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I, Julie Parham,

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A THING OR TWO ABOUT LOVE:
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by

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Abstract: *A Thing or Two About Love: a collection of short stories*

A Thing or Two About Love consists of a twenty-page introduction and five short stories. The introduction provides an explanation and analysis of the stories. The stories deal with characters who live in a fairly ordinary world that seems to be a constant source of frustration and confusion. The stories represent the characters' search for belonging, a connection to something or someone in an ambivalent and neutral world. The first story, "Tilda Looks For A Millennial Kind of Love," is set in Chicago in December 1999, and addresses some of the hysteria surrounding the "Y2K" crisis. The main character, Tilda, works at a low-level job in an actor's union, and struggles to maintain her friendships while struggling with her inability to commit to a serious romance. The second story, "Spin," involves Marie, a woman whose adventures begin when she shares a rental car with strangers. She abandons her rental-car acquaintances to hitch a ride from a truck-driver, and ultimately, learns about herself and her relationships with her husband and her sister. In "The Change Must Be Good," a pub fire results in Samantha, an elderly woman recovering from her husband's death, becoming acquainted with two young British "punk-rockers" and an old man. A tentative friendship begins. The title story of the collection, "A Thing or Two About Love," introduces the reader to Ellie, a woman caught between a world of her fantasy and the world of reality. Ellie has returned to college and fallen in love with a much younger woman, and must now face meeting her girlfriend's mother for the first time. In the final story, "Claire's Gifts," a man wakes up one morning and finds twenty-eight strange cats in his apartment. He must discover where the cats came from and

face the consequences of his ex-girlfriend's departure, while keeping his newest relationship a secret.

Thanks to Erin
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Introduction

It was not my intention to write five stories about love and relationships. I tried to write about a woman who hitches a ride across the Midwest in a horse truck. I tried to write about a woman who travels across Europe on her own. I tried to write about a man struggling with twenty-eight cats in his apartment. I tried to write about fears, worries, heartbreaks, and joys other than those caused by loved ones. And yet whenever I ask what is behind the hitchhiking, the traveling, the cats, the answer is always relationships. Perhaps, like E. M. Forster, I am discovering that my stories are showing me what I think of the world. As he put it, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Cowley 30). From seeing the stories in this collection, I must think it is our relationships that create the core of what we do and who we are and how we behave. This is why it seems appropriate to title the collection *A Thing or Two About Love*. I find it pleasing that the title of this collection is a phrase spoken by a side character, a socially awkward man trying to reinvent himself, a former librarian, as an artist. He is my stand-in, in some ways; I am trying to move from lover of books to writer of books, and, like Gerald, the process for me is not simple.

Joy Williams wrote that "[The writer] must be reckless and patient and daring and dull" (Blythe 7) and her words have lingered with me as I worked on this thesis. While "dull" and "patient" have not always been amiable, they are, at least, obvious companions. "Reckless" and "daring," however, have caused me some grief. What does it mean for a writer to be reckless and daring? The words feel true, but in what way reckless? Daring with what? Word usage? Premises? Some literary device? Some theoretical position? And,

after trying on my own versions of reckless and daring, I am still not quite sure, although I have begun to discover what they are not.

I know that I see recklessness and daring in the stories of other writers. Lorrie Moore and Judy Budnitz specifically come to mind. At a lecture at the University of Cincinnati in the spring of 2002, an audience member asked Lorrie Moore why her stories were so restrained. She laughed and said she thought the opposite was true—that she was more often criticized for pushing jokes too far, that she thought of herself as ridiculously unrestrained. And it seems true: in "People Like That Are the Only People Here," the lines of dialogue are a bit too polished, too witty to sound completely true: "Honey, I only do what I can. I do the careful ironies of daydream. I do the marshy idea upon which intimate life is built" (Dark 12). It is ridiculous, nearly impossible, to imagine someone actually speaking these lines extemporaneously. But they are funny. They are necessary. They are a little bit of recklessness in a heartbreakingly realistic story. Judy Budnitz, on the other hand, has daring premises; in one story, a woman tries to trap a hijacker by metaphorically shedding layers of herself, but this becomes a literal shedding, down to contact lenses, skin, layers of celluloid, breast implants... Both authors root their stories in reality, but deal with it recklessly, letting their stories sweep just outside the boundaries of realism. The result is surprising and delightful.

Early on as a graduate student at the University of Cincinnati, I recognized that I admired this quality, and vowed to try it in my own stories. In an early draft of "The Change Must Be Good," Samantha is haunted by the ghost of her husband, who becomes such a nuisance that Sam goes to England to escape him. It was playful and funny, but I

had trouble finishing the draft. It was not for lack of ideas or interest, but because it seemed too "non-literary." This admission is a bit embarrassing. If people can shed their celluloid in the back of an airplane, why can't they interact with dead husbands? The answer, of course, is that they can–if the writer is confident. And daring.

Partly because I did not have this confidence, my search for recklessness has emerged in other ways in these stories. In "The Change Must Be Good," instead of the dead husband appearing in the pub to speak to Sam, there is a fire in the pub kitchen. This is not a particularly daring addition, although it is risky. The risk is that the event might seem contrived, driven by the need for something to happen, rather than an event "organic" to the characters and the situation. Although it does seem slightly out-of-character for Samantha to escort the old man to the source of the fire, once she is there, the details–like the bits of paper towel ash floating in the air–make the scene, and Sam's reaction to it, believable.

In "Tilda Looks For A Millennial Kind of Love," the recklessness emerges in a character, Tilda. Near the end of the story, when she has been driven to her wit's end by a neurotic actor, Tilda invites the man to her office for a meeting, and then showers him with the shredded remains of his headshot and résumé. While it seems "natural" for Tilda to displace her anxiety on someone she does not care about, the shredded résumé scene seems a little forced. In order to balance out the artificiality of the event, however, Tilda realizes how ridiculous it is:

> "Happy New Year!" I shouted and pulled from behind me a bag of headshot-confetti. I showered him with bits and pieces of his life and his

> dreams, and left the bag at his feet. His look was confused but delighted and I ran before he recognized what the confetti was. I wouldn't have been able to stand it.

This self-awareness keeps the moment from being unbelievable, although the act of luring the man all the way downtown to shower him with confetti does not seem quite right for the story or for Tilda's character. She should have done something bolder, something more connected to her struggles and conflict in the rest of the story. If she had seduced the man, for example, it might have been more appropriate for her character.

A similar situation appears in "A Thing or Two About Love." My strategy, when Ellie puts the allergy medicine in Helen's drink, was to try to make the event seem as normal as possible. Like Tilda, Ellie has the excuse of being drunk. Ellie also goes through a lot of rationalization beforehand, a sort of a counter-argument to convince the reader that the action she is about to take is not a plot device (which, of course, it is):

> If she slipped the medicine into Helen's drink, Helen would get groggy, Ellie would drive them to Helen's hotel, drop them off. Then she and Rachel could sit in the lobby and talk, or maybe go for a quiet midnight swim. It sounds appealing, despite the fact that Ellie feels like a frat boy, thinking about slipping a Mickey into the beer, but Ellie tells herself that's ridiculous. Mickeys and Roophies are hardcore. This is allergy medicine. Besides, she thinks, it's over-the-counter.

Again, the plot device works, but not perfectly. But, as with Tilda, Ellie needed to do something at this point in the story. When this story was read at a book club, consisting of

mostly retired Ohioans, this scene drew mixed reactions. A few people appreciated the dark humor and agreed that the action was necessary for Ellie to take. Others were horrified at this incident. Drugging people is serious, they insisted. Ellie, they complained, did not take it seriously enough. In some ways, it is a valid concern. But I would argue that Ellie is so caught between a world of her fantasy and the world of reality, the seriousness of such an act would initially be lost on her. But perhaps Ellie's fantasy life should be re-emphasized just before this scene, to make it clear that for Ellie, drugging the drink is not meant to be a criminal act.

An early draft of "Spin" also contained an incident that stands out. Originally, instead of simply petting the horses in the back of the truck, Marie actually releases them, but that version ended with Marie jogging across a pasture, admiring the beauty of the horses and realizing, thanks to the exercise and fresh air, that she must be assertive to solve her problems with Carl. While I like the idea of Marie releasing the horses, resolving what comes next became problematic. As in "A Thing Or Two About Love," real consequences would come from an act that could be considered criminal. Marie could get taken to court by the company transporting the horses for theft. Bill might lose his job. If she has a change of heart and tries to catch the horses, she may not catch them all. She might get shot at for trespassing. Marie might be left alone at the side of the road as Bill drives off into the night. While this last image is visually appealing, I felt that Marie was simply too responsible of a person for this course of action. I could not make her this reckless; in the current ending, she only considers releasing the horses.

What has happened is that in my attempt to be reckless and daring, these stories have developed a pattern; I have displaced the recklessness onto the characters, forcing plot devices to make these women seem daring, when it should be me, not them, who takes the chances.

I was a bit more successful with this in "Claire's Gifts." Rather than have the characters do ridiculous things, I began with a "Judy Budnitz" type story: a ridiculous premise. In this story, a man wakes up one morning and finds 28 strange cats in his apartment. The story met with some resistance in a workshop because I had revealed the number of cats. "Impossible," my workshop critics said. "Change the number to eight and we'll believe it." But in my mind, Alan's apartment was swarming—eight was too few. I resolved the problem by simply leaving the number unnamed, which still has left a few readers dissatisfied, but emphasizes the point that ultimately, the cats are not what is important in the story. What is important is Alan's relationship with Skye, or rather, his realization that their relationship is important.

There are plenty of reasons that I did not achieve the kind of recklessness that Joy Williams referred to, and one of them is because I was trying too hard to make something happen. To determine why this is the case would be a treatise all its own—am I nervous because these stories are a formal requirement; do I not develop characters enough to let the action happen more organically; was I being "reckless" with plot when I should be reckless with dialogue, or narrative structure? And if writing is about being reckless and daring, what risks is Alice Munro taking when her stories feel so natural, so ordinary? And

how is it that I find an Alice Munro story almost always more satisfying to read than a Lorrie Moore or a Judy Budnitz story?

I did not particularly like Alice Munro stories until I began working on this thesis. Granted, my exposure to her was limited to "Boys and Girls," "Royal Beatings," and other Munro works in the freshman literature cannon, but I found them slow-paced and too realistic. I don't remember why—probably I read a Munro story in *O.Henry* or *Best American Short Stories* while I was writing one of my own—but last year I began turning to her stories for advice, for clues, for blueprints.

The first thing I learned was that structure is everything, and it must start, not surprisingly, at the beginning. For example, in the title story of her collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage,* the story opens in a Chekhovian manner, right in the middle of the action: a woman buys a train ticket and purchases a wedding dress. (We discover seven pages later that her name is Johanna.) Twenty pages pass before we realize that the man she intends on marrying knows nothing of the wedding, and very little about Johanna. Munro withholds certain crucial information, and relationships that seem simple at the beginning are shown to be quite complicated by the end. The result is that she actively engages the imagination of her readers as we guess who and what and why, and the fifty page "short" story trips along at a quick pace.

This particular story and this particular writerly device inspired the relationship between Alan and Skye in "Claire's Gift." It was a simple story with simple relationships, and the original premise needed dimensionality. In early drafts, Alan struggles with losing Claire and dealing with the cats she has left on his "doorstep." However, for some reason

in early drafts, Alan's cousin kept bringing her friend Skye home from college. I kept trying to write Skye out, but could never quite get rid of her. Finally, when I examined the structure of the relationships, her role in the story became clear: Alan and Skye are a couple. At Alan's request, they keep their relationships a secret while he tries to deal with the aftermath of losing Claire. In particular, I attempted to imitate Munro's "delayed disclosure" by not revealing Alan and Skye's relationship until page seven. The revelation of this relationship gives the pace of the story a boost, and the relationship saves the story from being one-dimensional. Rather than have the conflict be about whether or not Alan keeps the cats, the cats become an obstacle in dealing with a larger, more critical problem to Alan: whether or not to try to "keep" Skye.

The evolution of this story is similar to others in this collection. I began with a character and a situation, sometimes even making a cluster-chart, one of those graphic organizers popular with high school teachers. I would put the situation in a circle in the middle of the page, and from that circle, branch out with five or six possibilities of what could happen next. With this method, only after several drafts did I discover the conflict in the story.

There is a school of thought that one should not begin writing a story by knowing too much; that writing is a process of discovery about the characters and their situation. Or, as Mary Gaitskill put it, "when I start writing a story...I feel like I'm marching through mud" (Blythe 162). I think, however, that even while trudging through mud there is a flickering light ahead of these authors to give them direction, and that light must be the conflict. I have discovered that when I begin with just a situation and a character, and no

specifically defined conflict, the story never entirely lifts itself out of the mud. "Tilda Looks For A Millennial Kind of Love" is a good example of this. The story is rather funny. The setting, Chicago in December 1999, is interesting, as is Tilda's job in an office for an actor's union. But the central problems, Tilda's conflict with Marianne and her inability to commit to Dennis, come across almost as after-thoughts, rather than as the machinery that moves the story along. This is most noticeable in the scene where Tilda reveals her infidelity to Dennis.

> Marianne gave me crap about my list, but as far as she knew, it stopped with Dennis. I couldn't tell her. She would only be disappointed with me. Only one person knew about the man from the elevator—a doctor. Not even my doctor, just a faceless MD from the yellow pages. I told her that I was worried that my unfaithfulness indicated a chemical imbalance—maybe I was manic depressive or pregnant or diabetic—but she had shaken her head, told me to stop sleeping around.

This act of infidelity seems like it should be important, since the story begins with a discussion of Tilda's list of the men she has had sex with. Rather than being exposition, this infidelity should haunt Tilda, shape the way she thinks during the pages of this story. Instead, it is presented as an isolated incident, one more example of an immature act that she claims to feel guilt for, although she shows none of this guilt elsewhere in the story. The fact is that this case of adultery was added into the story late in the process, as a way to reassert Tilda's inability to commit. If this dimension of the conflict had been clear in my head from the beginning, this example could have become more significant to the story.

"A Thing Or Two About Love" is an example of a story that had a clearly defined conflict from its inception. The story developed out of a conflict between Rachel and Ellie and a dress. Immediately, the conflict between them pertained to age and another woman. Even with a pre-established conflict, there was still room for discovery: I didn't "know" until the third draft that the other woman was Rachel's mother. Although the story still has a slightly forced plot device, it feels, more than others, that it has emerged from the mud and cleaned itself off. The characters and their relationships are interesting, and the dialogue and action are interesting and propel the conflict.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, this is the formula for playwriting and for improvisational theater: two characters and a conflict. Because I was working with more than one character from the beginning, and because from the beginning the characters were motivated by one clearly defined conflict, the plot has logically developed up to the conclusion and the ending is the most clearly ambiguous of the five stories. Throughout the story, Ellie has struggled to find a balance between her physical existence (the outside world) and a mental existence (her idealism and daydreams). By the end of the story, Ellie's actions and thoughts have collided in a situation where she must now reconcile the two by making some very hard decisions. Rachel has accepted Ellie's proposal, but did Ellie really mean for her to? Ellie's confusion, because it is clearly defined, is satisfying. It is almost a cathartic feeling that comes from seeing another person trapped in a difficult position.

This struggle that Ellie experiences is typical in these stories. Like the complications that surround their relationships, these characters live in a fairly ordinary world that seems to be a constant source of frustration and confusion. Ellie is sent back to

college by a boss that does not understand her equalitarian park designs. Marie would rather take her chances hitchhiking than deal with small talk. The only advice Alan's best friend gives him is to date women who don't know how to jimmy locks. Perhaps as a reaction to this world, Samantha, Tilda, Marie, Alan, and Ellie all long for something that they cannot seem to articulate. It is, in its most basic form, a search for belonging, a connection to something or someone in an ambivalent and neutral world.

Tilda longs to be understood by someone, but in her efforts to find it, she cuts off the one steady source of love that exists for her–her best friend, Marianne. Perhaps the millennial kind of love that Tilda is searching for is not the needy, confused love she feels for Dennis. Perhaps it is not romantic love at all, but the painfully honest friendship she shares with Marianne. Tilda has the chance to be happy, but she must decide which kind of love she wants. In the new millennium, it seems, she must be honest about both to get either.

In "Claire's Gift," Alan is also seeking love, although he does not think he is. When it finds him, he resists it. It is only by some chance of fate that he realizes his good fortune before he has lost it. In the other stories, Marie struggles to reconcile the expectations she has for herself and the way she is living her life, while Ellie struggles with her desires and reality. Samantha longs to find peace without her husband, and does so in the company of young and friendly strangers. It is possible to find happiness, the message seems to be, but only by chance.

One reason that happiness is at times elusive for these characters is because they are unable to confront people. Ellie, Marie, Alan, Tilda and even the minor characters, like

Helen, Carl, Skye, Marianne are controlled by their desire to avoid conflict. Inevitably, this avoidance leads them to it. Ellie, unable to adequately confront Helen, slips her a sleeping pill. Tilda breaks up with her boyfriend and then becomes re-involved with him because she finds that easier than resisting him. Marianne, from "Tilda," is in love with Tilda's boyfriend but cannot confess this to either Tilda or Dennis. Carl, Marie's husband in "Spin," knows Marie is unhappy but is too timid to confront his wife about her problems. Despite an age of therapy and self-help books, these characters are isolated as they search for coping skills.

Being alone literally, as well as metaphorically, adds to the confusion. Many of these characters seem to be strongly influenced by absent characters. There are lurking sisters, ex-girlfriends, fathers, husbands... people on the peripheral vision who wield a substantial amount of power. Samantha has her dead husband. Alan has Claire. Marie has Carl. Rachel has her father, and Ellie has her parents. If these main characters felt like they belonged to a community, if they had a stable and steady source of companionship, it seems unlikely that these absent people would figure so prominently in the stories. The stories suggest that in the absence of a community that plays the role of conscience and therapy-group, people will reach across time, distance, and death to create a feeling of belonging. Samantha is the most able to come to terms with the absence of Sully, and Alan, to some degree, does so with Claire. This happens because these absences play a vital role in the central conflict of these two stories; the absence is what must be resolved by the end of the story. In the other stories, however, the absent characters primarily seem to provide only guilt and a sense of disappointment. In "A Thing Or Two About Love,"

Rachel's father and Ellie's parents are not the central conflict of the story, but their existence adds to the confusion and the uncertainty. By the end of the story, Rachel and Ellie have not come to terms with their parents, but they must deal with the frustration and guilt their existence causes. In "Spin," the absence of Marie's husband, Carl, is a little different. Although he is not present in the story until the end, he is a physical presence in Marie's life. His absence from most of the story could be metaphoric; although he knows Marie is depressed, he stays uninvolved and "absent," only becoming re-involved in her life when we see him at the end.

