

T H E I O W A S H O R T F I C T I O N A W A R D

MY BODY TO YOU



ELIZABETH SEARLE

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MY BODY TO YOU

BY ELIZABETH SEARLE

1992 Iowa Short Fiction Award Winner

Selected by James Salter

In the thirteen stories of *My Body to You*, thirteen women or girls pilot their own bodies through a shifting universe of lovers old and young, parents devoted and destructive, sisters of different sexes, children and adults living in the mysterious world of autism. All these characters share keen powers of observation and a heightened sensuality. In a wild variety of settings, they struggle to control—or dare to abandon themselves to—their intensely private passions.

A woman in love with a gay man she calls Sister Kin attempts to escape the bonds of her own body. An eighteen-year-old virgin enters into a passionate affair with an older man who turns out to be a virgin of a different sort. A special education teacher in a school for aggressive teenagers finds herself attracted to another teacher, also female. An intelligent outcast girl bonds with her mindlessly seductive mother to form “one person.”

Searle reveals other characters through inventive and often comic feats of narrative daring. A girl grows into womanhood during a single family dinner that spans twenty years. A middle-aged wife, once dubbed “The First Most Beautiful Woman in the World,” watches her former selves parade before her family in a lively evening of home movies. Two women—one recently divorced, the other a group home resident in love with The Who—join forces as they figure out “What to Do in an Emergency.” An old woman experiences both physical breakdown and spiritual breakthrough in a supermarket’s vegetable department. A young woman is drawn into the emotional and sexual life of an autistic boy obsessed with the number 8.

*My
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Elizabeth Searle

*My Body
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and for you, newt*

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*My
Body
to
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*My
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Above me, a boy is trying to guess my sex. He hangs from a metal bar by his long arms, his body suspended at a slant over mine. As the train jolts into motion, my head almost bumps his crotch. Maybe my new and bristling crewcut sings his zipper. He smells of subway: secondhand smoke, smothered winter sweat, year-old urine. The subhuman way, you call it. Eyes low, I scoot back on the plastic seat, my high-laced hightops pressing the shuddery rubber floor, firm as a surfer's bare feet on a board. Between my ankles, I grip my swollen overnight bag. I feel his eyes dart over my torso, lighting on three triangle points of interest. My oversized brown leather jacket—your jacket—is zipped; my jeans are baggy. My face is downcast. Nothing gives me away.

“We go-oh—” a drunk-sounding little kid calls out helpfully, his or her voice rising above the whine of the rails.

Metal shrieks. Loose face flesh jiggles. The train rocks and we rock with it. The hanging boy’s body sways, long and loosely jointed. Under my zipped jacket, my breasts bounce. Can he see? My head feels bare, no more soft curtain of hair to hide behind. I raise only my eyes, only an inch.

A zipper glints between vertical lips of denim. As the boy shifts his weight, a diamond-shaped flash of white cotton shows. Surrender flag. Does he know it’s open? Boldly, sizing up Another Would-Be Assailant, I follow his long legs. Usually I face bellies, not crotches. Usually I don’t raise my eyes. Girls can’t; bold boys can. This one has your sort of body: all bone and muscle, lean as a whippet. No visible jiggles. His bony knee twitches, rhythmically. *Coursing With Hormones*, you say, when you eye boys his age. His shiny fake leather jacket is held together with a bewildering array of buckles and zippers, shiny too. His collar is zipped, turned up à la James Dean.

Rebel Without a Brain, you’d murmur. And even here—underground, where it’s dangerous—I give a full-lipped dare of a smile. Rebel flicks his eyes down to me, then quickly back up to the metal bar he grips. An elevator stranger staring at floor numbers. His Adam’s apple bobs. A boy. Who thinks I’m another boy, coming on to him?

My hidden nipples prickle. Something to report to you, I decide, and we all lean left. Metal gives its plaintive subway shriek. Underneath the train’s cradle motion, we feel in the fleshy parts of our bodies the jagged galloping rhythm of wheels clacking on track. Rebel’s zipper vibrates delicately.

In bars, Man Ray or Monster’s or Hot Bods or Crisis Cafe, you snuck shy, sly stares below the belt. Crotch watching. Only watching, you—Sister Kin, the Flying Nun—swore. I sat in the dark with you and fifty-odd men, 50 percent of them dressed as women.

We—the sub-human strangers and I—straighten again like blown candle flames. I blink, the white cotton diamond blurring. Rebel has stiffened both legs, standing at attention as if my smile had been a soldierly salute. Is this how boy flirts with boy? Wheels clack down the track, panting faster. I want, you know, to know. And what better time to find out than today, our wedding eve?

"We hee-ere!" the drunk kid screeches, matching the shrill pitch of the brakes.

As a TWA employee—a steward among stewardesses—you and your spouse are both entitled to fly for free. Wherever, whenever. All we have to do is get married. Officially. This is an official proposal, you told me over long distance, right after I told you I was giving up on men. But Birdy, you exclaimed in breathless imitation of a woman's voice, maybe mine, So am I!

Really? I grip my denim knees, tensing my hands so my boyish knuckles stand out.

"Hee-ere!"

At the last abruptly shuddering swerve, Rebel gives an Elvis Presley thrust. His jutting hipbones frame my forehead. What part of me might brush what part of him if I dare move? Tremulously, he holds his body in limbo-dancer pose. Underground etiquette.

"Whoa—!"

My body pitches forward as the train straightens. A jolt. Real Sugar and Twice the Caffeine! I pull back fast, my whole head electrified. His cowboy cry was harsh, his crotch shockingly soft, a springy mushroom pillow. Just barely butted. Family jewels, your silken mother taught you to call your own, as if they were shiny and gem-hard and indestructible. My scalp tingles. Fine hairs quiver on the bared back of my neck.

Swans, you murmured one night, in high school. We were watching *To Have and Have Not* on your mother's white leather couch. We never kissed, not then and not later. Swans, you repeated, rubbing your neck against mine, slow and hard. My neck felt long, curved, warm, then warmer. Your Adam's apple filled the hollow of my throat as if I'd swallowed it whole. *This must be, your breath cooled my skin, how swans neck.*

"Sorry," I mumble as the train brakes tighten their bite. And I raise my eyes to give Rebel a steely unapologetic Fellow-Teenage-Boy stare. Going too far, you might say, approvingly. My hardened lashes scratch my finest skin. Mascara. My one mistake.

His eyes—brown, but blank as blue—aren't quite centered over his nose. His train-shaken face is city white, speckled by purple. James Dean, with acne. I bend all the way forward, my head nearly centered between his black denim knees, my braless breasts swaying in your

jacket. Do Family Jewels hang as soft and tender as breasts? A question no one on earth can answer.

Grabbing my overstuffed bag and tucking my chin to my collarbone, I spring up, jill-in-the-box. Swing your partner, doe-see-doe. I duck under the black leather bridge of his arms. Free, I tell myself as we bump hips. Both bony. We sway. My stop skids into view in murky underground light.

"Sor-ry man," Rebel mumbles under the climactic subway screech, deepening his voice to give both words the same sarcastic emphasis. I hug my stuffed bag and push past a flat-footed woman holding a sci-fi paperback close over her face. *Caves of Steel*. Metal scrapes metal, a chorus of high-pitched dog whistles, each straining to hit the same note.

Round the world, you've promised me, your voice as close to serious as you ever come. London, Cairo, Copenhagen, Tokyo.

En el caso de emergencia, a sign above the door starts to say, and Rebel elbows aside the oblivious *Caves of Steel* dweller, slips behind me. At the final jolt of the halt, he presses me against my overnight bag, his jacket crackling. I clench my ass muscles the way I do when, after a day of temp service typing in nylons and high heels, I feel a businessman press me in the crush of rush hour. My ass trembles, firm as any boy's. The scratched Plexiglas doors vibrate through my bag, trying to open. If you stood behind me now, would you think I was a boy? Would you feel—as I do for once, one moment—turned on?

I make a fist. In the past year, I've met a number of perfectly nice men. You know. My first Would-Be Affair lasted three weeks; my last, three months. A pattern that's begun to resemble the Morse code's international signal for distress.

I rap Plexiglas. On the other side, dumb waiting faces stare up. Smoky boy's breath fills my ear. If you're ever trapped in a locked car with some maniac clawing at the windows, Mother told me years ago, give the horn three short, three long, three short. SOS.

Blood love, you told me last night.

I blink, snow still studding my tarry lashes like tinsel. Snow explodes in the pale daytime headlights of the bus. Airport shuffle bus,

you call it. I huddle up front, near the driver. Upholstery soaks in sound, no subhuman clangs or clatter. I feel but can't hear my stomach growl. One day empty. The bus rocks more gently than the train, trying to lull me. I sit straight, on alert. Freshly chopped hair must have fresh nerve endings, like cat whiskers. Through my hair, I feel Rebel behind me, straining to see me. He'd waited patiently for the bus, standing apart from the rest of us. He alone carried no bag. Sometimes on buses or subway trains, you spot certain men, strangers but for one night, and you whisper to me, Oh good, *he's* still alive.

"Buried," a balding old woman across the aisle mutters, a voice from underground. I smooth my damp bristly hair, what little's left. Mia Farrow, you exclaimed by phone last night when I told you I'd finally cut it. Mia Farrow, *Rosemary's Baby*, right? Was I right?

Always, I'd answered, picturing you stretched out under silky sheets. Your long hair falling over your bare shoulders like a black silk cape. Your eyes making black slashes in your white face. Kin Hwan. You say I am but really you're the one, the beauty.

I turn to my window, its green-tinted snowfall, and wonder if your bachelor party has started yet. Just a few old acquaintances, you'd told me. Where, I'd asked you, changing the subject. Where were we going for a honeymoon? Paris? Madrid? You hesitated; a Jolt soda can clanked your receiver. First, you said, you had to get off FL to NY, the Palm Bitch Run. Then, before we'd be granted license to marry, there was one more thing we had to do. Even if we didn't have to, you were going to. Tomorrow, before city hall. What? I'd asked, breathless like you. Another clank. Blood, love, you'd mumbled.

I lean left with the groaning curve of the bus, my eyes squeezed shut. And I mouth my favorite word to myself, to calm myself. Whip. My lips purse into a kiss shape. Pet. Whippet, whippet. She disappeared, you remember. The day you appeared. I slump back in my seat, not caring if Rebel sees. Weak already, so early in my fast.

Poor Panda. Mother named her for the black markings on her elegant white snout. The name didn't fit any more than a sleek leaping greyhound fits a fat lumbering bus. This one isn't even a Greyhound. It bumps along in fits and starts, stuck in slush-bound traffic. Whippets make greyhounds look slow. Whippets share the greyhound shape, you know, but they're smaller, more compact. A perfect miniature horse, disguised as a dog.

Panda loved to run and I loved to watch her. Mother and Stepdad

#2 and I lived in South Carolina then, across the street from that vast, rolling golf course. Down the street from you. Summer day-times, I sat in our front yard, peeling busted golf balls like eggs and fingering the tightly wound tangle of rubber band inside. One long rubber band, the color of muddy pee. How'd it get so dirty, in there?

Behind the trash bin, Panda clinked her chains, pacing. Head low, like a horse. Miles down Route 2, cars would rumble. Panda's ears would prick; her ribs would stand at attention. She'd yip—a poodle sound, unworthy of her—and I'd rush to the trash, grab hold of her chain, yell no no no into the roar of the approaching car. Links bit my palms; links dug into Panda's slender, desperately strained neck, all tendons and bones. Her tensed-up hindquarters quivered. The chain twisted and trembled.

Summer twilights, Stepdad #2 got home at six, after closing up the golf course. Then and only then, he'd release Panda for her nightly run. Off like a shot. I sucked in my breath and watched, not even minding Stepdad's hand on my shoulder, holding me in place. Not that I—anyone—could run like Panda.

Whippet, whippet, I whisper again, a warm upward rush of air in my throat. Bus rumble absorbs the name, her real name.

Whippet made the golf course wild. Her hoofed feet never touched the ground, like a soaring Greyhound Bus greyhound, only real. Her body became a white blur in the twilight. I'd strain my eyes to watch Whippet fly over greens that weren't, for this space of time, meticulously manicured greens but hills, valleys. Down my back Stepdad's hand would travel, slowly and lightly. Up over the swells of ground Whippet would swoop. At the golf course border, she'd skid in the short grass, her hoofed paws digging into turf. She'd turn heel, take aim, take off in the opposite direction. Pacing still, poor Panda.

Green glass vibrates. Under my half-zipped jacket, my breasts bounce as they do when I try to jog. That same pain. Across the aisle, the buried woman dozes. Her skull shows, clear and firm compared to her lumpy profile. Her jowls jiggle as if she's shaking her head. But it's the bus that's shaking her head, shaking all our loose flesh. Breasts, jowls, jewels.

TO AIRPORT, a giant green sign says, and a ramp rises up. The bus bumps, a bump we barely feel in our padded seats. Dentist seats, our bodies numbed. Can movement be muffled like sound? Above TO AIRPORT, a real airplane—startlingly huge—climbs air.

How come she comes back? I asked Stepdad, whose hand had stopped at the small of my back. I felt myself stiffen, though his touch was light. His hand rested there—no, anything but ‘rested.’ A long, long-fingered southern boy’s hand. Only his fingertips touched me.

She’s gotta eat, Sweets.

How come? I wondered, as Panda rasped and panted and choked down hard nuggets of dog food. Her dark eyes bulged, too big for her skull. A bird’s skull, narrowing to a point. Even as she ate, her body remained graceful, shaped like a slender yet buxom superwoman. No soft flesh: only thin efficient hips overbalanced by a rib cage spacious enough to hold her largest parts. Her heart, her lungs.

I stand when everybody else stands. The bus exhales. Reaching for my bag, I swallow green-tinted air. Laughing gas. For years now, you’ve refused to take what your friends call, simply, The Test. Positive, negative. You didn’t want to know, you said. Promised. I draw a deep steadying breath. The buried woman stays sunk in her seat. From above, her head looks bald as any man’s.

My long neck rises to hold my head high as I start down the sky-ceilinged stretch of terminal. My crewcut bristles in the indoor chill. My bag bumps my legs. Blood, love, blood. My ankles scissor back and forth, my feet in my new hightops fast and soundless, no longer hobbled by heels. Fly for free, fly for free. Cautiously, I dart one glance over my shoulder. Not far behind me, a dark head bobs among the other heads. Its oily hair gleams. I turn back too fast to tell for sure. He has, I remind myself, no bag. And I pick up speed, wanting all at once, though I’m an hour early, to run.

Whippet. That was my one clear thought the summer I turned fourteen. I’d run away with her, run like her. The hot afternoon I first met you, Mother was out in a new man’s car, her dirty white Mustang parked in the driveway. I paced beside it, on guard. Stepdad was due home anytime. We’d never been alone in the house together before, he and I, only in his car. Driving lessons. I’d steer us out to the red clay back roads, stop the car when and where he told me to. His rusted Vega. Did I hear it already, rumbling up Route 2? My rubber thongs flapped against my bare feet like wings in frantic flight. My long driveway shadow stretched out even longer as I crouched, as I fumbled with the knotted mass of Panda’s chains, Mother’s forbidden keys jangling.

Halfway down the terminal, I spot an arrow. I follow it, grateful

for the blue and white picture, feeling too weak to read. I drop my bag with a muffled thud beside me, people rushing forward behind me. Six phones stand bolted together in two rows of three, back to back. I stare at the square, chipped push-tone dial. Some numbers have worn off. I try to remember the number I know by heart.

Somehow—how could be charted only later, by you, by a map of scratches and bruises—I'd gathered Panda up in my arms. A panic-stricken whippet, a force of nature. She whipped her body back and forth like a fish in a net, all muscle and bone and motion. She fought me the way I'd imagined fighting him. Her nails scraped my throat and tore my T-shirt and nearly clipped the nipples of my new breasts.

Somehow, forcing her front paws together and letting her back legs churn, I thrust Whippet through the open Mustang door, scrambled in behind her. In the front seat of Stepdad's Vega, I'd stared and stared at the mute steering-wheel horn, trying to remember what Mother told me about the Morse code. Two long, two short? Frantically, Panda scratched the window pane, her ears pricking up. Did she hear his not-so-distant engine? Mother's key turned between my bloody fingertips; my feet found the gas.

We roared down Route 2 at a crazy tilt, wheels sinking into a shallow red clay ditch. Late sun blinded me. Above the engine, Panda gave high screeching yips. My grip on the wheel tightened, my hands slippery wet. Where were we going? I'd glimpsed you before, of course, out in your yard, alone and quiet like me, and maybe that's why I swung into the first driveway past the golf course entrance, nearly crashing into the scrolled wrought-iron legs of your mother's carport. My first clear look: Kin Hwan, age fourteen, rushing outside to defend his mother's house.

I fumbled for the gearshift, bumped the headlights. Your face lit up, white as a Kabuki dancer's. Your spiky black hair exploded out around your head, ahead of its time, stiff with spray. When, frequently, your glamorous Chinese mother was out of town on business, you wore her robes. Before me, no one had ever seen you in silk.

I shoved open the door, ducked fast. Tornado drill. With an uncharacteristically sloppy leap—her hooves skidding on vinyl—Panda vaulted over me and disappeared into the dusk. I smelled dog piss soaking into car carpet. I stayed ducked down, the steering-wheel notches pressing my forehead. His hands, I never told you. His fin-

gers: one, two. His fingernails, almost imperceptible, inadvertently scraping my moist innermost flesh. One of the tinier varieties of pain. I kept my head bowed as you bent into Mother's Mustang, slow and cautious. My skin felt hot, the same flush that formed under his touch, only deeper. Ashamed now, too. My long hair hid my face and half my body.

In your mother's darkened living room—it was always nighttime in that house—I sat on the white leather couch, hugging my bare, bandaged knees. My arms were neatly bandaged too, by you. My skin smelled of witch hazel. My T-shirt was torn, showing one strap of my training bra. A light flickered, the softest possible.

You stepped toward me, so silent I felt I was watching you on a TV without sound. Peach silk shimmered over your body. Through the thin silk, your chest was smooth, hairless. With a shy flourish, you held out another weightless robe, pink and maroon. I blinked, pleased. Colors to complement my bruises. You bent over me, studying me, your eyes narrowed so the whites disappeared. Two clear black mirrors, glimpsed in slits. In my memory of this night, these were your first words to me, ever.

