—and that Elizabeth was to come twice a week for lessons, either to his studio at the college or to his house.

Elizabeth's mother told Elizabeth that she was not to tell her father just yet that she had a new piano teacher.

Elizabeth's father had not wanted her to take piano lessons at all, when she first started, long ago, when she was just five. And three weeks after she started, he had said that she didn't need any more lessons because she could play everything in the hymnbook already.

What does she need more lessons for if she can play all the hymns? he had asked.

And five-year-old Elizabeth had cried all afternoon to think that she might not have any more lessons.

Brother Billy Thompson, the preacher at their church, had said that Elizabeth would praise the Lord with her piano playing. Because of Brother Billy, Elizabeth's father had decided to go ahead and buy the little upright piano to practice on at home. And he finally told Elizabeth's mother that Elizabeth could take lessons with Mrs. Chandler, even though it meant learning worldly music by Bach and Mozart and Beethoven.

And so, Elizabeth is now able to sit in the living room of Dr. Richards' house, overlooking the cool, blue swimming pool, where the handsome young Mexican rakes leaves from the pool with a calm, rhythmical, almost musical motion.

"Yes, dear, you know the notes perfectly," Dr. Richards says.

Then he pauses, as if searching, and runs a hand through his hair again.

“Have you seen the movie *The Little Mermaid*?” he asks.

She feels a little embarrassed, like the time that she had to explain to her worldly cousin Jeannie that she and her brothers don’t go to regular school like other kids, and don’t watch *The Simpsons*, and that she doesn’t go swimming in the same pool with boys and men. She feels embarrassed like the time Mama told Dr. Richards she would have to pray about the piano lessons.

“We don’t watch Disney movies,” she explains to Dr. Richards. “They are worldly.”

He looks even more perplexed, and takes a deep breath, as if he isn’t sure what he should say now.

“Well, dear, *Ondine* is a mermaid,” he says at last. “But she’s an evil mermaid. She gets pleasure from tempting men into the water, and pulling them under, and feeding on their souls. In the poem, the man she is tempting resists. But I think that Ravel put something a little different in the music. I think that in Ravel’s piece, *Ondine* convinces the man to come and swim with her. And we hear him drowning, and we hear her laughing for joy, because she is so cruel, at the end.”

He brushes her off the piano bench, and sits, and frowns at the music, and begins to play. It is not as neat and clear as when Elizabeth plays it, and she knows it. He misses more than a few notes. But it sounds, somehow, more frightening and beautiful, in spite of the missed notes.

And something occurs to Elizabeth. For she realizes that if she can play the notes as perfectly as she already plays them, and make the music sound as frightening

and wet and sad and cruel as it does when Dr. Richards plays it, then the music will be truly beautiful. More beautiful than the lawn and the bright red flowers and the cool, blue swimming pool.

Maybe even as beautiful as the handsome Mexican boy, who has now disappeared behind the tall green shrubs.

And Elizabeth knows that for the people who hear her play it, the world and the cars and the televisions and the traffic will all disappear for a moment, and all that will exist and all that will matter will be the beautiful, cruel mermaid. And they will all leap into the water with the mermaid, giving themselves to her.

Elizabeth knows that she will not tell Mama or Dad or Brother Billy Thompson that the music is about a wicked mermaid. If they ask, she will tell them that the splashy, beautiful music is about Jesus walking on the water.

When the Mexican boy went behind the shrubs, he was wearing jeans that hung low on his hips. His white tee-shirt was stuffed into his hip pocket. Now, he has come back from behind the shrubs, wearing a tiny, tight black bathing suit. He is younger, much younger than Dad or Dr. Richards, but he is older than Elizabeth. His muscles are hard and golden in the sun; the tiny black bathing suit grips the middle part of his body. His hair is cut short like a soldier's.

Elizabeth wears her hair in a tight bun because that is a modest fashion, appropriate for a Christian girl. This is how Mama wears her hair, and this is how Dad and Brother Billy Thompson want her to wear it.

When she sees the Mexican boy dive into the water, she wishes that she could pull the pins out of her hair, and feel it flowing down her back, and dive into the water with him.

Dr. Richards stares out at the swimming pool.

“I told Mundo he could swim in the pool after he gets done with the yard work,” he explains, even though she hasn’t asked.

Mundo knows that polite gringos, like Dr. Richards, pay Mexicans like him in cash. That way he doesn’t have to deal with banks or officials or anything that might get him in trouble. To show him how much he appreciates it, Mundo bends and stretches and wipes himself with the towel a little longer. Dr. Richards watches him with a little smile, and runs a hand through his hair.

One of Mundo’s roommates, Roberto, saves his money, and makes careful lists of groceries and supplies, so that there’s always something to eat at their apartment. And he always sends part of his money home to his *madre* in Mexico.

But Mundo and Alex, his other roommate, spend all of their extra money on dinners at cafés and restaurants, or handsome silky shirts and cute pants at Ross. And, of course, on beers, or, if they’re feeling rich, on shots of whiskey, at Miguel’s, where they go to dance the salsa and the cumbia with the pretty Mexican girls, or at Starry Skies Saloon, where they go to hang out, and dance with each other, or with the gay Anglo men who dress like cowboys and look at them with hungry eyes.

Now and then, Mundo and Alex buy a little weed from the pretty black woman who lives in their apartment complex. When Mundo has weed, he shares with Alex, and when Alex has weed, he shares with Mundo.

Roberto owns the truck they use to get to their yard work jobs, and to carry the mowers and weed eaters and bags of fertilizer. Alex and Mundo beg Roberto to drive them down to Starry Skies or Miguel's sometimes, especially on a Friday or a Saturday night. At Miguel's, when Mundo dances the salsa with the pretty girls, he always watches to see which of the men are looking at the girl he's dancing with, and which are looking at him. At Starry Skies, while the twangy, funny country and western music throbs around them, Alex and Mundo always frown, at first, at the Anglos with their hungry eyes. Then, after a little while, they smile back and dance with them. Sometimes one or the other or both of them go home with one of the men for the night.

Mundo wonders sometimes if he'll ever see Dr. Richards at Starry Skies. Dr. Richards always lets Mundo know when Mrs. Richards will not be home until late, or when she has gone on a business trip, so that Mundo can stay late and swim in the little black Speedo bathing suit that he bought at Ross. Then, while the sun goes down, Dr. Richards sits on the patio and drinks whiskey and watches Mundo swim, and offers him beer or Coca-Cola.

Mundo wishes that Dr. Richards would ask him to come into his house, and that Dr. Richards would play on the big piano, just for him. Mundo has never been inside the house, but he can see through the big windows that are like a wall of glass overlooking the yard. And he hears the beautiful music from the piano. He sees the kids come for lessons—the serious-looking, rich Anglo and Chinese kids who play beautiful music.

Mundo wishes he could go inside the house, and touch the piano, and maybe even press down on the keys; he has never touched a piano. He imagines that someday Dr. Richards will invite him to come inside, and that he will show him the fine things in the house, and fix dinner for him, and give him whiskey. And then Mundo would love him, and do whatever Dr. Richards wanted him to do.

Of all the kids who come for lessons, one is different, Mundo knows. He saw her today. She wears plain, dull clothes. She wears her hair tied up in a tight bun like a housemaid or a grandmother. When she plays the piano, it sounds like water flowing, and people in love, and like rain in the forest.

Mundo would like to talk to her, and sit beside the piano while she plays. He would like to be her friend.

Today, when she played, the music was like a waterfall, rushing around his arms and head like the water in the pool when he dives to the bottom.

On Sunday mornings, before church begins, Elizabeth practices on the baby grand piano that Brother Billy Thompson bought when they built the new church. It is not as big as the grand piano at Dr. Richards's house, but it is bigger than the little piano at home.

Today, she practices Schumann and Chopin and Bach, glad for a few minutes before she has to play the ugly hymns about blood and Jesus' love.

When she plays the music, she imagines the fairies and angels dancing on the beams of light, or choirs singing in cathedrals with stained glass windows. She sees emperors and ballerinas. And mermaids.

She saves *Ondine* for last, just before she has to start playing the hymns. She thinks about Mundo and Dr. Richards. She thinks about the beautiful, evil mermaid. She imagines Mundo and Dr. Richards, swimming in the pool, naked. And in her daydream she is with them in the pool, and she is naked, too.

To think of this is a sin, she knows, and she feels her cheeks turn red, and worries that someone may notice.

The hymns are ugly, and make her feel sick, like eating too much candy. But she plays them, just for Mama, who looks so proud, sitting three rows back from the front, her hair tied up in a bun like Elizabeth. Dad is stern as he tries to sing the hymns; he listens carefully, and frowns, and nods in agreement with everything that Brother Billy Thompson says when the sermon begins. Elizabeth's brothers, Seth and Noah, two rows behind Mama and Dad, jab at each other and make trouble. They're just quiet enough so that Dad won't hear and turn around and frown at them—or, worse yet, grab them by their collars and jerk them out the door of the church and slap them so that everyone in the church can hear, as he has done a time or two.

Elizabeth is thankful that Brother Billy Thompson wanted her to have a piano, even if he sometimes looks ridiculous in his red ties, while his Adam's apple bobs up and down and he gets madder and madder about secular humanists and evolutionists and abortionists.

Today, he preaches about evil men that he calls *hormersexuals*.

Elizabeth has heard that word before, and knows that it is really homosexual. She found what it means in a book called "Questions and Answers for Christian Young People."

It means men who have sexual relationships with other men.

Brother Billy Thompson says that homosexuals lure young men into their evil ways. How else could more homosexuals come to be, since homosexuals can not have children?

At home, Mama and Seth and Noah and Elizabeth study Christian math and Christian literature and Christian biology. This explains how the world was made by God in seven days, and how this country was made by Christians who worshipped the one true God.

Seth and Noah tell each other dirty jokes and make farting noises when Elizabeth sits down, when Mom and Dad are out of the room and can't hear.

Last Wednesday, during her piano lesson, Dr. Richards said that it was time for Elizabeth to think about auditioning to go to college at faraway schools called Curtis and Juilliard. Brother Billy Thompson wants her to go to a college in Tennessee, where she will play the piano for good Christian young people. Dad says that girls don't need to go to college at all, and Elizabeth is not sure whether he is joking or not.

The sermon is nearly over, and Elizabeth is hot, and wants to take the pins out of her hair. When she plays the last hymn after the sermon, she slips in secret bits of Chopin and Schumann that no one recognizes, and even a little bit of *Ondine*. And she thinks another sinful thought, a very sinful secret, more sinful than the daydream of swimming naked with Mundo and Dr. Richards.

* * * * *

The whole world is like the inside of a furnace today. Mundo drips huge drops of sweat as he pull weeds from around the flowers, and then starts the lawn mower with a jerk of the cord. He will be glad when he can stop the mower, and swim in the pool, and hear the strange girl playing the beautiful music on the piano.

“Mrs. Richards is out of town on business,” Dr. Richards said earlier, when Mundo arrived.

Mundo knows that this means that he can stay late, and swim in the evening, when the long shadows stretch across the pool and the lawn.

This time, he decides, he will try to see if he can get Dr. Richards to do more than sit and watch him and smile. He plans to stretch and flex and smile at him, charmingly but unmistakably so that Dr. Richards will not be able to mistake what he means, and pretend he doesn't notice. Then maybe Dr. Richards will invite him into the house, and play the piano for him. And give him a steak to eat, and whiskey to drink, and take him by the hand, and lead him to a bedroom, where there will be a big bed, with a thick, smooth blanket. And there will be beautiful paintings on the wall, and Mundo will love Dr. Richards however he likes, in the big, soft bed.

Mundo cuts the mower engine and pushes the mower toward the gate. He calls Roberto on the cellphone to tell him that he is done, but that Roberto need not come to pick him up until he calls, late tonight, or perhaps not until tomorrow morning. The yard is green, the flowers tall and red. The strange girl with her hair tied up in a bun is playing the piano.

It is the music that sounds like rushing water. Mundo slips behind the bushes, where no one will see, and strips out of his jeans, and pulls the little black Speedo out of the pocket of the jeans. He stands naked under the sun for just a minute, and lets the music flow across his bare body, for just a little while.

He steps into his Speedo and reluctantly pulls it up over his knees and thighs, all the while whispering a prayer that he will not take it off again until Dr. Richards takes it off for him.

Elizabeth has played *Ondine* many times, now. She has practiced the notes carefully, so carefully that she could almost write the music out. But today, she knows that it will sound different. Because last Wednesday, she saw the way that Dr. Richards smiled at Mundo, after he thought that Elizabeth had left.

But she had not really left. She had run back into the house to get the music that she had forgotten.

And she saw Mundo and Dr. Richards standing in the yard, smiling at each other, and laughing. And she saw the way they looked at each other, and the way Mundo flexed his muscles and laughed. And she thought about the men that Brother Billy Thompson calls *hormersexuals*.

Today, just before she starts to play for Dr. Richards, she remembers the sinful, secret thought she had last Sunday in church, more sinful than when she thought about being naked in the pool with Mundo and Dr. Richards.

Today, she thinks about the evil mermaid as she plays. She thinks about a beautiful mermaid with long brown hair. She imagines herself naked in the swimming

pool, and she imagines Dr. Richards and Mundo naked in the pool with her. But that is not her most sinful secret thought.

Just as the music climbs and rushes upward to its most excited moment, she thinks about the time her worldly cousin Jeannie spent the night with her, and how she touched her in places no else had ever touched her before.

But even that is not her most sinful secret thought, either.

As the music swirls away in that cold, beautiful, evil laughter at the end, she imagines Mundo holding Dr. Richards under the water, and laughing, like Ondine.

The music ends. She turns and looks at Dr. Richards, where he stands by the piano, running one hand through his hair.

“Elizabeth, dear, I think you’ve got it,” he says.

Then, once again, Elizabeth thinks the most sinful, secret thought of all.