Alice Munro has one story in which a last-minute appearance of "absent" people is done very skillfully. In "The Children Stay," a woman leaves her husband and two children to run away with another man, the director of a play in which she is acting. For most of the story, the conflict seems to be about the woman's choice between the two men. However, the last half-page of the story is a meeting between the woman and her grown children. (Although they were physically present in the earlier parts of the story, they were not yet sentient beings, and their emergence as adults in the last scene makes them feel like they have a presence for the first time.) When her children mistakenly assume that the man she ran away with played Orphee in the play, the mother corrects them. When pushed about his identity, she says, " "Just a man connected," Pauline says. "It wasn't him." "(Dark 78). The grown children ask the right question and the mother reveals something about herself. This ending works in two ways. First, it shows that the main character, Pauline, is seeking a sense of closure. Second, it provides the reader with the realization that the conflict of the story was not about which man to chose, but whether or not to stay

with her husband. The "other man" was little more than a stand-in character, an excuse for Pauline to leave. The story becomes a bit more chilling and a bit more comforting at the same time. She did not leave for romantic love, but it seems she would not have been able to stay anyway, even if she had not met this particular man.

"Spin" makes an attempt to provide readers with a similar epiphany, but is not completely successful. The jump into the future to see Marie and Carl living apart but getting along seems designed more to supply closure for the readers rather than to provide an epiphany. Marie has somehow resolved her conflicts with Carl, her sister, and even the pilot from the beginning of the story. Although there is some evidence of how Marie became empowered enough to make peace with the world, in "Spin," the jump to the future feels more like a narrative trick to ensure an upbeat ending than a logical extension of the story. Was a resolution necessary at all in this story? Originally, the story ended with the line: "Marie hunched her shoulders, as if she were fluffing her thin feathers for warmth." It was a satisfying visual image—a woman stranded on the bare Ohio highway, shivering in the cold, being escorted away by the police. In retrospect, the ending would be improved by eliminating the police officers altogether. Marie, in the cold, contemplating leaving Carl would be more effective. The police officers provide an excuse for the beginning of the story—they serve as a connection to Marie abandoning her fellow passengers, and while the arrival of the police is somewhat logical, it is not particularly satisfying. It feels a bit like a deus-ex-machina intended to ruin Marie's life, rather than save it. However, this ending in particular seems to emphasize that sense of hopefulness

about love and relationships. It can work out for Marie and Carl, but they must try and fail and try again before they can find success.

The upbeat ending of "Claire's Gift" also benefited from Munro's influence, though in a different way. Her story "Floating Bridge" is of a woman, Jinny, dying of cancer. The last two sentences of Munro's story are a short description of an emotional response: "What she felt was a lighthearted sort of compassion, almost like laughter. A swish of tender hilarity, getting the better of all her sores and hollows, for the time given" (Munro 85). The description of Jinny's emotion, "swish of tender hilarity," moved me with its precision and, for lack of a better word, gracefulness. "Claire's Gift" needed and received a similar final impression, even down to the word "tender":

> Her cheeks were flushed from the wind. Looking at her, being close to her on the noisy pier, Alan felt a tender sort of wonder. An awe as he tried to remember exactly how he had arrived at this point, exactly how he had gotten so lucky.

The incomplete last sentence gives the paragraph a light, airy quality. Because Munro handles her subject in "Floating Bridge" in a meaningful way, this quality enables the ending of her story to become hopeful, perhaps even celebratory. In "Claire's Gift," this airy quality allows the final mood of the story to be pleasant. Although the writing in the latter example is not nearly as graceful as Munro's, this is a far superior conclusion to "Claire's Gift" than the original, which described a cat curling up on Alan's lap.

The ending of "Claire's Gift" is probably a good example of what I have striven for in an ending; it is a small version of an epiphanic moment. Alan's realization that he is

lucky, that his relationship with Skye is how he is lucky, may or may not change his life; in some ways, I think the reader hopes that it does not, simply because that would be too optimistic. Other writers would argue that such an epiphany is not what a short story should strive for, since life does not come in little epiphanies. Instead, perhaps stories should have more of an "anti-ending," like in "Tilda," in which the story just seems to stop. As a reader, I prefer the type of ending that makes me rethink the entire story. However, this type of ending, like in Munro's "The Children Stay," requires a certain amount of sophistication in the structure and planning of the story. As a writer, I do not think I have reached that point yet.

Another area of writing that I have consciously struggled with in these stories is the use of dialogue. As an undergraduate theatre major, I spent much of my time writing short scenes and drafts of one-act plays. This influence is clear in the rough drafts of my stories, as they are dialogue-heavy. I have tried to be more sparing in my use of it, to rely more on brief descriptions when I could. There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with having a lot of dialogue in a short story. Stephen Dixon, for example, has made excellent use of dialogue. His talent, however, like Munro, is making the conversations multi-purpose. For example, in his story "Mac In Love," the main character (Mac) imagines a three and a half page conversation between his ex-girlfriend and her best friend, in which they talk about how crazy Mac is. Not only is the conversation witty and entertaining, it provides background about Mac and Jane's relationship, gives some idea of Jane's character, and some idea of Mac's character, as well as an inkling as to why Jane may have left him. For example:

[Jane:] "...How did he give you those notes?"

[Ruth, her friend:] "On the stoop where we met. Wrote them up one after another in a way that seemed almost logical and clever to me in the sequence and routine he used. But having someone around like him would really scare me, to tell the truth."

[Jane:] "He's essentially harmless, don't worry." (Dixon 36).

The imagined observation about the notes allows the reader to see a certain smugness in Mac's self-image, but, through Ruth's concern, also allows us to see that Mac is self-aware. Finally, in Jane's last line, we see Mac's hope that Jane really understands him.

The story itself is fairly stylized, as the excerpt shows, and inserting this type of dialogue into one of the stories in my collection—"A Thing or Two About Love," for instance—would not work completely. But the idea could. One trick, it seems, is putting this dialogue into the beginning of the story. By the end of "Mac In Love," we are primarily "inside" Mac's head. There is some dialogue between Mac and two police officers, whom Jane has called to have Mac removed from the apartment lawn. But Dixon uses the dialogue to establish background and character, and by the end of the story, there is little need for conversation.

This happens to a small degree in "Claire's Gifts." At the bottom of the first page, Alan and his friend Stanfield have a brief conversation that reveals the cats in Alan's apartment were left by his ex-girlfriend. It does establish a bit about Stanfield's character. He is flippant and refuses to take Alan very seriously: "You've got to get a deadbolt for that door," Stanfield said. "Or better yet, stop dating women with a talent for breaking and

entering." But it doesn't reveal much about Alan's character, and at the beginning of the story, it is the main character we should be learning about. To achieve this, further conversation isn't even necessary here. Reworking one of Alan's lines, adding one response to Stanfield to show the reader exactly what the relationship is between Alan and Stanfield would improve this section. As it is, there is a vague impression that Alan is not completely comfortable with Stanfield. But the story is told from a limited third-person point of view. We should know exactly how Alan feels about Stanfield. If he feels ambivalence, then we must know the boundaries and causes of that ambivalence. This dialogue, at the beginning of the story, is the place for the reader to make that discovery.

The dialogue in the beginning of "Tilda" is a bit more successful. After her boyfriend Dennis discovers an incriminating note, he and Tilda discuss it. He is teasing, she pretends to be teasing but is serious, and we discover that although he is satisfied with their relationship, she is not. We also discover that while Tilda is blunt, Dennis is romantic and a bit naïve.

The conversations between Tilda and Marianne in the office also show the growing conflict between the two of them. We also learn that Tilda is becoming lax on the job, and that she cannot take anything very seriously:

> "Thanks, genius," I said. "And what should I tell him? That he bores me to tears? That he only laughs at my stupid jokes, and not the ones that are actually funny? That he makes me want to wear a hair shirt when he's around so I'll know that I'm awake?"

"Save it for Oprah," she said. "There is nothing wrong with Dennis. Make up with him quick before someone else snatches him."

Even here, Marianne could supply a line slightly more dangerous, with more of an edge to it, to give the reader more of a hint that she might be the one to "snatch him." There are similar places where the dialogue is almost, but not quite, multipurpose. When Dennis is selling a sailboat to a customer, the customer and Dennis have a quick exchange, which Tilda overhears:

"He's a good man," the older man said as he passed me on his way out. "I'll be back on Tuesday, Dennis!"

"She'll be ready!"

This exchange was intended to have two purposes: to show Dennis's bland but optimistic personality and, by the customer saying, "he's a good man," to make Tilda continue to doubt her choice in breaking up with him. It is only partially successful. To be truly effective, either the exchange needs to be worded in a more powerful fashion, or Tilda's reflection on what she hears needs to be more explicit.

The most troubling use of dialogue appears in "Spin." For the first eight pages, the dialogue is sparse and effective. In fact, there is only one line of dialogue in the first two pages of the story:

Her concentration lasted through Gary Indiana, past six billboards for Arby's triple cheese melt patty, until finally, inevitably, the hand model asked: "And—Marie, is it?—what is it that you do?"

This single line establishes Marie's angst about both of her situations–being annoyed by her fellow passengers and being confused with her marriage and career.

When the truck driver enters the scene on page ten, however, the dialogue begins to be used loosely and carelessly. Bill, the truck driver, tells a page-long story about driving two sick horses across the state. In some ways, this story shows Bill's necessary callousness towards the animals he hauls, but ultimately, it is unclear why we need to know that Bill has developed a callousness towards animals. In an earlier draft, this conversation was designed to snap Marie out of her funk, to encourage her to fight the depression she was feeling and to free the horses from the back of the truck. This action was ultimately cut, however, because it did not seem like a logical development of Marie's character at this point. Without this action, though, Bill's speech becomes strange and misplaced, its purpose unclear.

One way Bill's speech was designed to work was by reminding Marie of what is precious to her. If any of the stories diverge from the principle conflict of relationships, it is "Spin." Marie's struggle is with her lack of occupation. This conflict is clearly defined throughout the story, from the moment the hand model lotion utters, "What do you do?" to the end, when Marie is back at college. Carl and Lily both have jobs, as do the people in the Lexus, and everyone but Marie seems content. Even Bill, whom life has dealt with harshly, seems content to drive the truck. Marie's story shows that a culture driven by the forty-hour workweek can be devastating to a person without a job, because jobs contribute so much to our self-definitions. And happiness, "Spin" suggests, lies in being able to define ourselves as people who do things.

It is possible, of course, not to mention a person's job at all during a story. Dixon's "Mac In Love" is a good example of this. Although his attitudes and thought processes show him to be educated and certainly not poverty stricken, Mac does not seem to be a man of leisure. And yet he seems to have no job, no occupation whatsoever except for trailing Jane. Part of the reason this is successful for Dixon is because the story spans about twenty minutes of a day. It could be any warm day of any year, and Mac could be an aerospace engineer just as easily as a librarian. Mary Gaitskill also avoids mention of occupations in one of her stories, but it is clear how she does it by the title: "The Romantic Weekend." Once an author starts dealing with a character during the business week, and extends the story over a period of time, it seems that dealing with that occupation is nearly inevitable.

Although "Spin" suggests that the lack of an occupation can demoralize a person, other stories in this collection suggest otherwise. To begin with, in "Tilda Looks for a Millennial Kind of Love," Tilda's occupation reveals a lot about Tilda's character. Her job as an underling secretary, when she has a college degree, is testimony to her unwillingness to commit—in this case, to a career. Her frustration with the job adds to the tension in the story, compounded, of course, by the fact that her best friend has become her boss. For Tilda, being employed seems to be a way to pass time with Marianne, and a way to fantasize about men. Employment is a fact of life that she views in a fairly neutral manner; she has no ambition but holds no grudge against a culture that demands she work.

Alan, in a nameless corporate job, certainly feels the influence of a job-driven society. The namelessness of his job reflects how uninspiring the job is to Alan. But the

only source of friendship we see, other than his family, is Stanfield, his co-worker. Like Tilda, he remains neutral about his job, but the friendship that comes from it does not seem as genuine as Tilda's friendship with Marianne, which began before the two women were co-workers. Stanfield, unlike Marianne, takes advantage of Alan. We also see Alan's aunt as a custodian in a corporate building. Her wit and spunk seem lost amidst the drudgery of her job, and it seems that nothing particularly positive comes of jobs in "Claire's Gift." Work must simply be endured and tolerated.

For Ellie, in "A Thing Or Two About Love," occupations are much different. Part of the conflict in the story is Ellie's return to school, the "opportunity" to dabble in a new occupation when things with her old one go awry. Ellie's occupation as a designer, of both parks and clothes, influences the way she views the world. At the end of the story, to keep herself from becoming hysterical, she redesigns the hospital waiting room, infusing it "with color and light, sticking Organza blossoms into the nurse's pillbox hats, and carnations into lab coat pockets." Designing is not just a nine-to-five job for her; her job, inspired by an actual passion, is an intricate part of her personality. The presence of Rachel suggests the same thing; she is young and passionate about her future career, hoping to break into the world of art. Ellie is suspiciously silent on the matter, however. She never mentions Rachel's potential career, or lack thereof, and we begin to wonder if Rachel is not as talented as she seems to think she is. But the possibility for a beloved career exists for Rachel as well as for Ellie. Even Gerald, the former librarian, has the chance and opportunity to do what inspires him.

It is no coincidence, I suppose, that it is the artists in this collection whose careers show the most passion, the most hope for personal fulfillment. Being an artist allows Ellie to seek beauty in the most inopportune moments, but it also gives her the power to bring the beauty of fountains and Chinese gardens to those whom the park district believes are too poor for such treasures. Even if this is impractical, it is a fulfilling fantasy.

To create stories, I have discovered, is almost fulfilling. But the art of fiction holds the continual promise of fulfillment, despite the daily obstacles in writing. I have stopped in despair on more than one occasion, wondering when I had become so clumsy with words, when I had forgotten how to tell a tale. These pages are filled with mistakes and blunders, with inconsistencies and contradictions. But in the midst of these pages I finally see stories emerging, stories that need to be shaped and shined, but real stories. And despite the dullness and the patience, tomorrow, I think, I will keep writing, keep looking for the stories in the pages, even if it means trudging through the mud to find them.

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Tilda Looks for a Millennial Kind of Love

Dennis found the list three weeks ago. It was four o'clock in the morning and he had that dream again where he sells Richard Daley one of his new Classic Cat sailboats, the kind with the glass hull and bronze hardware. The climax of the dream is when Mr. Daley shakes Dennis's hand, and maybe it's the thrill of the touch, or the recognition of a public figure, or just the excitement of selling a $20,000 sailboat that gets to Dennis, but that's the point when he always falls out of bed. It was the second time this week I heard the telltale thud and grunt.

I rolled over to check, and sure enough, there was a warm spot but no Dennis. "You will find that millennial angst has created unrest in suburbanites," I said, addressing the ceiling. "Symptoms often include irritated bowel syndrome, splotchy skin, and X-rated dreams of Dick Daley..." When he didn't laugh, I asked if he was okay. There was a rustle from the other side of the bed, like pages in a notebook being turned. I figured he must be conscious and uninjured. If there had been bleeding, he would have screamed. "Have you slipped into a portal to John Malkovich's brain?" I asked, pulling myself across the bed and peering over the side. There were three scratches across his rib cage, wounds that still looked fresh against his pale skin. Last week, he had been attacked on the El by a fanatical fundamentalist trying to recruit souls before the millennial clock struck midnight. I imagined her eyes black and beady as a mouse, her hair frizzy with static electricity, her gestures wild and unpredictable. But Dennis said that she had looked normal. He thought she was a soccer mom, until she attacked him. He didn't know what set her off—maybe she

chose him because Dennis looks so helpless with a briefcase and tie—but it had taken three men in the car to pin the fanatic down. They got her, but not before she had left her mark on Dennis's stomach.

"What are you doing?" I asked, getting a momentary rush from hanging my head over the side of the mattress. There was no reason to ask; he had already begun making "keep" piles and "trash" piles with the junk from under my bed. It was typical. Dennis had an infuriating way of ignoring my intimacy issues, as if they were nothing more than flies to be continually brushed off his shirt sleeve; he knew that unauthorized cleaning was considered nothing less than privacy invasion, yet he continued to clean. Normally, any protest from me would elicit only a wink, or a thoughtful recapitulation of the merits of cleanliness. Tonight, however, Dennis didn't look up from the notebook he was reading.

"It looks like a list of your ex-boyfriends," he said.

"Oh, Christ." I snatched it from his hands and deftly rolled back to my side of the bed, trying to stash it between the mattress and the box springs. It was the blue notebook I keep under my bed, the one that had all three lists I'd ever made in my life: who really killed J.R., the twenty worst songs of all time, and the men I've had sex with—rated. Dennis was up in seconds, his short hair mussed and cowlicky, his eyes squinting without his glasses.

"This is what you think of me?" he asked.

"It was before I got to know you," I lied.

He sniffed and scrunched his round nose like a rabbit. "Why should I believe you?"

"You shouldn't," I said, and I meant it.

He laughed and lay on top of me, hooking his feet just under mine. "And now that you know me...?" he asked, whispering. He kissed my ear lobe. "Well," he said, when I didn't respond. "It's not exactly a fling anymore." He waited. "And I wouldn't call this just a one-night stand," he continued, with less confidence. He wanted reassurance, which I could not give, and so I should have been merciful and told him the truth, but he was getting a hard-on. I didn't have the heart to feel it shrivel when I said something horrible like, "Listen, Dennis, we've got to talk..."

Dennis took my silence as a sign, which it was, but not one he was supposed to understand. The hard-on shriveled anyway and he pushed himself off the bed and stomped into the kitchen to make coffee. I stared at the ceiling, knowing I should go apologize and kiss his back or grab his ass to make him feel better, but I just stayed there, laying over the hidden notebook. I imagined that the incomplete sentence, scrawled in a moment of puerile weakness, was burning through foam padding and springs, singeing a scarlet "G" onto my flesh: Guilty, but of what I wasn't sure. No promises had crossed my lips, even in moments of weakness, but neither had I fully disclosed my vision of our relationship, at least to the degree revealed by the sentence: Number 20. Dennis Arthur. decent fuck: no future.

The moon was waxing when I met him. That's how I explained dating Dennis. Either that or I had just watched Out of Africa again and was looking for something tragically romantic. Under normal conditions, I refused to date managers of small businesses. Big-time money or big-time romance had always been my motto, and for me,

selling sailboats was neither. But for some reason, when Marianne asked if she could give him our phone number, I agreed.

On our first date, Dennis pulled out my chair in Welynsky's Pub, complimented the waitress on her uniform, and by the end of one drink and a round of cheesy fries, had established himself as The Nice Guy of locker-room lore, doomed to disappointment after disappointment with women. I didn't like him. But I pitied him, and that pity led to the second date, tickets to Angels In America that led to the third, and sooner or later, Dennis and I had been together for the better part of a year. I talked about dumping Dennis the way Marianne talked about quitting smoking. "Tomorrow," we both would say and tomorrow would come and Marianne would light up a Parliament and I would drive to Dennis's after work.