Feel that. Real silk.

My quarters clank. Long distance costs two dollars. My finger stabs out the code, all on its own. I press the receiver to my ear, straining for the familiar purr of your phone. One, two. I stare down at my black hightops and blink. My feet blur. Four feet? Across from my own, I see his larger pair. His black denim legs are cut off above the ankle. He's standing opposite me, at the phone whose backboard presses the backboard of mine. Five rings now, and I know you won't answer. Not in the midst of a party. The VCR playing, you've planned, a fabulously bad Karen Valentine movie called *Coffee, Tea or Me?* The sixth ring is chopped short. Your machine kicks in. On tape, your voice is portentous.

"There. Is. No. Beep."

Silence rolls. "Kin?" Your name fills my throat as your Adam's apple once had done. Through the waiting whir, I seem to hear men's voices. A laughing circle of men, you in the center in your black and white silk party robe, your hair tied back with black satin. I blink, my lashes sticky. Unwieldy. "You're not . . . too far gone, are you?"

Your half-Chinese, half-Korean body won't tolerate it, as you well

know. Even semidrunken, you stare like a sleepwalker. The Flying Nun. Your black eyes glitter so you seem feverishly alive, present, and yet not, not there at all, absent.

"Sister Kin?" Tape whirs. You won't hear me for hours, if then. Maybe you'll pass out by the time I arrive. Maybe your apartment will hold a silence quite different from the peaceful museum silence I'll feel if you're sober when you first look at me, studying me.

"Listen." I watch Rebel's toe tap. Impatient, yet patient too. I lower my voice, wondering if he can hear. "Listen, I'm at my airport and there's this boy hanging around me. Skinny and hyper. Your sort, really." I picture you straightening, momentarily sobering up, your interest always aroused when a Would-Be Lover hovers near me. Officially, you encourage me to find a man, find a way to lose, at long last, my virginity.

"He's following me, y'know. Like some kind of bodyguard. Or . . . the opposite."

Drool, you'd advise. My real bodyguard. Scratch your ass. Make yourself un—

"Lis-ten," I repeat, holding on to the receiver with both clammy hands. You'll drag me into your kitchen soon as you see I've been fasting again. It's simple, really. You want to be my bodyguard; I want to be yours. "Don't . . . don't worry about the—" My stomach makes a last-gasp growl, half-drowning the word you couldn't say. "Test."

Tape whirs on, still waiting. I imagine party music, one song, the one you always sing to me as "I Had To Be You." I'm leaning against the metal phone shelf, my pulse so strong it steals all my energy. My empty stomach is collapsing into itself.

I giggle. Two tense teenage girls. That's what you used to imagine when we'd giggle on the phone in high school, telling secrets. How scared you'd been at breakfast one morning by a stain on your mother's silk robe. An unmistakable reddish smear.

"I mean, I'll take it with you and all," I manage. "The blood test." And I hang up: a click as fumbling and abrupt as the fall of a curtain on a skit.

I sway. Your jacket feels hot. Was it, as you once hinted, a gift from some man? I bend for my bag.

In New York, in June, you took me to be fitted for a diaphragm that I never wound up using, one which remained, like me, techni-

cally intact. Outside Planned Parenthood, we were ambushed by a woman carrying a sign that read *If the Womb Isn't Safe, Noplace Is Safe*. She marched up to us and fixed her murderous stare on me. "I'm so glad *you* were never aborted!"

Standing at my side, holding my diaphragm in a plain white bag, you stared right back at her and replied, perfectly polite, "Pity you weren't."

I blink. Tar specks swim. I blink again. Yes. Rebel's feet still wait. Testing my ability to move, I take a few slow steps. Blood, love, blood. I halt and stare up. Two signs have been painted and hung just for me. I hesitate between them, feeling him hover behind me. He thinks he knows what I am, by now.

Silly boy. A metal stall is a metal stall, anyplace on earth. Tile is tile. But MEN'S does smell stronger than WOMEN'S.

I lower myself, hidden except for my feet. So simple, it should be. All I have to do is transport, deliver, give, in a sense, my body to you. To guard. An unnatural act, you'd told me after Planned Parenthood, as we sat in your darkened apartment, contemplating the smooth white rubber cup. That's what you imagined sex would be, with a woman. It would feel, you'd said, like some kind of . . . invasion.

Yes. I bend, pulling up my jeans. Your jacket creaks. In chill TV light, we used to run our hands over each other's bodies, under each other's clothes. Once, you even slipped one hand under my panties, like—yet not at all—Stepdad #2 in the Vega. Your palm curved with my ass, not pressing. My flesh stayed soothingly cool, unmarred by any flush. On TV, James Stewart snapped at Grace Kelly. If she were mine, I'd treat her right, you whispered in a voice that matched your touch, tender and reverent. All I'd do, all day long is . . . polish her.

I look down at Rebel's familiar black hightops. He stands outside the booth. He followed me in at a decent distance, stepped back discreetly as I peed. The odorless colorless pee of a fast that's beginning to work. He knows I sat. I flush the toilet, feeling him stiffen, ready to escort me—where? I lift my bag. As I swing open the metal door, he takes half a step back. A tall boy, much taller than you. I look up at him, enjoying, I admit, the slight, feminine tilt of my head. Rebel's gaze wavers first, drops down to his feet. Will you, too, be a nervous groom? He takes hold of the metal door frame, leans close. His breath smells of smoke and sugar. "Where you heading, girl?"

I blink. A bride, batting lashes. Beyond Rebel's arm, I see the odd

exposed-looking row of urinals. Doe-see-doe. I duck under his arm, bumping him, the floor swaying like the train's rubber floor. Side by side, our leather arms awkwardly brushing, Rebel and I walk down the tile aisle to the front of the bathroom, the row of sinks. My face in the mirror jumps out at me, shockingly thin and colorless, no longer softened by my blond hair. All bone. Only my fake dark lashes gave me away, really.

Who gives this woman?

I bend over the sink. I do, I tell you. Take her away. Take my wife, please. I splash my face with cold water. If my head and ears could shiver, they would. My fingertips tremble, as they always do when my fasts reach the serious stage. I shut off the faucet and wipe my face with a harsh brown towel, rubbing hard.

"No-ohh!" In the mirror, a towheaded kid in overalls is dragged through the door by a puffing, hunched-over daddy. The daddy's glasses slide halfway down his nose.

"Don' *god-da*, don' *god-da*—" A metal stall door bangs like a shot.

Behind me, Rebel's loose-jointed body tenses up. Ready to lunge? Drool, you'd say. Make yourself—what? Bending forward, I try to scrub off my mascara with my balled-up paper towel. Waterproof, tearproof. Black lashes stab the whites of my eyes, black specks floating. A toilet paper roll clacks.

I crouch by my overnight bag and dig with sudden inspiration into its side pocket. Above me, Rebel still stares. At a loss. Under soft Kleenex and tampons, I root out a hard shiny metal nail-clipper. Standing shakily, my fingers shaky too, I manage to center the tiny curved blades above my eye, forcing my trembling eyelid to stay still. Behind me, I feel Rebel draw in his breath.

The toilet flushes, drowning the bite of blade through hair. Lashes fall, some sticking to my wet cheek. My lid springs open, prickly and stunned. Water rushes round and round and I have to hurry. What's more half-assed than two eyes that don't match?

"C'mon now," the daddy is urging, his voice echoing on tile. "All clean now!"

My next clicks come out loud and clear. My pulse leaps in my throat in wild applause. I brush more lashes off my cheeks and they stick to the sides of the sink like beard clippings. Their tips are black; their roots, blond. Behind me, Rebel stares, forgetting how to do any-

thing else. I turn to face him. In harsh bathroom light, his buckles and zippers shimmer. A mirage. His eyes and lips shimmer too, floating inches from his face. He stares as if I have shaven off a beard.

"See?" the Daddy's voice demands from the back of the bathroom, overpowering the kid's shy trickle of pee. "You did have to!"

I try to blink, wincing. Everything wavers. Rebel's dark, darkly lashed eyes widen but his pouty inflatable mouth stays shut, shellacked shut by spit as shiny as lip gloss.

He steps toward me and I bump the wet sink, feel wetness soak into my jeans. I smell Rebel's breath again, cigarettes and sweets. I may, I tell myself, kiss the bride. I shut my eyes—another sharper prickle—and bend forward. Before Rebel can jump, I brush his wet soft lips with my dry ones. Good-bye, I think.

Whoa. He staggers backward, then catches his balance, expertly. A light-boned surfer, shaken up, but still in control of his board. His wild off-center stare caroms around the tile walls.

"Not so hard, huh?" The metal door swings; the daddy's ass emerges. He's kneeling to zip the kid back into its overalls.

I lift my bag, nod. Rebel Without a Brain, meet Rebel Without a Body. That's how I feel, so light. My lids burn as if from years of tears.

"Scuse me—?" Across the tile, the crouched, round-faced Daddy stares over at both of us, fierce bathroom light in his glasses. The kid squirms, struggling to unzip what his father's just zipped. I start to turn, stop with a shock. My soft stuffed bag drops.

"Hey—" Rebel has hold of my oversized sleeve. "What're ya tryin' t' do?" His voice rises to a childish whine. He tugs. Leather strains my shoulders, the jacket half-zipped. My fingers curve. With a single jagged motion—a lightning flash splitting a sky—I unzip it all the way, jerk free from both arms at once. Birdy Bird.

"Miss?" the daddy calls out. Reluctantly alarmed. I turn my ass on him and Rebel both, bending fast to grab my bag. My breasts bounce freely as I straighten, my T-shirt thinner than skin. No doubt the door's thud echoes on tile. Hit and miss. The daddy's voice echoes too. It must be directed at someone inside the bathroom, not at me, so clearly outside. I turn from MEN'S and start off down the terminal again, my bag thumping my legs. Rebel's thin spit is evaporating on my lips. Behind me, distantly, the door whooshes. My head feels

light, my body lighter. My breasts strain my T-shirt, unbound, and yet they too feel light at first, unreal. Heads turn to look but I give my eyes to no one.

After the ceremony, you'll photograph us, setting your timer. Glossy black-and-white stills, stylized poses, our lips always a fraction of an inch apart. A born model, you called me after Mother's divorce #2, when I got so skinny. Weighing myself three times a day. Menstruating once in three months. You eat like a bird, you'd scold in what we both called—though neither of ours sounded anything like it—a mother voice. With you, and only with you, I ate. Feasts devoured in the blue light of late-night movies, strawberries dipped in chocolate in your mother's gleamingly unused fondue set. We lay on her white leather couch, studying her slick floppy copies of *Paris Match*, *Vogue*, *Endless Vacation*. Rating bones, seeking out models who'd make the most elegant skeletons. After all, after death, breasts and family jewels go the way of all flesh. Bones last, you'd pronounce as we made up each other's faces, shadowed our high cheekbones and deep eye sockets. You took my picture; I took yours.

Panting, my head buzzing, I step into line at the gun detector machine, dart a glance over my shoulder. Meeting my eyes determinedly, as if the daddy has sent him on this mission, Rebel takes his place too, one pregnant woman between us. She yawns, safely anchored. He holds your leather jacket balled up in his arms, a live animal he's struggling to control. What am I trying to do? I concentrate on keeping my feet connected to the floor. My head is a helium balloon, threatening to carry off my hollowed-out bird bones.

"Next," someone says, and I slide my feet forward. How long will my fast last? If the worst is true for you, how long will I last, with you? I step through the electrified metal arch, turn to see Rebel slip out of line on the other side. He still holds the jacket with both hands, but more loosely now, a dazed hunter displaying prey. At the same time watching that prey—its spirit—escape. His eyes and mouth are both open, his fly still only half-closed.

White flag. As I turn, I imagine reaching down gently, zipping him up, all the way. I feel a wet spot on my jeans from the sink, feel his eyes on my back till I turn the corner to the gate, his marathon gaze broken at last. Good-bye, I think again, remembering the title of a book I once saw on your nightstand. *Good-bye to All That*.

As I take my place in another longer line, I wonder how much it

cost, the jacket. Wonder who did give it to you. I shiver in my T-shirt, hand over my ticket. Some flight soon, you'll tear my ticket, smile at me as if we aren't married, as if I'm a prime Palm Beach Bitch. In the chill and flimsy tunnel to the plane, I imagine taking your hand in an anonymous doctor's office, a waiting room.

Wind whistles through the not-quite-sealed space between the entrance hatch and the boarding tunnel's mouth. I hesitate at the last step, from the shuddering tunnel floor onto the solid-seeming floor of the plane. Better get used to it. As my feet move, I reach around with my free hand to touch—for luck—the outer curve of the hatch door, the same surface that will soon be swept by upper-altitude winds: unimaginably cold and strong.

When, I asked you once, did you first know about yourself? And you answered me without a blink of a pause: Always.

A tray unfolds. A hand, a female version of your deft and slender hand, sets down a sealed plastic bag. I take a breath of stranger's smoke. Above me, a nozzle blows some substance thinner than air. I always sit in Smoking because the rear would be the last to crash. Not that anyplace, as you point out, is safe then. *If the womb isn't safe . . .*

I unseal the plastic lips. You're right, lady. No place *is*. Not as long as you're you, trapped in your body like—I slip on bulky black rubber headphones—any dumb fetus. Cleared for departure.

"Trays up, please." The stewardess swooshes past, repeating her command in a voice that sounds recorded. "Up?" Across the aisle, a man rustles a muffled *Boston Globe*. How can any flesh-and-blood being ignore the terrifying grandeur of takeoff?

Outside, snow swirls faster. The ground and airport buildings begin to move. My seat belt strains, strapping me down. My breasts jut out in my T-shirt, soft and proud. Beautiful breasts, or so I'm told. The man's eyes linger, then stop short at my shorn head and raw staring-back eyes. He bows into his half-lowered *Globe*, insanely intent.

Swans, you murmured, rubbing my neck with yours, unhooking my bra as if untying a strand of hair. Your fingers barely brushed my skin. I lay on my back on your mother's couch, white leather cool under my body, my knees raised. Bending, you licked the hardened

nipples of my soft, boyishly flattened breasts. Just a taste. The touch of your tongue was gentle, not tentative. The furthest we ever got.

The plane begins to pick up speed. When I fast, when I stick with it, I always reach this point beyond hunger. It's like the second wind we used to find at 2 AM, watching all-night movies. My stomach is collapsed against itself, nourishing itself. It's not so much that I'm not hungry. It's that the whole idea of hunger feels foreign.

After your tongue touched me, I held myself still. A model. Your black eyes gleamed above me, matching the gleam on each nipple. A sculptor who's just added his finishing touch. In the dark, my knees framed your face. In the dark, the bones of your face stood out, identical to mine. Sisters under the skin.

What, I'll never ask, did you see as you stared down at me? What is it to you, my body?

My headphone plug bounces on my shoulder. The ground moves fast and the buildings move slow. I begin again, more seriously, to shiver.

Marry me, I'll say to you tonight. This much I know. I hug myself, pressing down my breast flesh to feel my ribs. Months ago, I hugged you good-bye, gripping your rib cage as if holding Whippet again, trying to. Marry me, for real. For better or worst. I'll be true to you, if you'll be true to me. Really? you'll ask. Blood thumps the thin skin covering the hollow of my throat. If TWA detected lies, not metal, I'd prove it. If I took the test this moment, anyway, I'd pass.

Through my new rubber ears, the surrounding scream of the engine reaches its highest pitch. I blink, my prickly lids burning, my eyeballs burning too. Determinedly, I stare out the oval window at other planes lined up on other slushy runways. Sleek, massive machines. They quiver in place like whippets longing to run. They *want* to fly, I tell myself, holding myself still. Nothing to fear. As the wheels release the ground, this—what I'm about to do—seems a perfectly natural act.

News

Baby disappears, Tornado rips Ohio, Chickens die in piles in the heat.

Good evening. Our table tilts toward Dad under a weight of loaded plates: hot corn, warm slaw, sweet or glazed or baked potatoes, fried chicken. Ninety-eight degrees outside, and supper steams away, our three faces flushed. Grease equals love. Temperatures rise. This first summer of my life, chickens drop dead in record numbers. Their bodies lie stacked in an anonymous farmyard, my mother's body outlined by the TV's snowy blue light. It is 1962. Under her thin maternity dress, Mother is wide and soft and moon white. Behind her, the TV glows on wheels, centering itself in the kitchen doorway; beside

her, the refrigerator looms like a square white extension of her body, quietly, almost imperceptibly, humming. No end in sight, the weatherman says, and Dad cranes his neck to see around Mother, see around me in my high chair. My white-blond head bobs up and down to block his view. Dad is a small man, after all. He's shy about his size, shy—even when I am a baby girl—about looking at me.

Sizzle, spit. Yellow chicken fat spatters, a telltale nervous burn tonight on Mother's bare arm. It is Philadelphia; it is July. I cough, sob. No, I gasp for air or pretend to gasp, Dad's head maddeningly eyeless and still.

I'm one year old; Mother is not yet fat, only pregnant. Her hand steadies my high chair tonight as my head bobs and bobs. There's something I want Dad to know, something Mother did this afternoon, something to do with a hot airless car.

"Just shopped downtown, t-ried to keep cool," Mother tells Dad, stuttering no more than usual. Mother's a born liar, just like me.

I cry. I sputter and spit. Night after night, a gurgle rises up in my throat the minute Dad appears at our supper table. Dad comes late, always starved because he's skipped lunch in the high school teachers' lounge to stuff LBJ bumper stickers into envelopes alone in his classroom. Mysterious meetings at Democratic headquarters fill most nights, and then when he does eat home, the TV speaks only to him. Dad chews his chicken intently, holds his head as still and determined as Kennedy's head in the photo hung above our table. John Fitzgerald would have been the stillborn baby's name.

Eyeless, eyeless. I hate the bare skin on the back of Dad's head. That blind spot faces me as I, age three, raise my fretful outgrown baby gasps louder and louder against the TV. Till at last, Dad's face turns to me as if this is where he wanted to look all along. His eyes spark; his lips curve to form a *shh*, yet I can't quite drive him to that final hard *t*. Never "Shut up," only:

"*Shushh.*"

A chewed bit of chicken flies from his mouth, and sometimes in kindergarten, age four or five, I give it a fingertip touch. The yellow meat gleams like it's still alive. A square of late sunlight on the shiny tabletop, the steady hum of the fridge: everything feels alive when he fixes his eyes on me.