And this is that sinful secret thought: that she loves this music more than she loves Jesus.

The lesson ends. It is time to for Elizabeth to go home.

“I’ll wait on the front porch so I can see her,” Elizabeth says.

“Are you sure, dear?” he says, then agrees, then says that he must go out in the yard to talk to Mundo.

Elizabeth goes out on the front porch.

A white car pulls up. It is Mrs. Richards. She has forgotten one of her suitcases.

“And what are you doing out in the heat?” she asks Elizabeth.

“Waiting for my mother to pick me up,” Elizabeth answers.

“Your house is on the way to the airport,” Mrs. Richards says. “We’ll call your mother and find out if she’s left yet, and I can take you if she hasn’t.”

They step back inside the house. Elizabeth dials her mother. Noah and Seth were late at baseball practice and Elizabeth’s mother is not yet on her way, and was, in fact, just about to call and say she’d be late.

Elizabeth and Mrs Richards look out the tall glass windows and see Dr. Richards talking to Mundo. Mundo is laughing and flexing his muscles. Dr. Richards leans forward and touches Mundo on the chest. Then he leans closer and kisses Mundo on the neck. And Mundo reaches up and kisses Dr. Richards on the mouth.

Mrs. Richards turns away. Her mouth twists into something like a little smile.

The sidewalk is so hot that Elizabeth can feel the heat through her shoes as she walks to the car. She can see the tall buildings downtown in the distance. They quiver in the heat.

When Mrs. Richards starts the engine, a blast of cold from the air conditioner hits Elizabeth’s face. She shivers a little.

She reaches up, and pulls the pins out of her hair, and loosens the tight, appropriate bun. Silky strands of shiny brown hair pour across her shoulders and down her back.

Mrs. Richards looks at her and smiles. For once, she does not look as if she wants to change her.

She reaches in front of Elizabeth, and positions the sun visor so that Elizabeth can see herself in the mirror. She moves her hand to Elizabeth's head, and touches her hair for a just a moment.

"You know, Elizabeth, you're really very beautiful," she says, as she strokes, rhythmically, almost musically. "You should always wear your hair this way."

Way Too Neat

9 o'clock, and nobody's here but a bunch of losers in cowboy boots, trying hard to two-step to a Toby Keith tune. In other words, Tuesday night dance class at Starry Skies Saloon and Dance Hall.

Half-a-dozen already-drunk lesbians wander through at 9:30, get a lot drunker, wander out on the dance floor to bump into the guys who are trying to dance, then leave. 10 o'clock, one of the barbacks throws a tantrum, yells *Shove it up your ass, you fucked-up queen* at the manager, then stamps out the back door. 10:30, speakers still blaring, lights still flashing over the empty dance floor, and the place is a mess.

I start to pick up a few stray bottles, throw them away. Put one or two mugs back on the bar. Then pick up a few more stray bottles. Pretty soon, the place is almost clean.

I know, why do I bother. I don't work here. But somebody has to keep things neat and orderly. That's why I empty out the kitchen cabinets, sort everything out, put everything back, in neat rows, every Saturday morning. That's why I clean out the closet, and put all the shirts and jeans and boots and shoes in neat, orderly rows, with the colors coordinated from dark to light, every Sunday morning. That's why I'm clearing away the empty beer bottles and the mugs at Starry Skies, even if I don't work here. If I don't, no one else will.

I've just about got the place in order, and the more bottles I throw away, and the more mugs I put back on the bar, the more sure I am that I'm going to break up with Brett, and this time I mean it.

Meanwhile, I'm just about alone, except for the shirtless bartender—nice firm pecs, tight abs, bushy cowboy mustache—and a few nerds who can't dance anyway.

In walks dimples, biceps and a sweet little made-in-Mexico ass.

"Hey, where is everybody?" he asks, in a way that says he thinks I work here.

If it weren't for that one little crooked out-of-place tooth, and those dweeby glasses he wears that make him just so fucking cute, I'd totally ignore him.

"It's no fun dancing when the place is all cluttered," I say.

Maybe he'll get the point, that I don't work here. And maybe he won't notice that there isn't anybody but a few jerks to dance with, anyway.

After I drop the last stray beer bottles in a waste basket, and put another handful of empty mugs on the bar, I'm glad to talk to the little asshole. Because he is kind of cute, and I've decided to bust up with Brett, anyway.

Because Brett left the cheese out on the kitchen counter again. Jeans in the dryer, wrinkled. I had to polish his boots one more time, because he hadn't bothered for two whole weeks.

And then, the last straw. 6:30 p.m., I was still at home, he was watching a rerun of *The Simpsons*. I was going through the mail. And there it was.

The Visa bill. *His* Visa bill. The one he had promised to pay, twelve weeks earlier. *Twelve fucking weeks ago*. Now two whole months late.

I just about screamed. For the one millionth time, I was totally fed up.

"Sure, you don't fucking care if your credit's ruined," I yelled.

I hardly ever cursed before Brett moved in.

Brett stared at the screen, fascinated like he hadn't seen Bart skateboard over Homer's car a thousand times before.

"It's my credit rating, not yours," he said. I could barely hear him above the television.

"What about mine?—if there's ever gay marriage, and we get married, and you're on my credit record? Do you know how hard I've worked to keep my credit rating good?"

"It was just fifteen bucks," he answered, getting up from my favorite chair, where he had been sitting eating fried chicken—*fried chicken!*—while watching television. He tossed the plate he had been eating out of into the sink. Clang. When, Chrissake, the dishwasher was perfectly empty and ready for dirty dishes.

Because I had unloaded it for the fifth time in a row without any help.

"That's just the point," I said. "All you had to do was send a check for fifteen dollars in the mail five days before the due date. You had the fifteen dollars, we have stamps."

I walked over to the stamp drawer, and pulled out a little sheet of stamps. Commemoratives, with a picture of Kateherine Anne Porter on them.

"See these? These are stamps," I said. "You put them on envelopes. Then you mail your bills. Then, when you need to, you can buy a house and a car and reserve a hotel room because you have good credit. Write checks. Put checks in envelopes. Put stamps on envelopes. Put envelopes in mail. Then life is happy."

I placed the stamps back in the drawer, at a neat right angle next to the specially-made return address labels. The ones with the gold equal sign for the Human Rights Campaign. I slammed the drawer, hoping he would jump. He didn't.

I headed out the door for Starry Skies. All by myself. I knew Brett wouldn't come with me. There was a football game on. A football game!

Usually, of course, there are plenty of guys for me to dance with at Starry Skies.

But it's just Tuesday. Nobody's here, except me, cleaning up the bottles and mugs for the staff. And I haven't danced all night because there's nobody here but drunk lesbians and dorks from the class, and this mess besides.

At least there's the Mexican. Says his name's Rico.

"You're kinda cute," he says. He's finally got the idea. I don't work here. He thinks it's funny that I'm clearing away the mugs and bottles. I can tell by the smile with the one crooked tooth.

"You dance?" I ask.

"Not usually," he says. He's standing next to me. I'm not sure how, but somehow his arm is around my waist. He says, "For you, I'll give it a try."

Yeah, he's a lousy dancer. But he's a great kisser, when he jams me up against the wall and I take his tongue in my mouth, and let my hands slide over his cute, tight butt.

"Stop it," he giggles. Hot. Totally hot.

Then he rams his tongue into my mouth again.

All right, I'm not impressed at all when he starts bragging about the rental properties he owns and manages in Oak Cliff. I'm not very impressed when he tells me

about his cabin on the lake. Big deal. But, yeah, it's sweet that he wants to impress me. Weekends at the lake wouldn't be so bad. I could straighten and clean the kitchen cabinets and closet on Friday night before going out.

"I'll bet you like to take boys out there for a good time," I say, when he mentions the house by the lake the third time. "Make love under the stars."

"I'm not that kind of guy," he says. "I like to get to know somebody first."

"Yeah, right, I can tell," I say. "Can I come over tonight? I want to suck your dick. Tonight."

I can't help thinking how nice it would be to let Brett know I could find somebody else, just like that.

Rico backs away, smiles.

"I have to get to know you first," he says.

"*Yo quiero chupar tu verga,*" I say.

He looks back, surprised, and laughs.

"I told, you I'm not that kind of guy."

"How about next weekend?" I ask.

"Yeah. Call me during the day on Friday."

We move over to the bar, where I pick up a little white card. The ones they leave out just for moments like this. Nice little box of pencils, too. Brett calls them "trick cards." Rico writes his number on one. I can tell by the prefix it's a cell phone. I write my cell phone number on one to hand to him.

"You call me," he says, handing my number back. "I'll get your number off my caller ID."

We stumble through another two-step. I lead, he follows, we both laugh when he trips a little. Too much beer, not enough dance lessons. Totally cute. Just like Brett when we first met.

Only Brett's just irritating. Rico's cute.

I walk out to the parking lot with him. He winks at me as he gets into a blue Lexus. Maybe he's for real.

I make sure to tell Brett all about Rico when I get home. He's not impressed. Pretends he doesn't hear me.

He's watching *Cops*. Reality television about policemen. The credits roll past over a song about "Bad Boys," along with footage of a policeman shoving a handsome, handcuffed guy in jockey shorts and nothing else into the back of a police car.

"Hot," Brett says, staring at the television.

I glance into the kitchen on my way to the bedroom. Plate still in the sink. I go to bed and fall asleep to the noise of whiney, yellow music and occasional very bad dialogue interspersed with masculine moaning on the television—and the click and hum of frequent fast-forwarding that tells me *Cops* is over and Brett's watching a porn video.

* * * * *

Friday afternoon. I'm home early. Haven't seen Brett since Wednesday. He's gone to his mother's house—what a fuckin' baby—as an excuse to get out of my way. We are definitely still not getting along, though sometimes I think it would be nice to have him back, maybe just for a little visit.

Then I remember Rico.

“Who?” Rico says, when I call him on my cell phone.

“Remember? From Starry Skies last Tuesday night?”

“Listen, I can't talk right now,” Rico says, sounding a little panicked. “I've got your number. I'll call you. What did you say your name was?”

Asshole. Chalk another up to experience.

When I get back from buying groceries on Saturday afternoon, I hear the vacuum cleaner running. The dishwasher has been unloaded. Brett's back.

We make love until midnight. And again at 3 a.m. And again at 6:30. I forget about Rico.

Sometimes I hate Brett. But damn, he's good at what he does best.

Six months later. Brett's camped out on the couch, watching Mexican prize fighting on cablevision. Eight empty bright blue Keystone Light beer cans on the floor. Empty Fiddle Faddle box. You know, that caramel-popcorn stuff that rots your teeth and gives you bad breath.

I don't care. I want to dance. I promised an old friend I'd be out at Starry Skies that night, and don't feel like canceling. What the fuck does Brett care? Not any less than me. I know he'll be here when I got back. A little drunk, warmed up from watching the wrestling studs, ready to play, if I know Brett. Either that or too drunk and used up after watching a few porns. I'll have to straighten up the tape shelf tomorrow morning. I pick up the beer cans and the empty Fiddle Faddle box and throw them in the trash before I leave, trying to make enough noise to make Brett notice.

He doesn't.

Since it's winter, I wear my black felt hat. Dance with a guy I haven't met before, a tall blond guy in a pearl-snap shirt with the sleeves torn off, tight jeans and a big shiny silver belt buckle.

Fifteen minutes later, I dance with a tall blond guy in a pearl-snap shirt with the sleeves torn off, tight jeans and a big shiny *gold* belt buckle. If it weren't for the belt buckle, I'd think it was the same guy.

I'm thinking I wouldn't mind going home with either of them, but, five minutes later, they're dancing together. Then making out by the bar, before disappearing out the back door together.

I guess I should be glad that some people who were made for each other manage to find each other.

Then, out of nowhere, Rico. Asshole.

"Hey, remember me?" he chirps. Smiles with that crooked tooth. Irritating, not cute.

Do you call it chutzpah when it comes from a Mexican? Or do Mexicans have some other word for it?

I can't believe the nerve.

"Sure do," I say, turning away.

"Hey, are you mad at me?"

"No, but I will be if you don't leave me alone."

He looks like he wants to cry. Shit, what does he expect?

When I get home, I tell Brett about Rico while I finish up the dusting. Brett, stretched out on the bed, leans on his elbows and pouts, naked and impatient. I can't help it, he should have dusted before I got home, if he's in such a hurry to fuck.

Besides, I like the helpless, impatient look on his face, and I like to make him wait, sometimes.

"Why would he think I'd all of sudden be interested, six months later, when he never called back?" I ask.

"He got what he wanted before," Brett answers. "Which was to brag to you about his stuff and make out for a little while in public. He's probably got a wife and three kids at home."

He rolls over on his back, flexes one bicep, then another. His dick's hard. He pulls me onto the bed and tugs at my jeans.

* * * * *

Four months, eight haircuts later: light beige hat for summer. White shirt, stone-washed jeans. New, nearly-black boots. Almost bought the distressed leather pair, but there's something about distressed leather I don't like—the randomness of it, I think.

Wednesday night at Starry Skies. I bus the rails. I think the boys who work here don't bother to bus when they see me come in, since they know I'll do it for them.

Brett's gone, again. He left the fried chicken, a whole box from Popeye's, out on the counter to get cold. When I turned on the light, a fuckin' cockroach ran across a golden crispy breast. I threw the whole box out. And Brett, too. It's bizarre to see a grown man cry like he did. But that was the last straw. He's back at his Mom's house. Perfect refuge for a homo-slob.

I don't call him for a whole week. And then only to say hello to his Mom. I like Nadine, really, though she spoils Brett terribly. No wonder he can't take care of himself.

Well, he can make a mess of his life, but I'm going to get on with mine. Starry Skies every night, so long as the vacuuming's done. I'm going to find someone who likes dancing with me more than watching *Cops* or Mexican prize-fighting. Someone who can pay some bills and do his own laundry.