The day after Dennis found the list, Marianne and I sat in the upstairs lounge of the Central Regional Office of Actor's Equity. It was eight-thirty in the morning, half an hour before official opening, and only a few of us were in the building. Marianne smoked on the orange and purple plaid tweed couch. I, who had already chewed three of my fingernails to the quick, was working at the long table, sorting and filing headshots, resumes, and personal statements. I flipped through the headshots, looking for someone more exciting than Dennis, feeling guilty for looking, and furious for feeling guilty. Reluctantly, I set aside the headshot of an actor with a Paul Newman grin. "Check this one out," I said to Marianne, holding up a side shot of a man in a black catsuit leaping into the air, body arched. "Memory," I sang to her. "I am dressed in a catsuit. Watch me

leap through the thin air. You can see through my shorts. Guess how many times this bastard has called?" I asked, shaking the photo so that it flopped and creased.

"Once?" said Marianne. "Stop doing that."

"Only four times since last Monday," I said. I resisted the urge to crumple the photo into a laminated wad and set it on fire. "Maybe we can install a hotline voice messaging system so I'm not answering every call from every wacko in the region."

"Can't afford it," Marianne said.

My career was a low-level position in the Membership Department. While my normal job did consist mostly of filing new and existing equity memberships and answering the phone, my latest task was a "special project" brought about by the Y2K. Understand that our office was completely Y2K-ready. The computers had been checked and rechecked months ago, statements had been issued in the newsletter claiming our readiness, everything was under control. A peaceful transition, however, was not to be. On December 3, the Chicago Tribune ran a short editorial by a bitter computer programmer named Walter Buggems who had recently been fired from Hi-Op Computers for sexual harassment. His editorial said that no one was as ready for Y2K as they thought, and that especially "medium-sized" organizations would be hit the hardest. They were just small enough to think they could handle it themselves, but Y2K-readiness would actually be too big of a job for their inept computer operators, they would miscalculate, and the businesses would ultimately crash. Examples of such organizations, he said, were local pizza franchises, taxi services, and the Actor's Equity Union. Maybe he believed he was the Upton Sinclair of the millennium. Personally, I believe the woman he sexually harassed

was an actress and the editorial was his sneaky form of revenge against all actors in the greater Chicagoland area. Assuming my theory is correct, it worked.

Within the day, we began receiving phone calls from panicky prima donnas who had received phone calls from their mothers and their friends, telling them about the "Buggems Bombshell," as we began calling it. Each feared for their hard-won Equity "Identity" and assured me that the last thing they would be doing in the year 2000 was acting in a non-union house. Explanations were fruitless. On December 4, Marianne finally told one of the callers that if he was so worried about our systems crashing, he should send an extra copy of his headshot and file information. "Document it all," she said. "We all have to cover our ass before the New Year."

It was as if Channel 9 had reported clear skies; within minutes, it seemed, the sky began to fall. If it had been one nervous actor who had brought in his life in a manila envelope, it might have been cute. If it had been two nervous actors, we might have smirked and complained about it over coffee. By the end of the week, the other fifteen states in our region were calling the office and sending in pages of useless information. It was December 16. We had two weeks until The Moment of Truth and the glorious task of sorting and filing and returning phone calls was appointed to me.

"So," Marianne said, twirling her cigarette as she tactfully changed the subject from my bitter task at hand. "You had a run-in last night..." She prompted me. In the twelve years of our friendship, Marianne and I have never agreed on my any of my boyfriends. The ones I call boring, she calls "stable." The ones I call exciting, she calls "manic depressive," but I explained the situation to her, anyway. After all, she was my best friend.

I told her how Dennis, after my refusal to consol him, had made coffee and gone into work four hours early.

"Seriously, Tilda, I thought you got rid of that list in college. Why don't you go take him lunch and apologize to him?" Marianne said.

"For what?" I flipped through a set of file folders, angry that my guilt would not subside. The manila stack slid to the floor. "For honesty?"

"For being so passive-aggressive," Marianne said. "If you really aren't happy, you should talk to him about it."

"Thanks, genius. And what should I tell him? That he bores me to tears? That he only laughs at my stupid jokes, and not the ones that are actually funny? That he makes me want to wear a hair shirt when he's around so I'll know that I'm awake?"

"Save it for Oprah," she said. "There is nothing wrong with Dennis. Make up with him quick before someone else snatches him." Marianne was right. There was nothing wrong with Dennis. But still, I was dissatisfied. He was like one loose thread on my sweater that was still waiting to be pulled tight and woven back into the design. It wasn't just a matter of seeing other men on the street and wondering what it would be like to be with them. Everybody does that. It was like I had a disease; every man I saw that wasn't Dennis was my lost soul mate. I would see him—a stranger, buying a newspaper in the street, or standing in line to buy tickets to a movie, or standing in an elevator, drumming his fingers against his suited pant leg with an awkward smile and joke about the millennial fanatics—and each moment would become a Fox night-time drama: "Tilda: Adulteress or Just A Woman With An Active Fantasy Life?"

Marianne gave me crap about my list, but as far as she knew, it stopped with Dennis. I couldn't tell her. She would only be disappointed with me. Only one person knew about the man from the elevator—a doctor. Not even my doctor, just a faceless MD from the yellow pages. I told her that I was worried that my unfaithfulness indicated a chemical imbalance—maybe I was manic depressive or pregnant or diabetic—but she had shaken her head, told me to stop sleeping around. When I told her it was just a one-night stand, that I didn't even have his last name, let alone his phone number, she had called in her assistant and tried to force tests on me. When she left me to slip on the paper robe, I had slipped out past the nurses. If it was chemical, I decided, the doctor would have been worried. She had only been disgusted.

The truth can never be silenced for long, though, and my infidelity was no exception. I brought in Mercer's chicken for lunch and was clearing a place on the desk when Marianne walked in. "Why aren't you over at Dennis's shop explaining what an ass you are?" she asked, picking up a chicken wing.

"You're welcome," I told her. "I'd get lunch for you anytime."

"I think there's something else," she said, and proceeded to explain to me all the reasons she thought I was fooling around on Dennis. She covered everything, from my sudden dismal of him to the way I'd been chewing my fingernails. She must have spent days trying to piece it together. I was speechless. Best friends were not supposed to meddle. Her job was to silently look on as I made an ass out of myself and take me out for a beer when it was over. She had, in my mind, crossed the line.

I muttered something about minding her own business, and some other witticism like "Oh, yeah?" Before I could offer a truly witty retort, the phone rang. The voice on the other end was deep and confident, like a PBS radio announcer. "Yes, I'm in the union, and I'm calling because of this Y2K thing."

"Our computers are completely Y2K ready, sir. Please don't send anything in," I said, holding the receiver with my chin while I angrily thumbed through greasy chicken wings. Marianne gathered her papers and left without so much as a drumstick.

"I already have," he said. "I was just calling to confirm that you received it."

"Oh, great..." I wiped off my fingers and dragged the cord across the room to the long table to look for a napkin. "Yes, it's right here. Everything looks in order," I said, licking my fingers.

"Really?" he said, in a way that made me feel as though I had just missed something. "Don't you need to know my name?"

I spent a minute trying to calm him down before I finally hung up on him.

For the rest of the day, I resumed my morning occupation, staring at headshots, knowing neither John T. Vadaline, with the double-pointed goatee, nor Paul Kenneth Wilson with his smoky gray eyes would infuriate me as much as Dennis or Marianne. They would insist on an open relationship, recommend people for me to date on the side, never meddle in my affairs, and they would certainly never be offended by being rated at sex or relationships. Their entire identities hinged around people subjectively rating them. That's why I need an actor, I thought. Because every actor needs a critic. Paul of the smoky gray eyes wouldn't get mad if I said we had no future. Paul of the smoky gray eyes

would not only understand, but would lean over the other side of the bed, pull out a list of his own, and compare notes with me.

I don't know if I really believed I would find someone who would make me happier than Dennis. I like to think that I was strong, independent—millennial—enough to begin a new phase of my life as a single woman with no romantic prospects. But that's not what was on my mind. What haunted me was the ticking of the clock—a time-keeper bigger than a phantom biological clock, a time-keeper that had nothing to do with being a woman—that ticked off the minutes lost arguing over anchovies on the pizza, the seconds wasted counting out correct change. There were people wrapped in parkas and scarves right outside my office window telling me that death was at hand, handing me fliers that said this was my last chance to get it right. How could I ignore that?

By five o'clock, I had planned my final speech for Dennis. By seven o'clock, over crab legs and cheap red wine, it had been delivered. It was a quiet breakup, with no fuss. Dennis was like that, and I told him how much I appreciated it.

I caught a virus over the weekend. It was awful—something between a cold and the flu, where every trip to the bathroom meant I lost a pound of fluids, one way or the other. Saturday afternoon I left a message for Marianne, telling her I had dumped Dennis and was ready to forgive her—just kidding, of course. I half-expected her to materialize on my doorstep with chicken soup, but she never showed up. By Tuesday, though, my guilt about Dennis had been flushed out with the virus, and I felt rested and focused, as though the 'pause' button on my life had been released. I was feeling playful. Every time I answered

the phone, I drew out my vowels as long as I could. Most of the callers were actors, who appreciated a good drag queen imitation. But just after my first coffee break, Marianne called me into her office.

"Someone called Rich," Marianne said. She was sitting on top of her desk. "He said you were belligerent. People in the office say you're screwing around, Tilda. You're getting me into trouble now."

"Oh, please," I said.

"Can't you just stop screwing around? Period?"

I explained to her, calmly and coolly, the late hours I was working, the stacks of headshots and resumes and W2 forms I had meticulously filed.

"People are complaining. Rich is complaining. See if you can commit to something for once and do it right."

The tone in her voice suggested that her attitude was being influenced by recent decisions I had made in my personal life. When I mentioned this, she suddenly became busy, organizing her pens, stacking her paper clips into a little pile.

"Why should I care that you screwed Dennis over," Marianne said. She still did not look at me, but stared down at a stack of papers on her desk. When I leaned forward, about to explain how much I hated her meddling with my life with Dennis, her ruthless and unforgiving judgments of my actions, I understood. Behind the hair hanging over her tilted face was a deep blush. I stepped back, and left her office.

When I entered his shop, Dennis was talking with a customer, an older man with white hair and a J Crew outfit. Dennis waved at me and I smiled but stayed where I was by the door. The two men laughed, shook hands, and the older man patted Dennis on the shoulder.

"He's a good man," the older man said as he passed me on his way out. "I'll be back on Tuesday, Dennis!"

"She'll be ready!"

His face glowed with the glory of a sale, and before I could stop him, Dennis was insisting on taking me sailing on the lake before it snowed.

"I don't think so," I said. "You might ask Marianne, though."

"She doesn't sail, does she? Come on, Tilda," he said. His enthusiasm was rare and despite my black mood, I couldn't help smiling at him. "The weather is perfect. Let's do something crazy."

"Like what?" I said, thinking of sailing out of Lake Michigan, down the Hudson River and out into the wide quiet emptiness of the Atlantic.

"Let's sail all the way to Milwaukee," he said, leaning forward like he does when an idea excites him. "There's a restaurant on the shore. We could have dinner and be back before ten. Call Marianne and tell her you won't be back today." His cheeks were turning pink and he started popping his knuckles like he does before he races.

My goal, by going to his shop over my lunch break, had become unclear. I knew I needed to talk, but I didn't know what I needed to say, or even if it was Dennis I needed to talk to. But he was smiling and offering his hand. He would take care of me, I knew.

Wipe crumbs off the corners of my mouth and remind me to wear my seatbelt. The thought comforted me.

"Today is not a good day to call," I said.

The next morning was New Year's Eve day. It was bright and gray. On every street corner downtown were wreaths, jingle bells, and Christians wrapped in stocking caps and wool mittens, passing out yellow fliers: The Book of Revelations is at hand! The day of reckoning is near! Where will your soul be January 1, 2000?

Through an intra-office memo, Marianne announced that I was on probation. Everyone, with the sole exception of me, could go home at noon. The memo politely requested that I stay until five, or until all of the mail was properly filed and sorted. I began drinking at one.

The lounge was empty, but the phone was ringing. "I called last week to check on my file," the voice on the other end said. "But I'm not sure the woman I talked to was very reliable."

"Really?" I said. "What was your name again?" He repeated it and this time I recognized it. "What can I do for you, Mr. Schneider?"

"I'd just like to ask someone reliable to check on my file," he said.

"Reliable? Oh, you've called the right place, Mr. Schneider," I said, flipping through the stacks. "It seems we have not one, but two files for you. Hmmm..." I said, tracing the jaw line in the picture with one finger. "It looks like we may be missing some very important information, Mr. Schneider. You better come down to the main office."

"I'll come right away," he said.

He lived in Evanston. It would take him approximately twenty minutes to reach downtown. I opened his file. Michael Schneider, his resume read. Age thirty-six. Hair, black. Eyes, black. Talents: juggling, Irish dialect, fencing, modern dance, Alexander technique. Previous roles: Second door man, "Gypsy." American Blues Theater. 1996.

Two weeks this man had been calling me to preserve for all time his appearance as second doorman, wasting more than a day of my life to save one shining moment in his. I pulled all three of his files out of the drawer and headed to the back room. On my way, I grabbed another handful of files off my work table." Unreliable office assistant, eh? The world will end if we forget your two crummy seconds on stage." I flipped on the lights and switched on the paper shredder. "Easy does it," I sang to the machine as it warmed up. I examined his headshot while I waited. His smile wasn't bad but there was nothing but guilt in his eyes. "Goodbye, second door man," I whispered as I sent his first resume into the machine. "There's no room for you in the next millennium. All the doors are automated."

At 4:03, I left a pile of shredded headshots in Marianne's desk. I shut off the lights, put on my coat, and locked the doors to the office.

I waited for him in the lobby, sneaking drinks out of a flask stashed in my coat pocket. At 4:27, a short man with black hair and a wrestler's build pulled on the locked doors to the Equity Office. I approached him. "Michael Schneider?" I asked.

"Who are you? Do you work here?" he asked, squinting at me through beady little eyes.

"Happy New Year!" I shouted and pulled from behind me a bag of headshot-confetti. I showered him with bits and pieces of his life and his dreams, and left the bag at his feet. His look was confused but delighted and I ran before he recognized what the confetti was. I wouldn't have been able to stand it.

"You're drunk," Dennis said when he answered his door at 6 PM. He had hung up his coat and was kicking off his lace-up burgundy shoes. I nodded.

"I'm sure you have plans," I said. "But I just wanted to wish you a Happy New Year. Is Marianne here? Let's have a drink." I finally knew what it was I had to say. I owed it to Marianne to tell Dennis what I knew—how good she was, how evil I was. She was too shy, too respectful of my feelings to ever confess to Dennis. It was my responsibility to be her voice. "Let's definitely have a drink," I repeated.

"Sounds like a good idea," he said, leading me into the living room and pouring himself a glass of wine. I thought briefly of the unfinished candlelight dinner I had planned for him a month ago. The thought of mentioning it, of seeing the delight on his face, made me queasy.

"I thought, no way to spend the holidays except with old friends," I said.

"They're the best ones to drink with," he said, kissing the back of my hand.

"Marianne is my oldest friend," I said. "We had planned on whistling our New Year's horns together. And here I am, at your place." I took a long drink. "I have to tell you something."

"I have to tell you something," Dennis said. "She went out with people from the office," Dennis said. "She called to see if I wanted to go. When she said you weren't going, I thought I'd wait and see if you'd show up. Which you did," he said.

"Apparently," I said. I tried to imagine who she was out with—Rich? One of the snobbish secretaries? She had nothing in common with those people, no interests, no history. They were convenient stand-ins for friends—coworkers. Even the name sounded sterile. You could never be intimate with a coworker, I thought.

"I don't know about you," Dennis said, picking a piece of cork out of his glass. "But days like this I want to quit my job and do something crazy - like run off and join the circus."

"Bad day?" I asked, imagining Michael Schneider picking up a scrap of paper, recognizing a piece of his name, or the side of his nose. I thought about Marianne finding the shredded resumes on her desk Tuesday morning. I wondered if I still had the business suit I wore to job interviews.

"Sometimes I just wonder where these people come from. This woman came in today wanting to order a replacement mast for her husband's boat, had no idea what kind of mast, no idea what kind of boat, nothing! So, I show her pictures of the kinds we carry, she can't decide between these two, and when I tell her she should go home and find out before she buys one, she flies off the handle! So now she'll probably go off to some other jerk who'll sell her something that's all wrong, overcharge her, and he still gets the business! Unbelievable!"

He squeezed my hand tighter for a moment, then let me go. "Sorry for that," he said. "Should we think about dinner?"

"I'm not hungry. I think I need to go to bed," I said. The clock was ticking but I couldn't stand it, couldn't hear it...

He tucked several strands of my matted hair behind my ears and kissed me on the forehead. The touch of his lips felt strange. "Then I'll just heat up some chicken from yesterday."

In the darkness, the smell of Downy clashed with the stink of Marianne's cigarettes on my clothes. I pulled them off and crawled under the blankets, shivering at the coolness of the sheets. I curled myself into a ball and listened to the sounds coming from the kitchen. The microwave hummed. A chair screeched, pulled out from the table. Utensils dinged together. Someone sat down and began to tear at reheated flesh, to suck on reheated bones. From just beyond the door, the reflected glow from the television screen was visible, flickering along the walls of my bedroom as flames. He flipped through the channels, stopping on a piano solo. Tchaikovsky. The pianist played on and on, and I blocked out the voice of the woman pleading for money. She sounded like the fanatics at the office corner, screeching and wailing, promising doom if I did not give...

Backlit by the glow from the television, a darkened figure moved toward my bed. He threw back the covers, his feet gravitated toward mine. I pulled away from him, curling my body into a ball like a fist. I looked up into his eyes, but the light was behind him, and they were dark. He had propped himself up on one elbow and was leaning over me, the flames reflecting over his head like a flickering halo. For a moment, the darkness let me

slip outside myself, and I imagined I was Marianne–small, frightened, aroused. He tucked the loose strands of my hair behind my ears, leaving my face naked.

Spin

Back at Gate C23, Marie had volunteered to share for a rental car. She had been standing at the back of the line that snaked around O'Hare's Terminal C, when the couple approached her. Com Air Flights would not be airborne, a voice on the screechy intercom had announced, for another fourteen hours. Marie's sister Lily was arriving in Cincinnati in less than ten. The car seemed like a good idea. What choice was there but to venture from the fluorescent clutches of O'Hare onto the dark, starlit Midwestern Interstate?

Foolishly, perhaps, Marie had assumed that five strangers in a Lexus would have nothing to say to each other. She had been looking forward to those six hours of silence in which she could sulk. Not because of her bad luck with airports—that was a fact she had grown accustomed to, like wearing itchy dress socks as a girl—but because Carl had stayed behind in Las Vegas. Lily, who was two years younger than Marie, with a child and her own beauty salon, had insisted on visiting this weekend. And the car was cramped and smelled like hairspray.