"So what did you do today?"

Dad asks *me* now too, sometimes asks both Mother and me, often

only me. Pop quiz. No telling when he'll turn and cock his balding nut-hard head to listen, a teacher always on watch for the rare bright student.

"—at re-cess, an' these boys, they caught this big old daddy long-legs—" As I speak, I turn the back of my head toward Mother's bowed face. Mother is waiting to sit at the emptied supper table and enjoy her chocolate ice cream all by herself. Already, age five or six, I sense the broad peaceful expanse of Mother's days alone, sense that when I burst home from school full of news, I risk splashing into an absolutely still and private pond.

"—great big daddy longlegs an' then they *pulled off* all its legs—"

"*All its legs?*" Dad's beer-brightened crusader eyes widen. Just behind Mother's round shoulder, a blue-white Hubert Humphrey makes fierce choppy motions with his tiny hands.

"An' then the bo-dy, the daddy longlegs *bo-dy* . . . Only it didn't have any long legs anymore . . ." I halt, confused. Dad blinks.

"Must cease now, Will cease now," Hubert Humphrey insists, and Dad waits a polite half-beat before turning back to the TV. Hubert's voice rises; my voice stays caught in my throat. Inside, I can see the legless longlegs, a soft grey button that twitched like a Mexican jumping bean. Only not happy that way but mad—twitching and twitching and trying to move.

"How?" I demand, age seven, and in a New York City slum behind Mother's rounder heavier shoulder, a bloated rat body is held high by the tail by a newsman. Hundreds of Rats Successfully Poisoned. Dad will always explain these things, matter-of-fact. He is a teacher; he will never lie to me, never hide from me what he calls the brutal truth: (as in: Those goddamn Republicans ab-solutely re-fuse to see that the brutal truth of the matter is . . .)

"The rat explodes. But in-ternally." Here Dad leans so close I feel his warm beery breath, so close Mother can't hear. "That means *in-side* its own body. The poison, see, *seals up* the rat's intestines so when a special kind of gas builds and builds in its stomach, it can't get out. But then when it—when the rat—explodes, all the . . . the *mess* is contained *in-side* the rat itself."

I nod only slightly, not jarring our gaze. Object of the game: to hold his gaze as long and as often as possible.

But how to compete with the man who gripped Hubert Humphrey's legs? Here he is, come to supper, the Democratic District 13

Chief who wrapped his arms around Humphrey's legs as Humphrey stood up on the back seat of a campaign convertible rolling through downtown Philly. Without the Chief, HHH—who is only about Dad's size, the Chief confirms for us—HHH might have been pulled from the car by the throngs of Philadelphians who lined the streets, craning for a glimpse.

Dad nods, his eyes brimful. At the head of our table, the tall bearded Chief sits in Dad's seat. Five beers tonight for Dad instead of three, our chicken roasted instead of fried, our potatoes creamed, our TV silent. For the first time I, age eight, begin to sense how uncomfortable Dad can be made by even a small silence at supper. Maybe he wishes he could turn on the news tonight, as usual. Maybe this is the first time I've ever seen him strain for someone's attention. Mother and I watch, quiet as Cleo the cat stalking under our table.

"All election night," Dad tells the Chief in a heightened beer-brave voice, "it was nip an' tuck, nip an' tuck between Nixon and Humphrey. And in the end, Humphrey got nipped and the American people got . . ."

He halts. This joke is destined to hang over our table forever unfinished. The man who gripped Humphrey's legs gives a slight stiff smile, one bushy eyebrow raised. Dad shoots a glance not *at* me but toward me. And they both laugh, Dad laughing hardest.

Slowly, Mother lowers one shoulder into the awkward pause that follows this laugh. Her heavy bare arm grows longer, takes on Cleo the cat's disdainful liquid grace. Mother's fingers run down Cleo's smooth black body, up to the tip of Cleo's luxuriantly arched tail. Above the curve of Mother's back, the fridge hums.

Afterward, as Mother and Dad walk the Democratic Chief to the front door, I sit alone at the table. The fridge hum sounds cool and dignified; Dad's voice at the door rises foolishly. Inside, this quiet fridge holds all our safe, hidden food. Mother's body, I know, once held a baby like that. The baby before it was born still, way back when Mother was—

That word. A word I've heard spoken by Mother or Dad only in the low reverent tones newsmen use for kidnappings, murders, disappearances. What will happen if I say it out loud, loud? Will I have to stop myself like Dad did?

"Preg—"

I repeat this syllable weeks later, my face bowed over my supper

behind my long pale bangs. My voice rises only slightly above the TV voice that Mother ignores and Dad strains to hear, a Mud Slide Slathering Peru.

“Preg—” I say, trying it out. “P-p-preg—”

That stutter, Mother’s. Where did it come from? Dad’s head turns with a battered high school teacher’s instinct. A mocking tone in my voice? Am I making fun of her? Dad’s eyes fix on me; Mother’s eyes are downcast. I watch Dad’s flat hand on the table move, maybe start to rise against me. Only one electrifying moment: Dad *en-raged*, I always think when he stares that way at the TV screen, five beers his norm this last year in Philly.

Goddamn Nixon. Dad bangs the tabletop, his fist doubly tight, doubly angry for being so small. Goddamn school board on my back—Damn right-wing crackpots—Damn Philadelphia Voting District Number Thir-teen—They can all go to—

Greenville.

In Greenville, South Carolina, the air is warmer, hazier. Drifting over our supper table through the screened window of our new kitchen is a smell of distant manure, wet grass, red clay. Mother suffers in her cotton tent dresses, tight under the arms. Her face is flushed but never shiny, never sweaty, her skin always lovely and white and poreless.

“Lady next door carries a gun in her purse,” I say at supper that first week, poised, at age nine, to begin life as a liar. But this one fact is perfectly true. Behind the long uneven fringe of my bangs, I feel Dad’s eyes linger on me. Dad is home more often now.

These days, the TV stays in the living room, its glow only half-visible through the open kitchen doorway. Dad doesn’t bother to roll it back and forth each night anymore. On-screen, white men hurl bricks at school buses. Under the table, Cleo prowls and sniffs, restless and wobbly for weeks after the tranquilizer we’d forced down her throat for the ride from Philly. Her eyes glow, yellow and unfor-giving.

“Chickens run round with their heads cut off.” I speak even louder our second week. My chicken wing lies skinless on my plate, broiled and not fried on account of Dad’s high blood pressure. “Chickens don’t die,” I say, more to myself this time. And that’s when I feel Dad glance at me, though he still pretends to watch the screen.

Greenville has become the murder capital of America, a twangy local newsman tells us.

Brown is the color of dead, of hamburger; chicken meat is yellow, white, the color of my hair, my skin.

More murders per thousand people than New York, De-troit . . .

With my fingertip, I nudge my untouched chicken wing to the edge of my plate and let it plop, warm and greasy, into the paper napkin spread over my legs. Dad still watching?

. . . Unusually high percentage of extended families settled in the Piedmont area . . . leads to prevalence of so-called kin murders . . .

Late, slanted South Carolina sun warms my knees. That greasy wing feels even more alive, more potent now that Dad bothers to notice. Especially since he pretends for some reason not to.

"—an' licks," I say at last. Age eleven or twelve, Watergate just breaking in.

"All the teachers down here," I say flatly. "Teachers never did that kind of thing back in Pennsylvania, y'know?"

I speak to my knees, my plate. My light hair hangs straight and limp; my vowels are drawn out like a Greenville girl's, like one of Dad's high school students, come to see him after class.

"Big old wooden paddles with special holes drilled in them 'cause that's supposed to make it hurt more. An' my English teacher, he's the worst, great big man. He even gives girls licks if . . . if you forget your homework two times in a row."

This last is not true; licks are generally reserved for big boys fighting between classes. Why, I wonder, did I say that? Under the table, Cleo rubs her smooth black head against my ankles, not gently the way she used to before the move but more urgently, obsessively. Some unscratchable itch behind her ear, some unshakable insect buzz inside her head.

"—an' now me," I say the next day. "I mean, today I couldn't find my homework. Maybe some boy took it, or I don't know what . . ."

I pause, and even Sam Ervin's rolling Judgment Day voice seems to falter. An empty classroom: the Greenville girl might press her knees together and Dad's teacher eyes might grow so moist and attentive it makes her uneasy. She'd shift in her seat but keep talking, mesmerized by her own slurred voice.

"But if it happens a-gain, he says, he *told* me this after class, he'll take me out in the hall and give me three licks."

A blatant lie. Does Dad sense it? He barely nods from across the table.

In the brick and glass high school building where he teaches, miles away from the smaller wooden middle school where I attend seventh grade, Dad must have glimpsed kids braced against their lockers as if standing for a police frisk. The teachers with their specially designed paddles take aim from behind. And inside the nearest classroom all the other kids strain to hear each lick, poised together in a silence as complete as the silence at our supper table when I finish. I still hold Dad's gaze. My face is flushed with my lie, Dad's face flushed too. Has his old Philadelphia anger begun to rise up again now along with Sam Ervin's righteous drawl? But it is Mother who actually speaks, her voice so low I feel like only I can hear.

"W-we must talk to some-one. I mean we should drive down and t-talk to this man."

Yes: Dad's lately dulled crusader eyes begin to light.

"No—" I say, something in my frozen face changing his face.

I bend over my buttered corn, knowing that Mother knows I've been lying, performing. Cleo's tail flicks past my knees like she knows more than any of us, her purr rich and insolent.

Cleopatra shot dead on our front lawn. Early June. Dad tells me quietly over our clean-scraped supper plates, the news turned down tonight so it sounds like the newsmen are using their respectfully lowered death voices. But really it's only Dad. His eyes avoid mine the way they have ever since the licks, as if he was the one who'd been caught in a lie, caught in something, anyway. Dad's head bows over his beer, his forehead higher now.

"Some hunter maybe, maybe that crazy lady next door. They must have thought Cleo was, I don't know, a skunk or something, I suppose."

Is he making this up? I stare at him, a rise in my chest at the hope of a lie.

We bury her out back where I used to plant the greasy untouched chicken wings that I'd smuggle away from the supper table. I patted dirt flat over each wing—*planting*, not *burying*. I half-expected them to grow, sprout. Delicate, monstrous feather flowers. And now—this summer as Cleo gets shot and Nixon gets exorcised and I turn thirteen—now something not quite natural begins to grow and twine up inside of me.

Terror-fried. I invent this phrase in June and repeat it to myself all summer. Chicken skins suck and tear as Mother peels them off before

supper, Dad's blood pressure still too high. And still he craves his grease, has to have it.

"Goddamn doctor," he mutters. Under the supper table, my hands run down my thighs gently, the way Mother used to pet Cleopatra. Much more gently than I ever touch the boy I've dated all summer. Each night in my backyard, he and I kiss and rub each other into a slow-motion frenzy of frustration.

Terror-fried. Dad shifts in his seat and I shift in mine and far off in Philly, where we used to live, a Baby Disappears.

Mother left baby alone in car, and all the world knows it. All watch this single close-up. Not a standard knuckle shot as the suspect shields her face, no—this mother is different. She rates a full ten minutes simply because she holds her hands down and her head high. Unseeing, distracted even. A trick it has taken me so long to learn. Look neither left nor right. Ignore those camera eyes. Yes, that's how to drive them mad, make them come back and back.

All of us crane to see this woman, even Mother, especially Mother. Mother's eyes grow oddly bright. At supper's end, I dawdle over my chocolate ice cream the way Mother always does. She likes to mash it up all soft and soupy, and then savor it slowly, alone, just before she clears the table. She isn't used to me lingering too, isn't used to talking much. Maybe this is the longest speech I ever hear her make.

"—D-driving along in down-town Philly, so hot, an' you were a-sleep in the c-car seat next to me, an' the baby in-side me and I was so hun-gry. Eating for two I guess, and any-way I swung the c-car into this hamburger parking lot but it was full. S-so I parked the car down the street and slammed the door behind me. Wasn't thinking of any-thing but m-milk shakes. I stood there at the counter all sweaty and they handed me that sack all cold and heavy and I went c-cold too. B-bolted—didn't even pay. Crazy preg-nant lady, I ran back down that street an' you were c-crying like mad in your car seat an' the windows down, doors not e-ven locked. Just like that poor woman to-night. There but for the Grace. A-and you kept crying and I kept hugging you and crying too and all the while s-sucking down that *milk shake*."

Mother hesitates, looks away. "Y-you can't imagine what it's like," she murmurs. "I mean when you're pregnant . . . W-when I was pregnant with you . . . Every-thing else is just—"

She hesitates again, chocolate on her lips, and she licks them clean

impatiently; this is important, what she's trying to say. "Outside," she finishes, a hard edge to her voice. "Everything else is just *outside*."

Yes. I nod. She can't see the nod, her eyes downcast. But yes, I can imagine it already—having a baby inside to share that feeling of everything else, everyone else, being out.

Though the baby itself is outside too, once it's born. I nod again, slowly, to myself. Ice cream on my tongue, and I wait for Mother to go on, to tell me this night what my twangy-voiced gym teacher has already described in graphic detail in health class, what I'm not sure my boyfriend fully understands as we rub and grope. But Mother shifts in her seat, silent. Not shy, exactly. No: I shift too, half-relieved that she doesn't speak, sensing she senses I've already found out for myself, the way she no doubt had to do. Maybe Mother and I would both be embarrassed by any other scene. Together, we study our bowls in contemplative silence, two still ponds, side by side.

Next night at supper, our Mother of the Disappearing Baby reappears. Once again, she holds her head mysteriously high as she makes her way across her front lawn in a dream, a blaze of white light. *She whose four-month-old infant son disappeared from a parked car late yesterday afternoon.*

"Must happen all the time," I hear myself say. A certain expectant silence still lingers at the table from the night before. Across from me, Mother's round face is unreadable, unsweating.

"Baby dis-appears," I drape my white napkin over my nude chicken wing. "Baby *ap-pears*," I whip the napkin off with a magician's flourish.

Looking neither left (Mother) nor right (Dad), I let them both see a reddish mark on my neck as I crane toward the TV screen. No coat shrouds the mother's face, yet she moves as if protected, shielded. A trace of a smile curves, maybe, in the corners of her mouth.

"Hey look—she *likes* it!" I bang my fist on the table, wanting to jar that woman's distant TV calm. I don't look over at Dad, but I can feel him looking at me. I don't look over at Mother either, but I feel like I'm speaking to her, like we're alone again together, Dad only watching. My eyes are fixed on the TV screen. Flashbulbs explode in the mother's unblinking face, her movements slow and serene. Not quite floating, not quite smiling.

"Look, Mom," I say in a voice so low I know Dad can barely hear. "Look how happy she is. Bet you she's forgot all about that lost kid."

Bet you she's . . . ," I hesitate, press my lips tight like Mother's, imitating Mother, "p-p-pregnant—"

Dad springs to his feet, jarring the edge of the table. His glass knocks the coleslaw bowl. *Crack*, and a puddle of mayonnaise-swirled beer sloshes over the tabletop toward my lap.

"Shut up."

Dad barks this out with the force of a curse, a literal curse. May every opening of your body seal up, shut up: mouth, nose, ears, intestine—

Slap flat. Dad's aim is off, his arm not quite long enough. His small hand clips my cheek, my nose, just hard enough to move my head.

Hours later, age thirteen and three weeks, I will take matters into my own hands, will lose my virginity in the night-cooled backyard grass. But first: I can only stare up at Dad, my mouth sealed and eyes wide with shock and satisfaction. Dad's face is frozen like mine.

Quietly, Mother appears behind him, her defender, her hand steadying his tensed shoulder. Mother is large and white, her body so much larger, really, than his. Zany jingle music loops out from the living room. Mother must have been larger than Dad for years, forever, and yet I'd never noticed it before. And like the sting of the slap, like Dad's brimful eyes, like the beer dripping down my bare legs, this fact feels obscene and frightening and exhilarating.

Age fourteen, fifteen, fifteen and three weeks.

How old is Dad by now? Forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one. He hunches over the crusty chicken he's wheedled Mother into frying as if someone is about to whisk his plate away. I am in Greenville High now, the same giant brick building where Dad teaches. Students imitate him, saliva flying as he speaks, his eyes perpetually moist. Sometimes in the crowded cafeteria, I'll catch a glimpse of Dad as he sneaks out toward the teachers' lounge with a heaping bowl of greasy macaroni and cheese, forbidden by his doctor.

"So what did you do today?" Dad still asks some nights.

Insulated by an extra twenty pounds of flesh, Mother has grown as silent at supper as she must always have been during her days alone. Dad asks only me, his voice more gentle and cautious in the years since the slap. He seems resigned to the fact that I, like his sullen southern girl students, might shrug, ignore the question.

"What do you think of Gloria Steinem?" His eyes fix on my bangs, brownish blond by now, like Mother's hair. Whenever something

comes on the news that he thinks might interest me—feminist marches, rock concert riots—he'll shoot a hopeful surreptitious glance across the table to see if I've bothered to listen. These days, I hear, Dad slumps through his classroom duties.

Sometimes I answer, feign interest. I don't want him to guess how deeply uninterested I am, in fact, in politics, the outside world.

"Kind of cool," I mutter, "the way she told off that news guy." And I glance over at Mother, who always knows when I lie.

"Right." Dad is high on his fourth or fifth beer. "Showed him up for what he *is*." A bit of fried chicken flies from his mouth onto the edge of my napkin. I finger it, imagine slipping it into my mouth, holding it there on my tongue.

A secret. My lips are sealed; my body is a machine, an animal. All on its own, against odds, my body might shelter a baby. Humming, humming, my period two weeks late. It is July again, Greenville still. Two years since I lost my virginity. These days, my new boyfriend comes over every other night. He watches TV with Mother and Dad and me, and then when Mother and Dad have gone to bed, he snaps on a rubber and climbs on top of me on the couch, TV still lit. Last night I watched "The Twilight Zone" over his heaving shoulders. I didn't even tell him I was late. At supper this next night I wipe my face, push back my hair. *Brush fires sweep California*, smoke billowing over Mother's rounded-down shoulders.

"Something on your mind?" Dad asks. His voice and smile are tired and tentative. A smile: I don't realize till he speaks that an odd half-smile has formed in the corners of my lips. I shift my weight, wipe my face with my hand. Is excessive sweat a sign of pregnancy? My face and eyes feel moist. Like Dad's eyes feel all the time, I tell myself, and I look toward him across the table, see him glance over to Mother.