When I get to Starry Skies, there's Rico, leaning against the wall. He turns and walks away when he sees me. God, what a cute butt, packed into tight jeans. I love that one little crooked tooth, adding just a hint of trouble to a perfect face.

Some things are better if they're not quite perfect. A living room should be neat. The rails around a dance hall floor should be clean. The shelf where you keep your

porno tapes should be organized. (Alphabetically by category. College boys. Latino. Leather. Military. Police.)

But a man shouldn't really be perfect. A real man should be just a little bit of a mess. With something like a tooth that's a little out of place. Or torn jeans. Or a bad tattoo. Or cute little crooked glasses that keep slipping down his nose.

I know I shouldn't, but my switch flips on and I can't stop myself. I walk up behind Rico and tap him on the shoulder. He looks relieved when I say Hello, I guess because of the way I brushed him off last time.

All right, I say. No dancing. No making out in the bar. Just come over to my place. I need you. I need you to be my top. Tonight.

I give him directions before I get in my car. He listens, with an earnest, obedient expression on his face. He follows me out of the parking lot in his white Lexus. Down Oak Lawn Avenue, up Wycliff Street. I dodge a young drunk guy in a T-shirt who lurches in front of us. (Reminds me of Brett when I first knew him.) Behind me, I see the brake lights flash on Rico's Lexus.

Five minutes later, we're standing in my bedroom, he's unsnapping my shirt while we kiss.

"I like to bareback," he says.

I say *No*.

And he says, "Come on, Baby."

And he gives me this adorable little bad boy smile, with that one crooked tooth, and doesn't say anything else, just looks at me with those bad-boy eyes. And I don't care anymore. Boots off, jeans jerked down, then dropped on the floor in a random

pile. Get out the paddle. Smack on my bare ass until it stings. Just a little K-Y. Not too much. He's on me. I forget about the mess, forget about bills, forget that I don't even know this guy's real name and that he's probably got a wife and three kids, at least two of them his own, at some gaudy pseudo-villa in Oak Cliff with a crucifix on the wall in every room.

I look over my shoulder at his face, desperate and happy. He's going so good that the little gold cross around his neck jangles.

He moans. He's done.

And then he's gone. Out the door. No good bye kiss.

Summer. Hot. Ninety days after the last unprotected anal penetration. Yeah, with Rico. Except for the times with Brett, who's back.

Nowadays, Brett unloads the dishwasher at least twice a week. Washes all his own jeans and shirts. Hides his boots so I won't polish them. Always puts the cheese and the chicken away. No, he never goes dancing with me, but he fucks me hard every afternoon after work. And again at night when I come home from Starry Skies. I like it.

"I don't give a fuck," Brett said, the first time after he got back and I told him I had let Rico fuck me without a condom. He just unzipped his jeans and shoved me onto my knees in that cool way he has, that I love so much.

"I'm the top," he said. "I won't catch anything from you. Now get to work."

Since it's been ninety days since Rico, it's time for an HIV test. I drive to the neighborhood branch of the county health department, a storefront operation next to a photo shop and a discount grocery. The STD clinic is behind the main waiting room, so I have to practically fight my way past waves of tired young mothers and yelling pre-schoolers. It's worse than *Starry Skies* at 11:30 on a Saturday night.

I resist the temptation to wipe dirty mouths clean and put away the scattered toys. In the little separate waiting room in back, I wait with a woman with one screaming baby and one very rowdy boy, I'd say about three years old. She's early twenties, in a pink tee-shirt and torn jeans; she twirls strands of long blonde hair while holding a bottle for the baby, stretched out on a chair next to her. She stops twirling her hair long enough to dig a copy of *Modern Bride* out of her diaper bag and to hand a copy of *Woman's World* magazine to the three-year-old to tear the pages out of.

There's a television, playing an educational video about a cool, handsome guy who finds out he has an STD. The show ends, and a message pops up in neatly aligned letters: *Practice abstinence.*

The three-year-old, wearing tiny camouflage pants and a T-shirt that says *I'm gonna be a truck driver like my Daddy*, rips the cover off of *Woman's World* and hands it to me.

A big blonde with a pink smile stares back at me from the torn page; the caption says that she's lost 120 pounds without dieting. Tall yellow letters underneath ask, with questionable relevance, "Can *ice cream* cure your PMS?"

I don't have time to figure that one out. The three-year-old points at the television screen and eyes me suspiciously while licking the chocolate coating off of a Twix bar. His mother, studying *Modern Bride* intently, doesn't notice.

"What does it say?" he demands, still pointing at the television screen.

I'm at a loss. Somehow "Practice Abstinence" doesn't seem like the right thing to say to a three-year-old in the waiting room of an STD clinic.

"It says, 'Be kind to your baby brother,'" I answer.

This cheers him up, and he squeals and laughs as if he's just heard a very good joke.

He starts dancing around the room, yelling, "Be kind to your baby brother."

His mother doesn't notice.

Back in the examining room, the nurse is young, plump and wise. The blood draw doesn't hurt, but I've forgotten about the gonorrhea test they make you take when you get the HIV test.

Urethral swab. Pure pain. Poetic justice, I guess.

"Remember that the next time you play around without protection," she says, smiling with wry satisfaction at my aching dick.

We can hear the three-year-old, still chanting at full volume, so loud you can hear him down the hall and through a closed door, "Be kind to your baby brother!"

The nurse gives me a telephone number to call and a secret code to give to get the test results. One week from today. Between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. only.

* * * * *

The dusty summer day has turned on its head with an afternoon thunderstorm. I'm out on the highway. It's 4:45, which leaves just fifteen minutes to call and get the test results, and I'm thirty minutes from home. I exit and look for a place to park, and end up pulling into the parking lot at one of those giant new Wal-Mart stores. I've got the phone number and my confidential code, A135, on a green sticky note in my wallet. It's 4:55 by the time I find a parking space.

The rain has stopped for a little while, but the pavement is slick, and lightning flashes in the mountain of blue-black clouds in the west. I get out of my car, just to get fresh air, and fish the cell phone out of my pocket while a gust of wind cools my face. The same gust pushes the shopping carts loose, out of their little pens. They bump around the parking lot like gazelles made of plastic and metal, nudging each other and ramming into parked cars and setting off car alarms. As soon as I get this call over, I'll chase them down and put them back in their little shopping cart pens. Unless the news about the test is bad. If that happens, I'll get back into my car and cry for a while.

I enter the phone number in my cell phone. A cheerful man answers and asks for my code. He puts me on hold. No music. Not even Muzak. Not even a warning to "Practice Abstinence."

Fifty feet away, a red pickup truck starts to slide on the slippery parking lot and I think that the asshole can't possibly slide this far even on a surface this slippery, and I can't believe it, the goddam truck is sliding right in my direction and all I can do is wonder, do I just stand here?

Or do I dodge?

On the Line

This is how it works.

You dial the number.

It rings on the other end, then clicks. One of those computer voices that sounds like a real person asks you for your mailbox number.

You punch in the numbers: 2-8-2-5. The voice asks for your password. Just like when you call up your bank for your balance. Or when you call up the credit card company to see how much you owe and the voice asks for your card number.

Your password is *D-O-G-G-I-E*. 3-6-4-4-4-3. After your Schnauzer, Doggie, who's dozing at your feet.

Click, and you're on line.

You punch four, to listen to recorded messages from other users on line.

You listen to several before you hear one that's kind of interesting.

Hi, this is Brad. I'm 42, blond and blue-eyed. I work out regularly. Well-toned. Total bottom. Looking for a quick fling at my place in far north Dallas. If I'm on line, I'm horny. Looking for somebody 18 to 35, prefer white or Latino, well-hung. I'm ready to take it. Leave a message if you're interested.

And you press two to leave a message. Put just an edge of Hispanic in your voice. Invent a quick bio for yourself.

"Hi, this is Cisco. I'm 24, I live on Royal, east of Central. I'd love for you to come over and suck my dick, maybe do a little more."

You pause, gasp a little, just for effect, like maybe you're so horny already you can hardly stand to wait.

You continue: "You like to get fucked? I'm so horny tonight. Call me. 972-663-0830."

Push two to send the message. And wait.

You're in your study, over the garage. You've been to bed already. Ruth's asleep. She fell asleep in your arms. Looked so sweet in her soft, ruffled, Edwardian night gown. Still looks sweet after twenty years. She works hard at her job at the bank. You love her. She loves you. You were careful not wake her when you left the bed to go to your study at 2 a.m.

Your cell phone vibrates.

"Hey, it's Brad. Is this Cisco?"

"Yeah." You shift into your Cisco character. Remember to shade your accent with a little Spanish. Not too much. "Watcha doin?"

"Just looking for some fun."

"You wanna suck my dick?"

"Hell, yeah—I mean, I guess so. What do you look like?"

"I'm 24, got close-cropped hair, well-built. I'm 5'9", 165. Solid. Smooth."

"You sound pretty good."

"What about you? You're for real?"

"Like I said in my message, I'm 42, in good shape, blond, blue-eyed."

"Oh, Daddy, you want me to ride you?"

"Get over here, Baby. You got a car?"

"Uh, it's in the shop."

"Yeah, right.," he says, like he doesn't really believe you.

But it turns out he doesn't care, and he says, "Hell, what time is it? I'm so horny I'll come out to your place. Dammit, it's 2:30, Cisco."

"Oh, Brad, I want you. Come and get me."

"What th'Hell. Where are you?"

"I'm in a complex, 3300 Royal Lane. Know where that is?"

"Hell, I can find it."

Not much chance of that, you think, since it doesn't exist.

"Anyway, listen careful," you say, in your best Cisco voice. "It's kinda tricky. You have to drive up to the gate, enter admission code 6985. Got that? The gate will open. Drive around the postal center and main office, there's a pool on the left. You'll see building D. Come up to Apartment 16, second floor. The door will be unlocked. I'll be waiting."

And you feel proud of yourself, because you know that the postal center was a nice touch.

Pause for effect.

"And, Daddy?"

"Yeah, Cisco?"

"Hurry up. I'm horny as hell and can't wait much longer. It's been days, Daddy."

"I'll be right there, Baby."

And you kind of wonder if you should do another one tonight.

No, it's 3 a.m. You can sleep, at last. Knowing that, if you haven't made a man completely happy, you've made him happy for a few minutes. That he'll get in his car, panting with anticipation, and drive down to Royal Lane, and, at least until he figures out

that 3300 Royal Lane doesn't exist, he'll be happy, with anticipation and desire for a moment that won't ever happen.

And you can rest, knowing that at least for tonight he probably won't commit the awful sin that he wants to commit. You've saved him from himself.

Ruth's warm, and sighs in her sleep as you crawl into the bed beside her. The ruffle on her collar tickles your chin when you lean over to kiss her. And you feel good about yourself as you fall asleep.

Ruth stirs a little when you get up the next night, at 12:15 a.m.

You pause to make sure she's still asleep.

It's a weeknight, there won't be many guys on the line. Dial the number, and wait for it to connect. Punch in your secret code. Then your password.

Pass by a 30-year-old African-American looking for his first gay experience.

Then, hey, here's one you've been thinking about for days:

This is Robbie, student at TCU. I'm 20, live close to campus. Total top, won't do nothin' else. Just want you to come over, get down, let me take care of business. I'm real good lookin'. You won't be disappointed. Leave me a message if you're under 25, white, and a bottom.

College boys can be the most interesting, after all. He needs you, or at least he needs somebody. And you can provide him with that somebody, at least mentally. You can help him create that somebody he needs, in his mind, and that somebody can live for a while in his mind.

You hang up, pull out your little book, look up your other mailbox number and your other password, *schnau*. 7-2-4-6-2-8.

The Schnauzer yawns and stretches and looks up you.

You start to listen to the messages, and you hear the one you made up and posted two days ago, just for Robbie, so he'd maybe hear it and respond:

Hey, this is Jason. I'm 22, six-foot-two, two hundred pounds, solid, black-haired, love to bend over and take it from behind. I live in Arlington, can get out or host.

There's a sudden beep on the line. That means that you—well, Jason—has a message.

Bingo. It's Robbie, he's taken the bait, leaves a phone number, 817 area code.

"I'm ready to fuck your face and your ass, man," he says, in the recorded message.

You call him right up.

Damn. Busy signal.

You try again, this time he answers.

"Hey, I'm horny right now, can I come over?" you ask.

"Hell, yeah. I don't have class until 11 tomorrow. Get the hell over here, buddy, I wanna take care of you."

He gives an address close to campus in Fort Worth. You pretend to take directions. You even say that you're looking for a pen to write with, and make him hold for a minute, while you pretend to look.

He keeps talking, and you pretend to write, even making him stop and repeat things. He mentions that his blue pickup truck's parked in the street in front of his house.

Nudge Doggie with your foot. Doggie pants with appreciation for the attention. You cruise the line for fifteen minutes, call Robbie again, from your cell phone, in case he has caller ID.

"Listen, Robbie, I'm lost. Did you say left at Forest Drive?"

"No, man, I said right!" He's horny and irritated. He wants you—well, he wants Jason—bad.

A few minutes later, you call back.

"Hey, I see it," you say. "Number 2502?"

"Yeah," he says, sounding hopeful.

"Blue truck out front?" You remember the blue truck from the directions he gave you.

"Yeah, come on, I don't see you."

"I'm pulling up."

And you push the off button on your cell phone. And tomorrow, if there's a message sent at 2 a.m. from 817-664-8203, or any 817 number, you sure as hell will delete without listening. After all, you did him two favors. You gave him half an hour of anticipation. And you saved him from sinning, tonight. And you feel good as you get in the bed with Ruth, who's snoring gently.

She looks as sweet as ever, and you see her eyes move under her eyelids, and you know that she's dreaming.

It's a busy week. You miss three nights in a row on the line. Dinner with Ruth's mother one night. Had to stay late at work one night. Just too tired one night.

It's spring, cool outside. Ruth snores softly, doesn't stir a bit as you rise almost silently. You wonder if all women snore like that. Ruth's the only woman you've ever slept with.