Even so, Marie could not sustain her peevish mood. The more she thought about Carl sinking nickels into the slots without her, or the star above the horizon that reminded her of the mole on her mother's chin, or on her breath that fogged the window next to her cheek, the more Marie became aware of the people sharing the car with her, the rustling of the flight attendant's jacket, the faint sterile smell of Listerine on the salesman's breath as he sighed and crossed his legs, and sighed again and uncrossed them.

They talked about the drought. It was February, and there was no snow, hadn't been in over a month. Was there such thing as a winter drought? her companions wondered. Can a winter drought hurt crops? Ruin water supplies? What was February without snow? It was a

barren plain, Marie thought, as she watched out the window as they passed acre after acre of parched farmland.

Once the conversation turned to the details of their jobs—the price of piloting school, the hardships of selling history textbooks, the petty jealousies in the hand modeling community—Marie lost interest. It was the darkness, she supposed, that made them so willing to share. With their faces concealed, it became easy for them to confess. It became so that Marie, afraid her frustration would reveal itself, spent what seemed like hours concentrating on remaining perfectly still. When her nose began to itch, she willed it to stop, afraid to move even one hand. She imagined the hand might not be satisfied with a nose scratch, and might move on to the neck of the pilot, who was sitting in front of her. Her concentration lasted through Gary Indiana, past six billboards for Arby's triple cheese melt patty, until finally, inevitably, the hand model asked: "And—Marie, is it?—what is it that you do?"

The shadows of telephone poles sped by as she wondered how to answer. Would she tell them she had almost graduated from Ohio State University with a bioengineering degree in feed science? About how Carl had fallen to one knee, with promises of a farm just east of Cincinnati with her own horses and goats and barn cats? It wasn't really Carl's fault that the closest they'd seen to a barn cat in three years was Whiskers, who belonged to Mrs. Henderson downstairs. Pastureland was more expensive than Carl had imagined, the equipment more than he could afford on his mid-level corporate salary. He hadn't had to take the first job offer he got, from Proctor and Gamble, but the economy was in a recession. And Cincinnati was a very pleasant place to live.

What, then, did Marie do? For the first year of her marriage, she had gone to visit her horse Polly at the University farm every weekend, but over time it became awkward. The freshman agriculture students didn't recognize her. The old timers asked how she was and what she was doing, and Marie grew tired of constructing creative responses.

Last year, when she had stopped visiting Polly altogether, she had cried a lot. But it took stamina to act like nothing was wrong. Carl saw through it, of course, but she always claimed she was too tired to talk. He wasn't one to press the issue. To distract herself from the deficiencies in her life–lack of degree, lack of job, lack of horse–Marie had taken up walking. Every day, three times a day, sometimes two or three hours at a time, Marie would don her Lycra outfit and walk around the neighborhood, circling the same blocks again and again.

"I exercise," Marie told the hand lotion model. They had hit a stretch of highway with seams, forcing Marie to clear her throat and say it again.

"Oh," the model said. "So you're an athlete?"

Marie explained that no, she wasn't an athlete, she had dropped out of college to marry her husband and now she exercised.

"Oh! You're a housewife! That's a tough job, too."

Marie assured her that no, she was not a housewife, because she did not clean, nor did she cook. There were no soap operas, no garden parties, no Martha Stewart arts and crafts, and no lunches with her mother. She simply exercised.

A backlash to this attitude was inevitable, Marie knew, but she couldn't help herself. She enjoyed the moment of silence while her companions decided how to react. Then, as she knew they would, the suggestions came. Had she tried flight attendant school, selling books,

retail, hand-modeling? The pilot assured Marie she'd be a wonderful waitress and the salesman knew of an opening at a deli in Florence, Kentucky. The flight attendant knew that the airline was in desperate need of "maintenance-control" people in Houston, and the pilot had heard that people were getting paid thousands of dollars to teach English in Ghana.

Marie dodged their questions, tried to deflect their suggestions, to hide behind the darkness of a February night, but she could not escape the conversation. Even crouched in the corner, her hands practically covering her ears, their words sought out her warmth. Finally came the question that Carl referred to only as the "The Biggie," the question that for three years Marie had successfully avoided answering and that everyone who knew Marie—Carl, Lily, their grandmother, even Mrs. Henderson—knew not to ask: "Are you planning on having children?" the hand model asked.

Her reply was a lie. But she despised their proximity, their stories, their gossipy interest in her life, and she wanted to stun them, wanted to hurt them. "I hate children," Marie said, and once again, the car fell silent.

It remained silent, without even the radio, for another seven miles, until the pilot swung the Lexus to a stop in front of a glowing neon Shell station. They all stumbled out, stretching limbs, cracking backs, the night air allowing conversation to return, but slowly, gently, as if Marie's pronouncement still remained with them, threatening to crack their fragile moods.

The air at the gas station smelled of horses. It disoriented Marie for a moment. It was a smell from her childhood, from her Life-Before-Carl, as Lily would say, and while the others coughed and waved their hands in front of their faces, Marie breathed deeply. The smell came

from a big rig parked at a diesel pump nearby the Lexus. From the trailer on the back of the rig, Marie could hear the shuffling and whinnying of the animals.

While the others rummaged through the trunk for wallets and spare change, Marie went to the trailer. Through the slats, she could make out the shadows of bony knees, swishing tails. She wondered how Polly was doing. "Hey, there," Marie said. She spoke to them in a low voice that was drowned out by the idling of the truck. She considered for a moment climbing into the cab and escaping with them. She would stop by Columbus and pick up Polly, then turn west and drive all the way to Montana. There was a ranch there, a friend of hers from high school worked on it, just outside of Butte. He had sent her a postcard of it—the Triple J. The land was flatter than Ohio with giant blue mountains in the background. The horses in the photo looked strong and wild as they ran across the plain. Or maybe it was just how they were airbrushed, Marie thought.

She felt a little guilty for not including Carl in her daydream. But Carl, with his button up shirts fitting snugly against his belly, his obsession with tying the perfect knot in his tie, his baby soft hands, never quite fit in. Too sedate for a ranch, too bookish for a farm, too clean for a trailer in the desert. And yet he would be devastated if she ever left him. He would get on, though, Marie thought. A man like Carl always does.

"Does anybody want to use the pay phone?" the flight attendant asked. She had just purchased a phone card and she waved it in the air like she was hailing a taxi. Marie considered calling Lily. Marie suspected Lily's intentions for this visit were not benign. They rarely were. Marie decided to call anyway. If something happened to her, if the salesman or the model turned out to be a serial killer, someone should know.

When Lily answered the phone, her voice came through the line slowly and sleepily. "Don't go to the bathroom without your bag," Lily said. "That way you can always make a quick escape."

"Don't be silly. They're fine."

"Why did you call me then?" Lily said.

"I don't know." Marie leaned her head against the cold plate glass window. She imagined Lily arriving off the plane, waving agriculture college pamphlets and brochures.

"Look, here's your homework," Lily said. It was one of her tics, wanting people prepared before she talked to them. "Think about leaving Carl. Not forever, just for a little while. Finish your degree. Get out of the house, get a job, get a haircut. Do something, Marie. Just think about it."

Marie brushed her frizzy hair with her fingers before returning to the horse trailer. She poked her fingers through the slats, hoping to be nuzzled by a wet nose.

"We're ready," the model said. "Do you need to go?"

Yes, Marie thought. But not in that way. She climbed in the backseat of the car.

He had pretended to leave her. Last month, just before New Year's, Carl had pulled a suitcase out of the closet and started throwing shirts into it. That had given him away—he hung his shirts in a garment bag when he traveled. Lily had put him up to it, he said, when Marie called his bluff. She told Carl it would help motivate Marie to take control of her life. Carl was just an enabler, Lily had said. As Carl explained this to Marie, he had cried. Marie had kissed him, wiped his tears with her shirt sleeve, and unpacked his suitcase. She convinced him to tell Lily that he had lost his nerve and had never gone through with the plot.

Marie had thought it best to confront her in person, so that Lily couldn't get off the phone to tend the baby or see to one of her customers.

The pilot announced that they were three hours from Cincinnati. "Anybody up for a car game?" he asked. "I could use some help staying awake." Twenty questions, hinky pinkies, and billboard scrabble were all suggested, but the salesman voted against them all. When the model suggested they sing hymns, the pilot didn't wait for a consensus, but began, in a moderate baritone, "Oh, come, all ye faithful."

The salesman squirmed next to her, stretching his legs out and pushing Marie closer to the door. She wiggled back, pushing her elbow gently into his gut. He stopped squirming and retreated to his original position. Marie closed her eyes. In three hours, she and Polly could ride the entire Antioch trail, including a stop to wade in the Little Miami. In three hours, she might hear the Methodist hymnal in its entirety, two-part harmony compliments of the pilot.

When they stopped at the next gas station, the same truck and horse trailer were there.

"Do you want your bag?" the model shouted. When Marie said yes, the hand lotion model gave her a knowing smile. "I always keep a few extras in my pocket," she said, whispering to Marie. "You know—for feminine emergencies."

Marie scowled, and hurried to beat the others to the restroom.

It smelled of mildew and aerosol hairspray, and Marie tried to hold her breath as she stared at herself in the warped, aluminum mirror. A familiar face stared back, the peaked one that had appeared a few months after her wedding. She had been fatter, certainly. Corn-fed, Carl had teased her. Now, Lily said, Marie looked "urban," probably from the exercise. She

was glad the Lexus had been dark, so she didn't hear how the model or the flight attendant would have described her.

The flight attendant was waiting outside, already uncapping her lipstick. The only other person in the store–for the attendant had at some point disappeared into the back–was a man who, Marie decided, must be the driver of the rig that was idling in the parking lot.

He was a scrawny old man with gray polyester pants and a toothpick in his mouth. He wore a blue work shirt with white long underwear folded up over the cuffs of his long sleeves. From the candy aisle, Marie watched him in the giant security mirror that hung from the ceiling like a stained, reflective moon. He flipped through a newspaper as he stretched his back, his movements stilted and arthritic. Marie spent a moment calculating the risk of asking him for a ride; he could be an ax murderer, she thought, but an old one. She could certainly outrun him. Besides, Marie thought, he was pulling horses.

If Lily knew what Marie was thinking, she would say, No way, Marie. You're fucking nuts, and that, for Marie, cinched the deal.

He was climbing into the red cab of his truck when Marie approached him. She spoke quickly, before she could change her mind. "Going east?" Marie asked. And in that moment, she could see her other self, the Marie who hadn't spoken, wilt like paper over a flame, crumbling quickly and disintegrating in a sharp burst of light and smoke.

"I really need a ride. Just for a couple of hours," she said. She coughed to clear her throat. "To Cincinnati."

"Twenty bucks," he said. The yellow glow of the truck's parking lights became brighter as the engine idled faster, making light dance on the rear of the tiny rental car.

The cab smelled of hay and horse manure.

"It stinks in here," the trucker warned her as she climbed into the passenger's seat.

"I don't mind," Marie said. Her mouth felt dry suddenly. "I'm used to it." She situated herself in the seat and looked around. It was possible he had killed people in here, Marie thought as she looked around the cab. Hitchhikers and drifters. A hammer rested on the floor near her feet, along with several large wrenches. But it looked more like the inside of a workman's locker than the lair of a psycho. Photos were taped to the dashboard and the sunshields. A pair of socks, rolled into a ball, rested on the floorboard near a black tool kit. The flight attendant looked at her from the backseat of the Lexus. Marie waved and the flight attendant waved back.

The trucker shifted from side to side in his seat, took a sip of his coffee, and yanked the truck into gear. The Lexus seemed puny from her vantage point, as did the gas station pumps. One nudge from the truck and they would fall like dominoes. The flight attendant was still watching, so Marie gave her a thumbs up sign, and waved. As they pulled out of the parking lot, it occurred to Marie that the model might not have been paying attention when Marie told her she was leaving. They might think she had gotten abducted. From the side mirror, Marie saw the flight attendant waved again as the truck jerked out onto the highway ramp.

The trucker wore a gray cap, the bill creased on the sides so it made shutters around his forehead. He came from a generation of men who all looked like farmers, Marie thought, weathered, tan, and tough. Clint Eastwood men, who could punch you clean over the counter in a bar fight, and then buy you a drink twenty minutes later. She liked men like this, and had, until they were married, thought Carl was one of them. Marie began to imagine the faces

and the countryside and the inside of diners that this man must have seen. She was relieved that they seem to have made him tired.

Tuned to a country music station, the radio competed with the noise of the truck, but even so, Marie thought she could hear the horses in the back, shuffling a few steps to the right or to the left.

"I have a horse," Marie said. "Her name is Polly."

"Got a farm?" the man said.

"No," Marie said. She explained about the University farm.

His name was Bill. He held the Styrofoam coffee cup as he drove, steering the wheel with the palm of his left hand. When the radio station became static, Bill told her that he had farmed for fifty years before he went bankrupt. "I held out as long as I could," he said. "Then Ginny died last year. Cancer. We were married fifty-three years," he said, pointing to a photo taped to the dashboard. It swung by a piece of yellowed scotch tape. The woman in the photo must have been in her sixties, and she was looking at Bill. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips were pressed together in a smirk. One of her arms was looped through Bill's and even Bill looked a little smug, as if he carried a secret that every man wanted. Marie envied them.

"I'm sorry," Marie said.

He sighed. "Well, she was bound to die of something. Car wreck would have been cheaper. Could've kept the farm, then."

On either side of the highway, the soy fields and pastures looked like black swamps, the edges rippling when the truck whizzed by.

"Must have been nineteen fifty-six when they got sick," Bill said. "Shaking, fever, sweating so their manes were wet, kicking at anything that moved. I got five teeth knocked out that summer." Bill used his index finger to tap on his front teeth. "They all fell out eventually, but Ginny always said I'd be a spokesman for dentures."

"So what happened?"

"I hauled two of the horses all the way to Omaha. It wasn't easy. My horse trailer had broken down that summer, and with six kids, we couldn't afford to go out a rent a trailer truck to haul them. I had to use the goat trailer we used at the fairs. These horses were squeezed in there for a day and a half while I drove half-way across the state. When I get to the doctor, he says, 'Bill, I don't know what's wrong with your horses, but I think they got cramps in their legs.' "

Marie smiled. "Did he know what was wrong with them?"

"Nah. He gave me some pill to give them, but a day after I got them home, one of them—her name was Daisy. Sweetest horse until she got sick. The kids used to treat her like a pet, fix her mane up in braids, lead her around the yard. A day after we got back from the vet, Daisy reared up and kicked Jane, that's my oldest daughter. Broke two of Jane's ribs and her right arm, so we had to shoot her. Fifty years ago, I got a nickel a pound for horsemeat. These horses I'm hauling now will bring about fifty cents a pound."

"These?"

"They're old," Bill said. His laughter was coarse. "They'd probably send me off if I was a horse."

"Those horses out there. You must miss working with them. Ever thought about letting them have one last stroll around the pasture? Just to remember what it's like?"

"Look, I've shot a lot worse than horses," Bill said. "Somebody paid for them to go to the slaughterhouse and that's where I've got to take them."

Marie remembered her first 4-H competition with Polly. She was teenager, barely fourteen. The category was spins. While Marie gently guided the reins from the ground, the horse turned in circles, her forelegs in the air while her hind legs rotated beneath them, looking something like a large dog begging for food. Behind them were the advanced competitors. Their horses were leaping and twisting in the air, jumping deftly over hurdles.

She waited thirty minutes before she asked him to pull over. By the time Bill disappeared into the gas station, Marie had pulled a key off of his key ring and had the latch to the trailer in her hand. Flakes of rust stuck to her palm and her fingers. If she pulled up on the latch, releasing the catch, the trailer door would slide upwards and open, and the horses would be before her, tethered to each other and to the side of the truck like chain gang prisoners. A few hooks to release, the ramp to lower and the horses would be free.

They stood in a row down the length of the truck, separated by stalls of thin sheet metal. Marie stroked the back of the horse nearest the door. His skin flinched under her hand and he whinnied. Although his stomach sagged from age, he had the look of an animal that had once been powerful.

Her sinuses stung from the cold air blowing in through the open trailer door. Polly had belonged to both Marie and Lily, once. Lily had loved to braid Polly's mane while Marie

brushed her legs and stomach and back. In the field behind their house, they would invent roles for themselves. Sometimes, Lily would be the maiden in distress while Marie, the wandering knight arrived on horseback to save her. Sometimes Marie would be the unconscious villain, slung onto the horse like a sack of flour, riding to her death at the end of the field, while Lily chased after on foot. When Lily started bringing other girlfriends over, Marie created new characters that rode alone, the milkmaid who escaped from her evil master, or the witch who circled the forest on horseback looking for prey. At eleven, Lily had suggested Marie join 4-H; she said it was "creepy" the way her older sister played by herself.

The horse whinnied again and the others responded, filling the trailer like a low, mournful chorus. Marie found a bag of feed in the front of the trailer. They were not hungry, but she poured it out for them anyway, letting the food become a pile before each horse. Returning to the horse closest to the door, she stroked his manes, pulled out the tangles with her fingers until it fell smoothly around his shoulders. She rubbed his coat until Bill returned.

His reaction was confusion, at first, and then anger. He thought she was robbing him, poisoning his cargo, or setting them free. Marie tried to explain why she needed to see the horses, but her tongue stumbles on the words. Bill climbed into the trailer, pushed her aside, and tugged on tethers and chains.

"Do you mind if I make a phone call?"

Bill did not answer, but kicked some of the horse feed across the floor of the trailer. Marie took her bag from the front of the cab.

Lily's voice cracked when she answered the phone and Marie could hear the cry of her nephew in the background.

"Don't get on the plane tomorrow," Marie said. "Don't come to Cincinnati."

"What's happened?" She was becoming lucid. "Should I call the cops?"

"I'm fine," Marie said. "I'd prefer to be alone this weekend."

"Look, about Carl—"

Marie cut the phone call short. She saw no point in turning it into a huge affair. Lily would be angry, but she would forgive Marie. Eventually.

Bill was still in the trailer securing the horses. Marie returned to her seat in the cab, pulling her knees close under her chin. She wondered if she would have to leave Carl. If her life felt vacant now, though, how could she bear being without him?

Flashing blue lights lured her outside. In the side mirror, she saw two officers standing near the truck talking to Bill.

"Marie Brown?" the male officer asked as he approached. She rolled down the window.

"Yes."

"We received a call from your friends, Mrs. Brown," the officer said. Marie hesitated, wondering if Lily had acted that quickly. "A Mr. Tom Ferguson and Miss Maggie Blye—" the officer said. The pilot and the flight attendant. Marie felt her mouth become dry. The officer continued. "They were concerned you'd climbed into this truck against your will."

"Oh, no," Marie said.

"Please step out of the cab," the officer said and he opened the cab door.

As it closed, the door squeaked and to Marie, it sounded like a crow cawing, desolate and mournful. As she stepped out under the brilliant night sky into the chill February air, she

pulled her coat around her, the wool collar scratching her chin, and, digging her hands in her pockets, Marie hunched her shoulders, as if she were fluffing her thin feathers for warmth.