"Just thinking about this show I saw on TV last night." My voice barely rises above the weeping of a California grandmother who has lost her home. "It was about this boy," I say to my plate. "And he was, I don't know, was searching for his parents. And he finds out his father is supposed to be this crazy hermit scientist-type guy. So—so the boy goes to see him in this secret laboratory and the boy says, Who am I? And then the scientist kind of *peels* back the skin on the boy's arm and we see all this, I don't know, metal and wire and dials and it turns out the scientist *built* the kid and the kid had never even

guessed and—" I take a breath, talking too fast. "And so the kid says to the scientist, But who AM I? And the scientist, he says to the kid, *Who are you? Who is a refrigerator?*"

Dad blinks. His smile widens gamely, uncertainly. From a slight extra stab of brightness in his eyes, I can tell he suspects that I, like his students, am making fun of him in a way he can't pin down. But I'm not, I want to say as he smooths the thin frizzy hairs on top of his head. His eyes move again from me to Mother. Something is up, he can tell, and I too turn toward Mother, so still at her end of the table. She is giving me a thoughtful look, her face smooth and sweatless.

Baby found, a newsman proclaims soberly in that special tone, the death tone: *The body of a five-month-old infant boy was discovered by police today floating in the Reedy River. The infant had been wrapped in a plastic bag and apparently—*

"I can't eat," I announce, and I push away my loaded plate, *clank* against the cut-glass coleslaw bowl.

. . . strangulation. No apparent leads as to the identity of the—

"Yes." Mother's voice comes out unexpectedly strong and clear. "Yes, w-we can't have that thing on during *s-supper*."

Bracing her hands on the table, her body cumbersome under her loose cotton dress, she starts to pull herself up.

"No, let me—" Dad rises to his feet, still small and wiry. "Listen, I'll turn it off right now." His bright eyes fix on me, making sure I hear. One last intent look, and he turns, his shirt damp between his shoulder blades. His head is completely bald and pink in back, shiny from the heat. He disappears into the living room.

Apparently floating for three—

A fumble, a click. The fridge hums; the table shudders. Mother has pulled herself to her feet, her stomach crowded by the edge, her breath a little short. Dad does not reappear. He seems to be standing in the living room, waiting out there, maybe, for something to happen in here.

Mother's face is flushed and not a bit shiny. She says my name. I push back my chair and stand, my legs weak. My hair hides my face and I grip the table's edge, only the square wooden corner separating us. I draw in a shuddery breath, then look over at her, even make a slight move as if about to turn and collapse against her body, into her arms. I can remember, imagine the warmth and heavy enveloping

softness of her embrace. My T-shirt sticks to my back; my panties are damp with sweat under my cotton skirt.

I feel my spine, my shoulders stiffen. I can feel Mother stiffen too, bracing herself as if she too doesn't really want to hug. Both of us afraid, maybe, that I'll break down, tell all in a flood of tears and phlegm. And what if it really is there: a baby afloat inside of me? Needing attention, needing warmth when I crave cool. My eyes narrow against the South Carolina sun that slants through our screened window. Mother's body sags with the heat, her shoulders slumped and at the same time tensed. Warm chicken, warm corn, warm slaw, warm flesh.

I try to wipe my face but the napkin's greasy and I crumple it, let it drop beside my loaded plate as I turn. Relief: I feel Mother's shoulders relax, feel Mother's relief as strongly as my own. Sensing her silent approval, I edge out around the table, dry-eyed. I hesitate at the darkened living room doorway. Dad's in there somewhere, invisible.

Then I turn again, take two determined steps. I lay one hand flat against the cool white surface of the fridge. Steadying myself, I pull open the top compartment, a *suck* sound as the sealed freezer door gives way. The freezer is nearly empty, nearly level with my head. I bend forward, shut my eyes, stick my head inside.

The hum of refrigerated silence. The smell of ice-cream-box cardboard. The chill of frost on my flushed cheeks. Thick icy frost presses against my chin and the back of my head. Sharp crumbly crystal cold.

Behind me, I sense rather than hear Mother sinking back into her seat. Mother watches me now from the table: protective, respectful, complicitous, distant. Frost cracks. My breath not quite a cloud. Out in the living room, I can't hear Dad at all.

It is July; it is 1986. Past midnight: 1 AM? 2 AM? This time, the freezer air startles me as if I've been asleep. I reach inside with only my hand. The chocolate ice cream box is sticky and familiar to touch. Greenville, South Carolina; a cool summer night. I have driven all day to get here. Mother's shadow filled our screened backdoor when my car pulled in. Alone in the house. As we stepped into our old kitchen after a tight, only slightly awkward embrace, I'd seen on our table the half-eaten bowl of soupy ice cream. Mother looked at the

bowl, then quickly away, embarrassed, maybe, by wanting to eat at all tonight.

"I'm hungry too," I tell her. A lie. My stomach is tense and fluttery from the ride and yet I peer now into the same old freezer, same chill hum, same sticky chocolate-stained box, near empty. The freezer door swings shut behind me, that sucking sound like a kiss.

That hum like no other hum. My back to the fridge, my denim jacket still on, I scoop my ice cream into a bowl like Mother's. I sit down beside Mother at the table. Same old maple finish, still shiny. Mother looks over at me, murmurs something about arrangements, phone calls to be made. As she speaks, she toys with her spoon, her voice muffled, difficult to understand. Folded beside her bowl is a hand-scribbled list of names to call, relatives to notify, less than half of them checked off. I say I will take care of the rest. Mother nods, bends over her liquid ice cream and begins to eat again, quiet as a guilty child. I push away my hair, rub my eyes, my face. Clench my back teeth to stifle a yawn.

"Been driving fifteen hours," I tell her, and then I stop myself. It occurs to me that I haven't spoken to Mother again in all those hours, that I should have called, that she's been here alone all the time I was driving.

"Mother?" I begin again in a quieter voice, not sure what I'm going to say. I try to imagine her sitting by the phone this morning after she called me with the news. "What . . . what did you do all day?"

A pause. The rhythm of Mother's spoon slows. I feel like I used to when I'd burst home from grade school, break into the stillness of her afternoon. A relief in a way now, when, after a moment of faint late night refrigerator hum, Mother's spoon clinks again, resumes its rhythm. Her smooth white face bends even closer to the bowl. I taste my own ice cream, cool on my tongue. Saliva rushes to my mouth; this hunger is unexpected, and it too is a relief. Both our spoons clink; our lips close soft around them. We eat slowly, intently. We spoon down this chocolate ice cream as if it's not ice cream at all but cool dark sweet silence, as if it's Dad who's just asked us that question and, as always, we aren't telling.

Round Objects

She lies still as an egg. A heavy hidden egg in a hole. Her body curves into the sagging center of the mattress, warm, her back pressed against his bare back. He's here. His breathing is low and slow and phlegmy, his body as still as hers, their bed a boat on motionless water. If she moves, moves her legs even a little, the boat will tip. She'll know. So she doesn't move, doesn't open her eyes, pretends instead to breathe in deep and complete sleep, to ignore what's starting to stir inside of her, down low.

Her overdue period or the beginnings of morning sickness or the cell itself, split and hot and fizzing.

Listen—she can almost hear it. But she turns her face to her pillow and the smell of sleep, the smell of her own unwashed hair. *Egg, in,*

hole, Egg, in, hole, Egg, in, hole. These words are mixed up with some dream maybe, or maybe with something she'd heard at the Center. Yes: one of the other attendants was talking yesterday as they all changed diapers, as that huge new man—age forty, someone said—was lifted from his wheelchair to the changing mat by the special harness contraption, a metal crank that eased his body up. Slow motion, dead weight. Sarah feels herself begin to ease up inside now, just as slowly, her eyes still closed.

You? She presses her curved back against his.

Always a surprise to find him here on this bed with his long heavy man's body and man's smell. His feet hang off the mattress; his bald spot shows through on the top of his head, the place that's soft at first on a baby. She likes to smooth his dark frizzy hair over that spot, exactly enough hair to cover it, still.

You? She thinks again, blinking open her eyes.

Four years ago in the staff cafeteria, she'd noticed from a distance that this tall nervous man with the big calm hands—cupped firm behind a woman's wildly jerking head a few hours earlier in the Profound Retardation Ward—that this man was careful to toss spilt salt over his left shoulder. Their shared superstitions formed a first wordless bond between them.

To think of good luck is to jar it, Sarah tells herself often.

He is officially now, incredibly, almost fifty years old; she, twenty-five. And she listens these days—to his keys far down the hall, to his private mutterings in the bathroom, to his breath this morning, his head half-hidden by the worn brown sheets that covered this same saggy boat of a mattress in his old bachelor bedroom. These are the sheets in which she'd lost her virginity, sheets that smell faintly of him, his sweat, for he gets all in a sweat at night, every night. Yet his breathing this moment is peaceful. Deep-sea deep-sleep breaths: a long slow-building inhale, then a small stuck pause, then the long thick release.

She's lain awake nights and listened for this, sleeplessness being the mark of his depressions. The last time, last spring, a psychiatrist had prescribed some pills, saying he'd become convinced that everything is more or less biochemical. Sarah had nodded, not believing him any more than she believes the Center nurses when they assure her that the retarded woman she feeds at lunch will never choke, not on

pure puréed diet. Not Mary Mae, whose head lolls back and forth, mouth hanging open, who inhales as she eats. Tends to asphix her food, they say—and Mary Mae turns red, red-purple, coughs, spatters puréed peas and pears and tuna. Then the cough becomes half-cough and half-laugh and Mary Mae gives that loopy open-mouthed grin and she is, really is, okay. Breathing, anyway.

Slow and steady. Pale October sun has begun to seep through the drapes; street sounds below are beginning to rise. Distant sirens spiral. Again, Sarah buries her face in her sleep-smelling pillow. But she can't sink back down as usual into the absolute morning stillness she loves. Above the bed, she has tacked a Vermeer print of a woman pouring a jug of milk into a bowl. The milk stream curves, frozen white in space and yet always somehow liquid, and warm.

She moves. All at once, Sarah lifts her head, props herself up on her elbows, stretches her legs. Her right foot rocks back and forth against the mattress. It jiggles like a teenager's foot whenever Sarah sits, even if she's alone. He says they'll have to drive a stake through that foot before they can bury her.

Same old nerves—stomach stirring, foot jiggling. Better, these days. Now she works only three shifts a week, but before she met him she struggled through a full-time late-shift job in the Profound Retardation Ward, on duty till midnight. Then back in her apartment at 1 AM: a blank space, a tonelessness.

Hard to remember now, holed up here with him in this apartment. Hidden here, where she hopes the gods will not notice them or their luck.

Where now, as if to appease any watching forces, Sarah makes herself sit up and swing her bare legs off the mattress, jarring the slide of his snore. Yes. A definite warmth stirs below her stomach as she stands, as she pulls on a red cotton robe, as she splashes cold water onto her face in the bathroom.

A baby? Or that monthly slow-spreading ache?

She pulls down her panties, sits cautiously on the toilet. No blood. Six days late, maybe only nerves again. Pure nerves, they run the whole show. Especially these last few months, all of it decided so suddenly after his forty-ninth birthday in July. And though the baby was, if anyone's, more her idea than his, she feels now when they have sex that she's being rushed forward with no chance to stop and

think, no more slow thoughtful ritual of putting in the diaphragm. Instead, each movement seems reckless, as if she's whizzing along the freeway toward work, half-aware the whole time that death is just an accidental swerve away.

A single split cell, fizzing.

She pulls up her panties, closes the toilet lid with a soft thud. If she sees a squirrel, she must be pregnant. She turns and raises her eyes to the portholelike bathroom window: no squirrel on the ledge outside. Then in a blink one appears, poised in place before deciding which way to jump, which bare high branch of the city grey trees.

Sarah freezes with it. She loves to watch the secretive squirrels, their crazily bristling switching chewed-up tails. This squirrel quivers all over, electrocuted by the effort of making the tiniest decision.

Jump, Sarah thinks.

The squirrel jumps left; Sarah relaxes, relieved there's nothing definite, no blood. Maybe Maritza put a curse on me, she tells herself, flushing the toilet.

Maritza rarely makes a sound, propped in her wheelchair in the Profound Retardation Ward, her head huge, her features flattened, her eyes and hair dark. That mute black stare—a hex stare.

A stare that could freeze anybody's insides. Sarah cranks on more cold water and lathers her face with green Palmolive soap, thankful as she scrubs that she is in charge only of mild Mary Mae and Richie. Little Richie they all call him, though he is twenty-nine years old.

Rinsing her face, Sarah pictures Richie's undersized head, his oversized ears spreading out wide and white and keen as a cat's ears. His mouth is wet and slack-soft. Yes, and what was it her husband said about Richie that one time? She cranks off the faucet, water dripping from her nose. Her oval face looks shiny in the mirror, her eyes especially dark. Her mouth is soft and lazy; her straight brown hair hangs against the sides of her face. What had he said? It was back before they'd married, back when he used to make unnecessary official visits to the Retardation Ward to see her. To stand behind her as she knelt in front of Little Richie, a smell of talcum powder because she'd just changed the diaper, and he bent over to say something in a voice almost too low to hear.

But what? She halfway tries to remember as she brushes her teeth and rinses her mouth. Then halfway gives it up as she lingers in the

bathroom, looking at the toothpaste tube and not bothering to wash away her bubbled white spit. For Best Results Squeeze From the Bottom and Flatten as You Go Up. She nods. A great reader of labels. They speak to her in long peaceful housewife days when, thankfully, no one else speaks, no older sisters yelling through the bathroom door. Only the familiar morning silence and his razor lying on the soap dish. Tiny hairs from his shaving yesterday still speckle the sides of the basin.

The kind of thing she tends to study, interested, without any urge to clean. Though she thinks of herself as a housewife, a born housewife who loves to pace around the apartment, slowly, or to stand in one place, leaning for an hour yesterday morning against the ocean throb of the washer. Removes Protein Stains, the detergent box label said. And it added in matter-of-fact parentheses: (Blood, egg, milk). The phrase made a rhythm all day as she paced, as she cooked, studying various household details with that odd, advance feeling of nostalgia. For a long while now, she stands and looks at his shaving hairs in the sink. Then she turns off the bathroom light gently, leaving everything just as it is.

They were both lonely; they would keep each other warm through the New Haven winter. He was forty-five, was burnt out, he said, on love. A disastrous early marriage, disastrous affairs, and now Sarah, a twenty-one-year-old virgin with pliant white skin that shouldn't, he said, be wasted. He'd teach her things, then she'd swing out on her own, break hearts. Yes, not *in* love, but he loved her in a way. And she was from the start grateful not to be lonely, simply and intensely grateful—or maybe it wasn't such a simple matter when she showed her gratitude. And she could see just as clearly how he drank it in behind his deadpan expression, giving it back not in looks or words but in the care he always took of her, the nest of blankets he made in his car so she could nap after the midnight shift as he drove her home.

Now when they say they love each other, when she says *you*, she feels conscious sometimes—guilty, even—of meaning not only him but this whole time and place, this small sloppy apartment she loves

to pace and contemplate. He chose it for her because of the trees out front, the quiet side street, the squirrels. A hiding hole, he called it. They didn't have to have other people up at all, they agreed—other people tending to frighten her, to be afraid of him.

At first, Sarah had been frightened too by his unreadable face and low flat monotone voice. That first afternoon, when he sat down beside her in the staff cafeteria, her soup spoon had rattled against her teeth, her hands so shaky. Finally, suddenly, gently, he'd taken the spoon from her as if he were going to feed her himself. He held it between them, his own hand unsteady, and laid it on the table. They both looked down at it, then, for the first time, up at each other.

"You?" she says now, her face still shiny from cold water. And she sits beside his shoulder, the mattress sinking and creaking.

Yesterday, they made love in yellow late-afternoon light, and in the dresser mirror she'd glimpsed the white swell of her thighs like a wave on a lake as she and he rolled over, the whole bed rocking.

"Hey you," she presses his bare shoulder, the skin warm and loose there. He starts, always wakes with a start, then a low groan as he blinks, sees her, burrows his head against her thigh.

"Not yet," he mutters, his voice burry and sleep-deep. His overnight beard scratches through the thin cotton of her robe. She rests her hand on his head, the balding spot of white skin. Pale. His long large-boned face is beautifully, permanently New England pale.

"You sleep okay?" she asks. Day's first sentence, the words shy. An important question, always.

"Per-fect," he mutters.

Back when they started up together, he'd often say how well, suddenly, he could sleep. A small rejuvenation every night, he'd say, and she'd feel secretly powerful. His darkest brown eyes were never so tired then, at the beginning.

Could a baby do that for him again? She starts to smooth his hair over the bald spot, stops when he turns his head slightly, irritably.

"Any-thing?" he mumbles into her thigh, changing the subject.

"Not yet," she says. Then adds, surprising herself, "But I've got a feeling it'll either come today or . . . it won't—you know?"

She bends forward. Her unwashed hair hangs down over him as he lifts his head from her thigh. He stops halfway, half his long face shadowed. She sees one dark sleep-blurred eye, catches a buried glimmer of alarm. Buried but unmistakable, as plain as the tired fleshy

pink in the corner of his eye. Too old for children, he's said before, too old for such change.

"Well . . ." As she straightens, she presses his bare shoulder so he eases back down. Her fingertips feel ready to tremble.

It had been, yes, her idea to have a baby, she who'd come to bed the week after his birthday without her diaphragm, whispering no when he tried to stop, then yes, then it was decided. Or anyway then they went ahead and made love.

Now her hand moves back up to his head, smooths his forehead: bony, jutting out as if squarely, painfully swollen with thought. She used to glimpse him brooding and tense at his supervisor desk. What did he think about so hard? Sometimes she still wonders. Though not now, his breath warm and easy.

Only two things relax him, he's said. Sleep, and her. Lying around with her, just like this.

"So today?" he asks after a pause.

"Think so." She sighs. "Funny, but when it comes down to it, I kind of don't *want* to know."

"You an' me both." A phrase from their courtship. She smiles as he raises his head again, props himself on his elbow. Then he bends his legs and rises, his shoulder blades standing out on his long bare back. She has an impulse to lean across the mattress and grab at his pajama bottoms—not playfully but really grab his leg, pull him back into bed. She could do it too, her arms strong from lifting people in and out of wheelchairs.