On impulse, you lean over and kiss her softly on the cheek.

She doesn't move.

Doggie's faithful at your feet as you pad quietly up the steps to your study.

Because, tonight's special.

Tonight, you're going after Ben.

Because Ben is who you'd want to be, if you weren't you.

And, failing that, Ben is who you'd want to love, if you could love a man.

Ben might not even be on the line tonight, of course.

You wonder, what if Ben found someone.

Because, unlike most of the men on the line, Ben says that he's looking for someone to love.

You check your little book, where you've written the log-on you created when you decide to be Alvin—the Alvin you created to match what Ben wants. Only you can't

help remembering that Alvin looks a lot like you. And likes most of the same things you like. You'd be a lot like Alvin, if you didn't have Ruth, and church, and a job where they think you're just another nice, straight, middle-aged guy. And if you were gay.

"The number of users on line right now is . . . fifteen," the automated voice announces.

Pretty good for late on a weeknight.

By the time you get to number twelve, you decide that Ben probably isn't on at all.

Then, just before you hang up, there's his message.

.Part of you is ready for the same old routine with Ben, the same trick you've played for years on guys on the line, ever since the day you saw the ad with the picture of the cute guys on the back page of the *Dallas Observer*. You listened patiently for weeks, learning the right words to say, figuring out the lingo of "bottom" and "top" and "partyin' hard" and "layin' back."

But part of you wishes that it wasn't just a game, and wishes that you really could go and meet Ben.

And part of you remembers that, after all, you're just saving those guys, saving Brad and Robbie and Ben and all the others, if just for one night, from making an awful mistake.

This is Ben, the message says. I'm 38 years old, looking for someone, maybe a few years younger, maybe older. I've got brown hair, blue eyes. My hair's thin, and I've always been a little chubby. I've got a few freckles. I like to read, to go to movies, to walk by the lake. I'm not looking for a one-night stand. I'm looking for lots of friends,

and I'm looking for one someone special. I guess I should say I'm versatile in bed. I have boundaries, but no requirements. If this sounds interesting, leave me a message.

You shove the real you inside yourself and become Alvin, just like you became Cisco and Jason and a few hundred other invented characters. Only Alvin isn't quite so different from you as Cisco and Jason and the others were.

Alvin presses two, to record a message for Ben. Doggie whines a little, then falls back to sleep.

"Hi, this is Alvin. I'd definitely like to meet you. I'm 40 and single. Give me a call anytime, let's set something up."

Alvin speaks the cell phone number carefully, and sends the message to Ben, and you feel Alvin going away. And you're very tired, all of sudden. After all, it's late. You leave Doggie asleep on the floor, and slip quietly across the house, and into the bed, where Ruth still lies snoring.

You don't check your cell phone for messages until the next afternoon at work. And there it is. No name on the caller I.D. You can't even stand to listen to the message, because you know it must be Ben. Or it least you hope it's Ben.

And you think, *score*.

And something dangerous happens in your mind. You start wondering what would happen if you really did go to meet Ben.

* * * * *

2 a.m. that night, you slip out of bed. Ruth stirs.

“Where are you going?” she says, in the voice of someone who’s more than half asleep.

“Just to the bathroom,” you answer.

You stand in the bedroom door for a minute, just to make sure she’s asleep. You hear her snort, then slip back into her regular snore. You consider going into the bathroom and flushing, just to be convincing, but decide it might really wake her up.

The trees outside rattle in the spring wind as you cross the dark living room, toward the stairway that goes up to your study, over the garage. Doggie jolts up in the kitchen, sees that it’s you, and drops back to sleep instantly.

You log on as Alvin. Yeah, Ben’s there, awake. Probably lonely. You send him a message.

“Hey, Ben, it’s Alvin. Sorry I missed your call today. Call me now, we can talk.”

A minute later, your cell phone vibrates. You pause for a minute.

And you wonder, *Do I really want to do this?*

You decide that you do, and you answer.

You’re cheerful and almost perky in your Alvin voice.

“Hello.”

“Hey, it’s Ben. Is this Alvin?”

Before you know it, you’ve set up a meeting. Not a get-together-to-fuck. A get-together-to-talk. At a coffee house. Over on Cedar Springs Road, in the neighborhood

with the gay bars and bookstores and gay coffee houses. 3 o'clock, Saturday afternoon.

You hang up, and realize that it's about to get dangerous.

Because you're about to wonder if you really want to do it.

A light flashes under the door of your study. Someone's in the living room.

Then you hear Ruth's voice.

"Tim?"

"I couldn't sleep, Honey. Thought I'd check out the headlines."

You manage to turn the computer on enough so that you can turn it off if she walks up the stairs and into your study.

But she doesn't.

Saturday morning, you know you're safe. Church group cookout that afternoon.

You're in your study, but you hear Ruth answer the phone in the kitchen.

"Cancelled?" she says.

You cluck with disbelief. Your disappointment is real, because now you know you'll be tempted to go meet Ben. And suddenly you feel frightened and anxious, and scared of what you'll do.

"Listen, I've been wanting to find something for your mother for Mother's Day anyway," Ruth says, standing in the study door. "Maybe you'd like to go to Dillard's with me?"

And you don't know why, but you say, "No, I think I'd just like to hang at home today."

It's getting dangerous.

You've been down Cedar Springs Road before, just north of Oak Lawn Avenue. Really, everybody has. There's the gay saloon, the bars, the restaurants. After all, you don't have to be gay to go there.

There's plenty of parking. You're fifteen minutes early. You go into the coffee shop. Order a double latte from a young man with what must be twenty piercings—ears, lips, tongue, nose—and green stripes in a black Mohawk. His look is tough, his voice soft and amiable.

You sit at a table, read the *Dallas Morning News*, and wonder, *Where is he?*

There's a young couple sitting at a table nearby. Cute blond guy in jeans and a blue T-shirt, and a tougher-looking guy, the same age, dark black hair. They stare at each other and smile, and hang on each other's words, like they're in love. They talk, constantly interrupting each other, they're so eager. You wonder what it's like to be young and in love with another man. And you wonder if you missed something.

Your cell phone vibrates.

"Hey, Alvin, it's Ben. I'm running a little late. I'll be there in half a second."

Suddenly, you're in love with the sound of Ben's voice. And you start to think about Ruth, but you stop yourself.

You look out the window and watch the cars slide down the street, slipping past each other, some slow, some fast. You watch for the green Toyota Ben says he's driving. You begin to think, what am I doing? You're a little scared and, suddenly, very hopeful. Part of you hopes that he's really coming. Part of you prays that he won't. And part of you wonders what you'll say to him when you see him.

Losing the Lottery

The morning was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green.

At least, the grass was richly green in Shirley's mind. Everyone else in Vermont saw gray skies, and the last patches of snow bordering the brown grass of winter, on the cold March morning.

As she pushed the baby carriage, full of newspapers and groceries and two-year-old Joanne, up the hill from the center of the village, Shirley saw green under the brown grass, flowers about to sprout out of the cold brown dirt, and blue sky behind the late winter clouds.

Her heart pounded in her chest and her breath came in quick pants as she neared the end of the short, uphill climb. In spite of the lingering coolness in the air, a drop of sweat formed on her brow, and dampness gathered under her green overcoat. She noticed, for the first time that morning, that she was wearing her green overcoat. And she knew that she only wore her green overcoat when she was pregnant.

I must be pregnant, she mused. Why else would I be wearing the green coat?

I need to learn to drive, she decided, and turned off the rough asphalt sidewalk, and on to the uneven marble slabs—surplus from some quarry, years ago—toward the side porch of the big, white house the villagers still called “The Old Thatcher Place,” after the family that had lived there before.

In the corner of her eye, she saw a scrap of white paper, once folded, now open, gusting in the spring breeze.

It looked like there was a black dot, right in the center, where the folds met. But her hands were too full to stop and chase it; she was almost home, and her head was spinning with ideas.

An unexpected jolt of pain shot up her leg; she had stepped on a smooth, round stone, about half an inch thick and two inches long, unexpected on the walkway.

She resisted the urge to curse it and kick it aside, and decided to leave it where it was.

Who knows who put it there, or what purpose it had? Better not interfere with stones that appear from nowhere, that weren't there before. There's a reason for everything, after all.

The thought made her feel a little better—that someone or something, something that lurked in the trees along Prospect Street, had placed the stone there for a purpose.

Stones. That's one thing there's plenty of in Vermont. Stones. Smooth, round stones. "A smooth round stone, as small as a world and as large as alone," she thought. "E.E. Cummings," she added, and corrected herself, "e.e. cummings."

Her son Laurie had come home from kindergarten the day before, sweaty and panting and talking excitedly about the little stone forts and pyramids and walls that he and the other boys had built during recess. She had fed him homemade spice cookies and orange soda and listened attentively as he told about little boy battles and little boy wars, and how he and his friends had finally mounded a huge pile of stones on one corner of the playground, and how they had guarded the mound from the other boys.

Remembering, she felt even more exhilarated as she maneuvered the baby carriage up the porch steps and into the kitchen.

Without planning, without even thinking, she knew exactly what to do. She threw the cold, square boxes of frozen vegetables into the refrigerator, tossed the mail onto the table—brushing aside a black cat—and lifted cooing, two-year-old Joanne into the playpen, pausing to stretch her aching back for a moment.

The study where she and Stanley did most of their writing was hushed as she entered.

In a moment, she had forgotten any pain, as she swept some old letters and notes off the desk, and rolled a single sheet of the cheap yellow paper she always used for first drafts into the typewriter and began to type. Another black cat rubbed against her leg, producing a pleasant electricity.

Her head buzzed as she touched the typewriter keys, and listened for the chatter of the small boys in her mind. The words appeared on the page, almost as if they had a life of their own:

The morning of June 6th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming and the grass was richly green.

What the heck, she thought, paused, and penciled the word *profusely* above *blossoming*, so that it became *the flowers were blossoming profusely . . .*

A little baroque, she thought, a little wordy, but it helps the rhythm. And supports what's going to come later.

She closed her eyes, and images of Laurie and his friends crowded into her mind again. Her eyes still shut, she began to type once more.

Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys.

She picked up her pencil again, and wrote, between the lines, *the villagers pronounced this name "Dellacroy."*

Type that in with dashes on the second draft, she reminded herself with a whisper.

She remembered how at supper, day before yesterday, her husband Stanley had sucked up a whole spoonful of his favorite potato pudding, and began a discourse, his mouth still full, on one of his many passions, folklore. His folklore course was always popular with the girls at the college.

"We made up a fake 'old proverb' in class today," he had said. " 'Lottery in June, Corn be heavy soon.' Good, eh? Couldn't you just hear some cantankerous old Vermont farmer saying that?"

Now, she typed the phrase, slowing down as she did.

Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.

She paused, and let the phrase sit on the page for a while, working its magic. She listened to it in her head, imagining a coarse, self-righteous voice.

Joanne continued to gurgle and chatter calmly in the playpen, already conditioned, at age two, that once Mommy went to the typewriter, any bid for attention would be ignored anyway. She blew a few spit bubbles, unnoticed by Shirley, then toppled over into a nap. Shirley, deep in her trance, began typing again, creating a

contrapuntal music of steady quick snaps interrupted by the little bell that warned of the end of a line. She pulled out and replaced yellow pages, one after another, unconsciously, not noticing as she went through pages two, three, then four, and then five. A black cat sat on her lap, took a nap of forty-five minutes, and leapt away, completely unnoticed and ignored.

A feeling of being watched suddenly overwhelmed Shirley, a feeling that had been lingering all day, but that had been especially strong earlier that morning when she had gone into the little village post office. She felt it again, now.

Had the two or three people standing around the post office already been silent before she came in?—after all, they were Vermonters—or had they become silent when she stepped into the tiny building, pushing the baby carriage, singing softly to Joanne.

Sometimes she assured herself that she was imagining things, that surely they were already silent before she came into the post office. Other times she was positive she heard lively chatter, about weather, and politics, and church, before she pulled the door open and let herself in, and that they had all fallen silent suddenly, and were staring at her.

She thought about it.

And she typed:

A sudden hush fell on the crowd as Mr. Summers cleared his throat and looked at the list.

Mr. Summers, she thought. It is, after all summertime, she thought. When it happens, every year, in June.

The words continued to pop onto the page, in rhythm with the clacking keys and the now ominous sound of the typewriter's return bell.

She paused one last time, closed her eyes, and deliberately imagined the sharp, unexpected pain she had felt in her foot when she stepped on the stone on the walkway, earlier that morning. She imagined the pain, the irritation, the moment of anger. Had Laurie put it there, or one of his friends? And she felt it all, as if it were real, as she wrote the last paragraph of page nine:

"It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.

Stanley was home at 5 o'clock, thirsty for a martini. Shirley was thirsty, too. She thought about showing him the story.

"How was your day?" he asked, leaning back on a worn armchair.

"Decent," she answered, not wanting to jinx the optimism she felt for the new story. "Got a start on a story. In fact, wrote the whole thing through. Pretty good, if I say so."

A cat bounded onto Stanley's lap, and he swatted it away. Stanley couldn't tell the cats apart, they were all black, and there were so many of them. Shirley always told him there were only five. There were always at least twelve. Stanley's eyes were as bad as a cat's are keen. He lived in an uneasy truce with the lot of them.

She thought again about asking Stanley to read the story right away. No, she told herself, he doesn't need to.

She changed her mind, and was about to speak.

“Oh, yeah,” Stanley said, interrupting her. “Got a note at the college today from Ralph Ellison.”

“No kidding,” Shirley said. “When is that old rascal coming to see us? Tell him I miss him.”

“We’re going to have him speak at the college,” Stanley said.

“Great,” Shirley said. “And I’m going to take him down to the post office with me. That should go over really well in North Bennington. I’ll make him hold my hand, see if any of the locals drop their wooden dentures.”