On weekends, he came to visit her in her apartment in Columbus. "I've been looking at houses," Carl said. For the first time, silver hairs were appearing around his temples. He looked tired. There was a house he liked, east of Cincinnati. It wasn't a farm, they couldn't afford a farm yet, but it came with an acre of land, a vegetable garden, and a garage that could be turned into a one-horse barn for Polly.

"In Amelia?" Marie asked.

Carl said he thought so.

"Remember the pilot?" Marie asked. "From that awful trip?"

Carl remembered. He had heard the story more than once, but it gave him an excuse to tease her. "You never liked that guy," he said. "Why not? He sounds nice."

He probably was. He had a home, out near the house Carl had found. It was just past the suburban sprawl of eastern Cincinnati, where the traffic was more pick-up truck than passenger car. Marie wondered if she'd ever call him. Tom Ferguson. He must be right in the phone book. She probably wouldn't, but it was nice knowing she could, if she wanted to.

The Change Must Be Good

In front of a pub called The Greyhound, two blue-haired teenagers pass out flyers. One of them, a boy with black lipstick and rhinestone-studded wristbands, smiles shyly at Samantha as she approaches. Sam glances at the ground and enters the pub. The stale, smoky air of the pub is filled with the first strains of an American pop song—the Backstreet Boys, Sam thinks. It is a different England, a different Europe, than the one Sam had visited on her honeymoon in 1951. Now it is all pop stars and tennis shoes. In Florence, there were more photos of Charles Barkley than the Piazza del Duomo. The change must be good, Sam thinks. Somehow.

Light streams into the dingy barroom, falling on seats covered with a faded orange and red striped fabric. The bartender hums as he hooks up the kegs for the day's drafts. Samantha thinks he barely looks old enough to be drinking alcohol, let alone serving it. He greets her and, when she orders a scotch, a dimple appears in his left cheek.

From her table, she studies the paintings of racing dogs that hang on the walls. In the painting directly above Sam's table, six dogs speed towards a finish line, their long bodies drawn taut and thin. Onlookers in the stands wear nineteenth century hats and suits. A few parasols dot the background with color. The dogs in the foreground of the painting are painted in enough detail that Sam can make out each rib beneath the gray fur. "Merry Olde England," the caption of the painting reads. Merry for who, Sam wonders.

She thanks the bartender for the drink. Her husband Sully also had a dimple, although without looking at a photograph, she can no longer remember in which cheek. He had died two months ago, his face unfamiliar to those who had not seen him in a year. Their children and

friends explained to each other that the change was from the lack of sun, the lack of exercise, the last few weeks spent in the hospital. But to Sam, the change was deeper, more fundamental. His features had altered with the progression of his disease. As he forgot his address, the names of his daughters, his favorite meal, his wife, it seemed as though the structure of tendon, bone and flesh forgot, too. Once the disease became severe, Sully's jaw, which for seventy-one years had rested slightly to the right, became perfectly centered. The stress he carried in his shoulders vanished just before his death, as if the guy wire that had carried Sully through life had simply snapped.

The scotch is smooth as she sips it, but it burns going down, and Sam flinches and her eyes water. If their son Andy had come with her, he wouldn't have let her drink. "Cirrhosis, mother," he would have said, although no one in their family had ever had liver trouble. He would have probably ordered them both fruit-flavored seltzer water.

An old man arrives at the pub, greeting the bartender with a gravelly "hallo." Using a cane to support his slight body, he slowly maneuvers his way through pub chairs, tottering as he walks. From underneath his brown plaid shirt, his back bulges into a hump. His brown trousers are rolled at the bottoms, as if he will eventually grow into them. Sam expects the bartender to help him across the room, but the young man simply grins.

"You know what I want," the old man says to him, grunting as he pulls a chair out. He sits down at the table next to Samantha's. She lifts her bag, planning to change to a table farther away, but the bartender interrupts her.

"This is Abe Graham," the bartender says to Samantha. "You two both drink scotch before noon."

"Mind your own bloody business," Abe says. Liver spots darken his face and hands and Sam detects a tremor in his hands as he pulls himself towards his table.

It's good advice, Sam thinks. She wishes her children would follow it. She opens the newspaper she read earlier this morning and pretends to read it. Andy and his sisters had opposed this trip, insisting that it was foolish for their mother to travel alone. She was too old and too naïve to handle all the currency changes and different languages. "But it's the Euro now," Sam had told them. "What could be easier?" Andy scolded her for being sarcastic, and the girls urged her to at least take a companion. If not one of them, they said, one of the grandchildren. Someone who could call for help if she slipped and fell. But she insisted on going alone and they concluded that their mother was losing her reason, or maybe—and Andy had always been melodramatic—that she was suicidal.

But Sully had planned the trip for their fiftieth wedding anniversary. To waste the hours he spent doing research, booking hotels, organizing the sites they would see would have been a shame. And a companion would have been too much work—constantly negotiating and compromising, spending too much energy just trying to get along with a person. That alone would waste the vacation, she thinks.

The bartender winks at Sam when he takes Abe's lunch order. The old man hacks out a loud, phlegm-filled cough. When Sam glances over at him, he nods.

"Could I interest you in a game of cards?" he asks. He pats the deck in his shirt pocket. "Spades, gin rummy, Go Fish, you name it."

"I'm sorry," Sam says. She rustles her paper and pulls it closer to her face.

"Sure, no worries," he says. He returns his attention to his drink, sipping slowly as he stares down at the table. Sam wonders how often he comes here, how many strangers he has played cards with. Who is she to be so antisocial? she thinks suddenly. This is her last stop before returning to an empty house in Danbury, Connecticut. When Sully died she had not had to worry about being alone. In the weeks after his funeral, she had cleaned, organized, planned for this trip. When this trips ends... But Sam pushes it from her mind. She won't have to worry about it for a while. The children will be there when she gets home. They will send grandchildren to stay with her, for a month or two. Eventually they will slip back into their old patterns, stopping by once a month, filling the extra place setting at the table with a new boyfriend or a girlfriend. Will she become like this man sitting next to her, inviting strangers to help her pass the time? She almost laughs out loud at the image of herself becoming a regular at Joe's Bar and Grill in Danbury. Those regulars are pool sharks or alcoholics, people looking to win a buck or die a little faster. She's not ready for either of those options. Yet.

If it were just a question of getting work, she could return to the public library, ask for a part-time job in the mornings. Janet, the city's hiring liaison, would hire her in a second. But the library was Sam's for so long—thirty years—she cannot bear the thought of taking orders from the new head librarian they hired at Sam's retirement. He seems like a decent man, but still. He does not know how to prop up the number nine stack with plywood shavings, or how to control the temperamental water pipes as well as she. Too many cooks, she thinks. Her presence would be awkward.

The pair of blue-haired teenagers who were passing out the fliers enters the pub. "Fill me up, Mikey! I'm running on empty!" the boy yells, pounding on his stomach. The silver chains dangling from his pants pockets jangle. The bartender laughs and motions for him to sit down. The girl, dressed in black boots with rubber soles three inches thick, smiles at Abe, who raises his drink to her, and Sam guesses that these two—did they still call them punks?—must be lunchtime regulars.

The old man watches them for a moment, then shuffles his deck and begins playing solitaire. Sully would reproach her for not playing cards with the man. He would look at her with a quick glance of reprimand, perhaps, then a wink, before suggesting a game to the companionless fellow. For Sully, engaging new companions had been effortless, thrilling. He would have had the whole pub playing Spades before the afternoon was over. Sam sighs and curses her fickle memory. Sully would not have played if Sam did not. Later, at the bed and breakfast, he might have scolded her for not playing. They might have even argued about it.

The noise in the pub escalates when a group of six Americans arrive. Except for their cameras and fanny packs, they look dressed to go jogging in their cotton shorts, white running shoes, and baseball caps. When Abe chuckles as the group argues over a seating arrangement, Sam wants to laugh with him, but she hesitates. He might construe her laughter as a gesture of friendship, or take it as a sign he should make her acquaintance.

At the table across the pub, the Americans begin complaining. Where are the menus, they want to know. One of the women, a skinny brunette, fetches them from behind the bar. A curly haired man says in a loud voice, "Bangers and mash, if you please," with a poor imitation of a

British accent, and the others laugh uproariously. They take turns repeating the phrase, none of them more successful with the accent, until one man complains about the service. He goes to the bar. "Excuse me," he says. "We're ready to order."

"Sit down, mate," the boy with blue-hair says. "He's doing the best he can. The only one working, you know."

"Yes, but we're on a schedule," the American says. His glasses have thick black frames and he stares at the boy through them. "Aren't you people?"

Next to her, Abe huffs and coughs, shifting himself carefully in his seat so that he can watch them. "My Iris, god rest her soul, would have a thing or two to say," he says. "She had no patience for those kind of Americans." Sam has heard of American travelers who pass themselves off as Canadian, to let people know they are not obnoxious or puerile. Sam wonders if it is not also a special pass that allows them access to the secret nooks and crannies of Europe, to hidden castles, traffic-free highways, and first-class train seats.

The bartender enters from the kitchen. The way he handles the Americans impresses Sam. If she were the bartender, she thinks, she would bid them good riddance at the door. But this young man charms them. He asks them questions and does an impression of President Bush. They forget their impatience and laugh as he serves them drinks.

When he returns to the kitchen, there is a crash. Metal clatters against metal, the bartender screams, then curses. The talking in the pub stops. People look at each other for a signal that the bartender is uninjured. It does not come.

The old man is the first to stand, but too quickly, and he stumbles. Sam grabs his arm to keep him from falling. "I'll help you," she says, getting out of her seat. He pulls his arm away,

more out of impatience than rudeness, and walks quickly, relying heavily on his cane. Sam follows. The punk girl is running across the room towards the bathroom, banging on the door. "Kane," she shouts. "Come quick."

They smell the fire before they see it, a charred, greasy tang that makes Abe speed his stilted walk into a run. Sam is vaguely aware of the people around her, but the heat in the kitchen makes her head swim. Tiny bugs bite at Sam's arms and neck, and she slaps at them until she realizes it is the grease, snapping and popping as it catches on fire. The grill and part of the counter are in flames. She backs away from the fire until she is against the wall. There is a rush of air, a crackling sound as a roll of paper towels catches on fire. The flames leap up towards the wooden cabinet above the counter.

The bartender is across the bare room, leaning against the stainless steel freezer, pressing a towel to his face. On the floor near his feet is a broken plate and a spray of black grease. Without looking up from the towel, the bartender directs them to the fire extinguisher. It is on the wall, just behind Sam. When she hesitates, trying to remember how to use it, the American with the black glasses grabs it from her hands. There is an instant where Sam will not let go; her instinct is to fight to hold on to the extinguisher. But her fingers are not strong, her hands are shaking, and the man, his forehead sweating, pulls the pin. He sprays the grill, but the foam does not suffocate the flames; it shoots them across the room, like a gust of wind, and scorches the side of a cabinet. The wood flickers and burns.

There had been a fire next door to their first apartment, in Boston, just after they were married. Sam was awake with Andy, trying to get the colicky baby to sleep. A boiler in the basement next door exploded, they would later learn. The explosion shook their apartment. The

kitchen window blew in, shattering glass across the table and floor. Sully had rushed out of the bedroom to find her and walked through the glass. With his feet cut and bleeding, they had evacuated and, in their pajamas, watched as their neighbors' apartments burn to the ground.

Sam wants to leave the kitchen and escape to the street, but there is someone standing in front of the entrance to the bar and the bartender is leaning against the back door, blocking it. The fire extinguisher is in the hands of the boy with blue hair. Swiftly and methodically, he sprays the outermost edges of the fire, shouting at the others to move as he points the extinguisher at the paper towels, the cabinet, the counter. After several minutes, when the sirens of the fire truck can be heard in the distance, the fire on the grill is extinguished as well. Ash from the paper towels floats in the air, and Sam coughs until she gags. Everyone is sweating. The bartender is sitting on the floor against the wall, one side of his face red, blistering, raw. Sam pushes past the others to the back door. In a tiny gravel lot outside, she vomits.

The officer scolds them all for not evacuating, and tells them how lucky they were to have Kane with them. He's a part-time volunteer firefighter, he says, slapping the boy on the back. Kane blushes. The officer assures them that although the grease burns will hurt for quite a while, the bartender's wounds look worse than they are. As he talks, the white stretcher is loaded into the back of the ambulance, the bartender mumbling last instructions to Abe as the white doors close.

Once the fire truck drives away, the group lingers on the sidewalk as Abe locks up the bar. There is nervous laughter. They sound relieved, still shaky with fear. Standing apart, Sam finds that she cannot laugh with them. The image of the bartender sitting on the floor, his swollen lip,

the scorch mark on his cheek, will not leave her. Despite what the fireman said, it is clear the young man will have scars, even disfigurement. He is too young, Sam thinks, to suffer like that. There is no justice, no sense in a person suffering through that much pain. It is only when she feels a hand on her shoulder that Sam realizes she is crying, sobbing openly. The others look at her with pity.

"Look," Abe says. "It's a tragedy. Michael's a great kid. He'll come out all right, though. Find a way to sue the owners for a pretty sack, I'll bet." Sam nods. He offers her a handkerchief, but she declines.

"Try to forget about it," a voice says. It is the punk boy, Kane. He clasps Samantha's hand tightly. His skin is soft. "That shook me up, too. But everyone's okay now. Mikey's going to be fine. How long are you in town for?"

"Until tomorrow," Sam says in a whisper. The thought of returning to the empty house on Violet Avenue, with its trim green shutters and red front door, is suddenly unbearable to Sam.

"We can't let your last day be such a disaster," Kane says. "Here's something I bet you didn't know. On the first day of summer, the British all put on magnificent, ridiculous hats and parade around the Serpentine." Abe starts to speak, but Kane pounds him on the back, and the old man begins coughing. "You remember, old timer," Kane says pointedly to Abe. "It's an old British tradition."

"The first day of summer," Abe says, between coughs. "I had forgotten."

"Henny and I are headed up that way anyway. Why don't you come with us? And Abe, too?"

Sam refuses, but the other Americans urge her to accept Kane's. Fresh air is what she needs, they tell her, what they all need. She begins to walk away to return to her bed and breakfast, but Kane stops her, asks her to consider it a free, guided tour. The Americans would go with her, but their tour bus is scheduled for departure. These British are good people, they assure her. She'll be taken care of.

If the old man would only stay behind, the walk would be agreeable to Sam. She senses he has the potential to be a nuisance, but she cannot think of a way to discourage him from coming.

The weather is warm but a faint breeze rustles the maps of the tourists standing on street corners. Kane easily leads them through the tourists, since most of them move out of his way when they see him approach. In addition to his studded wristbands and collar, Kane wears a pair of black leather pants with zippered pockets at the sides of his knees and his thighs. Silver chains dangle between the pockets, creating a web of metal around his legs that clinks as he walks. His shirt is a blue button-up work shirt, like a factory work shirt from the forties. He does not look at people as he passes them, but rather glances over their heads, or down at the sidewalk. Periodically, he turns to make sure Sam and Abe are still behind him, his soft voice carrying over the noise of the street when he looks back.

The girl, Henny, twists one strand of jet-black hair into knots as they walk. Like Kane, the ends of her hair are blue but the rest is jet black, like thick wet paint. Along with her rubber platform boots, she wears an old t-shirt with the name of a school on it and a long skirt made of layers of ripped fabric. She has thick black eyelashes drawn onto her cheeks, and when she blinks, a pair of sketchily drawn eyes stares out at the world from the tops of her eyelids. As they walk, she remains apart from them. It almost seems as if she is not aware of them, but every now and then

Kane will say something that will cause her to laugh, or she'll glance at him in a sharp, appreciative way. Abe tells Sam that Henny is the one who called the fire department.

"Just keep in mind that the burns weren't so bad," Abe says. Kane cuts him off.

"Don't worry the poor woman to death, old-timer," Kane says. "Now, come on. Mind the traffic." They have reached Queens Gate, a busy, bustling street with taxis honking and buses screeching and sighing. On the other side of the road is the arched metal entrance into Kensington Gardens. Poking out of the iron fence are green leaves and bursting red and yellow flowers. Sam breathes deeply and feels her muscles begin to relax. For two weeks, her only job had been to observe and absorb, to appreciate aqueducts, mosques, turrets and gargoyles, even railroad tunnels that stretch for miles under mountains. Sully had packed the itinerary with his favorites—amazing feats of construction, awesome displays of mankind's ingenuity and love of beauty. At every stop, Sam found herself wondering: 'how did they build that?" while taking an unexpected satisfaction in knowing that Sully would have the answer. This park, she knows, is no engineering accomplishment. But she can already see the rows of trees and expanse of green grass, and she realizes how her itinerary has neglected this type of beauty.

"Kensington Palace is just right up that way," Kane says, pointing his cane to the left. "Princess Di got her busy on with Dodi over there. Hyde Park is just through these gardens."

The park, Kensington Gardens, is filled with soccer players and strollers—"Football and buggies," Abe tells her—people on benches and fat, eager squirrels that, in Sam's opinion, are a little too brave. Kane and Henny have moved ahead again, leaving Sam and Abe to follow. Like two couples, Sam thinks, and she tries to quicken her pace to lessen the gap. Abe's breathing becoming raspy as he tries to catch up to her. She encourages him to walk faster, but glances back

and sees his face is strained, wrinkled with the concentration of walking. She slows down and walks next to him, watching the others move farther ahead.

Abe explains that he knows them from The Greyhound. They are friends of the bartender, who is Abe's nephew's friend. Kane and Henny are both entering their first year of college in the fall. Kane, Abe explains, will be attending the University of London—he plans on becoming a barrister—"A lawyer, to you Americans," he says—and Henny is attending a small graphic design school on the east side of London. She works at a hair salon a few blocks from The Greyhound.

Sam imagines Kane in a barrister wig, with short blue spikes poking out from the sides, speaking solemnly to a British judge with his tongue piercing glittering under the lights of the court. Perhaps he thinks he will change the system, Sam thinks sadly. Or maybe he knows he must change. She wonders if Henny will lose the studded wristbands with him, or if she will leave him when he does.

"Let's sit down a minute," Abe says, as they pass a tree-lined path with benches tucked into little alcoves. "We'll catch up to them at the lake." He pats the bench next to him and smiles. Sam sits as far away from him as she can. "Michael's burns weren't that bad, you know," Abe says. "In the war, I guarded the flame thrower in our battalion. Seen many a man burn up worse than that. Once, I saw a man burnt head to toe, his skin peeling away like he was an onion..."

"Please!" Sam says. The bartender's blistering cheek is once again vivid in her mind. She hangs her head down to steady her breathing. "Can we talk about something else? Tell me... about Kensington."

"Righty then," Abe says. "Let's see...Just up the street is The Old Goat Tavern. We passed it on our way up. Your youngest Roosevelt visited there once. And back in the forties, the acid

bath killer would pick up his victims there." He taps his cane on the ground to punctuate his story. "Lured his victims to his house, killed them, then melted their bodies away with an acid bath. They could only be identified by their teeth. Amazing how the teeth stick around after everything else is burnt off."