"Got to go see Big Chief today." He turns toward the bathroom. The Chief runs the Center.

"Nnnn?" She turns too and leans on one arm, looking up at the poster.

". . . ten years ago," he mutters from the bathroom, probably Thank God it's not ten years ago. Back then the Chief scared him shitless, he'd say, and he always tells her how this is an advantage of aging, how things like that finally stop mattering so much. On their way to not mattering at all? He begins to run water in the bathroom sink. She shifts her weight, annoyed at him, feeling something that's different from either cramps or nausea—or is it?

With steady maddening calm, his shower starts to pound through the half-closed bathroom door. By the end of today, she'll know. She could yell into him how sure she feels—not that he'd want to hear.

Not that she wants to hear or form those words herself. Not now, anyway, in these last few minutes before she has to dress for work. She stares up at the Vermeer print, at the walls they'd painted together last summer. Long peaceful hot afternoons. His insomnia of that spring had gradually lessened with the pills, his mood had gradually lifted, and Sarah had felt as they painted that they were sealing his recovery, sealing their home for the winter.

Cream-colored dribbles, steady roller strokes. She stares at the wall, breathing in the stale familiar warmth of the apartment air, the taste of his shower steam. A single clear thought forms in her mind, in the space of her single held breath.

She doesn't want a baby: not now, not at all.

Round Objects, says the box.

A hazelnut; a hairy shard of coconut shell; a warty golden squash, dried and rattling with seeds; a pinecone, dry too; a piece of shirt cardboard cut in a perfect circle.

Sarah works them one by one into Little Richie's boneless hand. Sometimes he drops them; sometimes she does. Her hands are unusually clumsy today, the wide wheelchair-lined classroom unusually loud. Students moan to themselves or sputter, the air dense with a smell of baby powder and adult urine. Bells and feathers and ribbons hang from the ceiling, swaying in the drizzly breeze of the open windows. Everything feels damp, slippery.

"Sorry," Sarah murmurs as the hard hollow squash *thwoks* to the floor. Though Richie can't understand words, Sarah keeps saying that, each time she drops something. And she feels as if she's apologizing to her baby, the idea of her baby—apologizing, maybe, for the steady thickening pulse in her throat.

Fear of something more, she suspects, than just being pregnant. And she makes her voice calm, her mouth round.

"Oooh . . ." She rattles the squash hard next to Richie's poised cat ears. His slack mouth twitches at the corners, then twitches again at a metal clank so loud Sarah jumps in her skin. The harness machine. It cranks, beginning to raise that new heavy man from his wheelchair.

Sarah lowers the rattly squash onto her lap and watches Little

Richie listen to the crank. His hearing is his sole undamaged sense. His body hunches like a shrunken old man's, but his skin is soft and utterly unlined, his face expressionless. As he listens, only his long sparse eyebrow hairs seem to move, to waver like insect antennae.

Richie's mother always smooths his eyebrows back and back when she visits, always leaves behind detailed notes about foods he seems to like. Egg in Hole: lightly brown the toast, slice out a hole, drop a sunny-side-up egg into the center.

Someone had read that note out loud yesterday after Richie's mother left, the smell of her hairspray lingering in the classroom. Still lingering today? Sarah sniffs sour diaper air as she bends for the Round Objects box, her foot jiggling. Usually Sarah avoids looking at Richie's mother, her cobweb-thin hair styled so carefully. Like many of the mothers, she seems anxious to show everyone that she loves Richie, that she did nothing wrong.

Simple bio-chemistry—a phrase used often last spring by the psychiatrist who'd prescribed those pills. Yes. As the grating harness crank halts, Sarah straightens and glances across the room at that huge new man lying on the mat where his diaper will be changed. And she remembers her husband lying in bed last spring, his night breath alarmingly light—almost imperceptible—when he took those pills.

Sarah fumbles with the squash, the Round Objects box. She swallows hard, forces the damp-feeling cardboard lid into place.

Throughout the rest of the morning, she finds her hands growing steadily shakier. Silent staring Maritza is wheeled in late, a football helmet strapped on because she's been hitting the same side of her head over and over, her cheek reddened. Sarah takes one look, turns away. She keeps her back to Maritza's dark stare. As she lifts Richie from his wheelchair, as she changes his soiled diapers, as she feeds Mary Mae, she feels her back to be a wide dumb target.

Lunch at noon, recreation hour at one. Still keeping her back to Maritza, Sarah hoists Richie and wheels him outside with the others into the hazy sun behind the Center. There, on a square of asphalt, the wheelchairs line up into the usual circle.

"Now don't you start that," an exasperated attendant says as Sarah eases Richie's chair to a halt. Sarah turns, finds herself looking down at Maritza's white football helmet, her face. Strapped into a neck-high

plastic body suit, Maritza's oversized head and torso seem even bigger and more rigid. As Sarah meets her stare, Maritza raises one hand and slaps her own exposed cheek, her fingernails scratching the helmet shell. Her hand flops back down onto her lap, rests there while Sarah watches. Then—wearily, automatically—Maritza lifts it again, as if obeying an order no one else can hear.

"Stop that." Sarah turns away from the flat answering slap. She faces the trees that surround the Center and tries to ignore the next slap-scratch and the next, relieved when, at last, the whistle shrills.

Around and around on the asphalt. The perpetually hung-over recreation director never seems to know what else to do with the Profound Retardation Ward. Yet he keeps that whistle shrilling gamely, uses his big basketball-court-sized voice.

"Let's pick it UP!" he shouts now from the sidelines, the muscles of his own neck wincing at the sound. His skin is ham pink in the cool though humid New Haven air.

Around and around. Usually Sarah falls into a pleasant plodding sort of trance as the wheelchairs circle, always staying in the same place. But today she feels self-conscious, out of step. Her feet try to move too fast. Behind her, above the humming motion of wheelchair wheels, she hears Maritza's fingernails against the helmet. A sickly half-alive chick scratch-scratching its shell. Slap-scratch, slap-scratch, slap-scratch—

The faces in the other wheelchairs bob up and down with the beat. Their skin looks toneless, doughy. Soft white or brown faces that might melt, Sarah feels, might dissolve here in the sun. And that swell below her stomach—waiting all morning—begins to rise now along with the pulse in her throat. Nausea? Nerves? Morning sickness in the afternoon?

Sarah leans her weight against Richie's chair, grips the handles. Panting slightly, she watches Richie's stiff unwashed hair lift in the breeze. She thinks of smoothing back her husband's hair this morning, smoothing it back four years ago, before the skin showed through on top of his head.

He was forty-six then, she remembers. And she finds herself seeing again—no strength now to stop the picture—her husband's long silent body lying in bed, lying there on a night last spring when she'd had to lean close to make sure he was still breathing. Forty-eight last spring, forty-nine now; she, twenty-five.

When she is thirty-five, he will be sixty; when she's forty-five, he'll be seventy—

Back when they were first married, such calculations left her in small secret panics. She'd tried to make herself stop counting and adding that way. She tries now to stop the steady swell rising below her stomach, the flat rhythmic scratch behind her, the picture in her mind: his body on the bed looking older and heavier as her legs move and move, as her thighs rub against each other through her worn jeans. Wheelchair wheels whir like giant insect wings.

Once before in her life she has fainted. She was about to throw up in a doctor's waiting room, was standing, swaying, embarrassed in front of those people. All of them whirled away with the black spin of her head, her body's sheer dropping weight.

She leans forward, bends into the abrupt swerve of Richie's chair. The two of them veer out of the safe circle, she and Richie rolling across asphalt in dream motion. Such relief to be carried off like this, no choice but to sink down next to the school's brick wall, vaguely aware that she hadn't really moved fast, that she had even managed to ease Richie into his stop. The rubber wheelchair wheels bounced against the wall; Richie's small head moved with the bounce, not resisting.

That's how to survive car accidents, Sarah remembers as she sinks to her knees, rests her back against the rough brick. Yes, car accidents: don't fight the motion, relax your body and your neck won't snap. Some magazine had told her this, or was it some box label?

She leans her head on the wall, sees the other wheelchairs stopping, some of the other attendants hurrying forward. The rec director looms above her, his whistle poised between his teeth. She squints up in the hazy light, pushes back her hair.

"I had to sit down for a minute." Her voice comes out surprisingly calm.

Had to. The words repeat a few minutes later as the whistle gives a respectfully softened half-shrill. The reassembled wheelchairs begin, haltingly, to move.

Sarah sits on the sidelines and watches, no choice in the matter. What a release it had been that other time, the time she'd really fainted, to have no choice, to let her body and the forces of gravity take over. What a release now, as if she'd been straining all morning to stand in one place, to make some kind of decision.

In my hands, out of my hands. She sits, her legs stretched in front of her, her arms folded over her stomach. In-to my hands, out of my hands, in-to the hands of my body. She feels tired, almost sleepy. Beside her, Little Richie sits silent in his chair. Sarah can feel his half-shut half-blind eyes take in the other circling wheelchairs the way her own eyes take things in just now. Blankly, calmly, unblinkingly.

The white football helmet bounces as it passes. Maritza's limp hand lifts and flops back into her lap and barely lifts again. Maritza's eyes are fixed on another woman's back, her eyes fixed so hard on whatever happens to be in front of her. Sarah notices this, pleased by this, then turns her own eyes from the black-and-white blur of Maritza's face to the pale placid oval of Richie's.

His mouth is slack, a string of saliva suspended from the light hairs on his chin. His mother wipes saliva from his face with folded Kleenex, and usually Sarah wipes it too. But now, she studies this spittle, clear and thinly gleaming. And she remembers all at once, unexpectedly, what it was her husband had said about Richie.

Yes: he leaned down above her and Richie into the talcum powder smell, four years ago.

Not so bad in a way, he'd told Sarah, and he'd looked at Little Richie carefully, speaking with care, speaking in the slow detached voice that sometimes makes her angry.

There he was, a newborn baby boy, he'd said. *And time just stopped.*

Back home at five, Sarah sets out a carton of milk, a bowl of moist defrosted hamburger, a cup of bread crumbs, an egg, and an onion. Usually she'd sit in front of these and reabsorb the silence of the apartment. Today she starts to chop right away, breathing the smell of onion and raw meat.

Blood, egg, milk—the words and the knife make a beat as she chops and chops. Eighth of a cup, quarter of a cup, half of a cup.

She'd called him at work after she got home. He hadn't been in his office when she'd stopped by on her way out because he'd spent the whole afternoon in the Adult Residential Ward. A woman there had

crashed her head through a window at lunch. He would be late; it took half the day to fill out forms authorizing four-point restraint—arms and legs tied. Sarah dumps the onion into the hamburger. His voice had sounded tired; his dark eyes already looked tired early this morning. Often she finds herself staring at him. She sets down her cup now, lets her eyes move around the kitchen, absently at first. Then slowly. She studies the room with that odd sense of nostalgia, as if she's already looking back intently on this place and time.

The nostalgic feeling is one she doesn't discuss with him, won't. No, she thinks, and she cracks an egg hard, egg white and chips of shell all over her onion-smelling fingers. She digs in with her wooden spoon, the yolk smearing out golden into the meat.

Yesterday afternoon in late yellow light, like the light from her Vermeer poster, they lay on the bed half-dressed, his head on her lap. She asked him question after lazy question about his first teenage love affair, a story she already knows inside out but loves to hear. And he lay there lazily compliant, laughing with her, at her. He'd tell her anything, he said, as long as she kept stroking his head. Over and over the balding spot, thin frizzy brown hairs, just enough to cover.

Don't move and you're perfect, she'd told him. Her wooden spoon slows as she remembers, halts as she thinks of lying there again this morning. Staring at paint strokes on the wall.

And time just stopped, he had said, years ago. Not so bad in a way, he'd said too, looking down at Little Richie, Richie's blank baby eyes and his hunched old-man body. A body that will keep aging and aging, Sarah thinks, no matter what Richie's mind does or fails to do. She holds her spoon still. But she feels the warm waiting ache below her stomach give an undeniable swell.

She pulls the wooden spoon out of the meat as if her name has been called. Something is finally beginning to loosen inside as she sets the spoon down damp beside the bowl, as she plunges her hands into the hamburger and begins to knead it, fast and firm. Has she washed her hands with soap since coming home? She thinks of those adult-sized diapers and Little Richie's diarrhea. She isn't sure she did wash, doesn't, for once, care. She keeps on kneading, then shaping the meat, liking the feel of all that in her hands.

Blood, egg, milk, shit. Sarah molds and pats the loaf, stands up un-

steadily, a little breathless. She slams the oven hard, sealed in 375 degrees until done. Done. She leans against the sink, turns on hot water, tries to wipe her wet hands with a paper towel but it comes apart, her fingers so greasy. And shaky.

She looks down at them, exhilarated that something has finally begun to happen—something that's been happening all day, only now as she pushes away from the counter she's moving with it, moving outside as well as in. Her hair swings against her face, her breasts jiggle, her thighs brush together. She walks quickly, runs almost, across the kitchen and bedroom toward the bathroom—not dazed, not dizzy, not half-conscious.

No: she's wholly vividly conscious as she bumps her hip against the sharp edge of her dresser. She slams the bathroom door, the draft cool on her face. Her back and arms and hands all move together as she turns and unzips her jeans, starts to pull down her panties, her fingertips tremulous. Her eyes feel clear, ready to take in whatever comes.

But still. The dark stain she finds there stops her breath. She sinks onto the open toilet seat, her back curved over, her thumbs hooked in the elastic band of her panties. Her eyes fix on the stain, register it.

Gradually, her hold on the elastic loosens and she blinks, straightens, sits on the toilet breathing in and out. Her fingers still tremble. She notices this when she stands and bends to the cabinet under the sink, tears open a new box of tampons.

A few minutes later, she is running water, standing before the sink in her T-shirt and clean underwear. Her hands rub her stained panties under the cold stream. Her bare thighs press solidly against the porcelain, press harder the harder she scrubs.

A temporary stain, she tells herself. A stain that may not appear at all next month, or the next. She feels sure of this. Not sure—the way she's tried to feel so often lately—that she wants or doesn't want the baby. No, it's more like the quieter simpler harder certainty she'd felt this morning. She knew then that something decisive would happen today—simply that, whether she wanted it or not, it would happen.

Some month soon, a cell will split. Another, different heaviness will form inside of her, grow inside. His darkest brown eyes will show through clear and young in the baby's face. Sarah's breath begins to quicken, her breath coming as fast as the water itself. Faucets cranked

on full, the cold water streams through her fingers: streaming streaming streaming.

White wine. By the time he gets home, nine or ten, she is semi-sloshed. But she gives him a big strong embrace and stands on her toes to whisper the news in his ear with wine-smelling breath.

"Oh yeah?" He steps back as if to catch his balance, his hands on her shoulders, easing her down. "Y'know you sound kinda relieved."

Flat on her stocking feet, she looks up at him. His long bony face is typically deadpan; his deep-set eyes don't meet hers. "Sound kinda drunk too." He smooths back her hair, his hand cool from the air outside, his raincoat damp. His eyes are still averted—maybe disappointed.

But when he raises them, she sees in place of this morning's glimmer of alarm a softer more familiar conspiratorial gleam. We've escaped again, he seems to say, you and me both.

"Oh yeah?" she says. And he gives a slow tentatively relieved grin.

She wants to shake her head at him. But even after such a long day he looks young, his full-lipped grin spreading out wide and easy.

"Damned if I'm not relieved too," he says. "And I'm cold sober."

By eleven they are both drunk, lying in bed eating warmed-over meat loaf and ketchup, their mouths stained red and sloppy. Sarah has pulled off her jeans and pulled on a long T-shirt. Only a thin sanitary pad is pressed in her panties since her blood flow is always lightest at night. They watch the late news—a supermarket murder, a bombing in Beirut—and laugh at their favorite commercial: dancers throwing themselves into ecstatic sprays of diet soda, slices of lemon and lime flying through space.

Then he lies back on his pillow and tells her about his meeting with the Big Chief, the pros and cons of stronger tranquilizers for the violent ward. More Thorazine, Halidol. She listens, though it's the kind of thing she doesn't like to hear. When he finishes, she shuffles out to the kitchen with their plates, then back to the bedroom, shutting off lights as she goes.

He's half-asleep, smelling of wine and, already, of his night sweat. Warm, anyway. She crawls in beside him under the worn brown

sheets, pulls up the blanket from the foot of the bed. Her head feels heavy, not light anymore from wine. Outside, a fire engine siren begins to swell up along the street, a smaller police siren looping toward it from another direction, distantly and wildly. Sarah pulls the covers to her chin, curves her back and presses her ass against his thighs. He is lying on his side behind her. Obliging, his long body curves around hers, his big hands warm on her stomach as the two sirens converge in a final frantic swell.

"New Haven lullaby," he mumbles into her hair, and he settles in closer, his chin bony against her shoulder.

"Y'know," she answers in a low voice, "Mom used to tell us that sirens were giants whistling. I mean she meant it to be . . . I don't know . . . a cheerful idea or something. But I could picture these giants crushing up cars and setting buildings on fire and then *whistling* to themselves, you know?"

"Mmmhmm." He breathes in and out, both of them warming up now, their bodies growing heavy. Another siren starts up far off in the city.

"Keep thinking of Maritza," Sarah mumbles. He sighs, presses her stomach.

"In another century," he tells her, "'Ritza would've been burned as a witch."

Sarah gives a sleepy nod, thinking of spilt salt, his throwing that salt over his shoulder in the staff cafeteria.

"She scares me," Sarah says.

"You an' me both," he says, and then they are respectfully silent. All around them, the apartment feels dark and quiet.

But not, Sarah senses, completely still. Not at all still the way it usually feels, the way it felt this morning. Seems silly to think of that, how still she'd imagined the apartment to be. Above the bed, she can feel the Vermeer milkmaid, the warm unmoving stream of milk. Its stillness feels separate from this room, separate from the new grainy shifting texture of the darkness.

Behind her, he stirs, sighs, his chin nudging her shoulder. Disappointed about the baby? Or only tired? Sarah moves too, her body sunk more deeply into the mattress, but not settling there. A slow pulse in her throat, her skin wide awake; she's listening.

For the apartment, the bed, the mattress are not at all steady, bal-

anced. The dense dark air itself almost perceptibly hums, vibrates. Behind her he stirs again, his hands beginning to move.