She was so pleased with her joke that she forgot about the story for the night, and didn’t think of it again, in the midst of Stanley’s monologues and Laurie’s tales from school and playground, until after Stanley had left for the college the next morning.

With the house quiet except for an occasional gurgle from good-natured Joanne, Shirley carefully matched a sheet of carbon paper between one white sheet and one yellow sheet, after laying yesterday’s draft on the desk beside her. She looked over the draft, marked some changes, and began typing in a rhythmic, steady beat that ensured a nearly clean copy. She stopped only twice to erase; her typing was as neat and efficient as her writing. *Scat*, she said fondly to a cat that eased shyly onto her lap, then fled as if obeying a temperamental empress.

After she pulled the last sheet out of the typewriter, she typed out a quick note to her agent, stuck a paper clip on the nine loose pages, folded them, thrust them into an envelope with the note, and addressed the envelope, in her scrawling, extravagant hand, carefully stacking the carbon copy on the edge of the desk, out of harm's way.

She felt the usual twinge of fear as she approached the tiny post office, up the hill from the grocery store—and squeezed Joanne's hand for a little extra bravery for both of them. She tried not to notice the dowdy, brown-haired housewife, about the same age as Shirley herself, who stared at her suspiciously as she came in.

Nearly home again, she panted a little as she neared the house, and remembered the rock that had nearly tripped her the day before. It was gone. She pondered, for a moment, on the magic of rocks, before deciding that the children probably wanted hot dogs and orange soda for lunch.

Ginny was determined to do well at her first job in New York. She had wakened hours too early, and bathed too quickly, and finally calmed down and brushed her hair one hundred strokes, as carefully as her mother always told her to. She was so jittery that she didn't make coffee at home, in the little apartment she shared with three other

girls from Ohio. Once at work, however, she knew she'd need some to stay alert on her first day on the job, after the nearly sleepless night.

She didn't know any of the clients in the literary division of MCA yet. It was mostly just a bunch of names she hadn't heard of. But she knew that some of them were famous, at least in what her teachers had called "literary circles." Miss Everett leaned out of her office to say "Good morning." She was friendly. Everything would be all right.

Ginny watched another secretary take a cup of coffee from the urn on the corner table, then took one herself, dropping in one lump of sugar but no cream, before placing it carefully on the edge of her desk, away from the letters and envelopes she was supposed to open.

The mailroom boy, Ted, was already flirting with her. She didn't like it. Or maybe she did, she wasn't sure. He startled her when he slapped a stack of envelopes on the desk.

"Didn't mean to scare you, Ginny," he said, a little grin on his face.

She couldn't tell whether he liked her or hated her. She didn't know whether she liked or hated him.

She started opening the envelopes. She took one little sip of the coffee, decided she didn't want any more, and hoped that no one would notice that she had wasted a whole cup. She would pour it out when everyone was gone for lunch, she decided.

At five after twelve, she was alone in the office, just as she had planned. The office was quiet, all the other secretaries and Miss Everett and Ted had all gone out. Why didn't anybody ask her to go to lunch?

The phone rang. A writer calling about a manuscript.

Then another phone, across the room, rang. Startled, she jumped up to answer, knocking the cup of coffee onto the envelope she had been about to open. The call was from Brenda's elderly mother, who went on and on. And on and on.

"Yes, Mrs. Hopper," Ginny said. "I'm sure the apple crop will be good this year. Why, yes, I'd love a jar of your special apple butter."

By the time Ginny was back at her desk, the envelope was soaked with brown coffee. She found a napkin, wiped up the mess.

She glanced at the envelope. She could barely make out the name on the return address beneath the stain. Stanley Johnson? Shirley Johnson? Shirley Jackson?

She had heard of Shirley Jackson. One of Miss Everett's most important clients. Shirley Jackson had written a book, and she lived in Vermont.

She heard someone at the office door, someone who started to come in and stopped. She recognized Ted's voice; he was telling a joke to someone in the hallway.

"And then the farmer's daughter," he said, before his voice lowered, and she couldn't hear anything else, except the burst of laughter from another man in the hall.

What could she do? She had ruined a letter, maybe more, from an important client, on her first day.

Panicking, she dropped the coffee-soaked envelope into her waste basket, then fished it out again, then wrapped it inside two sheets of white typing paper, and wadded it all into one tight ball, and pressed it into a wastebasket three desks away.

"Hey, sweetie, where'd you go for lunch?" Ted chirped, startling her again. She was sure he had noticed her throwing the wad of paper away.

“I wasn’t hungry,” Ginny answered. “My wastebasket was already full,” she added, explaining why she had thrown something in a wastebasket three desks away.

He looked at her puzzled, as if he hadn’t noticed and didn’t care, before returning to the subject of lunch.

“Hey, I had lunch but I’m still hungry,” he said, smiling at her. She didn’t like this sort of smile, or the way he said *hungry*.

“Maybe we could go together sometime,” he added. “Lunch, I mean.”

The party was over, the guests had gone home. Shirley and Stanley, drunk, had stumbled up to bed at last. The darkened house now belonged, as it always did in the middle of the night, to the cats.

Chief among the cats was Shax, the King of Many Demons, and Shirley’s favorite cat and familiar spirit. With Shirley, his empress and adored one, out of sight, Shax carefully ordered and reordered the other cats, swiping at any who looked tempted to disobey or question his rule. Finally, disgusted, Shax chased all the other cats out of the moonlit study, leaving them to whatever evil spirits might haunt them in the night. He sniffed the desk, then jolted when the clock struck three. As he jumped onto the desk and off again, a whole stack of yellow papers slipped and floated into the wastebasket next to the desk.

The next morning, Tessie, a girl from the village who helped with the cleaning, sighed as she emptied the wastebasket into the garbage, enjoying the smooth flood of yellow pages onto the discarded food and empty whiskey bottles.

* * * * *

Summer arrived at last, in Vermont. The flowers did, indeed, blossom profusely, and the grass was, as Shirley had imagined it would be, richly green. Children's games, walks to the park, polite hellos to other mothers with children, who always seemed to have better friends to talk to, which didn't bother Shirley, who, still in her green overcoat, settled in with a book on a park bench. Today, it was *Raintree County* by Ross Lockridge, Jr. She was on page 389 of 1060.

Tiresome, she thought, though slightly interesting, if only because Lockridge had committed suicide a few weeks earlier, with his newly published novel climbing up the *New York Times* bestseller list. Still, she wished she were reading *Pride and Prejudice* again instead.

She saw one of the nasty village boys throwing a stone casually at his mother, who jerked up, grabbed him, and slapped him hard on the rump.

This made her think of the story she had sent off to Rae Everett at MCA weeks earlier. Should have heard by now. She made a mental note to make a call about it when she got home.

On the phone, Rae, usually cheerful, explained that she was a little upset about having to fire one of the new office girls—a hopeless nervous case from Ohio—earlier that day. And she flat out admitted that she hadn't seen the story Shirley had sent in March.

"What do you mean, what story?" Shirley said, hoping Rae was joking, maybe even teasing her because the story was so good.

Or maybe it wasn't as good as she had remembered.

“‘The Lottery,’ ” Shirley continued, her voice growing irritated. “I sent it to you twelve weeks ago. Braved the darned locals at the post office to put it in the mail, which is no small feat,” she added wryly.

In a minute she was calm. Letters and packages do occasionally get lost in the mail, they agreed, that’s why they have a “dead letter” office, she joked.

“Listen, I keep a carbon of everything,” Shirley said. “I’ll just send you the copy. And make another copy while I’m at it, since obviously the United States Post Office can’t be trusted anymore. Personally, I blame it on Margaret Truman.”

Hmm, not on the desk, she thought, surveying the hushed quiet of the study. I don’t remember filing it, she thought. Maybe I’m getting more efficient, and filed it without thinking about it.

She bent down to the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet, stopping to straighten her back., then pulled out the “new stories” folder.

Empty.

Don’t panic yet, she told herself.

Suddenly, she felt as if “The Lottery” had been the best thing she had ever written.

She was drunk by the time Stanley got home. Laurie had been out playing with his friends all afternoon. Joanne sat screaming in her playpen. Mommy was either supposed to be playing with her or typing. Something was wrong.

“They lost my story,” she sobbed when Stanley found her, face down on the bed.

“What story?” Stanley asked.

“The darned story I finished in March and sent to Rae Everett,” Shirley said, trying to be calm. “‘The Lottery.’”

“I don’t remember any story called ‘The Lottery,’” Stanley said.

“I forgot to show it to you,” Shirley said. “And I sent it off, and they lost it, and I can’t find the carbon copy I made.”

Stanley had a hard time believing Shirley would write a story and send it off without showing it to him. She leaned on him and cried, and he indulged her for few minutes. Finally impatient for his afternoon drink, he stood, and noticed the unpleasant wet spot on his shirt where she had wept.

The next day, with increasing foreboding, Shirley tore the study apart. Despair turned into depression. She fed the children hot dogs and orange soda for lunch, then tried to calm herself by making Stanley’s favorite little rum cakes. Then drank what was left of the rum, and drifted toward unconsciousness and peace, for a few hours.

Sally was born in October; Barry a little over three years later. No one was surprised that Shirley Jackson, formerly a promising young American writer, published novelist, included in *Best American Short Stories 1944*, but now the mother of four young children, was content to be Mrs. Stanley Hyman, Bennington College faculty wife

and devoted mother. She cooked, she learned how to garden; with her publication record from years earlier, she taught a few classes at the college. As the children grew older, she managed to keep her weight down, though it was a struggle. Her doctor didn't even consider suggesting the new "miracle" diet drugs that he prescribed for other housewives.

She always promised herself she'd write again. And, she did—a few humorous columns about childrearing for regional newspapers, mostly.

Stanley went through several months of angry frustration over her sudden retirement from writing, sometimes encouraging her, sometimes raging at her, before devoting himself to his own writing and teaching, taking solace in his attractive, perfect housewife partner, and indulging in an occasional fling with a college girl.

For her part, as the years went by, Shirley felt an occasional sting of jealousy whenever she read a bit of Updike, or Stephen King, and wondered if she could have done better than the former, and knew she could have done better than the latter.

Shirley Jackson never knew the notoriety her story might have brought, had it not been lost, and had it been published in *The New Yorker*, or some other leading magazine of the day. Generations of American teenagers did *not* read "The Lottery" as part of their eleventh grade English class. Shirley Jackson did *not* race, fueled by chocolate and alcohol and amphetamines, through motherhood and writing and marriage to an insufferable egoist. She did *not* die a pathetic early death in 1965, obese, alcoholic, and paranoid, following publication of two masterful novels.

Shirley Jackson Hyman, beloved wife and mother, died a few weeks ago, peaceably, in her sleep, in a Vermont retirement home, having outlived hard-drinking, hard-driven Stanley Hyman by many years.

Shirley Jackson, writer, had ceased to exist half a century earlier, on the day she discovered that her greatest story had disappeared. Shirley Jackson, writer, was, at that point, dead, as surely as if she had been stoned to death on the village common.

You may think you have read, at some time, a short story, titled "The Lottery," by Shirley Jackson. You may even think you remember a calmly horrific plot, and even little details, like small boys building piles of rocks, or a cantankerous old man, or an officious lottery manager. You may even think you read a few lines from "The Lottery" just a few minutes ago.

But, indeed, you did not and could not have read any such story.

For, after only one person, the writer, read it, "The Lottery" disappeared forever, one copy into the slowly smoldering flames at North Bennington village dump, the other into the depths of Long Island Sound, where it rotted with the rest of that day's garbage from Manhattan. Even the words you read just a few minutes ago are gone. You dreamed what you know of the story. Words are, after all, only dreams. And if those words are only dreams, then so are you.

And you, dear reader, no longer exist. You are as dead as if you, too, had been stoned to death, one clear and sunny morning in June, in the fresh warmth of a full-

summer day; when the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green.

Hunger in America

Three swift whacks from the executioner's blade, there on the steps of Lincoln Memorial, brought a quick end to the brief but painful episode remembered as the "Winter of Famine."

Three heads, just minutes earlier attached to the bodies of the President, the First Lady, and the Vice President, rolled onto the marble steps. The winter was over; the cherry blossoms along the Tidal Basin provided an attractive backdrop to the nationally televised execution, just minutes after the conclusion of the quick trial and sentencing at the Capitol.

Alexander Overtop, known to his friends as Sander, shared in the national certainty that things were definitely getting better, now that food was plentiful again. Stretched out in his recliner and staring at the television, he bit into a sauce-drenched pork rib just as the axe came down on the neck of the once-popular, now reviled President. Like everyone else in America, Sander could hear the live cheers in the background.

Sander had as much reason as anyone to be optimistic. He had struggled for years as an appliance and kitchen wares salesman in the basement of Tudbury's department store, just a few blocks from the neatly shutter-decorated suburban bungalow he shared with his wife Gilda and their daughter, Belinda. Now, he had a feeling that happiness and contentment were at last in his grasp.

Gilda, a lean, black-haired elementary school teacher and weekend karate instructor, had always urged Sander and Belinda to get out, play tennis, shoot hoops, walk, jog, learn karate. Sander and Belinda, who shared freckles, light brown hair, and

a tendency toward plumpness (always carefully controlled by the ever-vigilant Gilda), preferred a good game of the juvenile version of scrabble, or a long stretch of television watching.

Hearing the nationally televised thud of the executive heads on the monument steps, Sander sensed that it was his turn to wear the pants in the family, at last. Even before the executions, with the Winter of Famine fading into memory, he had noticed a rise in sales in the kitchen wares department. Fliers from Tudbury corporate headquarters promised the arrival, soon, of walk-in refrigerators, multi-purpose cooking units, and stove tops with six, eight, even ten burner coils, all in response to an America that had suddenly taken an interest in food and eating.

“It’s Morning in America,” the new ads from Tudbury’s promised, “and breakfast is waiting.”