Before Sam can change the subject to a benign topic, Abe asks, "So, tell me what brings you to Jolly England."

Sam glances around for the teenagers, but Kane and Henny have continued walking. Leaving Abe talking to himself on the bench, she stands and looks around. Did they turn onto a hidden path? Disappear behind a row of bushes? She runs a few paces down the sidewalk until, just beyond a family walking hand in hand, Sam can make out the pointy blue spikes of Kane's hair.

"Wait!" Sam says. The spikes move back and forth as Kane looks for the source of her voice. Henny spots her, pointing one black clad arm towards Abe. She and Kane return to them, their platform shoes making their walk a slow, tottering gait.

"We thought you were trying to get lost back there," Henny says, smiling at them.

"Oh, no," Sam says. Henny holds out her hand to Sam, and Sam grasps it tightly. Henny's thick silver rings are hard and cold against Sam's palm. "We weren't," Sam says. "Please walk with us. I keep losing my breath."

The Serpentine is more of a pond than a lake, and Sam thinks Abe blushes a little bit when she expresses her surprise. Nevertheless, it is quaint. Husbands and wives, single people, groups of women, old people, children, men with greasy moustaches, men in flat straw hats,

women in long ridiculous summer dresses all surround the Serpentine. Some jog around the perimeter, others float across the lake in paddleboats, others sit in on the freshly mowed grass in striped canvas boating chairs. A middle-eastern man is renting the chairs for three pounds an hour, and Sam wants to rent one, to melt into the crowd, and disappear for an hour, a day, a month. But Kane and Henny keep walking.

"The thing about the Serpentine," Kane says. "Is the blue-green algae." He points towards the signs that surround the lake. "They say it's no good for swimming."

"What does it do?" Sam asks.

"Nobody knows," Kane says. "They probably just want to scare the Americans from diving in and taking a swim." He winks at her.

"Who would want to swim in this?" The lake is wide and green, thick with dirt and weeds. It smells old, like fish and algae, and stagnant water. When she was first married, Sully used to take her rowing in Danbury Park. He would tease her with stories of taking her to Europe on their honeymoon so that they could row on the lakes there. She always imagined the European lakes as dank and ancient, full of the skeletons of murdered kings. This one is too small for that type of intrigue. Despite the smell, it almost has a festive atmosphere.

"Where are the hats?" Sam asks. "The traditional first-day-of-summer-celebration hats?" Although several women are wearing floppy cotton hats, there is no spectacle, no parading around the lake to show off those hats.

"Well," Kane says, and he laughs. "Perhaps I embellished a bit. But you did need to get out in the fresh air, and it really should be a tradition."

Abe chuckles as they walk to the water's edge.

Another man, this one with a heavy, garbled accent, rents the paddleboats. With so many boats, Sam begins to worry. There might be a traffic jam on the lake, a gridlock of bumping sterns and flailing oars. But the man doesn't seem concerned, and two small brown boats, with oars securely bolted to the sides, are pointed out to them. She doesn't want to go, doesn't want Kane and Henny to get away from them, but the smiling boat renter holds out his hand. The boat sways, then steadies as Sam climbs in and sits down on the flat bench in the front.

As Abe steps in, the boat rocks dangerously. Without his cane, he seems particularly unsteady, and the boat renter grips his arm tightly as Abe sits down. Then the two of them are away, floating and drifting across the water. If only the water went on and on, Sam thinks, down to the Thames and out into the ocean.

The boat begins moving in sudden jerks and sways. As he works the oars, Sam can see Abe's hands shaking. She considers offering to help him row, but remembers how he had pulled his arm away in the bar, declining her assistance.

Kane and Henny push out next to them. Kane seems aware of her discomfort because he tells her to hold on. "We'll give you a lift to the middle," he says. Sam grabs the side of his boat, and Henny grabs the side of theirs. Under his breath, Kane hums a song Sam has heard, although she cannot remember where. The women smile at each other as Kane propels them across the pond.

"My husband and I came to England once," Sam says.

A Thing Or Two About Love

Ellie Marcus rubs her feet along the tile in the bathroom. She knows without looking that the floor is cream-colored, turning slightly yellow from age and lack of care. Her toes, like miniature cartographers, trace the crumbling black grout as she brushes on mascara. The grout should have been resealed months ago, but Rachel, Ellie's friend and lover, has not yet called the landlord. In half an hour, she is going to Rachel's senior art exhibit. Although Rachel claims she is not nervous about the exhibit, Ellie is, for both of them. Tonight, for the first time, Ellie will meet Rachel's parents. For two months, Rachel has been insisting there was no cause for alarm; they had supported Clinton even after his impeachment. But Rachel is younger than Ellie by almost ten years and so Ellie, chalking up her girlfriend's optimism to inexperience, is still worried.

At half-past seven, they leave for the University of Wisconsin's art gallery. "Maybe," Ellie suggests as they get into her silver Honda, "we should just zip over to a bar, have a few drinks, and call it a night."

"Great," Rachel says, sniffing and rubbing her nose, which is her trademark sign of anxiety. "Your unconditional support is overwhelming."

"You know what I mean," Ellie says. "Don't be nervous. It's going to be fine."

Cars are crammed into the college parking lot, and Ellie complains as they climb out of the car.

"How are the straps?" Ellie asks.

"They're fine. You reinforced them about fifty times. They're not going to break," Rachel says. Ellie slows her pace to get a look at Rachel's dress, Ellie's own private exhibit of the evening.

This is her first official attempt in the world of fashion—her freshman project. The dress is a slinky, forest green fabric that shifts and slides over Rachel's backside as she walks. Despite her painstaking craftsmanship, Ellie imagines the seams spontaneously unraveling as Rachel thanks the gallery audience. Still, Ellie can't help but be pleased, for it flatters Rachel's waifish figure. While she knows her art will never appear on the Paris runways, Ellie finds it heartening that she beads a decent skirt. And if it is only Rachel she has to clothe, well ... what could be easier? Rachel, with her flare and grace, walks over the gritty asphalt parking lot as if she's on a catwalk. A young man in a stocking cap hollers, "hey, baby" at Rachel as she walks past. Ellie runs to catch up.

"What do you get when you cross a deer and a chicken?" Ellie asks.

"A turdeerken?" Rachel asks and Ellie, relieved that Rachel isn't angry, smiles. They had seen a turducken in the grocery store once, a turkey stuffed with a duck stuffed with a chicken. Any variation on the phrase is one of their running jokes.

"Ha ha. No," Ellie says. "Me. You get me. Doe-eyed and scared out of my wits. And I'm joking about the doe-eyed part."

"Why is everything suddenly about you?" Rachel says, walking faster. "Isn't this the night of my show?"

"You're right," Ellie says as they reach the gallery. "I'm selfish."

Inside, the ceiling lights have been dimmed. Tiny fresnels spotlight the paintings. A man in his forties, with thinning blonde hair, is positioned in front of the paintings like an overweight Ken doll. "Welcome to Everywoman's Every-Senior-Art-Exhibit," Gerald says to Ellie, when Rachel walks to the coatroom. Gerald is right: the beige walls, the block of Brie on the refreshment table, the Merlot. Ten years ago, Ellie would have admired the room. Now, she gives it a mental

overhaul: turns up the ceiling lights, sweeps away the furniture, retracts the formal invitations, ushers out the guests–until nothing is left in the room but one person and one painting. The ultimate arena sport, Ellie thinks.

"My god this table cloth is ghastly," Gerald says, tugging at the cream linen cloth. Gerald is not exactly one of Ellie's friends, but he is the only person in the fashion program older than Ellie, and the only person who openly criticized Rachel's dress in their design class. Ellie is not wild about the prospect of a conversation with him, but she needs a distraction.

"It's a nice centerpiece," Ellie says as she digs through her purse, referring to the flowers on the table. Slender yellow and purple petals curl around a pewter jar. "Allergy medicine," she explains to Gerald as she pops a pill out of its silver package. "Orchids are my favorite flower, but they make my face swell up like a Smurf."

"So I bet you never attended events like this on your old job," Gerald jokes. "I did from time to time–library fund-raisers, you know." Although she is not working on any projects, Ellie does not consider civil engineering to be, as Gerald puts it, her "old" job. She is, she tells her friends, just on sabbatical. To prove her point, she has one corner of her drafting board reserved for a sketchpad filled with drawings of fountains bordered by French hedges and manicured bonsai trees and a tiered pond. Although Ellie still believes them to be exquisite (they have since been adapted for a local country club), the City Commissioner hadn't appreciated the drawings. For a project such as hers, he explained to Ellie as she sat nervously in front of the city council, they were "ridiculous and a waste of city time." It was a phrase Ellie had hated–"city time"– and much later, Ellie realized she should have asked him if there was a panel of urban planning gods with scales and tweezers who divided the universe into city time, country time, graduation time...

In an attempt to pacify both sides, Ellie's boss had gently suggested that she return to school for a little while, to "get some things out of her system" and to "get back to the basics." Enrolling in the fashion design program had been a clerical error—she had wanted urban landscape design. Her advisor, cheerful but senile and tenured, had confused names and inadvertently enrolled Ellie Marcus, instead of Ellen Martin, as a future Ralph Lauren. When Ellie had opened the registration envelope in August, the name of the courses had amused her: basic fabrics, basic design, fabric design basics... it was, indeed, she thought, back to the basics. Ellie had attended the first fashion design class with a withdrawal slip in her backpack. The lab assistant, a svelte and energetic young woman named Rachel, had welcomed her to the class with a hug. She smelled like peonies. By the end of the first quarter, Ellie decided to blame her career diversion on kismet.

It has been a difficult decision to explain to her parents. They feel, and Ellie does not disagree, that she is a failure for having to return and, as if it were a high school subject, take "college" again. They are disappointed and concerned. Ellie has a younger brother, but he is irresponsible to a fault, and they have no expectations for him. Ellie has always been the golden child, and if Ellie does not pursue her chosen career, who will support her parents in their retirement? If it were a midlife crisis, they would understand, but she is too young for that; nobody else they know—and nobody else Ellie knows—flunks out of her job at age thirty.

"Here comes your sweetheart," Gerald says, nudging Ellie out of her reverie as Rachel approaches. She is flushed and smiling from the attention she is receiving, and gives Ellie a quick kiss on the ear. "Sorry about the Orchids," she whispers.

"It's okay," Ellie says. "I've got my meds. Where are your parents?"

"Mom should be here any minute."

"And your dad?"

"No," Rachel shrugs. "He's not coming. Hi, Mrs. Denary, thank you so much for being here," she says, turning to a woman with a large, flowery hat.

Ellie whispers from behind Rachel. "What happened? Is he okay?"

"He's fine," Rachel whispers back, clearly annoyed. "He's just not coming."

Ellie turns to hide her flushing face. It is not a reason to be mad, Ellie tells herself. There's probably a good reason that Rachel isn't talking about her father. But this is the exhibit Rachel has been working towards for four years, obsessing over for the two years she and Ellie have been together, and not an event to be casually missed. Ellie longs to pull Rachel aside and insist on an explanation, insist that Rachel not shut her out. She is not willing to embarrass Rachel, though, and so instead, downs a glass of wine. She feels even more self-conscious now, standing at the refreshment table next to Gerald while Rachel moves on without her.

"What was that about?" Gerald asks in a low tone, peering at the cheese plate.

Her flushed cheeks now the effect of wine, Ellie turns to him. "Apparently," she says, "the father isn't coming." Gerald's eyebrows lift slightly and he shifts closer towards Ellie.

"Family troubles?" he says, and Ellie is instantly disgusted at herself for the overture. Gerald pursues, but when Ellie only mumbles in response, he continues to talk, something about the difference between a cinch and a gather. He does not realize that Ellie isn't listening.

At eight o'clock, there is a commotion at the door. A woman has entered. She moves like a rabbit, with quick, sudden movements, and people are laughing as they try to stay out of her way. She is holding a coat, but excitedly moves towards the paintings, back towards the coat room, then

towards the paintings again. Her hair is cut short, allowing her pixie ears to stick out through the brown tufts of hair. She is adorable, Ellie thinks, and then realizes that it is Rachel's mother.

It only takes seconds for Rachel to spot her, and then there is squealing and hugging and laughing and the holding out of arms to examine dresses. They act, Ellie thinks, like sisters, and for a moment, Ellie is jealous of their intimacy.

After a moment, she sees Rachel point in her direction and Ellie suddenly feels a great pressure on her bladder. Meeting parents has never gone well for her, she is always too shy and too nervous, but it is too late to escape. In the time it takes the mother and daughter to cross the room, Ellie braces herself for humiliation...she has been slapped, even spit on by other parents, and Ellie knows she should be ready to fight back...But, too quickly, Ellie is facing the woman. There is no barbarian behind those thin eyebrows and pointy chin. Behind the excited smile, and the thin powder of makeup over wrinkles, she is just a smiling, slightly older version of Rachel. The resemblance is so great that Ellie hugs her. "Is this the seamstress?" Helen, Rachel's mother asks, holding Ellie out at arm's length. "Is this the woman who turned my little girl into a goddess?" Ellie cannot help herself; it is quick and familial, but she kisses Helen right on the mouth. Embarrassed, delighted, and overcome, Ellie excuses herself and runs to the restroom.

Her slightly ridiculous entrance into the gallery did not do Helen justice, Ellie thinks. The woman holds herself with a confidence Ellie finds attractive. It is as if the beautiful and sexy promise in Rachel has sprouted and Ellie sees before her the woman she has been waiting for Rachel to become. Specifically, she is reminded of a miniature fountain of Hera the city commissioned once. The goddess embodied classical female beauty, with a soft omniscient smile

on her face, silky, clinging gown—but Ellie has grown out of objectifying women. Her giddiness at the thought of talking to Helen is simply nerves. To prove this to herself, Ellie forces herself to begin a conversation. She has to clear her throat to get her voice to work properly.

"Did your husband get held up at work?" Ellie asks.

Helen smiles and Ellie feels her hands begin to sweat. "Yes, that's it. Rachel's father is such an overachiever." She turns to Rachel. "You can be so infuriating. Why wouldn't you tell Ellie?" Helen turns to Ellie and, quite seriously, says, "Rachel's father and I are getting divorced. He moved out two weeks ago," Helen says. She pats Rachel's hand, as if her daughter needs comforting. There had been from Rachel only the vaguest indication of trouble between her parents, but Ellie feels relieved. Suddenly, there is a reason for the slammed doors, the shattered coffee cup. But Ellie is also annoyed. Surely, she thinks, she had a right to know before now.

"Isn't this a lovely painting?" Helen says, turning to a man a few feet away, who smiles and nods. "This was painted by my daughter. What do you call it, dear?"

"It's called, this is not the time or the place to start with your passive-aggressive bullshit," Rachel says, grabbing her mother's elbow.

"Rachel!" Ellie says. Ellie sees the man exchange a smile with the lady he is with, and the two quickly walk to the other side of the gallery. She is embarrassed by Rachel's outburst—although they are familiar to her—and she, too, begins to move away, but Rachel firmly holds on to her arm.

"I am not passive or aggressive, dear. I simply assumed you would have told Ellie about your father abandoning us," Helen says. "You owe her an explanation for your behavior, if you're anywhere near as moody with her as you are with me."

"It wasn't worth talking about," Rachel says. "You'll take him back in another two weeks. Why would I even bring it up?" Rachel says. She speaks loudly and interested faces in the gallery turn in her direction. Helen smiles and turns to her daughter.

"Temper, dear," Helen says and Ellie is delighted at her straightforward manner, her poise, her blunt peach-colored fingernails. "Why don't I get everyone a refill?" People in the gallery whisper, then gradually turn their interest back to their own conversations.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, okay?" Rachel says to Ellie, once Helen is out of earshot. "I just didn't want to talk about it."

"Fine," Ellie says. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I don't know why you're so mad at her, though. She's amazing to be handling it this well."

"Yeah, clearly you think she's amazing. You kissed her hello," Rachel says.

"I was nervous," Ellie says.

"Whatever. She eats up the attention. The point is, my father had an affair," Rachel says. "And she..." Rachel glances at her mother across the room, talking with Gerald at the refreshment table. "That amazing woman took him back." They watch as Gerald moves closer to Helen, his bearish frame dwarfing the smiling woman.

"That must have been awful for her," Ellie says. She tries to imagine cheating on this woman, and cannot do it.

Rachel sniffs and rubs her nose. "Yeah, right. She took him back, El," Rachel says. "Aren't you the great feminist?"

"The world is complicated," Ellie says. She watches Helen returning, three wine glasses delicately balanced between her fingers. "Sometimes you love people anyway."

"Oh, darlings, don't let me spill," Helen says as she approaches. Ellie takes one of the glasses from her.

"Don't believe her," Rachel says, accepting her glass. "She was a waitress for five years during college, and she can carry six glasses at once if she wants to."

Helen claims it is simply not true, but she is pleased at the compliment. She reiterates, telling Rachel that her talent is simply astonishing and within half an hour, the two parade around the room.

"Quite a pair," Gerald says when Ellie stops momentarily at the refreshment table. "She certainly is amazing."

"I know," Ellie says, watching Helen's animated gestures. "She's so confident. She's so beautiful."

"Young love," Gerald says, shaking his head. The table wobbles as he leans back on it. "You and Rachel are going to do well together, I can tell. And I know a thing or two about love."

Ellie sips her wine and twirls a napkin between her fingers, wondering when she became the type of person who could love her girlfriend's mother.

After the last of the obligatory praises has been bestowed upon Rachel's talent, Helen threads her right arm through Rachel's and her left arm through Ellie's and insists on taking them to a bar to celebrate; drinks are on her. They settle on The Rusty Nail, a bar across from the pharmacy school that Ellie remembers with some fondness from her first college days. While it hasn't changed much—wooden booths, peanut shells covering the floor, battered dartboards lining one wall—Ellie feels that it is smaller and dirtier than she remembered. She is embarrassed for

suggesting it, but Helen doesn't seem to notice that the three of them are overdressed. Instead, they make themselves at home, Rachel flinging herself in a booth and kicking off her shoes, Helen darting to the bar.

"What did you think?" Rachel asks. "Wasn't it a gas?"

"A gas?" Ellie frowns. "Maybe. Your mom is amazing."

They hear Helen's laughter from the bar and turn to see a man, dressed in boots and ten-gallon hat, putting his arm around Helen's shoulders. Helen ducks under his plaid-shirted arm and leans over the bar to the bartender. Rachel rolls her eyes. "Give her twenty minutes."

Helen returns with a pitcher of beer to the tune of the cowboy's whistles.

"Since when do you drink beer?" asks Rachel.

"When in Rome..." Helen says with great cheer, scooting into the bench next to her daughter.

"Please, don't start," Rachel says. "She's a warehouse of clichés," she explains to Ellie. "It's a miracle I ever became an artist. There was never an original thought in the house when I was growing up."

Helen is clearly pleased that she is being teased and begins to banter with Rachel. Ellie willingly plays along. The three of them talk about art, landscape design, Picasso, a woman named Kennedy who painted only orange for a year. "It was such crap," Rachel says. After fetching another pitcher, Helen offers a toast to her daughter.