First, slowly, they press harder against her stomach, then ease up the curve of her stomach, ease under her T-shirt to her breasts. After a moment, taking her time, she begins to move too, rocking gently against him, all of it slow and warm and deliberate as his night breaths. Both their breaths smell of wine. The saggy mattress begins to creak. A boat pushing off, floating off. She rocks against him a little harder, like the way the mattress begins to rock too, back and forth and back. His body is heavy and solid against hers. All she feels is her own motion, and all she sees in her mind as she moves are the simplest things. An egg, a hole, a mouth, a circle.

Alice Egner

Alice Egner loved herself. It was 1959. She was nine. And she loved her own high forehead and her own pale elongated face—the small wolfish black eyes, close-set; the thin anemic features; the two protruding front teeth. Back then, her head seemed much too big for her slight body, long neck, narrow shoulders. *Egghead*, one kid on the playground yelled, infuriated by her slow floaty thin-legged lope on the baseball field, by her slow-motion bat swings that never cracked against anything. *Egghead Egner!* he yelled, and Alice loved even that call, because she did love her head, and she carried it, in fact, exactly like an egg, balanced carefully, intently, as if she were straining to hear the thick precious liquid inside.

An amazing woman, Alice once overheard a man say. He was light-

ing a cigarette in their apartment hall; Alice was sitting up in bed, door ajar, listening to the murmur of Mother's party.

Absolutely amazing woman. Hasn't got the brain of a *cat*, but that Gladys is an amazingly stacked woman.

Alice liked those words. Her mother's head was small and sleek, her face thin-featured like Alice's. But on her, the black eyes slanted and the rabbit teeth made her mouth half open into a pouty lipstick-ad shape. And she *did* seem as if she must have a smooth ice-cream-scoop-sized cat brain, as if when she moved she listened to steadily purring cat sounds. Alice used to fall asleep hearing them too. Amazing, absolutely amazing, amazingly stacked, amazing cat-brained woman.

They lived together in an old red brick apartment building in Louisville, Kentucky. Gladys worked as a secretary for a soda pop company and she met men at the office. Gone days, gone most nights. But Saturday mornings she took Alice to the big Sky City supermarket, gave her four dimes, and let her sit in the automatic photo booth. Alice loved to have her picture taken, loved the slick chemical smell of the prints and the fusty old-popcorn old-velvet old-breath smell of the dark booth, the look of her big white face in the black glass just before the FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH.

She lined the pictures of herself up and down her bedroom walls, watched her dark squared-off bangs grow. Mother cut Alice's hair once a month Dutch-boy style, the short cleanly chopped bang a straight line only half-covering her ears. *Schnap schnap*. Mother made slow precise cuts with the scissors, intent on the job, silent. *Schnap schnap*. Alice's lank dark hair fell without a sound.

Mother rarely talked. She rarely stayed home, but when she did, she'd sometimes watch Alice dressing and undressing dolls or sorting eight-by-ten glossies. Sometimes she'd stare with a look Alice took to mean *amazed*.

Weekday afternoons, Alice sat out on the fire escape blowing bubbles with a coffee cup of soapy water and the thin plastic wand that Mrs. Ray gave her. Mrs. Ray, the cleaning lady, was tiny and cork-colored and she came from New Orleans, spoke more French than English, called Alice "You," softly. You? You?

Alice watched bubbles float at dusk, a sound of running water inside the apartment, the bubbles not glinting pink anymore but almost invisible, dark as everything else. Alice, her arms lightly covered with goose bumps, tried to blow each one without making a sound. *Fffffff*—air, just invisible air and pink-tinted water. *Shhhh*—the steamy bath ran inside, another perfect bubble quivered, then blinked away whole, and the silence was so complete inside Alice's head that she felt she could carry it with her everywhere. No trashcan banging shouts from below, no laughter or cracking bats on the playground, none of that, nothing but her mother's slurry soft purr of a voice could enter: *Shhh*. Shut your eyes.

The water would stop, Alice would hear nothing behind her, maybe a clink of bracelets. Then she'd inhale the bath oil and perfume and cigarette breath and the warm skin smell, a smell of nothing but heat, which was Mother's alone. Gladys touched Alice's back gingerly and gave her that stare in the dark, from inside the window. Alice turned to stare back, entranced. Shut your eyes, Gladys would say. Go sleep.

It was 1961.

Alice sat, warm, knees drawn up, on the floor of the full-skirt-packed cigarette-smelling closet. She was looking at Mother's eight-by-tens of famous movie stars and famous racehorses. Dark Star, Citation, Tim Tam. Marlene Dietrich, Humphrey Bogart, Ida Lupino. Gladys kept them all in a hatbox: horses standing in dark silhouette on stiff golden brown prints, their names scrolled elaborately beneath them; movie stars glowing in shades of slick photo-booth white. Greta Garbo, Whirlaway, Hedy LaMarr. The closet door was half-open, and Alice could see the back of her mother's sleek head, then as she turned profile the forehead with its smooth feline slant. An amazing woman, the brain of a cat. Alice stared the way she stared in the closet's half-dark at the black beautifully proportioned horse bodies and the white star faces. And her own pictures, now kept in the hatbox too. Tiny staring-back bursts of her own light-shocked face, repeated four times. FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH.

Alice had more than forty strips of herself in 1961. One day Gladys had quietly untaped them from her bedroom wall, put them in the

hatbox. Now Alice studied them as she studied the others. Humphrey Bogart eyes, she decided.

Put those away now, Alice, Gladys would murmur, grease on her face. Where you found them.

Gladys kept things like that hidden. They were 1940s horses and movie stars, Alice knew, and she knew too that her mother had been a star of sorts in the late 1940s—a teenage girl posing in a tight white dress on Derby Day of 1949, her smile lipsticked black. This picture was hidden too. Alice sensed it was a secret between them, like it was a secret privilege to sit this way and watch Mother grease her face shiny, tissue off the makeup.

Gladys was thirty-eight, almost forty. She was divorced, and ashamed of it, having grown up in Barberton, Ohio, where her church forbade dances and swimming and Bingo. But there was her body. There, in that tiny town, she needed no swimsuit to show it off, to make every man and every woman aware of it, as absorbed by it as she was herself. Even now, though less than before, even on the phone she made men aware by the slur of her voice that she had, still had, this amazing body.

Her husband-to-be had gone further than most, though. Barely bothered even pretending to speak to her on their first date. She'd met him in Louisville, where she'd gone to learn typing. He kept touching her, finally took her by the wrist and led her to the garden behind his mother's house. Later they lived there, his mother caring for baby Alice, Gladys lying in a thin skin of sweat in the backyard sun.

She'd middle-named Alice "Angel" because sometimes she longed for that kind of name herself, sometimes wished her own name were "Ginger." It was one of those things she never said out loud, just to herself, so many times the words became a chant. Ginger Ginger Angel Angel. So when her husband insisted on Alice, she wrote in Angel on the birth certificate without even asking. She liked to imagine the kids at school calling her daughter Angel. But then she was sure, by 1961, that no one ever ever would.

ALICE ANGEL HONEY—

THAT YOUR REAL NAME? THANKS MUCH FOR THE HEDY LAMARR
PICS, NOW HOW'S ABOUT SOME OF YOU? HUH, ANGEL? YOU GOT A

FEW SNAPSHOTS FOR LITTLE OLD ME? IN EXCHANGE I OFFER AN 8 BY 10 AUTOGRAPHED ON GARBO'S OWN BARE SHOULDER OR A 1946 PHOTOPLAY MAG. FEATURING G.G. AND DER BINGLE CROSBY OR A NUDE SHOT OF LITTLE OLD ME. HA HA JUST KIDDING ANGEL, HOW ABOUT IT?

Gladys hated him. She never read his letters, never read anything, but she hated him. Alice had found his name in the classified ads when she was eleven, wrote wanting to join his Greta Garbo fan club because she liked Garbo's face best, now kept his letters in a big envelope in the back of her closet. At first Gladys would barely glance at them as they lay proudly opened on the coffee table where she rested her feet after a day of clicking high-heeled up and down halls with stacks of typing. That loser, Gladys would think with her eyes shut. Loser Loser: it was another chant, over and over those days. That loser, she took to muttering half out loud as his letters became more and more frequent. He was a constant presence—he was, it seemed, Alice's only friend—and he was to outlast many of Gladys' men. He wrote once a week for months. It was during this time that Alice began to hide things.

ALICE ANGEL—

HEY I'D LOVE SOME PINUPS OF YOU, SWEETIE. YOU GOT RITA HAYWORTH SHOULDERS? LET ME SEE THOSE SHOULDERS ANGEL. UNBUTTON THE SHIRT ALL THE WAY ANGEL, HOW ABOUT IT?

Alice was twelve. She found a picture of her father scotch-taped under Mother's mattress. She taped it under her own. He had her face. Close-set black eyes, big bony forehead, thin features, thick-lipped mouth. He looked like a thinner Humphrey Bogart.

I look like Humphrey Bogart, Alice said out loud one night, experimentally.

Gladys, smoking on the couch three feet away, gave no sign of having heard.

Alice was thirteen. She hated school, thought only of coming home, of watching Gladys chip halfheartedly at unfrozen hamburger meat, watching Gladys lie on the sofa humid nights with Frank Sinatra playing, an ice bag over her eyes. Cigarette smoke curled up from her black bouffanted head. She wandered around the apartment

in her slip, stood over heating vents in winter, paced in front of open windows spring and summer. She still went out most nights, often alone, then came back and paced. At times, late nights, Alice would listen to the restless foot creaks and half-dream that Gladys would turn into some kind of animal, fly into some uncontrolled animal panic till she, Alice, would grab her wrists, wrench her to the floor, hold her there as long as it took. I know, I know, Alice imagined herself saying. Alice could hear Gladys dialing the phone at 1 AM. The sharp click as she hung up, then the second sharp impatient clicks of her cigarette lighter. Alice lay tense, feeling as if she could hear the tiny flames themselves. *Cliss, cliss.*

Yeah . . . Nnn . . . Betcha he can' even . . . Wish he'd uh . . . fire me anyways, huh?

Gladys's slow slurry phone voice. Not really words but sounds, Alice thought. She made sounds, sometimes nothing but sounds, as she sat on the phone for twenty-, thirty-minute stretches. Like she was drunk, though she never drank.

Nnn . . . Mmmm? . . . Uhn huh . . .

Alice listened. Alice knew quite clearly by then that people made fun of them both. Cat-brain, Egg-head. But together, they weren't so bad off. They could protect each other, maybe. At moments, at home in the shaded smoky bedroom closet, Alice still loved her own face, her mother's blank blurred stare, the familiar silence between them, as if their apartment held only one person.

Gladys was thirty-three when Alice was born. Too old, she always thought, and maybe that was why. Maybe if she'd been younger Alice would've turned out different. *Deformed* was a word that sometimes inched into her mind, late nights.

She was forty-five. She'd begun to notice how the skin of her face was growing looser. She touched it. She was seeing the man who fixed the watercooler, who once hardly dared look at her. She had long since given up on her boss. She came home tired. Loser, she thought when she saw the letters from that man. Greta Garbo fan club, writing and writing to thirteen-year-old girls, loser loser. Alice hunched over a sheet of paper, writing back, her limp dark hair hiding

her face. Gladys pulled herself up from the sofa, walked to the bedroom. Her head ached from the energy it took not to slam that door. She shut it, just a thud.

The watercooler man took her to Churchill Downs. She used to love Churchill Downs, would bet to win on her favorite jockey-silk colors, would wear the high heels with the thin strap, the ones that made her ankles fragile and sturdy at the same time, like a thoroughbred horse's. She loved to click along, feeling her ankles as if they were her center, men's eyes on her legs, her race card held stiff over her mouth as she clenched her teeth down the homestretch. She didn't shout.

Now she bet a whole paycheck on a horse named Champagne. Her own fury astonished her. Her head pounded as she made her way down the stands in her high heels, out before he noticed, down on the concrete with the betting crowd, tears, actual hot tears of rage in her eyes. It frightened her. Breathing became difficult.

She avoided looking at Alice. The long-standing silence in their apartment, once peaceful to Gladys when she was there so seldom, now made her even more restless and bored than the office. She used to soothe herself with Sinatra and steamy showers, staring down at her white body. *Shhhh*. Sometimes it was like not having a child at all, not having done any of that. Then Alice moved or Alice stared at her and she jolted upright on the couch, feeling the heat of her own skin.

Alice was fourteen. She pulled off her T-shirt in the photo booth, faced the back-wall Hollywood mural of gold-glittery palm-treed dunes, unhooked her limp bra. The photo booth smelled of cold popcorn. Her breasts were very small, almost flat. Her ribs showed, her head looked huge in the black glass. She was half-shivering with cold, but also something else. She felt eyes on her bare skin, felt as if someone was staring at her white soft thin skin. She touched herself. She dropped the quarter on the floor, dropped it again, into the slot, clink.

FLASH FLASH FLASH FLASH.

When Gladys was fourteen she'd strip to her underwear in her bedroom in daylight. Not in front of a mirror—she'd just stand and look down at her body, head cut off. She'd lose track of time; maybe she'd stand there an hour.

Thirty years later, she could remember exactly her body at fourteen. Now she looked at Alice's bare chest and shoulders. Alice was in the shower, sound pounding through the walls, and Gladys had been pacing about brushing her hair, waiting to get in. She'd paced into Alice's room, the shower sound beating in the walls there too, and had glanced at the envelope on Alice's bed, addressed to that man, strangely thick, not yet sealed.

Gladys looked at the pictures. She walked around the bed, then looked again, disbelieving, looked harder at Alice's face than she'd done in years. Slowly, she walked to the kitchen, tore a sheet from Alice's school notebook, almost tore the paper with the pen as she began to write.

LOSER—she scrawled, that heat rising up through her skin. YOU LEAVE HER ALONE YOU WHO ARE YOU ANYWAY T MAKE FUN OF LEAVE ALONE SHE GOT ENOUGH NEVER SHOULD VE YOU & LOSER FAN CLUB LIFE I FEEL SORRY FOR MAKING FUN YOU STOP NEVER NEVER STOP STOP—

She held the pen poised and trembling above the paper, wanted to write more but couldn't think what. Couldn't. She concentrated on her breathing, hardly aware of what she was doing as she stuffed the letter into Alice's already-addressed envelope. She was going to show Alice.

This was her single clear feeling. She walked to the bathroom door, breathless, her ankles weak. And she knocked, too soft to be heard.

Alice, she called, raising her voice only a little at first. Alice you come outa there—

Alice looked straight ahead. She held the letter in her lap. She sat on the stool. Mother had pushed open the door, eyes bright and blank with the kind of rage Alice had always feared but never imagined could be directed at her. She had to shield her own body, grip Mother's

wrists, run away. She'd never imagined running, always staying with Gladys, as long as it took. But when it happened, when she stood shivering and dripping in her towel in the hall while Gladys read aloud in a stiff almost inaudible voice, she'd thought only of getting away. Pulling on a T-shirt as the bedroom door slammed, slipping out, leaving the door open behind her, air cold on the damp back of her head. It was October of 1964.

She read the letter slowly to herself standing outside the supermarket. Read it again in the booth. One thing had seemed to her clear, even in Gladys's rage. Her mother was not angry that she had posed without a shirt but that she looked the way she did.

You— her mother had screamed at her. How you—Why—*You?*

Alice had been sitting in the booth for over an hour. She'd pulled herself out for two kids, stood dumbly through their FLASH FLASH FLASH, then pulled herself back in.

It had felt thrilling in a way, that other time. Alice was ashamed to remember this, ashamed as she pulled off her shirt, the letter dropping to the floor. She could hear more children outside the booth. Peek, scared giggle. She fumbled for a quarter in her pants pocket, dropped it, pulled down her pants, her panties, heard them run off.

In the black glass, her head was enormous. No chin, buck teeth, dark close-set eyes. She stood. Her bare haunches felt tight and cold, her legs bony, everything was distorted by the glass. She bent for the quarter, dropped it in FLASH, she could hear the kids coming back, she turned her butt to the glass FLASH, she turned again, knelt—*There, in there*—pressed her face to the glass for the last two FLASH, the bulb burst blue-white right into her eyes, her temples were throbbing FLASH, and they were pulling aside the curtain and she felt that her face, her head was exploding.

Virgins

My first lover and I leaned together in our bus seat all through that last morning, the two of us dazedly quiet the way we always were after sex—the way we were, this is to say, most of the time that summer. Mid-August by then, I remember: one and a half months since I'd lost my virginity to him in the dim tree-shadowed apartment we seldom left together. So odd, then, for us to sit packed in a warm load of strangers on a slow bus to Sears. Ohio morning air blew in drizzly-cool against our skin. The bus swayed to the hypnotic throb of those lanky bus-sized windshield wipers.

O-hii-O-hii-O-hii.

Bus wheels hissed to a stop in an oily puddle; LT's shoulders stiffened at the sound like a tense teenage boy's. LT was thirty-six years

old, six feet tall. His hair fell below his shoulders, dark and kinky thick and spectacularly outdated even then, years ago. I was eighteen, home from college for the summer, accompanying LT that morning on his annual shopping trip. My hand rested on his knee, steadied him as the bus doors wheezed open. The breeze smelled of wet leaves; LT and I smelled only of each other, of the warm perpetually rumped bed in which, the night before this trip, we'd found ourselves talking much more than usual.

I turned in our seat, pressing his knee. A wonderful quality in LT—that he never minded my staring. He held his head perfectly still, as if for a camera, his face bone pale in the fur dark mass of his hair. A beautiful animal, I thought. The bus was shuddering as it waited.

"Some kind of hippie," some voice muttered. "Like wow man, check it out."

Two teenage boys with razor-shaven punk-cut heads shuffled past us in their wet fake-leather jackets. No way to tell from LT's motionless profile whether he'd heard or not. As the bus door wheezed shut again, I found myself wanting to tuck LT's hair safely away on our side of the seat.

We were poised far outside Elyria on a particularly desolate stretch of country road. Through drizzle, the bus windows framed a muddy plywood sign that had been nailed to a tree there since long before I'd left for college. This sign's red paint had faded to an almost invisible red-pink, its printing fast and careless. *LIV BAIT*.

"I always hated that sign," I whispered.