In retrospect (“I should have seen it coming,” Sander later said) the real turning point for Sander and Gilda came a few months later, on one of those cozy, outwardly neighborly Saturday nights in the suburbs. Sander, proudly wearing his new badge as “Vice President for sales for Food-Related Items,” had personally sold three of the gigantic grilling-smoking-roisserie combos in one hour earlier in the day. In spite of his grand executive title, he still loved to get out on the floor and sell major appliances to folks eager to get the food-and-eating aspects of their lives in order. Whether it was helping an adolescent girl find just the right first hand-held mixer (a big moment in any young woman’s life), or guiding a retired grandmother as she selected a personal microwave-mini fridge combination for her bedroom, Sander knew he was doing more than just selling.

“I’m helping people build better lives,” he said, turning to next-door neighbor Gil Swift, sighing as he sank into the recliner, tired but happy after the busy day.

Gilda was in the kitchen, trying very hard to re-create the elaborate cake that had been the featured recipe item on the evening news the day before. The cake incorporated vanilla mousse, strawberries, and dark chocolate; Gilda insisted on calling it a “gâteau,” which Sander considered to be a bit pretentious. But what really irritated Sander was that Gilda had decided to use some cheap, fresh, farm-grown strawberries she had found while on a drive in the country, instead of the sanitary, calorie-enhanced, sugar-preserved strawberries the recipe clearly called for.

Still, she was new at all of this; she had wasted a lot of time and energy in the past with those calorie-burning karate and exercise classes. And, since she was having a hard time breaking habits from the old days, Sander willingly gave her benefit of the doubt. After all, it wasn’t easy for everyone to move ahead into the new America.

Sander appreciated that Gil, even though he was clearly having trouble of his own in the new era, was helping out emotionally, admiring the unadorned strawberries and pretending to be impressed by the word “gâteau.”

“Just a fancy way of saying ‘cake,’ ” Sander whispered to Gil and Gil’s wife, Sandra, with a knowing wink.

Sandra, who, like Sander easily put on attractive extra pounds, chuckled under her breath and reached for another batter-dipped onion ring from the platter on the coffee table in front of the television.

Sander, Gil, and Sandra enjoyed watching the newly sanctioned college sport of sumo wrestling as they munched from an array of snacks; the Texas Longhorns, aided

by a few hundred extra pounds, triumphed over USC in the network designated “Matchup of the Week.” When the match ended, Sander channel-surfed, finally settling on the Miss America Pageant.

Between segments of the pageant, a commercial break featured chubby kids pouring out of a mini-van, dutifully enjoying thickly-frosted cupcakes dispensed by a plump mother-figure. After that, just before the pageant coverage resumed, a blurb for the local *News You Can Use at Ten* promised a report about the tragedy of children who were too skinny.

“Some kids just aren’t getting the morning and afternoon snacks they need,” a pear-shaped newscaster warned, shaking his head with concern. “Get the whole story at ten, after the pageant. And find out what this means to *you*,” he added, like a smug older brother.

After the break, the newly added grilling competition of the Miss America pageant proceeded as planned; the studio audience as well as the judging panel were clearly most impressed by Miss Indiana’s chicken breasts with mozzarella. She appeared to be headed for the crown, or at least the title of first runner up. Miss South Dakota offered strong competition by reciting favorite restaurant menus, from fast food to gourmet, while twirling—well, actually mostly holding and sort of waving—a flaming baton.

Next-door neighbor Gil, an insurance salesman and sometime volunteer soccer coach for the neighborhood children, couldn’t help noticing the lustful, yes, lustful gleam in Sander’s eyes during the swim suit competition, while young ladies bounced, yes, bounced across the stage. It almost seemed to Gil that in past competitions, the flesh

hadn't bulged out at the thighs so much—nor had the competitors' breasts been quite so, well, jiggly and balloon-like.

“Whew,” Sander sighed, savoring a bacon-wrapped pineapple chunk and wiping a not-quite-rude dribble from his chin.

It was a “whew” of happiness. Beautiful, Rubenesque girls on television, good neighbors enjoying the show with him—Sander hadn't noticed Gil's almost disgusted reaction—and his beloved (if slightly troubled) Gilda in the kitchen, trying the latest recipe from yesterday's *News You Can Use at Ten*.

Then, the cry of distress.

“The gateau fell,” Gilda sobbed. “It's supposed to be light and elegant. Now it's just a mess.”

“It's okay, Plum Cake,” Sander said, enveloping her in a generous, nurturing embrace. Truth be known, he was slightly embarrassed that she was clearly not quite the cook that Miss Indiana was.

Sander promised Gilda that he loved her anyway (silently wishing that she'd put on a little weight, like Gil's wife Sandra had), and assured her that everyone was eager to enjoy the messy concoction of strawberries, mousse, and cake.

“Look,” he said, “it's not a gateau. It's what you call a trifle, now. It's every bit as delicious, and just as rich in calories *and* flavor.”

But when Gil said that he wasn't hungry, Sander felt his sense of manhood somehow diminished.

Sandra grabbed one last barbecued cocktail wiener out of the crockpot as Gil steered her toward the door, while Gilda continued to sniffle in the kitchen.

Sander served himself a scoop of the gooey combination of cake, strawberries, mousse, and whipped cream, and silently vowed that he would do more cooking himself in the future, if only to salvage the family honor.

Little eight-year-old Belinda joined him on the couch, eating a little more than she really wanted, just to please her dad, as they watched the final parade of well-fed beauties on the television. Belinda eyed the buxom contestants with suitable admiration, maybe with a gleam of healthy ambition in her eyes. True, she was a little worried about her mom, but the extra bit of strawberry trifle made everything all right, really.

Meanwhile, jogging trails across America had been converted, for the most part, to “picnic pathways;” bothersome bicycles were officially discouraged. In the progressive “blue” states, politicians enthusiastically endorsed government-sponsored snack stands in parks and playgrounds, while, in the more conservative “red” states, candidates favored the concept but insisted that the snack stands should be operated by private enterprise or, better yet, by faith-based groups.

It was in the neighborhood park, just down the sidewalk from an official city snack stand, that Sander and little Belinda ran into their neighbor Sandra and her lean son Jamison one sunny Sunday morning. Jamison was in the same grade as Belinda at school, but was not quite so well-adjusted and rotund.

“He’s skinny,” Belinda whispered to Sander, giggling. “The other kids call him ‘Skinny Jimmy.’”

“Honey, you know that he’s doing his best to be healthy,” Sander said in a hushed voice, kneeling beside her. “He probably has a thyroid problem that keeps him from gaining fat.”

Jamison had run ahead of the group and was pretending to shoot baskets on the weed-grown basketball court.

“Jamison, come back, it’s time for your cookies,” Sandra pleaded, a little embarrassed at Jamison’s antics. “And we’ve got chocolate milk, too.”

Jamison ignored her, and continued shooting an imaginary basketball. He remembered basketballs from before the Winter of Famine, but hadn’t seen one in a long time, since they had been removed, along with other calorie-wasting items, from the schools.

“Please, Mom, let me shoot baskets a little more,” he begged, smiling at her and pleading with his big brown eyes. “I’m going to be a basketball star when I grow up!”

She turned away, embarrassed by his odd ambition. Most normal boys his age wanted to be chefs, or waiters, or, maybe, kitchen appliance salesmen, like Sander.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do with little Jamison,” Sandra said, shaking her head, as she and Sander arranged plates of cookies on a picnic table.

She looked Sander right in the eye, silently asking for help in a way that was both appealing and a little frightening.

Between the two of them, Sandra and Sander had brought six boxes of cookies, including chocolate chippers, walnut gems, coconut snowballs, citrus cream bars, and pudding-filled cocoa delights. Sander had begun baking as soon as he got home from work on Saturday night, as part of his effort to put on more weight and to encourage his

loved ones to do the same—something he had resolved to do the night of the Miss America Pageant and Gilda's failed strawberry gateau.

His efforts showed; his waistline was a good four inches thicker, and he had moved up a whole shirt size, from XL to XXL. His stomach roundly filled out the baby blue T-shirts he now favored for leisure wear.

With his newly-gained physical substance, Sander enjoyed hitherto unknown smiles and attention, especially from the young mothers who looked at him longingly in the park or at the store. He fondly remembered the recent afternoon when two chubby women in their twenties, long locks flowing like butterscotch syrup down their soft, flabby necks, had followed him around behind the row of imperial microwave-convection-conventional oven combinations.

"Hey, mister, I bet you've got a good recipe for devil's food cake, haven't you, you devil," one of them had said, leaning a little bit closer than would normally have been considered respectable.

It was almost as bad (or good, Sander wasn't sure which) when he went to the park with little Belinda for the weekend picnic outings. One woman, pushing a stroller filled to the brim with a pink-faced cherub, had grabbed his arm and asked him if he had a day off during the week.

"The baby goes to Mom's Day Out every Thursday," she had explained. "Would you like to come over and swap pie recipes, and maybe try a few out?"

But now it was Sandra. Sandra, the next door neighbor, the best buddy's wife. Staring at Sander, admitting a family problem, implying a plea for help.

Well, that's what happens when you let yourself go like Gil has, Sander thought, sadly shaking his head. Gil had simply not put on the weight one would expect for a man his age, and the weight he had put on had been in all the wrong places—upper arms and chest, mostly. Sure, Gil was balding nicely, always well-groomed and definitely pleasant smelling. But if a man's all hard muscle and lean body weight, like Gil had become, all the nice clothes and cologne in the world won't help. As Sander and most of his other friends knew, it takes a little flab, love handles, something to soften a man up, something that says “banana cream pie,” to make a man really appealing to women.

Sander knew he wouldn't take advantage of Sandra's vulnerability, even though she was rounding prettily into middle age, with a bosom that now hung nearly to her saturnalian waist. He wouldn't do that to his buddy. Even though it was, really, Gil's fault, Sander swore not to exploit the situation.

The two children were playing together, though Sander knew that Belinda would shun Jamison if any of the plumper, more popular children came around. And who could blame her? Jamison willfully exercised and had just now left a delicious coconut snowball on the merry-go-round, with only a tiny nibble bitten out of it, while Belinda had dutifully and enthusiastically eaten an entire citrus cream bar.

Sandra gulped a whole miniature chocolate chipper—one of Sander's specialties—and leaned forward sadly. The deep, serious blue of her eyes reminded him of the topping on a blueberry shortcake.

“Oh, Sander,” she said, pulling a handkerchief out of her picnic basket. “I don’t know how to say this. Gil’s changed. He’s eating, but he’s not really eating a lot. And what he eats doesn’t seem to do any good.”

She paused, as if she could hardly bear what she was about to say. She lowered her voice to a whisper.

“I think he’s—he’s, well, I think he’s working out.”

Sander looked over his shoulder to make sure the children were out of sight.

He put his arm around her. She sobbed quietly, occasionally pausing to take a comforting bite from a pudding-filled cocoa delight.

Gilda pushed a strand of black hair out of her eyes, and wiped away the sweat as she surveyed the garage. She always enjoyed keeping the whole house neat and orderly, and the garage was overdue by several months for a good cleaning and rearranging.

Of course, there it was. The old home exercise unit. Carefully pushed out of sight, just like the long-retired bong from her college days and Sander’s racy men’s magazines, stacked in a dark corner.

She couldn’t help thinking there was something attractive about the boldly constructed machine, compact but imposing, with its thick metal bars and its accompanying set of hefty, interchangeable weights.

Gradually, she became aware of another presence in the garage, standing in the side door that faced Gil and Sandra’s house next door.

Somehow she knew who it was, without even looking.

“Those were the days, eh?” Gil said, leaning manfully against the door frame, his arms folded across his broad chest. His tanktop, purposely bought two sizes too large in hope of a weight gain around the waist, hung loosely around his tan, muscled frame.

Gilda felt a blush rising in her cheeks. *I'm just embarrassed for him*, she told herself, as she felt her face burn. After all, he obviously lacks the discipline to put on the soft pounds that were so appealing on the currently popular young movie stars—for instance, “Bear” Horowitz, and “Puppyfat” Holzheimer.

“I’m just trying to figure out how to get rid of it,” she replied, pretending to be repulsed by the large metal monster.

“There’s a glut of those going into the landfills,” Gil said. “It would probably be more responsible of you to keep it for a while at least, so’s not to muck up the environment. Everybody’s trying to get rid of those things nowadays.”

He lifted a wide, black disc, one of the larger weights that went with the machine, and stretched it above his head, unconsciously flexing his biceps and pectorals.

Gilda couldn’t help thinking that it had been a long time since she had seen a tight, lean belly on a man. She knew she should be disgusted. She knew she should tell him to get out, right away.

But something kept her from saying anything. For some reason, she remembered, at that very moment, the time when she was about eight and, while chasing a stray tennis ball behind a row of shrubs in the park, had seen two teenagers, their jeans pushed down to their ankles, grappling on the grass behind the bushes. She thought about how, when they saw her, they had only laughed, while she, who had

nothing to be ashamed of, stood silent, so embarrassed that she could neither speak nor move.

That was how she felt now. Only, she slowly realized, she kind of liked it, this time.

Gil slipped the 100-pound disc into its place on the machine and seated himself on the hard, leather-look bench. He stared straight at her. His hands gripped the handles. He lifted.

She stared back, speechless, and, for the first time since the Winter of Famine, hungry.

At that very moment, as Gil and Gilda stared at each other silently in Sander and Gilda's garage, Sander and Sandra talked in Gil and Sander's kitchen, next door, just a few feet away.

"You'll be able to get through this, don't worry," Sander counseled.

Sandra was making tiny, star-like puffs of meringue on a baking sheet; little white mounds of foam, squeezed out of a soft pastry bag.

"They're just not shaping up right," she said, frustrated. "Maybe it's the bag."

"I was talking about the problem with Gil and Jamison," Sander said.

The two subjects seemed somehow intertwined; whenever Sandra talked about the meringues, Sander talked about Gil and Jamison. And vice-versa.