"Here's lookin' at you, kid," she says.

"Great," Rachel says, sniffing.

"What?" Helen says.

Rachel suggests that her mother might have offered a more heartfelt sentiment on the day of her exhibit. Helen apologizes, but asks if Rachel is calling her shallow. An argument ensues and insults are exchanged—too moody, too sensitive, too spoiled, too bitchy, too slutty, too callous, too mean—and Ellie remains silent, trying to ignore the ripped plastic seat cover that is poking into her back. Any movement, she fears, will draw attention to herself and she might be forced to take Helen's side. She remains unnoticed, however, and it ends with Rachel excusing herself to go to the restroom. She is crying.

"She's right, I suppose," Helen says when Rachel is gone. "But I never mean any harm."

"Of course not," Ellie says. She feels awkward being left alone with Helen. "I'm sorry to hear about your situation," Ellie says. "But I was a little surprised Rachel's father wasn't here anyway. I guessed he'd be a big fan of Rachel's work."

Helen attempts to smile. "Oh, no dear. Richard is a fan of nothing but himself—and perky breasts," she says as she pours beer into the glasses, slopping onto the table as she does so.

"I'm so sorry," Ellie says, wiping up the spill with her napkin.

"Don't be—I was a terrible waitress."

"I mean about your husband," Ellie says.

"Yes, well," Helen says. "Aren't we all?" She stands up. "Shall we play darts? I'm sure if you play, Rachel will join in."

During the game, Helen talks constantly, practically throwing the darts without looking. When she is lucky, they hit the board. Rachel, her eyes still red from crying, hurls each dart like a baseball. Helen does not improve the general mood by flirting with the cowboy across the bar.

Ellie is glad that Rachel refused to let him join their game, but is so distracted trying to recapture Helen's attention, that Rachel wins the first game by forty points, the second game by fifteen. After each win, she raises her arms above her head in triumph and stalks across the bar to refill the pitcher.

Just before the final round, Ellie begins to win, and Rachel begins jerking the fabric of her dress across her ribs. "I guess you're good at this," she says to Ellie. She has been crying again, and Ellie realizes that she did not notice. She regrets not sticking up for Rachel. Even if their romance doesn't last past Rachel's graduation, Ellie thinks, even if the age difference is too great, right now, they are a couple. Ellie is determined to start acting that way.

"Gently." Ellie grabs Rachel's hand in order to stop it from ripping the delicate fabric.

"It's itched all night," Rachel says. "This dress is driving me crazy."

"I wonder why it didn't it itch earlier," Ellie says, hurt but trying to rise above it. "It's just rayon. Maybe it's dry skin."

"It is not dry skin," Rachel says, becoming angry. "It just itches."

In a whisper, Ellie asks Rachel what her problem is. Rachel is indignant at the question, and stalks over to the juke box in a sulk.

"She can't decide who she hates more," Helen says from the table near the dart board. "Me for taking him back or him for running off."

Despite her best intentions, Ellie is pleased at the confidence and sits across from Helen. "Sometimes I think she hates me," Ellie says.

"Nonsense," Helen says. "This is a family matter."

The comment is insulting to Ellie, but before responding she rationalizes; to Helen, Ellie must seem like a passing fling.

"I know," Ellie says, sighing and sitting next to Helen. "I just wish she would simply include me. You know Rachel. She just clams up when there is anything important to talk about."

"I think she handles situations just like anyone else would under the circumstances," Helen says. "If you haven't been through a divorce, I wouldn't be so quick to judge." Again, Ellie is surprised by the comment, but Helen's smile returns quickly. "Look, when you decide to settle down," Helen says. "Just make sure you've got enough money to support yourself on your own. That was my biggest mistake."

"I do have enough money," Ellie says, which is true. She has always been frugal.

"Not now," Helen repeats. There is a definitive tone in her voice that Ellie doesn't like. "When you're ready."

Helen, still beautiful, still confident, is becoming infuriating; Ellie is uncertain about her own life, about her own future with Rachel, and no one else, she suddenly believes, has the right to be certain for her. After all, Ellie thinks, she loves Rachel. Despite the mood swings, Rachel is honest and confused and sexy and hopeful about her talent—who deserves more in a partner? Ellie wonders. For the first time, their future together seems like a possibility, and, for the two of them, Ellie begins to hope. The emotion is like an astringent, and Ellie feels—painfully, eagerly—clean. "I am ready to settle down," she says.

"Don't be silly," Helen says. "This family is already a mess. There's the possibility, of course, that dating women is just a phase that Rachel is going through, but what could we do with

another artist? No offense, dear, but one is enough. Wouldn't you agree, darling?" Helen waves to her daughter, who approaches. "You and Ellie aren't running off to get married, are you?"

"No," Rachel answers, and then sees Ellie's flushed face. "Ellie?"

"Let's do it," Ellie says to her. "We'll go to Vermont."

"Of course!" Helen says. "But the whole idea is ridiculous. I've only known Ellie for a few hours, but it's clear that you two simply aren't compatible."

"Are you serious?" Rachel asks Ellie.

"I'll go back to work," Ellie says without acknowledging Helen's remark. "The fashion design was only because of you, anyway. You'll find a gallery to work at, we can go skiing in the winters, maybe we'll have some nice mountain friends to visit..."

"That's rich," Helen says. "Rachel is not a mountain person. See what I mean? Not compatible. And it's not about lesbians," Helen says. "Ellie, dear, are you a night person or a morning person?"

"Mom, I love you but shut up," Rachel says.

"I'll commute to New York or Boston or whatever city is close to Vermont," Ellie says.

"A commuter?" Helen says. "Clearly a morning person! Rachel is a night person. Like me," she says. Her shoes are off and she is sitting cross-legged in a chair. The cowboy has sauntered into the vicinity and is grinning, with little discretion, at Helen's legs.

"Just ignore her," Rachel whispers to Ellie, as she takes the darts from her. "We can only hope she passes out soon."

"Ellie!" Helen calls as Ellie walks towards the bar. "Don't take it personally, dear! You're both so young! I think you're a lovely person! Let's have another round!"

Ellie's skull aches. Ellie searches her purse for aspirin, but finds only her allergy medication. They have had enough beer, she knows, that the allergy medicine would put her to sleep, although Ellie isn't sure if that's such a bad thing at this point in the evening. Then she remembers Rachel's comment about waiting for Helen to pass out, and Ellie wonders if it would be possible to slip an allergy pill into Helen's drink. With the alcohol, Ellie calculates that it would knock her out within fifteen minutes. It would be awfully easy, Ellie thinks, and then she could talk to Rachel, apologize, propose.

If she slipped the medicine into Helen's drink, Helen would get groggy, Ellie would drive them to Helen's hotel, drop them off. Then she and Rachel could sit in the lobby and talk, or maybe go for a quiet midnight swim. It sounds appealing, despite the fact that Ellie feels like a frat boy, thinking about slipping a Mickey into the beer, but Ellie tells herself that's ridiculous. Mickeys and Roophies are hardcore. This is allergy medicine. Besides, she thinks, it's over-the-counter.

The bartender brings the drinks, and Ellie quickly crumbles the pill between her fingers into one of the glasses. If Helen tastes the medication, Ellie will simply suggest it's a bad beer, and take it back to the bar. She makes sure the powder dissolves completely and returns to the dart game.

"Please don't misunderstand me. I have nothing against lesbians," Helen says as Ellie approaches. In Ellie's absence, the cowboy has joined the game.

"She really doesn't," Rachel says.

"Me neither," says the cowboy, and gives a little hoot.

Rachel grabs a beer from Ellie, and Ellie makes sure it is not the medicated one. "She's just being overprotective," Rachel whispers.

A thousand comebacks come to Ellie's mind, she's sure they'd all be witty and biting, but she keeps her mouth shut. Only a little while, she thinks, and Helen will be fast asleep.

"I'll be honest with you. I experimented when I was in college," Helen says, accepting the beer Ellie hands her. "I don't think there's anything wrong with it."

"Mom-"

"It's okay, Rachel," Ellie says. "I'm just going to step outside for a while. You two have some mother-daughter time."

"Isn't that sweet?" Helen says, sipping the beer. "I never said you weren't sweet."

"Hey, what about me?" the cowboy says. "I could use some mother-daughter time myself. "

The air outside is muggy, and Ellie sweats through her chiffon skirt. Her pulse, despite the humidity, is in overdrive. There are people from the college walking by, and she thinks someone says hello, but Ellie is not sure if it is directed to her; she cannot concentrate on them. She is glad she held her tongue with Helen; clearly, the woman is trashed and stubborn. Anything Ellie might have said would be useless. But soon, Ellie thinks, Helen will be woozy and sleepy, and Rachel will insist they go home. She's a small woman, certainly light enough for her and Rachel to carry to the car. And maybe she'll regret her behavior tomorrow. Maybe she'll call Ellie and apologize, invite her to brunch where they all order Bloody Maries.

Ellie knows this will not happen. Helen will probably wake up hung over and angry, insisting that Rachel stop seeing Ellie. She wouldn't get her way, Ellie knows, because Rachel, like her mother, is stubborn. But in a few weeks, it would be possible. Rachel will not laugh at the

proposal, but soon, graduation will arrive, and Rachel will be forced to make choices. She is too independent, Ellie thinks, too determined to settle for her first marriage proposal. But Ellie will be glad she asked. Despite this evening, Ellie will be glad she asked.

A mosquito has settled on her kneecap, but Ellie realizes it only as it flies away. She listens for sounds inside that the medicine is taking its effect, and hears nothing unusual. She is tempted to feel betrayed; Helen appeared so confident, so bewitching at the beginning of the evening. Her attractiveness, Ellie realizes now, was only in her resemblance to Rachel. If Ellie hadn't been so uncertain herself about her relationship, about her career and future, Helen would have been just another parent. Ellie suspects that if she had kept up her defenses and been stalwart for Rachel, the night wouldn't be ending in this type of drama.

A guy comes out, wearing an apron. He offers Ellie a cigarette, but she declines.

"Asthma," she explains. The man nods, and sits next to her. He smells of french fry grease and beer, and suddenly Ellie feels very small. "It's hot out here," she says, feeling like she should make conversation.

The guy shrugs. "Go back inside," he suggests.

It is the first sincere comment that Ellie has heard all evening, and so she considers it. If she could have Rachel alone for just a half-hour, Ellie is sure she could begin to figure this evening out. Where had they gone wrong? How had Ellie not realized something was wrong with Rachel's family? There had to be signs, of course. Ellie remembered Psych 101 from her first round of college. There were always signs. What had Rachel's been? The way she insisted on leaving the living room light on every night, even after they had gone to bed? Was it they way she had to weigh her coffee before she bought it, making sure it measured out into even half-pounds? Or was

there something more obvious, more fundamental that Ellie had missed, something that Ellie, if she really was the person for Rachel, should have picked up on...

A phone rings inside and Ellie realizes she does not want to go back inside. What are they doing in there, mother and daughter, now that they are left alone? For all she knows, they could be in there laughing themselves to tears over Ellie's confused proposal.

Ellie's relationship with her own mother is, as they say, cut and dried. Phone calls on Sunday evenings, two presents each at Christmas, direct questions without prying. They are retired social workers now teaching part-time at a community college in Ada, Michigan. They put Ellie through college, the first time, and they stay, for the most part, out of Ellie's life, as long as there is no threat of a nursing home in their golden years. And now, Ellie thinks, I am the threat to their future. She has never before been so powerful and felt so helpless.

The guy in the apron stamps out his cigarette and goes back inside. Ellie glances at her watch. If the allergy medicine worked at all, Helen should be getting groggy. She imagines the flirtatious cowboy making advances at a drugged Helen, and Ellie begins to feel guilty. Rachel will ward off any unwanted advances, Ellis assures herself. She won't leave her mother alone.

Ellie does not notice the sirens until the ambulance is stopped in front of the bar. Two uniformed young men hurtle over the steps, past Ellie, and into The Rusty Nail. Ellie rushes inside to confusion; there are shouted orders, chairs being moved, and Helen strapped down, pale and gaunt, on a stretcher.

At the hospital, Ellie waits, crying, hard silent sobs. She feels ravaged, beaten. Rachel is talking to a doctor. The air-conditioning, or the crying, makes Ellie shiver, and she looks for a

blanket, or a jacket of some kind. She cannot bear to think about what she has done, about what kind of person she is. To keep from growing hysterical, she tries to meditate on the waiting room. As she looks around, she feels herself beginning to calm. With just a week, Ellie thinks, she could infuse the hospital with color and light, sticking Organza blossoms into the nurse's pillbox hats, and carnations into lab coat pockets. The charts would be printed on creamy beige hemp, instead of paper. The ink in the printers would be violet and blue. Orderlies would wear soft cotton aprons and push stretchers covered in blue-plaid flannel. The fluorescent lights would disappear, and the ceilings would shine with light from painted-on stars. The hair spilling over Rachel's shoulders would be threads of fine satin, deep black that shone purple in the moonlight; her gown would be moss, clinging to her skin and stretching curious tendrils down around her calves. The waiting room would blossom in a jungle of clean, plastic plants, of all shapes and kinds, spilling onto the magazine table and over the cold tiles of the floor, making a lush, vibrant carpet beneath her feet.

Rachel returns, her shoes clicking on the tile. "They pumped her stomach," Rachel says. Ellie groans. "They found traces of polyethylene glycol, which she's allergic to. That redneck guy must have slipped her something. He was flirting with her all night, did you see that?"

Ellie nods and grasps Rachel's hand tightly. Ellie feels light-headed, hysterical.

"Hey," Rachel says. "Don't look so freaked out. She'll be okay." She kisses Ellie's forehead, pushes a strand of hair away from Ellie's face. "After all of her crap, you're still so worried about her. God, you're sweet, Ellie." Rachel rests her head on Ellie's shoulder. "How could I ever say no to you?"

Ellie realizes that Rachel is talking about the proposal, and she feels like she is chained to a merry-go-round that is spinning out of control. Visions of the future, clear not even an hour before, now appear as waves of heat, blurry and disorienting.

"You, me. Tomorrow. Fifty years," Rachel says, kissing Ellie's hand. "I'm yours."

Claire's Gift

The June 2 break-in to Alan Sherwood's apartment was no burglary. The break-in artist did not take the television or DVD player, any of the seventy-nine compact discs, or the small stainless steel statue of Buddha that Alan had won at the Illinois county fair. Instead, she quietly jimmied the lock to Alan's apartment in order to give him something before she skipped town. A piece of herself. Or rather, pieces.

To Alan, they were dark bodies in motion, slinking beneath his bed like creatures from a childhood nightmare—unknown, sinuous, hissing as they disappeared beneath the upholstered furniture. It was a terrorist attack, Alan thought. And these were the new dirty bombs. When one of them jumped onto the bed, Alan kicked at it from under the covers, trying to knock it on the floor so it wouldn't detonate in his face. When the creature emitted a yowl, Alan came to his senses, and pulled the cord on his bedside lamp.

"They were everywhere," he told Stanfield the next morning, as they waited on their coffee. The Starbucks was downtown, next door to the office building where Alan's aunt worked. "Under the furniture, hiding in the closets. One was in the shower when I turned it on this morning."

"But they're Claire's cats?" Stanfield asked. He stretched as he spoke, poking one elbow towards the ceiling, then another, rolling his shoulders back, then forward. After nearly a year of jogging together on Saturday mornings, Alan still wasn't sure if Stanfield's stretches were designed to loosen his muscles or to show off what lay beneath his shiny black stretch shorts.

"They must be," Alan said, counting change out of his small backpack. "One of them—he has a white patch on one eye—I think I recognize him."

"You've got to get a deadbolt for that door," Stanfield said. "Or better yet, stop dating women with a talent for breaking and entering." He jogged in place as he tested his coffee cup for potential spills. With a nod goodbye, he began his slow jog out the door and through the pedestrian traffic.

In the lobby elevator, Alan pulled a brown paper sack out of his backpack. He hadn't seen Claire in almost a month. He had been a little surprised when she stopped calling, although they had never admitted they were formally dating. Just a handful of fine art films, a lot of sleepovers, and a few walks in the park. Why she would sneak her cats into his apartment was a mystery. Alan wondered if it was some sort of strange attempt at a reconciliation. She had always been a little odd.

The elevator doors slid open on the sixteenth floor. A short, stout woman wearing a white apron pushed a cart down the hall. When she saw Alan, she stopped, moistened a white cloth with a spray bottle, and wiped a smudge off the wall.

"Hi," Alan said.

"I heard you in the lobby," the woman said, wiping her hands off on her apron. Alan's cousins called her Aunt Jaundice, although her real name was Janis. "Letting yourself be robbed by that corporation." She pointed to his Starbucks cup. "Shouldn't a grown man know how to make his own coffee?"

Alan threw his half-filled cup in the garbage can attached to her cart. He wasn't good with teasing. It always surprised him, and he never knew how to reply. He knew that

Aunt Janis didn't really care about Starbucks or any other corporation. She just wanted Alan to have a snappy comeback. Eight years after college, she still asked about his old roommates, because they had teased her mercilessly when she would visit to do Alan's laundry. The teasing Alan received when she left was worse, but it had always been touched with envy. Everyone liked Aunt Janis, including Alan. He just couldn't help feeling like he was a disappointment to her.

"I brought your lunch," he said, handing her the paper bag. She stashed it in a hidden place on the cart, then looked at him, waiting for him to speak.

"My friend is waiting for me downstairs," he lied.

"Come to dinner tonight," she said. She pulled out a giant ring of keys and began unlocking an office door. As she spoke, she pushed the cart into the office. "Bring your friend."

"Maybe," Alan said. "If I can."

If he brought Stanfield to dinner, he and Aunt Janis would surely to hit it off, and Alan would have to sit through an evening of sarcastic witticisms being exchanged over the table. If he didn't bring Stanfield, Alan would be subjected to an evening of questions: why was Alan alone, where was Stanfield from, what was he like.

In the lobby, standing in line for another coffee, a feeling of panic began to unsettle Alan. The dinner could mean trouble in another way. What if Aunt Janis discovered that Claire left the cats with him? He had never introduced the two of them—he had been afraid Aunt Janis would dislike Claire. If his cousin Megan were to slip, to say something about Claire during dinner, Alan would be forced to explain to his aunt, after the fact, that

he had been dating a woman for the last few months. And that this woman had dumped her horde of cats on him. There would be questions, and weeks, if not months, of teasing. The thought was humiliating.

Jogging past his apartment, Alan turned down the tree-lined avenue that was Campbell, past rows of two story houses, until he stopped before one painted light brown. After ringing the bell, Alan peered at the second floor windows. Two plant baskets still swung on the small side balcony. The afternoon sun and the Venetian blinds made it difficult to judge whether or not someone was staring down at him. "Claire," he said. Alan tried again, this time shouting. The downstairs neighbor appeared.

"I think she moved," he said sleepily. "Anyway, some guy loaded all her stuff into a van. Couches, lamps, stuff like that."