"I always liked it," LT answered in his uninflected Midwest voice. His deep-set eyes were lowered so I couldn't make out what color they were that morning, what pale shifting mix of grey and green and blue.

"How come?" I whispered back. For any question, he'd invent on the spot an instant theory. Insta-theories. This was how we usually talked. Not about ourselves, very little of that.

"Grace," he said expressionlessly as the bus eased forward. "There's always something graceful," he told me, "in not trying at all."

And I—who'd raised my hand too eagerly throughout high school, who'd agonized throughout my acutely disappointing first year of college over what had become of what Mother called my *po-tential*—I nodded.

All those worries—carried off the plane that June in a brimful glass, ready to be forced down sip by sip—all that having become in July so abstract, unreal. For suddenly there I was lying on top of a naked man. My skin felt warm and damp and alive in a way it never had before, his lips and face smelling of wine, of me. LT was more than a little drunk, and it hurt too much at first for him to be inside me. In the hours before we actually made love, I lay on top of him, my bare skin pressing his. I was amazed by our nakedness, sure that lying together like that had simply and irrevocably joined us.

I am here, I said out loud. The way I said it became a joke between us—soft and surprised. For the first time in my life, I told him. For once no thought, much less worry, about my future, any future. Here Here Here.

Coca Cola billboard sailed by, the tail of its C swooping with the same casual midair grace as the silver greyhound silhouetted above our driver. Here, I thought, rain patter rising and falling on the bus roof and windows like the easy low voices of the black women up front and the phlegmy snore of the old man in back. Up and down the bus swelled, a spouting plunging whale. *Chhshh, Chhshh, Chhshh.*

Bus wheels hissed; my eyes burned. At midnight the night before, I'd rushed as usual down the long sidewalk blocks between his apartment and the quiet one I'd always shared with Mother. When Mother arrived home from her night-shift nursing job, when she peeked into my bedroom door, I lay in bed, chastely half-awake.

G'night, I'd mumbled to her, sounding much sleepier than I was.

Here Here Here, I thought, lying there in my new raw skin. Here, I thought fiercely as LT and I made love that morning, as we leaned together in our bus seat. The cold stale-sweet taste of breakfast donuts mingled in my mouth with the warm oyster taste of sex. I licked my lips, raised my eyes.

In the green-tinted bus light, LT's face was beginning to tense up. His long slanted jawbone wasn't as clearly outlined as it had been in the photo he'd shown me the night before. I shut my eyes, tried to nap on his shoulder as we neared the mall. But I couldn't stop hearing the occasional high school boy giggles behind us, or the giant windshield wipers, their insistent rubbery pulse.

O-hio, O-hio, O-hio.

A word made beautiful, LT once said, by the perfectly balanced blanks in the Os.

I'd noticed him because he never met anyone's eyes. This had made him seem both a little frightening and a little frightened as I wheeled past him with my wobbly carts of books in that long first week of June.

Only a year before, in high school, I had carried as I worked the blank waiting oval of a face which both was and wasn't my own. Mine really was in a way perfect, in a way plain: the features evenly arranged, the skin white, the wide pale eyes not answering with anything definite of their own the overbright red of my hair.

A promise of a face, hovering in my mind all through high school as I'd paced and planned and waited—for what? Was it only for that college scholarship? And what, then, had I expected?

Certainly not that my own throat and hands would close up like my shy mother's in crowded classrooms and crowded bar booths. Not that the evening silence lurking under TV voices in our old living room would stretch each night from Mother's apartment in Ohio to my dorm room in the East, this same silence waiting for me when I flew back home.

June. He sat at the Elyria Public Library's main desk, sorting inventory cards and stamping out books, dressed neatly and unobtrusively, his hair pulled back with a rubber band, neat too. But when I stood behind him to stack books onto my cart, it seemed to me that his swelled rubber band was just about to snap: his wild thick frizz spreading loose while he held his head, as always, perfectly still.

Teenage girls tended to linger by the main desk, I noticed that first week. He spoke to them only when necessary. His voice was surprisingly quiet for such a tall man, so low-pitched the girls would stand on tiptoe and lean across the desk to hear. Skinny girls, black girls, girls lingering by the exit. Mr. Spock, they whispered. Or the Dude with the Hair.

My first names for him. The Dude with the Hair and the hooded, oddly intelligent grey-green eyes. What a relief, after the noisy competitive rush of college boys, to watch this man hold his head like a vase: something precious and spillable inside, something decidedly not for display.

What a secret disappointment it was to notice that as he recorded the summer inventory, he would occasionally remove a catalog card, slip it into a pile he kept beside his lunch under the main desk. A thin pile he seemed to take home every few days—some research project? Some secret throttled *ambition*? Such an ugly familiar word, such a lovely strange quiet man.

One morning in mid-June while he was on break, I knelt down behind the main desk, hidden by my cart of books. I lifted the light stack of catalog cards. The first one was yellowed and old-fashioned, its title hand-printed in a formal yet leisurely flow of violet-blue ink:

Field, E.

Field flowers: a small bunch of the most fragrant of blossoms gathered from the broad acres of Eugene Fields' farm of love / by Eugene Field.

I blinked. A smile itched at the corners of my mouth as I flipped to the next card, also faintly yellowed.

Brans, H.

The chickens of the interventionist liberals have come home to roost / by H. Brans.

And then, on a bold new white card:

Nezara, Veridula.

Sperm precedence and prolonged copulation in the southern stink bug / by Veridula Nezara.

Books slid off my cart as I wheeled it back into the stacks. Then leaned against those shelves and gasped and laughed out loud in relief, a whole year's worth of laughing. The next day, when I was shipped down to the musty older books in the library's basement, I slid two cards of my own from the stacks I was told to sort. I added mine shyly to his stack while he was at lunch, both cards sepia stiff.

Hulbert, Archer Butler.

Soil, its influence on american history / by Archer Butler Hulbert.

And:

Curtis, Hattie.

Anger whisperings for the searcher after truth / by Hattie Curtis.

Then a series, slipped up from the basement into his stack gradually through the next week. All the books were written between 1860 and 1900 by the same indefatigable Maliek, John, beginning with *Civilization: It Is Material; Spiritualize It*.

Then: *Civilization: It Is Bad; Moralize It*.

And: *Civilization: It Is Ugly; Beautify It*.

And at last: *Civilization: It Is Impossible; Destroy It*.

Throughout this week, LT gave no sign of knowing it was me. He sat at the main desk just as before, his eyes shifting from grey-green to grey-blue to blue-grey. He took things in as calmly as ever, took me in: one slow thoughtful look late Friday, the last day of June. I bent beside him to sign my time card. The smell of my own sweat seemed to rise as he leaned closer, as I turned my face toward his. He smelled of nothing but cool, his eyes a clear almost chilling green.

Noon? I had to whisper back, his voice had been so low.

Noon.

At five till on the next day I hesitated a block away from the diner. I ducked into my old drugstore when, far down the sidewalk, I glimpsed him coming through the Saturday morning crowd.

Since I'd arrived home a month before, I had spoken to no one but Mother. I'd gone back to living with—in, almost—my mother's darkly brimming pupil-filled eyes, magnified by her thick-lensed glasses. Often, she'd fix her eyes on me across the kitchen table where we'd spent many nights cramming for my high school tests. Mother had quizzed me on words she couldn't quite pronounce; Mother had flinched only slightly at my impatience as I corrected her. Gamely, at this same table, she'd typed my financial aid forms and the endless college application essays which I composed by hand on the other side of the table. We were conspirators, timid bank heisters spreading my scholarship offers across the table like stolen bills.

I'd moved the out-of-state ones to one side, lingered over them, Mother lingering behind me. Why so far away? she'd asked in a quavery voice that made me scoot closer to the table, hunched over, the white face hovering moonlike in my mind. In Mother's mind too, I told myself as I rushed between school and my part-time jobs.

Working hard, saving money. But really all this time I had a habit of buying, for myself, secret expensive things we couldn't afford. Smooth fine-grained notepaper, rainbow packs of colored pencils, special creamy shampoos for my red hair. Each purchase was long and

lovingly premeditated: something I stopped doing in college, the practice somehow embarrassing to recall in the blanching light of my dorm room.

But when I slipped into my old drugstore on that first day of July at noon, I found myself standing stock-still and studying—really studying—a fancy new display of ballpoint pens. Red, black, green, blue: electric colors, neatly arranged. Breathing the scent of paper and eraser gum, I made tiny surreptitious squiggles with each pen on the top notebook of a display stack.

I felt but did not see him pass the drugstore's front window. And even after I knew he'd passed, I could still feel him, feel myself about to move toward him. Finally I chose the most expensive fine-tip black pen, stood holding it lightly between my fingers as if about to write something.

Then I did. In careful, vivid slow motion, on the cover of the new notebook, I signed my name as if I'd never sign it again: first, middle, and last.

Sometimes that summer as we kissed long and hard, our teeth almost grinding together, his mouth swallowing mine—sometimes my neck would stiffen, the last part of me left resisting.

The night before our trip to Sears, I lay on his bed and let LT give me a thorough massage. He'd never given me one so slow and insistent. His hands were guitar-player hands, long and strong, the fingers especially strong from hours of patient practice. The same chords over and over, the same firm circular motions up and down my spine, my shoulders, my neck.

Afterward, we lay in bed talking in an aimless way about the trip we would take the next day, his annual shopping trip. He told me how he'd never trusted crowds, how he made a point of never meeting strangers' eyes.

And instead of sliding into a lazy analysis of crowds, I heard myself say in a voice as warm and loosened as my back, "Y'know that used to scare me, the way you never met anyone's eyes. I used to wonder if you were into heavy drugs or something."

He laughed, the mattress creaking.

"Antisocial eyes," he murmured, his tone still the one we'd used

all summer, light and uninflected. "A useful tool," he told me. "A real achievement of mine, y'know? That all those genuine freaks in my high school thought I was even heavier into drugs than they were. When really I was—clean. Wanted to keep my mind clean and clear, to save it . . ."

For what? I had an impulse to ask. My whole body felt loosened, the two of us lying side by side, naked. But when he spoke again, his voice was strangely shy, hesitant.

"This was back when I played the flute."

"The flute?" I handled this word as gently as he had.

"Yeah. I played that before I ever started with the guitar. Guitars were cool, y'know, and flutes weren't, but I didn't care. I mean sometimes I performed in public and I never even noticed the audience . . ."

He paused as if he expected some reply. The expectancy was new. I shifted my weight on the mattress.

"I mean, I never thought about why I was there," he went on, voice still flat. "Never thought while I played about who was watching, who'd arranged it—weddings, school competitions, it never mattered."

He took a long breath, expanding his broad nearly hairless chest. The chest of a male angel. In the second slow pause of his exhale, I inched over and lay my head on his cool smooth skin. I could feel his ribs. I could feel his heartbeat. My voice came out all soft and awkward. Saying, in fact, the wrong thing.

"So did you . . . want to be a musician back then? I mean a, a professional?"

No, I wanted him to answer.

"No," he answered right away, softly too. "Nope," he repeated. "All I wanted then was to be good. A really good flute player."

But the guitar was different. It was mixed up with sex, with wanting women, wanting his wife. It was all mixed up, he said, with wanting things.

I hoped he wouldn't go on talking, his chest smooth and still. But I heard myself whisper, "Do you have any pictures? Anything of how you looked back then, in high school?"

Only one. His wife, the band he'd played in, his lovers—all those photos he'd thrown away. He didn't like to look at the faces, he said. His memory for faces, for details, was no good at all. "And that," he added flatly, "is a goddamn blessing."

Then I was sitting up, and he was kneeling beside the bed in front of a small square bookshelf. I could still feel the vibration of his voice in my chest as he slid something out from between two books, stood up holding a clean manilla envelope.

He is fifteen, black and white. He is playing a flute in a backyard woods somewhere in Ohio sometime in the mid-60s. His face is peacefully, contemplatively tilted. The line of his jaw stands out clearly; his loose dark hair blends into the dark of the trees. His long forearm cuts diagonally across the heart of the photo, tensed up, veins outlined. His hands look strong and tense too, yet delicately poised, one pinky raised. Prince of the Forest. His flute gleams in hazy late-afternoon sun. The photo blurs as if pressed under smeary glass—that blur only making it, he said, more perfect.

Not because the lines of the flute and of the fragile black microphone stand in front of him and of the young slender trees behind him all echo his own long forearm, his long lean flute of a body, age fifteen. No: the moment itself was perfect to him. Perfect, he'd told me, because he remembered nothing whatsoever of its details, nothing of what he called its *sordid specifics*.

That night, I carried one thought back through the midnight chill of sidewalk air, back to the clean worn sheets of my old bed. He won't remember my face. I told myself this clearly. It was August, and a plane ticket rested in the nightstand drawer beside my pillow, inches from my head. A real physical presence that night—a comfort, just as it was a comfort to hear the creak of my bedroom door when Mother peeked in at 1 AM, checking on me, making sure I was still there.

Then it was morning. He was tall and solid and I followed him through the men's department carrying in a heavy stapled bag his year's supply of plain cotton pants. I floated along with the Saturday crowd, walked in step with other silent women following other bewildered-looking men, some women leading sticky-faced little Sears

kids who came every Saturday, all wanting quarters because they all smelled candy. The whole floor smelled of hot popcorn and nuts and fudge, the strange kind of fudge that is vanilla-colored but still chocolate.

"White chocolate," LT said. Sexy mouth, I thought.

We passed household appliances, passed rows of urgently gesturing TVs, lingered near the stereos, pop gospel piped in all around.

Hymns for the Sickroom, he whispered down to me, a title we'd found together. We stood close as he leaned on one leg and flipped through stacks of new rock records. I watched, thinking of his own record collection: the experimental electronic music pieces, the old heavy-metal bands, the Bruckner symphonies. All of Bruckner, he'd say, takes place inside the womb. He handled each album as carefully as his own guitar.

"What happened to the band you were in?" My voice came out so small against the music and department store bustle that I half-hoped he hadn't heard. "I mean," I mumbled, "didn't you say you played guitar in some kinda group?"

The dark mass of his hair hid his face as he nodded.

"Yeah," he said under his breath, offhand. "Yeah, and then I quit because we were good. We were good but the other guys wanted us to do cover songs—you know what that means? They wanted us to do other groups' songs to get party gigs, and I wanted us to do only our own. Only."

"Oh." I consciously made my voice sound respectful. And I cleared my throat, let a teenage girl with spiky hair and magenta lipstick brush past. An elevator tone sounded from across the store.

"So why didn't you ever join another band?" My grip tightened on his heavy crackling Sears bag.

He stopped flipping the records. He turned, brushed aside his hair with an uncharacteristically impatient motion so he could fully meet my eyes—something rare between us even at that stage. I took half a step back, noticing again what had first drawn me to him: that his eyes were clear and cool, intelligent.

"You know how I see myself sometimes?" He paused, let another couple of black-leather punk teenagers pass, that elevator tone still sounding.

"I see myself," he said slowly, "as a vessel of potential. You know?"

A vessel. Of pure un-tried, un-spoiled potential—you see what I mean?”

He was still meeting my eyes. Yes, I thought, and for the first time in a year I pictured my own blank white face hovering.

Yes, I managed to nod. Only slightly, so not to jar his gaze. For I felt like I had when I first lay on top of him, like we were being joined again in an inextricable way. At the same time I felt that LT had committed some kind of sacrilege by speaking. His face under the fluorescent light looked lean and hollowed-out, his nose widened as if smelling for danger. His eyes were blue, clear blue-grey ether.

Looking into them was like stepping out of the harsh Sears light back to the bluish shadows of his bedroom, the high silence of our lovemaking. I took his hand; we moved into the crowd. And I felt myself to be a vessel too as we sailed along, rode down the escalator. The fluorescent store hum, the blue ether of his eyes. I was thinking, This is nice, this is sexy, coming here on Saturday is nice. In a slanted ceiling mirror as we rode past, carried along, I caught a glimpse of us. He was staring ahead in a tired way, his eyes deep-set and deeply shadowed; I was hugging the paper bag and smiling, a dopey beatific half-smile.

Down on the main floor, we smelled candy again. All around us, faces seemed to me vaguely familiar. And though Elyria is more a small city than a small town, though my mother had few friends who might spot us, still as we crossed the crowded drizzly parking lot and climbed back on the bus, I felt that strangers were watching us, noticing more than just his hair.

Noticing, for instance, how little we spoke as we sat together in the green-tinted late-afternoon light. Or how old his bone pale face looked. Though he still held himself like a teenage boy, his shoulders hunched.

“You okay?” I hated Mother’s hushed solicitous tone in my mouth, expected him to wince too. But he gave a nod, actually seemed in a distracted way to accept that tone. For the next few drizzly smooth-rolling miles I leaned against the seat and hugged the crumpled bag of clothes. I tried to nap, so tired I couldn’t make a fist, the tips of my fingers numb. Rain still pattered, the bus settling back into its rhythm. *O-hio, O-hio, O-hio.*

Muddy colors smeared together on our window glass: silver, soot, patches of lush summer green, wet wood, wet highway. Everything

damp; constantly, steadily drizzled upon. Lots of mud, I used to hate that, why had I hated it all so? Ohio is beautiful, I half-dreamed, Ohio is nice. A wet rain-rusted deer stood poised on someone's front lawn.

"Where are we?" I said out loud, sitting up straight. What had I just been thinking? I blinked, looked around as if waking in an utterly strange place.

For supper we made huge bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches. While the bacon sizzled, I called Mother, my fingers unsteady as I dialed, my voice unsteady too as I told her I couldn't be home for supper, that I was working overtime at the library. She sounded small and shy. After I hung up, I took a swallow of wine, cheap grainy red wine, the sexy kind that stays on your lips.

As we ate, I kept refilling my glass. My head lightened, the bottle lightening at the same pace each time I tilted it. Between sips and bites we shuffled, as we often did, through our book titles, the whole summer's worth piled in a bowl on his café-style table.

"*Why I Am a Spiritual Vagabond*, by Thor Mason," I read out loud. This one had been found the day we'd necked in the religion shelves. I made my voice sound sloppy, drunker than I really was.

"*Sanitary Memoirs of the War of Rebellion*," he intoned, his personal favorite. Our knees pressed under the table.

"*Secularism Is the Will of God*." My voice wavered, this being the first card we'd discovered together. "The week I started drinking wine." I held my glass up in a wobbly toast.