"I know Gil has a problem, but he shouldn't involve our son," Sandra said. "Just look at them. They're both practically deformed with muscles."

Sander looked down at the little meringues on the cookie sheet. Yes, he thought, those last two were deformed, more like breasts than stars.

The scene was rendered all the more poignant by the shouting, in the backyard, of Jamison, playing pretend football with imaginary friends. Other boys his age were indoors, snacking and playing video games. Where he had found a football, no one knew; most of them had been destroyed in the school reforms earlier that year. You had to feel sorry for the little guy, with his lonely, entreating smile, always looking for someone who shared his unusual interests.

“Look,” Sander said. “Maybe it’s none of my business, but I think I can help.”

“Really?” Sandra said, squeezing a shot of creamy whipped meringue out of the pastry bag. “What can you do?”

“I can talk to Gil,” he said. “And I can set a good example for little Jamison. Teach him how to grill outdoors. Watch old movies and eat popcorn all afternoon. Healthy man-to-man stuff.”

“I’d be so grateful,” she said. “Though sometimes I don’t think I can carry on like this much longer.”

“Here, let me show you how,” he said, moving behind her and steadying her thick, flabby arm with his, as they formed a whole row of perfect white meringues.

She felt his breath on her neck.

The kitchen door swung open. It was Belinda. Sandra and Sander jumped, and turned around to see the little girl, her mouth gaping open.

“I can’t believe it,” Belinda said.

A wave of guilt swept over Sander and Sandra. But Belinda didn't notice. She was looking past them at a tray of freshly baked fruit-filled sticky buns.

"Can I have one of those?" she asked. "They're beautiful."

Sandra sighed with relief.

"You can have two, dear," she said.

Sandra expected crisis when she called the telephone number she found on a little white card in Gil's billfold.

It turned out to be a gym, which was what she had anticipated.

So that's where Gil and Jamison go on their little "father-son outings," she said to herself. Not to MacDonald's or Fried Chicken Palace, like they always claimed.

In a way, she felt sorry for Gil, angry as she was. After all, he had been a soccer coach, back in the time before the Famine. Running around a grassy field on a sunny afternoon can be a hard habit to break, she knew.

She decided that she'd confront them. Maybe insist on therapy. It was her duty as a wife and mother.

A surly woman with a gravelly voice answered the phone at the gym. Sandra said she wanted to exercise, but she didn't want anybody to know.

"Don't worry, Honey. Your secret's safe with us," the woman said, audibly cracking gum. "What happens at Waldo's Gym and Body Shop stays at Waldo's Gym and Body Shop. You'd be surprised who we see in here. It's just a natural healthy urge, after all."

Sandra shuddered at the obscene philosophy as she hung up the phone. She gripped herself and drove to the gym, determined to rescue her son, her husband, and her marriage.

The gym was in a dark alley, behind an auto repair garage and next door to a night club that advertised, on a sign decorated with well-rounded female silhouettes, exotic dancers.

She swallowed, took a deep breath, and told herself it was for her son and husband.

But what she saw, after marching past the gum-chomping female attendant, ignoring the squawk of “Honey, you can’t go back there,” was something less and something more.

There was Gil, in shorts and a tanktop—not the one she had bought him, two sizes too large, but a tight-fitting shirt that accented his abdominal muscles. He labored, almost joyfully, at a rowing machine.

And there, next to him, Gilda, her thick, black hair tossing while she lifted herself again and again on a chinning bar. It wouldn’t have been so bad if Gilda hadn’t so obviously been enjoying herself.

Sandra’s world turned upside down. She knew that she couldn’t save Gil, couldn’t save her marriage, couldn’t save Gilda and Sander’s marriage.

But she could save her son. And that’s what she was going to do.

The two divorces were quick and relatively painless. Gil didn’t bother to fight for any sort of custody; it would have been hopeless, given his bizarre habits. Still,

knowing that Jamison should at least have some contact with his father, even if Gil was a hopeless gym addict, Sandra agreed to some limited, supervised visitation.

Gilda likewise understood that, given her lifestyle, to fight for anything more than an occasional visit with Belinda would be futile. Smiling sadly, Gil and Gilda declined when Sandra and Sander generously invited them to go out for milkshakes after the final hearing, as a sort of gesture of good will. They were all determined, in spite of Gil and Gilda's problems, to do their best for the children.

With her thin, hyperactive mother out of the picture on a day-to-day basis, Belinda blossomed. Sandra, now officially her stepmother, had won her heart one afternoon when the two of them made a luscious custard pie, topped it with sugar-soaked raspberries, and devoured it all while sharing confidential girl talk. Immensely chubby and very popular, Belinda won blue ribbons in the female division of the state interscholastic pie-eating contest; she eventually became homecoming queen at the high school, and headed up the plump, almost sedentary cheerleading squad—sedentary being no problem, since the athletic department at the school had been discontinued in favor of an enhanced food service and more co-ed cooking classes.

Newly married Sandra and Sander climbed to the top of the heap in local suburban social circles, largely on the foundation of their spectacular Sunday brunches; the only question was which of them would run for mayor.

“To think that we might not have found this happiness if the Winter of Famine had never happened,” Sandra said, over a stack of syrup-soaked pecan waffles.

“Out of pain comes happiness,” Sander agreed, smiling at her and affectionately adding an extra dollop of butter to her stack.

Even Jamison found his niche, eventually. Not surprisingly, he covered up for his lean, muscle-bound physique by becoming the class clown, always ready with a joke, blissfully unaware that the other kids laughed as much at him as with him. His mother and stepfather were silently relieved when he found a girlfriend, Debby Ann—a petite, slightly busty blonde who might have been popular in a less enlightened era. Other kids sniggered when Jamison and Debby Ann held hands or stole a kiss behind a locker door, but Jamison and Debby Ann didn't care.

"I encourage him to develop more healthy physical habits," Sandra explained to their new neighbor, after Gil and Gilda moved away, over a loaf of freshly baked, frosted raisin bread. "At his age, encourage is all you can do. We have two meats and two desserts at every meal, though, of course, he won't pay attention to what he eats. I found some freeweights that he had hidden in the back of his closet, but the school counselor told me it would only make things worse if I embarrassed him by confronting him."

Stirring a heaping spoonful of the new extra-rich creamer into her coffee, Sandra explained how grateful she was that Sander was understanding of the situation.

And she was right.

"We'll accept Jamison the way he is," Sander often said. "What could we hope for, considering his father? Maybe he'll see the light, someday. And if he and Debby Ann ever have kids, well, maybe they'll take after their grandmother, and have some meat on their bones."

Both Sander and Sandra regretted Jamison's annual summertime visits to Gilda and Gil; but, after all, what could they do when he begged so? Every August, he came

home from the cabin in the Canadian woods taller, tanner, and more ridiculously muscular.

“I just wonder what they feed him,” Sandra said, gritting her teeth.

For their part, now married and leaner and more muscular than ever, Gilda and Gil were glad to see Jamison for the all-too-brief summertime visits. They had tired of the taunts and stares that came after their marriage, and moved to a tiny village in far northern Saskatchewan. With wood to be chopped, livestock to be cared for, and a garden to be tended, they didn’t even need to take the exercise machine with them.

Their secret, closely guarded, was that they still indulged in sexual activity at a frequency that had become markedly unpopular and even scandalous in the states, after the rise of the universal interest in food. Most Americans eventually concluded that sex existed primarily for procreation, a viewpoint heartily supported by the leaders of virtually all denominations of that era. As the more progressive members of the counseling and psychology community pointed out, sexual activity was a phase that most people had to pass through on their way to maturity.

Gilda and Gil, hopelessly addicted to hard physical labor and fresh air, never quite got past their “naughty” phase, however. They succumbed to their baser instincts several times a week, sometimes several times in one day. They didn’t talk about it much.

So, after all, maybe it was a good thing that they were together. With the indignation of grownups down in the states behind them, they could endure the occasional teasing of chubby children in the village. Sure, most people thought they

were ugly, even a little deformed, with their hard, muscled physiques, and their tan, glowing complexions. But they loved each other, just as they were.

And they knew they would survive, in their little home in the north, and grow old together. They sat by the fire on winter nights, while the snow drifted softly outside, communing silently, aware that one day one of them would pass on, and leave the other with only memories.

They had no television, no microwave, no walk-in refrigerator. They had the outdoors, the sun and the trees, and the winter nights by the fire; they had each other. And that was enough.

Bible Stories

I. Heb's Wife

And the LORD discomfited Sisera, so that Sisera lighted down off his chariot, and fled away on his feet, and all the host of Sisera fell upon the edge of the sword; and there was not a man left.

Howbeit Sisera fled away on his feet to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite, and Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said unto him, Turn in, my lord, turn in to me; fear not.

—Judges IV

I married Heber, we call him Heb, when I was fifteen, mostly to get out of the house and away from my crazy Mama and a new Daddy every three weeks.

Lord, what a parade of losers. How did Mama even find them?

The one who tried to “help” me get undressed when I was seven. Good thing the iron was close by, even better that it was already turned on, good and hot. The one who was going to get rich and famous singing in the Grand Ol’ Opry. Might have done it if it hadn’t been for the armed robbery charge. Mama talked about going to see him in Huntsville. Never did.

Tulsa, Damascus, Babylon, Nazareth. Tyler. Siloam Springs. It’s all the same to me. One trailer park after another. One fool after another. Black, White, Philistine, Canaanite, Mexican. Cherokee. Some you couldn’t even tell what they were, except low-down and trashy. And usually unemployed, alcoholic, or already married to at least one other woman.

Finally, the last straw, I was fourteen, when the latest addition to the list of fools wandered back into my room when he was just married to Mama for a whole two weeks already. And I knew I wanted to get away.

At the time, I had me a job tending bar over at the Lucky Eight over in Longview. I know what you're thinking, I was only fourteen, but shit, a girl's got to buy groceries and pay the light bill somehow. Not hard to get a fake ID in Texas, or in Canaan, either, honey. Had me a guitar, had me a couple of good ol' redneck boyfriends, Frankie and D.J. Not anybody you'd want to settle down with, but a hell of a lot of fun if you're in the mood. If it was cold enough outside and we was drunk enough inside, we'd all three get into bed over at Frankie's place. I tried to get 'em to let me bring my little gay boyfriend Lestus on, too; he's so fucking sweet but Frankie and D.J. said, *No*, that there wouldn't be no point since Lestus wouldn't be interested in me and they weren't about to let him play around with them.

So, three in the bed was the most we ever worked up to, though I still wonder what it would have been like to bring Lestus on in.

Anyway, I was hanging around with Frankie and D.J., they'd work oil rigs, haul hay, fix roofs, build houses, work on cars, but always *always* played bass and drums while I played guitar and sang at nights the Silver Saddle and the Shootin' Star, when I wasn't tending bar at the Lucky Eight.

Thank God for condoms and the pill, I say.

Still, I needed to get away from Mama and every ever-loving redneck asshole she'd bring home, sometimes even married to, for Chrissake. Which is why, in spite of D.J. and Frankie, I was looking for somebody to settle down with, to give me a place to stay besides with Mama and the asshole of the week.

You see, all the hell I ever really wanted to do was play my guitar and sing, maybe settle down with some nice Frankie or D.J.—except not Frankie or D.J.,

actually—and get me some nice trailer house somewhere in some nice quiet mobile home park, you know, not too many rowdy parties going on at once, string some Christmas lights on the front porch, have me a couple of sweet babies, with tomato plants and play set out back, and play guitar and sing on weekends.

And I sort of got that, after Debbie Sue introduced me to Heb.

Debbie Sue was reading my cards one Saturday afternoon, while the dye was setting in my hair and I was getting ready to play that night at the Silver Saddle, and I was thinking about going over and trying to get into the Johnnie High Revue in Arlington someday soon. That's how Leanne Rimes got started, after all, and I'm damn sure as good as that little bitch.

Then Debbie Sue looks at the cards and says, "Have I got a man for you, little Jael-bird. What was I thinking, not to introduce you to Heb?"

So, she up and introduces me to Heb, pretty as a field of corn, blue eyes and yellow hair, strong arms and a tattoo that you can tell used to say "Debbie Sue" but's been covered over with "Born to Ride."

I don't know how they do that.

And, before you know it, we're married, and got a trailer house in Garland, and Heb, who's in the reserve, gets sent off to Eye-rack. Then the Mexican border, then the war comes to Texas, all Hell breaks lose. Seems like there's always some general up somewhere decides God wants a war, and some other general or president or sheik somewhere else agrees, so they have a war. I guess if I was a general I'd try to keep the war business going, too.

So, please, I'm just sixteen. I don't really know why I did it.

I was out on the porch of the trailer house. Hot summer evening, sun setting, purple clouds, stars lighting up in the deep blue sky. And Heb's off to some other war again, in one of those places in Africa, I forget whether it was Cuba or Afghanistan.

Then that Sisera fellow just walks up, no pickup truck or nothing, up and asks me could he come in. I say yes. Somebody's in trouble, you help 'em.

Electricity was dicey in those days, you recall, at first I thought it went out because we didn't pay the bill, then found out it was because of the war and only rich people and Republicans still got electricity all the time.

But I did have a little Bailey's Irish Cream saved from the good old days. Heb always drinks Keystone and Jack Daniels in front of his drinking buddies, but I know he really has a taste for that sweet old Bailey's when nobody but me is around.

Anyways, I was so fuckin' disgusted with the whole war and everything and Heb being off yet again that I just looked that ol' General Sisera up and over and invited him in and stripped him down and managed to get some hot water going and give him a nice little bath and a good time in the bed.

We sniffed a little head cleaner, I give him a nice little cup of Bailey's.

And he fell asleep. Out there, on the patio out back of the trailer, next to the tomato bed and the portable barbecue grill, under the awning.