Feeling like a fool for his momentary hope that Claire had wanted to see him, Alan scanned his memory for clues as to where she might be. With relatives? Co-workers? There was no one that Alan knew of. Was he shallow for knowing so little about a woman he had dated? Claire had been interested in big topics—homelessness, recycling. To her, details like family were just points of frustration. He was amazed she had been patient enough to learn how to jimmy locks.

At six that evening, Alan and Stanfield arrived in Evanston for dinner. Megan and her friend from college, Skye, were sitting at the kitchen table, flipping through magazines. Alan hadn't expected Skye to be visiting, too. She gave Alan a shy smile. He nodded and turned quickly to greet Aunt Janis. She was at the kitchen counter, folding small squares

of dough. The meal was one of her specialties: krautbierocks, a German delicacy of sausage and sauerkraut in a homemade pastry. The sauerkraut was boiling on the stove. "Wow," Stanfield said. "That's quite a smell."

Aunt Janis snorted. "So," she said. "Stanfield. Are you another of these men who can't make his own coffee?"

"And deny the economy my hard-earned money? What do you think I am, a communist?"

"Ha," Aunt Janis said. She couldn't hide her smile. "What a worthless friend you have, Alan. Why are you just now bringing him over for dinner?"

Alan smiled, already annoyed.

Second helpings were passed around, thirds for Stanfield. Even Megan was fawning on him. At one point, she asked Stanfield for his opinion on how she should get her hair cut. Alan was not sure which was more embarrassing: Stanfield's enthusiastic, lengthy response or Megan's giggled encouragements. When he was asked to offer a suggestion for Skye's hair, Alan flushed and mumbled that he had always liked long hair. He suggested they move on to desert.

"He's preoccupied," Stanfield said. "Give the man a break."

Alan tried to signal his friend. He had warned Stanfield to steer clear of that topic, but the slip was irreversible. What, exactly, was preoccupying Alan? Within minutes, Megan and Aunt Janis had extracted the story from Stanfield. Alan concentrated on the plate of food before him and prepared himself for the worst.

"Look," Stanfield said. "Alan is the victim here. He's been run out of his apartment by these monsters. In fact, he's so traumatized by this experience he's going to be crashing on my couch tonight. A man can't be expected to go back to his castle when it's overrun with vermin. He deserves a little sympathy, don't you think?" His last plea was to Skye, who had been sitting quietly.

"Sure," she said, dryly. With her fork, she pushed around the last few bits of food on her plate.

"Cats are not vermin," Aunt Janis said. "Alan. What are you going to do with them? You know what happens at a shelter if no one adopts them."

Skye asked why he didn't just give the cats back to Claire. Alan could feel his face flushing as he explained.

"What crap!" Megan said. "Who would dump their cats on an ex-boyfriend? No way. You've still been seeing her, haven't you?"

"No!" Alan said. He realized he was yelling. Before he could defend himself further, or apologize for shouting, Aunt Janis ended the conversation by saying they would all have to carefully consider what Alan should do next. Then, mercifully, she began asking Stanfield about his childhood on the south side.

Alan excused himself and called his apartment. There was a message from Claire on the answering machine. "Thanks," she said. "I'll be in touch soon." Soon? Her teeth sounded clenched together and Alan guessed she was painting her toenails, holding the emery board between her teeth. For a woman who had just deserted her cats, she sounded particularly relaxed.

That night, he tossed and turned on Stanfield's couch. He kept imagining his next conversation with Claire, trying to decide what tactics he should take. Under no circumstances should he sound desperate, Alan thought, although he wasn't sure he could fool her.

The next afternoon at work, Alan posted multiple copies of a sign: "Free cats to a good home," it said. A quirky clip-art cat with one ear cocked and a big grin was in one corner of the sign. He hung a copy in each elevator, on the corkboard in the lounge, and taped them on each vending machine in the building. He had stopped by his apartment after lunch, to a chorus of howling cats. They were hungry. They were shedding on his upholstered furniture. They needed a place to use the toilet. It was almost too much for Alan to bear, until he checked his messages and noticed that Claire's call the night before had come from Salt Lake City, Utah. Utah? He made phone calls to no-kill animal shelters. He began asking people on the bus if they wanted a cat, or two or three.

Over the course of the next week, he purchased forty dollars worth of cat food and three pans for cat litter. He created pedestals of old phone books for his two scrawny plants, to put them out of reach of curious taste-tasters. He changed the litter daily, but the odor and stray litter granules clung to the apartment. Every night he found an excuse to go out to dinner right after work, and managed to arrive home just in time to slip into bed.

By Friday, Alan's sign had elicited no calls, and his solicitations had beget no interested parties. Desperation was beginning to make him giddy. "Come out with us,"

Stanfield said, nodding towards the cat on the poster. "Dancing, girls, drinks. Get your mind off things. We'll go right after work." He patted Alan on the shoulder.

When they arrived at Z-Ropa, Megan and Skye were waiting for them. Stanfield and Megan slipped off to the dance floor. Laser lights beamed through cigarette smoke and a strobe light made Alan's headache. "This wasn't my idea," he said to Skye. She fumbled in her purse and pulled out a cigarette.

"Since when do you smoke?"

"We all have our secrets, don't we?" she said, she lit the cigarette, took a long drag, and began coughing. Alan patted her on the back, but she slapped his hand away.

"Skye," Alan said. "Claire and I broke up months ago. You know that."

"Do I?" She threw the cigarette on the floor. "You haven't been home all week. You never call me back anymore. What am I suppose to think?"

"I'm escaping cats! You heard Stanfield," Alan said, yelling over the pounding bass of the dance music.

Skye turned to the bar and ordered another drink.

The potential complications of their relationship worried Alan. Megan and Aunt Janis might chastise him for being too old for Skye, and inevitably, they would get too involved and give advice, even when it wasn't wanted, just like they had with the cats. Simple is better, Alan thought, and even if he hadn't convince Skye of this, she had agreed to go along with the secrecy, at least for a little while. Now that Stanfield and Megan seemed to be a couple, Alan supposed Skye would want to be one, too.

A man with a moustache and tiny goatee asked Skye to dance, and she accepted. Alan caught her glancing over at him while she was on the dance floor, to see if he was talking to someone, or to see if he was jealous, Alan supposed. But he wasn't jealous. He was trying not to think about Claire. He hadn't heard from her until three weeks ago, when she called. They had met at his place. It was supposed to be a dinner, just friends, but something about her threw Alan off-guard, just as she had always done, and he had kissed her. The first night was exciting; it seemed illicit, dangerous knowing that the phone might ring at any moment and it would be Skye. The next morning, Alan was prepared to feel contrite, ashamed. He was ready to make it up to Skye. But Claire didn't go home. She had stayed for three days, wearing his shirts, watching his TV, eating his food. Alan tried to give her hints that she should go, but she would tickle him or start making a meal, and he would be thrown off-guard again. Whenever the phone rang, he locked himself in the bedroom, and Claire guessed his secret, although Alan denied that he was seeing anyone else. When she finally left him, just deciding one afternoon it was time to go, she had quickly gotten dressed, kissed him on the forehead, and vanished out the door. He found it disturbing how quickly she could make a decision.

Now Alan wondered if the difference that weekend had been just him. Maybe Claire had been nervous, too. Maybe she had been sizing him up, plotting her delivery.

Eventually, as the dance floor was beginning to thin, Stanfield pulled him aside.

"Do you have any cash?" he asked.

"A little," Alan said.

"Here." Stanfield crumpled a fifty-dollar bill into Alan's palm. "Take a cab home, huh? Megan and I aren't ready for beddy-bye yet."

"I don't want your money," Alan said. He thought he should protest more, to make sure Stanfield didn't suspect anything between him and Skye. But Megan and Stanfield were already out the door, waving as they wrapped their arms around the other's back. Soon they became indistinguishable from the crowd. Alan and Skye, the only still bodies on the block of singing, stumbling revelers, watched their friends go. He imagined that Skye had probably left Megan in similar situations before.

The night air had cooled off the city and Skye suggested they walk. She was an attractive girl, a marathon runner who grew up in Detroit. When she was in high school, her father used to drive miles and miles into the country, let her out, and drive home. The cloud of dust from behind the car made her want to jog. Her dream had been college track, but she didn't get the scholarship she wanted. Alan had met her at Aunt Janis's caroling party. Skye, squeezing past him to get to the eggnog, had slipped her phone number into Alan's pocket. He had waited until February, during a dry spell with Claire, before he called.

They left the flickering club lights for the street, and followed the trail of darkened restaurants and donut shops for a mile or so to Alan's apartment.

"I'm not sure my place is fit for company," he said when they reached his three story apartment building. He unlocked the door, but loitered on the steps.

"Great. We'll sleep in the street, then," Skye said. She walked up the steps in front of him.

The cats moved like a school of fish, sweeping around them as they entered the apartment, gliding between their legs and over their shoes.

"My god," Skye said.

They scattered at the sound of her voice. Some scrambled under the furniture. A few crept up to sniff her open-toed sandals.

"Don't worry," Alan said. He grabbed some glasses and a bottle of whiskey. "They don't bite," he said, although he had no idea whether they would bite or not.

"So," Skye asked in a resigned way. "What are their names?"

It hadn't occurred to Alan that all of them would even have names, although Skye insisted they must. After a few minutes of watching Alan avoid the cats, of pulling up his feet whenever one walked near so that it would not rub against his leg, of brushing them off the couch and referring to them all as "animal," Skye decided that Alan was violating Claire's trust.

"What are you talking about?"

"Clearly she wanted you to take care of them," Skye said. "And you probably agreed to. I can't believe you're treating them like this."

"Like what? I feed them, I clean up their crap!"

"They're pets," Skye said. "They're used to getting attention. They're used to somebody loving them. Claire would be pissed if she saw what you're doing."

Alan protested. Skye was in no position to make judgments, especially since she'd never met Claire.

"Oh, I've met Claire," said Skye. She was angry now.

"You have?" Alan asked. The statement startled him.

"Well," Skye said. She looked flustered. "Not really. But in principle I have. And I know she'd be upset."

Alan said a mental goodbye to any hopes he'd had about having sex that night. He had thought that if he could just convince her that Claire was out of his life, she wouldn't be angry, but now, unbelievably, she seemed to be taking Claire's side. What a difficult woman. In the past, Alan felt he was always stumbling into situations. Life caught him off-guard, as if the world had a conspiracy to take him by surprise. Claire had humored him, if she was even listening to his theories, but Skye scoffed at this explanation. It was an excuse, she told him, for not dealing with life head-on. But what did she know? Alan wondered. Skye screened her calls to avoid speaking with her mother, and she interrupted people when they talked. True, he was attracted to her, but she infuriated him.

"I'm really more of a dog person," Skye said. "Although I don't mind cats. Maybe eventually the cats will see you as the alpha-cat." When he pursued this idea, it became clear that Skye felt he should keep all of the cats. It would be cruel to break them up. They were used to each other. They relied on each other. "Look at that one," Skye said, pointing to one cat with a mottled white coat, watching them from the doorway. Strange patches of brown fur on her face and her back made her look as though she were disfigured with burn scars. "She's the shyest. If she were given away by herself, she'd be traumatized."

"You don't know that."

"And this one," she picked up a gray and white one with a pointy face, who promptly bit her hand. "See how playful he is?" She put him down and he leapt on a passing black cat. "He'd miss his friends. He'd be bored."

Alan drank his whiskey.

Eventually, they fell asleep, she on the couch, he on the floor. They had resolved nothing. Skye was still convinced he had been having an affair with Claire and equally convinced he was heartless for not wanting the cats. Alan argued, but half-heartedly. Of everyone, he had thought Skye would be the one to support and comfort him. Where was the sympathy he should be getting for this predicament? He felt wholly misunderstood. Sometime in the early morning, Alan was aware of the cats settling in beside him, one curled into the crook of his knees, another next to his head.

When the doorbell rang at eight, the cats scattered. Aunt Janis had arrived. Skye quickly excused herself and disappeared into the bathroom. Guilt colored Alan's cheeks pink.

"Megan and Skye are having breakfast with your Aunt Nancy at nine," Aunt Janis said.

When Alan said that she was out getting doughnuts, Aunt Janis waved his excuse aside. Was Megan safe with Stanfield, she wanted to know. "Yes," he said, but he wasn't sure. She was safe in the sense that he wasn't an ax murderer. But given Stanfield's habits, his heavy cologne, his familiarity with the nightclubs in the greater Chicago-land area, she was at risk of being used. He never meant any harm, Alan knew. And he never intentionally led anyone on. "I don't know," Alan said.

Aunt Janis looked at him a moment. She had a glance, a way of tilting her face up and then looking sideways at a person that could make Alan feel like a child. Then she sighed.

"It's terrible, giving them up," she said. "Did you know that when you moved here, your mother was just going to let you go, wait for you to call her when you needed help, let you spread your wings, as they say." Aunt Janis sat down on the couch. "I couldn't believe this was my own sister, so willing to stand aside for you. I couldn't do it. I couldn't bear the thought of you all alone in that dorm learning god knows what from god knows who. She didn't ask me to look after you, but I had to."

He wanted to say something witty or kind, but Alan was flustered. He sat down on the couch next to her, and patted her hand.

On their way out, Alan whispered, "Call me," to Skye. She walked down the steps as if she hadn't heard him. He felt like having a drink. How had he ruined so much so quickly?

That evening, lying on the couch, he tried to count the animals. He realized for the first time that they were lanky because they were young—still teenagers. Perhaps that explained their pack mentality. He remembered Claire crooning over each individual cat, picking them up and holding them upside down to scratch their bellies. One of them was named Pookah, he was sure. But which one? He couldn't even tell for sure how many black and white cats there were. Two? Three? Not only were they identical, they were always moving, occasionally stopping to pick a fight with a large yellow cat. The yellow cat

was fatter than the others, and stayed on the outskirts of the crowd. Alan decided he must be older, a leftover from another litter who was tolerated, but not liked, by the rest of the clan.

He dialed the phone number in Salt Lake City, the number Claire had called from. Three rings, then an answering machine with her voice. In the background of the taped message, a man was laughing. The laughter caught Alan off-guard. Had she known him before she left? What were they laughing about? Had Claire, of all people, found someone to be happy with? He worried that if he left a confrontational message, the man might pick up the phone. The machine beeped and there was a pause before Alan spoke. "This is a message for Claire," he said. "This is Alan calling. I just wondered... I just... wanted to let you know that the cats are fine."

He hung up, embarrassed and frustrated. The sound of the phone slamming down seemed to be a cue for the cats. They began running, tearing through the apartment, back claws scratching against the hard wood. One of them scrambled onto his desk, overturning the phone book pedestal and a plant came crashing to the floor. Dirt scattered, and Alan became aware of the state of his apartment. Phone books, dirt, tufts of cat hair floated across the hardwood floors, mats of hair stuck on the edge of the couch. The faint ammonia odor from the litter had not gone away in a week.

He grabbed his keys and left the apartment, walking first down one block, then climbing on the cross town bus. His instinct was to return to Claire's apartment, but he dismissed this idea. What did he expect, to find some scrap of her that he could punish? Skye was right, he decided. Situations did not fall on him. He invited them. He was too

accommodating, too uncomplaining, too nice. He punched the back of the empty bus seat in front of him. "Settle down, mister," said a man across the row. Alan punched the seat again, rubbed his knuckles, and then got off at the next stop.

In front of him was Navy Pier, with its lights and rides. Ships were sailing close to the shore, bobbing in and out of darkness into the neon lights of the pier. Alan entered and went to the line for the Ferris wheel. He watched the families move from booth to booth, the fathers hoisting children onto their shoulders, smiling as they spent money at every booth. Maybe it was foolish to avoid a serious relationship, Alan thought. Claire had made it easy, she would never have settled down with him, but Skye? Skye at least respected him, or had. She went along with his crazy schemes and waited to see him on weekends, when she could have dated any number of guys on campus. True, her quiet demeanor covered up a stubborn streak, but she was smart. She was beautiful. And he had probably blown his chances with her. How could he be so stupid? he wondered. After all, he was thirty-one. His parents had three children by the time they were Alan's age. And Alan? He had nothing to show for himself but an apartment full of someone else's cats.

"Eight dollars," the man said. He was in his early thirties, with a striped polo shirt and greasy hair falling out of a ponytail.

Alan felt in his pockets, finding only the fifty-dollar bill Stanfield had given him.

"I can't take that," the man said. Alan didn't like the way the man spoke with a swagger, as if Alan were an idiot.

"It's cash," Alan said. "What more do you want?"

"I want a bill I can make change for," the man said. "Go get change, then come back."

"No," said Alan. "There were seven people in line before me. You have enough change. Give me the tickets."

"I don't want to make change for a fifty."

"Do it!" Alan said. He was shouting now.

"Look mister," the man said. He looked around uncomfortably. "If I make change for you, maybe I won't have enough change for somebody else later."

"That's your problem," Alan said. "Give me the ticket."

People began leaving the line. The man fumbled in his cash register, handing Alan a neat stack of bills and two paper tickets. "There," he said. "Forty-two dollars. Your tickets. Just go, please."

A woman and her two children sat across from him on the Ferris wheel. As the car swung and swayed, the children leaned over the side. To Alan, they seemed like Slinky toys, loosely stacked coils ready to bend or flop whichever way they were nudged—right off the car, it seemed at the moment. The mother held onto the waistbands of their pants and smiled apologetically to Alan. Her hair was pulled loosely into a ponytail, wisps of it sticking to the sides of her face. There were shadows under her eyes, and, incredibly, she had incorrectly buttoned her shirt so that the fabric puffed out near her stomach.

Alan looked over the side of the car, tracing his path to the pier. Somewhere in those lights, probably under the neon sign of a bar, was Skye. She was probably with Megan, letting men buy her drinks, looking for someone who would not disappoint her.

Beyond the lights, outside the city, was darkness, but from the top of the Ferris wheel, Alan couldn't see where the lights ended. In the parking lot, the cars were lined up carefully. Even the pier itself, with its manic energy on the ground, was orderly from above. The ride stopped for a moment, their car near the top of the arc, and Alan took advantage of the view to plan his escape from the Ferris Wheel, so he wouldn't have to confront the man at the ticket booth.

When they descended, he stepped off quickly, cutting off the children who tried to run out before him. At the end of the platform, near a cotton candy vendor, Skye was waiting for him.

"I was on the bus when I saw you leave," she said. "I followed you here."

A gust of wind blew her hair in front of her face. She flipped the hair behind her head, and zipped up her jacket.

"I'm not keeping the cats," he said. He had meant it as a joke, but it sounded defensive. She frowned slightly. She looked towards the entrance of the pier, as though she might walk away. "Well, not all of them," he said, quickly. "No more than two or three."

Skye smiled. Her cheeks were flushed from the wind. Looking at her, being close to her on the noisy pier, Alan felt a tender sort of wonder. An awe as he tried to remember exactly how he had arrived at this point, exactly how he had gotten so lucky.