Anyway, he's snoring away to wake the dead. I got to thinking that he's some general, and he's part of the problem. I just got so danged mad I decided to do him in, right there on the spot. Do my part to end all of this trouble.

I wanted to call up Debbie Sue, since she's an officially designated, licensed prophetess and all, but of course my phone didn't work, because we're not rich and never have been Republicans.

So, I just said to myself, "What would Debbie Sue do?"

Well, Hell, you know what happened. If you don't just read Chapter Four of the Book of Judges:

Then she took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground.

Well, what else was I *supposed* to do?

I reckon he didn't feel a thing, he was out so cold. Eyelids pop open, eyes bug out like a lizard. A little shake, like a convulsion. Kind of cute, like he was trying to dance. Then the tender little stream of blood from out of his head, onto the grass, which had died anyway, on account of it being summer and all. Like a red crayola mark made by some kid, running from the place where the spike met the skin of his temple, down across his forehead onto the brown, crunchy trailer-park grass of summer.

I went inside, thinking, *uh-oh, holy shit, this time you've really done it.*

I thought for sure I was in trouble when CNN and Fox showed up in the front yard.

But would you believe everybody was saying that, thanks to little old me, the war was now *officially* over, and Dubya and Laura landed in a helicopter right there in the street in front of the trailer house—they let me call them Dubya and Laura, they was so proud of me—and they asked me what I wanted most of all in the whole world.

And I said, “I would want most of all a chance to sing on *American Idol*, if they ever have that show again.”

And they do, and I will, and that’s why I’m here tonight, getting ready for the national cablevision hook-up and a big kiss from Heb, who’s back from the war, which isn’t on any more, thanks to me. And Lestus went shopping with me and helped me pick out new jeans and earrings, and Debbie Sue fixed my hair, and D.J. and Frankie are backing me up on drums and bass, and we’re already famous, and we’re going to be rich.

And I’m thinking, *Jesus Christ, ain’t this just the everlasting shit?*

II. So Naomi Returned

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.

—Ruth I: 22

It’s not easy, being an abductee. Sure, there are the conventions and all, and the chance to get together with other abductees and swap stories.

Kind of like the Free Will Baptist conventions we used to go to, me and Chill, before that day when he went off to sell the Chevette and never came back and I got abducted and all of that changed.

This is how it happens. First, there’s that day when you can’t stand to go to the mailbox because you know there will be bills in there you can’t pay. Then you go the whole week without going to the mailbox.. And then you get to feeling like you can’t go on anyway, and you don’t want to. And Chill hasn’t been home for a week, because he went to sell the Chevette and never came back.

You think you can't go on, and you've lost count of how many kids there are, and you count them, one, two, three, and one's got the measles and one had diarrhea all day and the other one has a look way too mean for a girl who's just in the fourth grade, which is what grade you know she's in because it says so on the notes from the principal.

The man behind the register at the 7-Eleven tells you what time he gets off work and asks you what you're doing tonight and you say, "Nothin much" and he says, "Wanna go over to the Lucky Dawg for a hot dog and root beer?" and you're so lonely you can't believe it and you say, Yes.

You realize you've forgotten the kids' names when you get home.

You realize all the bills are blue behind the little clear address windows, and you know that means no water, no lights, no phone, no cablevision. You can't wait until the first of the month and you hope that Chill's disability check still comes through., even though he's gone.

And that's the day you see the little feller looks half like an ant, half like a human being, and maybe half like a goddam cheewawa dog, only all shiny and silver and metal, with antennas, yessir, just standing there under the mimosa tree, and he's looking at you and all you can think to do is say, "Hello, Little Feller. Whatcha know?"

He says *Come*.

And you say, wait, let me take the kids over to their Grandma's, so they'll have a place to stay, and you just about think what a hell of a relief it will be to go to Planet Nine or wherever it is, just to get away from the diarrhea and the measles and your used-to-be-sweet little girl whose name you forgot but who looks to have turned mean

already in the fourth grade, complete with a bra with socks stuffed in it and riding home from school with a boyfriend with a car.

Can you do that in the fourth grade?

So you gather up the kids, except for the fourth-grader, who's down at the swimming pool with her friends and looks tough enough to make it on her own anyway, and you take the two that are left over to Chill's mom's house and she calls the kids sugar and punkin and looks over them at you like what-the-hell-are-you-doing, Ruthie, and you drive home and get out and thank God the little cheewawa-ant man is still there under the mimosa tree and you say "I'm ready" and then you go.

Sometimes, it's just time to leave.

So, then you're *out there*. And sometimes it seems like forever, at least 150 years. And, sure, there's pain, there's pain everywhere. You can't begin to imagine. But you figure out that, yes, there is a God, and yes, it don't matter whether God's a boy or a girl or a man or woman, and God cares about each and every molecule and speck of dust in the whole entire infinite universe but one thing God don't care about is pain. Because pain isn't just part of being alive, it's part of being. Period. Pain is what the Universe is about. God is pain, pain is God.

And let's just say that it's worth the trip, pain and all.

Then the time comes to go home. And your old friend Naomi's with you, who's been through lots of what you've been through *out there*, and when the little cheewawa-ant men ask for date and place, and Naomi says "Bethlehem-Judah-500 B.C.," you decide that maybe Brownhill-Oklahoma-2006 A.D., isn't where you want to go back to,

after all. And you say, kind of casual-like, “Bethlehem-Judah-500 B.C.,” and look at Naomi and wink, and she kind of gives you that pout like your Grandma gave you when you did something wrong but she was going to let you get away with it, and there you are.

Bethlehem-Judah-500 B.C., dry country, kind of like out at Elk City, the folks are crazy as Hell, anyway, I’d say.

And my, don’t they carry on when me and Naomi walk into town. Naomi, she sort of goes into a trance, like we learned to do when we was *out there*, and she says, “Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?”

And I’m thinking, Jesus Christ, Naomi, what the Hell are you talking about?

But I think about what we’ve been through together, and how she didn’t let on when I told the little cheewawa-ant man to send me to Bethlehem-Judah-500 B.C., so I just keep my mouth shut and play along and start looking around for MacDonalds because I haven’t had a Big Mac in about 150 years, literally, and I could sure use one now.

And when they ask Naomi where the hell she’s been, she just flips off, casual as can be, “Moab.” And looks at me kind of knowing, and I say, “For sure, I’m from Moab, that’s where me and Naomi met. At the Freewill Baptist Church.”

And Naomi says, all prim and proper, “That’s right.”

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So, I keep looking around for MacDonalds, hell, I'd settle for Whattaburger at this point, I'm so hungry for one of those little sacks of fries.

Finally, I give up on a national brand and head for the Lucky Dawg, and there's this guy named Boaz behind the counter. Accidentally gives me an extra large when I only pay for the regular fries, sometimes goes so far as to hook me up with the jumbo root beer when I just order a small.

So, when he asks me to ride over to Jericho to go the movies, I say yes. He revs up outside the little ol' place me and Naomi have fixed up, and honks, and I hop in and I'm feeling so good after the movie, and then the late-night dog and the root beer, that before I know it I'm doing something I probably shouldn't. Right there in the passenger seat of the truck. (Boaz is as good if not better than any I've had, by the way, even in the passenger seat of a pickup truck, which presents numerous logistical problems.)

But it's all right, after all, because, the next time, I tell him no-siree-bob, not until you stand before a licensed preacher of the Freewill Baptist Church or at least a real justice of the peace. And he says, okay, sugar pie, and we compromise on a wedding at Shiny Sam's chapel of love, and afterward have cake and little sandwiches and green punch which Boaz's buddies spike and we all get drunk.

Sometimes, after we make love and we look up at the stars, out over the hills of Judah, I tell Boaz all about MacDonalds and the big macs and the best little ol' french fries you ever did eat, and we promise each other that we'll go there some day.

And some days, when the harvest's in and the Philistines aren't attacking and the lambs are all sheltered, led beside the still waters and all, we just stretch out on the hay and make love all afternoon, and I try real hard to remember my other kids' names, but I just can't, and there's one on the way, here, anyway.

Like the book says, just like we used to read in the Freewill Baptist Sunday School, Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bare a son. And the women her neighbours gave it a name, and they called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David. Blessed be the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel.

III. Jesus and the Centurion

And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum, there came unto him a centurion, beseeching him, And saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented.

— Matthew VIII: 5-6

Got no ma, no pa, no girl. Don't give a fuck. Don't-give-a-fuck is just what the army wants, and don't nobody don't-give-a-fuck as much as I don't-give-a-fuck.

First, I'm just another army grunt who don't give a fuck. I'm so good at it they give me five other grunts to order around. Then ten, then a hundred. Presto, I'm a centurion. Don't give a fuck. That's why I'm a goddam centurion and you're not, asshole. Because I don't-give-a-fuck. And I'm good at it.

They shipped us out to Judea. God-fuckin-awful. Scorpions and whirlwinds. Barbed wire and concrete fences.

Main local occupation: suicide bombing.

Main local religion: None. Unless you count Yahweh worship. Local ragheads won't even spend the money for a statue of their cranky old-man god. Prissy-ass priests with a rule-book thick as the goddam AT&T Yellow Pages.

So, I'm down in Judea, see, nothing to do but keep an eye on a hundred asshole soldiers while they torture prisoners and take potshots at kids and old ladies who look like they might be terrorists.

Anyway, there's this slave market, see, just past the mall. You know, the mall with the twenty-screen movie land and the skating rink and the surplus store.

Shiny Sam's Slave Mart, you've seen the ads on late-night TV. Discount for military personnel.

Shiny Sam wears a bright yellow suit and a bright red tie. He's got a gold tooth. And a good deal for every asshole who walks onto the lot. Guarantees to undersell any deal you can find this side of Eden.

Just look at those girls, Shiny Sam says. *Flashes that gold tooth.*

What's that? he says, clearing his nostrils. *Louder, I can't hear you. Boys, you say? We ain't got no boys. Excuse the hell outta me. What kinda gay-ass low-class place you think this is? We got no boys.*

He pauses, picks at his gold tooth. Frowns. Then grins.

We got no boys. We got young men. Check their drivers license. All guaranteed over eighteen. And check out that cute number over there, the one with the eyes like dreams and faraway mountains and the tide rushing in at night under a full moon. He guaranteed to warm your cot, Sugar.

No payments or interest until July. Special discount for military personnel.

We do our part for ya'll, Shiny Sam says. Love of God and country, ya'll.

Boy don't say nothing. German, Greek, Arab, Mexican? Who the hell knows?

Boy don't know, that's for sure. Eyes like a set of handcuffs, like a leash. Like a falling star in August.

I sign the papers.

Trouble is, who owns who?

Back at the base, two of those one hundred assholes in the company smirk when they see the boy. Or look like they might smirk. Lashes for those two, and lashes for two others just to make sure the message sinks in. A little blood on the whip, a lot of moans, one nice loud scream. Everybody's happy now, right? No more smirks, right?

Boy's still quiet. Talks a little now and then. It's just business, right? What's between me and him, that's just business. Convenient for both. Nobody gets his feelings hurt. Nobody gives a fuck.

One night, instead of rolling over and going to sleep, he holds onto me like he's falling off of a cliff. And I hold onto him, too, like I might fall off a cliff if I don't. I don't know why. But I think that I don't know what I'd do if something happened to him.

Then the sickness comes. Like it says in the book, the boy falls down. *Grievously tormented*, it says. But *grievously tormented* don't begin to describe the way I feel, when I see the way he shakes and carries on, like a thousand snakes are inside him, eating him up.

That's when the Son o' God Traveling Medicine Show comes to town. Folks say Son o' God can heal the sick. I spit. I don't give a fuck.

But the boy's shakin' and tormented. Sure as hell wouldn't hurt if I went down to see Son o' God. Just to look around. Get away from these one hundred assholes the army gave me and this one sick boy I ought to take back to Shiny Sam for the money-back guarantee.

We'll just see about Son o' God.

Yeah, he slick as shit. Good magic tricks. Fine-ass dancing girls, Magdalen and Salome, shakin' it, workin' it for the soldiers and young bucks and tired husbands. Did I see a little bare tittie, up there, a little hint of nekkid pussy bush? Nah. Maybe.

Son o' God himself, smooth as hell, sweet-talkin' for the blue-haired ladies and horny girls. Nice message, love and peace and brotherhood shit. Lots of promises, fuckin' pie-in-the-sky, if you ask me. Hallmark card shit.

Greater Judea Citizens Good Government League don't object to the show. Military occupation office ain't bothered, stuff like this keeps the crowds happy. Local ministerial alliance don't hardly notice, they don't-give-a-fuck. Different socio-economic target audience.

Hell of a good set of tricks there, Son o' God. Water into wine. Food out of thin air. Nothing fancy. Loaves and fishes. Tater tots. Those little packages of ketchup you never can get open. Heals the sick. Raises the dead.

All right, so I'm at the show. The boys at home, probably writhing on the floor. Maybe dead already.

Allright, Son o' God, what you gonna do for my boy? I say. Beseeching just a little bit. Don't you see what's beginning to happen to me? See, asshole, goddamit, see?

Go home, mother-fuckin-soldier-bashin-right-wing-commie-pig, Son o' God says to me, smoothing down a lose strand of hair, adjusting the halo a little. And did I mention boy fucker? Go home, boy's alright. I mean young man. But check his drivers license, just to make sure.

I hear tell the FDA finally shut down the Son o' God Traveling Medicine Show. Gave him the whole cross and whips and nails routine. Set an example. Because what he was selling wasn't the problem at all. It was what he wasn't selling that got Son o' God in trouble.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, don't even give me or the boy a name in the big book. *A certain centurion*, Luke says. *Servant who was dear to him*, Luke calls the boy. They don't give a fuck. Just like everybody else don't give a fuck.

But if you should hear of this, or read of this, a hundred or a thousand years from now, know that the miracle wasn't that some no-account boy, some crazy boy with eyes like the sunrise, rose from his deathbed.

This was the miracle: I gave a fuck.