You can't drink it expecting it to taste like Pepsi, he'd said to me way back then. It has, he'd said, a different kind of sweet.

"And that's what's great," he was saying as we licked bacon grease from our fingers, surrounded by our cards. Our legs stretched out and tangled together under the table. Warm rain-cleared night air swelled in through the window screens. He was saying how great it was to have learned to like wine better than Pepsi. He was looking at me across the table as if he'd just invented me. His thick hair frizzed in the dampness.

"I mean," he said, "When you're a little kid, what do you think is the greatest thing? Marshmallows. Right? *Marshmallows*. But when

you're unraveling in the throes of death, do you still think marshmallows are the greatest thing in the world? You do not."

"This is true." I leaned forward. "And remember—r'member how you taught me to dance too? Remember the shadows?"

Weeks ago, our giant shadows bumped around on the walls every night to "Satisfaction," one dim lamp aglow on the floor.

"Dance, drink, and screw," I said very loud, suddenly almost teary-eyed with gratitude. Stop, I was thinking. "Dance, drink, and screw. You did all that for me."

"Sure." He leaned toward me across the card-strewn table, the same dim lamp glowing on the floor.

"Sure," he said lightly, "And now you'll just say Gee thanks, So long!"

From across the table he gave me a little wave with his big hand, winking, both of us halfway laughing. I took another swallow of wine, held it in my mouth.

"But me," he went on, "Why, I'll never leave me."

And he paused as if struck by that thought. He set down his wine-glass on the table, that movement steady, not at all drunken.

"Nope," he said. "I'll never leave."

He raised one long-fingered hand, held it as casually as if he were holding a cigarette, then spread his fingers, taking in with this small gesture the whole front room where we sat. The dark half-open bedroom door, the darkening window of Elyria grey.

"I . . ." he said quietly, imitating me, "am here."

He sat with his fingers spread, both of us looking at the room. The walls lined by wooden orange crates of records and by other empty cardboard cartons that nevertheless looked permanent, dusty rings marking where wet glasses had been set on them. The windows near the table were dusty too, the panes made of old glass, thick-poured, thickest at the bottom. Glass with a past. But as we sat there together, I stared into the growing reflective dark as if it were a dense crystal ball of future. My own face stared back, unrecognizable.

"Hey." LT's voice seemed to come from far away. "Hey, that's my trick."

"What?" My gaze moved now to our familiar two-backed shadow on the wall above the table. His side of our shadow moved, leaned closer.

"Your eyes," he said. "Antisocial eyes." Guiltily, I turned my face toward him, his eyes so deeply set I couldn't catch their glint. I looked down again at my wineglass, half-filled.

"If you keep looking away like that, how can I tell?" he said. "How can I tell if you still are or not?"

"If I'm still what?" My voice was as quiet as his.

He reached over and lifted my wineglass, took a sip.

"A virgin." He sipped again, drained my glass, set it down on top of one of our cards. I started slightly—we'd always kept the cards clean.

"There's more than one way to be a virgin, y'know?" He leaned so close I smelled the wine on his breath. He touched my chin with the tips of his strong guitar-player fingers. He could have forced my face up but he didn't. No, he spoke to me quietly, flatly, not at all as if making a real request.

"I mean," he said, "Look at me."

We were drunker than usual, rougher than usual in bed. Later the next day, alone in my locked bedroom, I'd find bruises on my thighs and I'd touch them lightly, wonderingly.

I touched his bare back after we'd made love, the wine taste in my mouth gone sour. He was rolled over on his side, half-asleep. Much later than usual, past midnight maybe, and I shut my eyes, thinking of that flute-player photo. Only one: rarely seen, rarely handled—or maybe, I thought, lying there, maybe slid from its envelope over and over, handled with such extreme care that it would look as if it had never been touched.

"So you don't remember faces?" I kept my voice low enough not to jar, my eyes opening.

"Fa-ces?" he repeated, muffled by the pillow. He lifted his head, rolled over on his back so I could make out his profile in the light from the open bedroom door. He yawned, rubbed his eyes.

"I only forget whole fa-ces," he mumbled. "I mean . . . there's usually one feature, y'know, that sticks in my mind."

"Like what?" I propped myself up on my elbow, conscious of his eyes turning toward mine, of his shoulders beginning to stiffen.

Abruptly, he rolled on one side, the movement much more awake

than his voice had sounded. He took hold of my face, my jaw, held it between his thumb and strong fingers.

"Your face," he whispered, so low-pitched I could barely hear. "Your face, y'know, is still perfect. You do know that, right? Because, I mean, nothing shows. Nothing shows yet."

He moved in closer, smelling of wine and me, holding my jaw tightly as he met my eyes.

"But your chin," he said. "That chin—that's the strongest, most determined goddamn chin I've ever seen. It shows a lot, shows such a lot about you—"

I pulled away, pushed at his wrist. His grip gave without a struggle and we both fell against the pillows, the mattress squealing. We lay there on our backs and breathed and listened to the drizzle start up again outside. Then his heavy breath began to slow and he rolled over, facing away from me.

I wanted to say something, drew in my breath. What stopped me somehow was the thought of that flute-player photo, twenty-one years old, his hair only slightly longer in the picture than it was in life. Yet his face had since grown much older, too old, really, for all that hair. I watched his broad bare back as his breath deepened.

Then I sat up in the dark and blinked and pulled the damp sheet to my shoulders. I wrapped it around me like a cape, crept out into the front room. The square plastic clock above his record player said it was nearly 1 AM, later than I'd ever stayed. Time for Mother to slip into our empty apartment, crack open the door to my room. As I stood wrapped in his sheet, this fact both did and did not register. I hardly saw the clock, the room. I remember knocking over his half-filled wineglass and watching the wine soak darkly into the thin moss-colored carpet. I stood still, barefoot, and fingered the scattered cards on the table, remembering his face in the fluorescent-lit record department.

A Vessel of Potential. The idea of his thinking that, thinking *about* that, carrying that phrase in his mind—this idea embarrassed me. My skin heated as it had done under the few clear stares on the bus. I started to pace, hating my embarrassment. I am here, I tried to think, but in fact, as I paced back and forth in his sheet, I felt I no longer was.

Here Here Here. The word was a sound, the sound was a beat, and then I was pacing faster. I was thinking in the old way and yet not at

all in the old way about the coming fall, the coming year, the classes I would take, the plane ticket.

After a few minutes, my steps slowed. I sat at the table and stacked the cards, the titles I knew by heart. Then, exhausted, I crept back to the bedroom, trailing the sheet. I lay down behind him and slept, his hair tickling my face whenever he moved.

Around four I woke, at first slow, gradually becoming aware of a stale wine taste in my mouth, a dull ache in my head. His bare back felt warm and near, the square shadowy bookshelf near too. Then I was out of bed, naked, splashing cold kitchen water on my face.

Home: my first thought. I wanted to crawl into bed in my own quiet room. My face wet, dripping, I crept back into his bedroom, groped for my clothes in the tangled sheets. Careful not to touch him. Not to think of what his face would be if he looked for me at work the next week and I wasn't there, couldn't come in, could barely keep my hands steady as I pulled on my T-shirt in the dark. Not bothering to try to find the bra, I stood and fumbled with the zipper of my jeans. My room, my bed, my mother.

I sat back down on the mattress, jeans half-zipped. Mother had been up all night with no idea where I might be. Mother would stare from behind her glasses, her eyes magnified in those hurt anxious looks she'd been giving me even before I started up with him, ever since last summer when I'd made it clear I would be leaving Ohio. For weeks, for years maybe, I'd carelessly or carefully ignored the looks. All of them combined, as I sat on his bed, into a clear overwhelming image of what her eyes would be when, in a few minutes, a few minutes before dawn, I crept back through our kitchen door.

Mother's face, LT's. I pulled myself up, stepped numbly into my sandals. Rain pattered on his bedroom window, the street outside still dark, his breath pillow-muffled and faint. I felt my way toward his door, trying, I think, to see that old blank white version of my face, a face I couldn't remember.

Couldn't picture it anymore. Out on the sidewalk in a few minutes, I wouldn't feel the wet air, wouldn't notice that my skin and shirt were getting soaked. My face. I remember reaching up to touch it, then kneeling down fully dressed beside his bed. I moved so fast I barely had time to think, only to feel along his paperback book spines for the protruding edge of the envelope. As I slid that stiff envelope from the shelf, he stirred. Outside, the wind had begun to pick up.

Outside, I would stand on a corner in the wet blowsy air, swaying, waiting for the curb itself to start moving, carry me across.

Inside, I hesitated in his darkened bedroom doorway, holding the photo in its envelope. I watched him lying on his side on the bed, the frizzy-thick mass of his hair spread out over the pillow like a small animal, separate from him. I didn't move so he wouldn't move. His bare back faced me, smooth and white.

*What
to Do
in an
Emergency*

To keep Bobbie Ann awake, the housemother gave her cans to count, bread dough to punch, fresh underwear to sort by indelible black initials printed on the cloth, and Incident Reports to file but not read.

"Not that you'll find any big surprises," May Mooney added flatly, as if she meant ever, in Bobbie Ann's whole life to come. Bobbie Ann nodded, her hair dripping rain. Her eyes burned, still scalded by her latest crying jag. Obvious as a flag, she knew: what Carson used to call, at first affectionately, her red-white-and-blue eyes.

"Head-butts, seizures, big-time bites." Here May halted herself. "'Course that's all daytime drama." She lifted her fat creamy cheeks, managed a Carolina hostess smile. Scared Bobbie Ann might yet bolt?

Above them, rain pounded the none-so-sturdy sounding roof. The housemother, the house itself, exuded false cheer: bright orange covers stretched over the lumpy wood-framed couch, a defiantly bright green church dress billowing over the massive expanse of May Mooney's body. Her arms swelled out, round and wide as Bobbie Ann's waist.

"Rose, Belinda, Jackie J." May maneuvered into a turn, the floor seeming to rotate beneath her. On her upper arm, an extravagant purple-green bruise bloomed. Bobbie Ann blinked, realized she was composing yet another description for Carson, as if she'd be coming home to him. Sitting on his lap, telling him her day.

"Wait now." Bobbie Ann's long hair dripped onto an incident, blurring the inked word *head-butts*. "You say lots of aggression here?" Her throat felt raw; it had been days since she'd talked to anyone except her mama's—now her own—lawyer.

"Not at night, hon." May Mooney chuckled, her thick neck rippling: heavy cream, the kind that turns light when whipped. "Lucky for you, they're all—" her tongue clicked, "—dead to the world."

Lights flickered. A tall, sparsely populated bookcase swayed as they passed. A fragment of title almost stopped Bobbie Ann: *What to Do*, it began in confident yellow block letters, and her heart actually rose with dumb hopeful relief, as when Carson used to take firm hold of her bare upper arms, never quite leaving a mark.

"Usually not one peep." May chuckled again, her cheer moderately more genuine now with her own escape all but assured. What, what to do. Bobbie Ann followed May's small-sounding feet, eying the broad green rayon plain of her back, the strained seams, each thread frayed thin.

"An' Rose. Now don't let her tell you she's earned her headphones." May puffed, halted by the front door. "Oh, an' we surely can't forget Philip. Li'l Philip Purdue." Her green eyes glinted like the microscopic gold cross at her throat. "He shouldn't even *be* here." Bobbie Ann stared. Here on earth, May seemed to mean. "But his father heads the board. Joined up just so he could buy Philip a slot. When all along we'd been told, *pro*-mised, nothing but moderate to severe . . ."

Bobbie Ann looked down at her own washed-out UNC sweatshirt, making a vow, the sort she'd made often lately. Late nights: after "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" and "Get Smart," after masturbating

and swallowing her Seconal. Another vow. No matter how low—how much lower—she sank, she must consciously avoid joining what Mama called the Chorus of Chronic Complaint.

“. . . and this boy's way past your everyday *severe*."

Bobbie Ann drew breath to question that word, but May turned her back, opened the coat closet. "You ask me, he's down there with those poor Mong'loid monster babies, Lord love 'em." She sighed, wrestling with a vast mass of plastic. Bobbie Ann blinked. Since her harried dripping arrival and May's ominously grateful greeting, Bobbie Ann had let May quite politely bulldoze past all her attempts to confess that she hadn't done this kind of thing in years, that she couldn't even remember what was meant by, say, *severe*.

"Oopsie dais-y!" May's voice rose and fell with her shiny plastic poncho: a sweet singsong rhythm she must use with the—what would they be called?—residents. "So." Crackling plastic settled. Rain sizzled. "Think ya can handle it, hon?"

Bobbie Ann managed a shrug, her shoulders already hard to lift. The same old nighttime cloak had descended inside her chest. Hugging herself, she locked her arms against her lowest ribs. A child-sized cage, thin curved bones Carson used to span with his hands.

"So, so, so." May gave a mighty sigh, her flea-sized cross quivering with sparks. Her Christian spirit sending signals of struggle as her eyes skimmed down Bobbie Ann's body? To stir up such resentment, Bobbie Ann thought, it—her thirty-year-old girl-sized body—must still look okay, even after weeks of junk food and no jogging. She hugged herself harder, to hurt, hating her own mean little rush of relief. Too many of her pleasures, lately, seemed mean. "Anyhow." May Mooney tilted her delicate watch, its face as tiny as one of her fingernails. "Any questions?" she asked, flashing Bobbie Ann a final green glance that meant: there better not be.

After May had zoomed off to her midnight prayer meeting in a jaunty two-door Toyota—her one chance in this life to be fast and small—Bobbie Ann huddled on the couch and skimmed the first forbidden incident. She blinked to clear her cloudy contacts, already too dry, worn since daylight. Would they last the night?

gpm, 4/14: R.A. commences inappropriate questions (ex: What

can you do to the Who? Why is your eyeball upside down?) Bobbie Ann blinked harder, wondering.

Two weeks before—barely able to remember why, in her single year at University of North Carolina, she'd majored in special ed—Bobbie Ann had signed up at a human services temp agency called Helping Hands. Carson claimed she'd chosen it as the most pathetic place possible. Another Little Orphan Ann maneuver. Maybe so, she'd thought, lying awake in their, now her, half-baked bed. Unable, night after night, to turn off her brain, turn on her own body. So when, at 11 PM, amidst a combination thunderstorm—crying jag, the agency phoned and asked her—begged, really—to drive out to a group home and do an emergency overnight, Bobbie Ann agreed. Sniffing and fumbling to hang up, she wondered, Could this night get any worse? Daring it to, she swung onto the streaming streets and skidded round a fallen tree limb, exhilarated to see that it wasn't just her, inside her. Everything outside too was, really was, ripping apart.

After told no headphones, R.A. commences self abusive/aggr. behav. head-butts arm of couch, bites arm of Yours Truly

Bobbie Ann flipped the folder shut, chopping short May's neatly rounded determinedly cheerful words. Thunder gave a deep chuckling rumble; lights flickered. False cheer: another trap she'd vow to avoid. Bedsprings made faint rhythmic creaks. Bobbie Ann shoved the incidents off her lap, let them scatter on the floor.

"Who . . ." A hoarse female voice called from upstairs. Or was it wind? "Who-ooh?"

Shaking her head hard, Bobbie Ann reached down into the laundry basket and folded two socks together, trying to hide the ugly *PP*. Muffled movement commenced upstairs, shuffling footsteps. Even rolled tight, the sock ball showed black blurry ink on all sides. Bobbie Ann hurled it back, watched it bounce off unfolded underwear. Through a fresh staticky burst of rain, a door thumped. Steps intensified.

Looking up, Bobbie Ann held her face still, as if for inspection. Lately, below the corners of her mouth, two matching weights had begun to form. She sucked in her cheeks, those extra pads of fat, picturing the neat white squares Mama sewed into the hems of all her curtains so they'd hang straight, even in a breeze.

The creaking wood stairs were softened by the hard rain. Bobbie Ann kept staring. Her thighs tensed; her feet pressed the floor.

"Who?"

A girl hovered in the dim living room archway. Lamplight gleamed off her glasses: dark octagonal frames, dense lenses. Bobbie Ann squinted at her thick-lipped mouth, half-open. Above, in the gentler outer circle of light, shiny black eyes, semicrossed, stared at Bobbie Ann's nose.

"Who *you*?" She shuffled closer in her nightgown, pressing colored papers to her breasts, her head bowed as if beaten down by the pouring rain. Her jaggedly cut black hair stuck out at all angles. Maybe she'd seized a pair of scissors herself. Or maybe it was a deliberate punk cut, one that would look perfectly normal on someone else.

"See Ro-ger. He's shape-ly. Isn't he shape-ly?" She was not, as Mama would say, from 'round here. Her voice held Yankee harshness. New Jersey, New York?

In the growing circle of lamplight, this girl held out a worn handful of magazine photos, their gloss long gone. Faces already outdated in Bobbie Ann's high school days. Roger Daltry and the Who. Some photos were pasted on uneven squares of construction paper. The girl stood close enough now that Bobbie Ann breathed her warm sleepy smell. Too little shampoo, too much toothpaste. Her breasts sagged under her cotton nightgown. Was she fifteen, thirty? She peered straight at Bobbie Ann's nose. "You sub?"

"That's right." Despite the pulse jumping in her throat, Bobbie Ann made her voice level. Imitation Mama. "I'm the substitute, the . . . overnight."

The girl nodded, impatient with an answer she must've heard a hundred times. "Wan' my head-phones." Her voice held no expectation.

"Well, it's . . . a little late, Rose." Bobbie Ann forced a baby-sitter smile. "I mean, everyone's asleep. Looks like you need some sleep too, hon."

Rose shrugged dismissively, maybe annoyed by the 'hon.' Or by not being asked her own name. "But we were talk-ing a-bout the Who, right?"

Her hard Yankee voice mimicked a soft Carolina rise and fall, an exaggeratedly courteous redirection of the conversation. Bobbie Ann nodded uncertainly. Nodding too, not at all uncertain, Rose settled next to her on the couch, startlingly warm and close. The lamp spotlight her top picture, an aging magazine shot of Roger Daltry as Tommy:

his electrified halo of girlish curls, his angelic deaf-dumb-and-blind kid stare.

"Feel me, tou-ouch me," Rose began to sing, softly off key. Her breath was hot and minty. "Fee-eel me, heal me . . ."

Stiffly, breathing the rich unwashed smell of Rose's hair, Bobbie Ann fingered Roger. His hair blurred white around the edges from too much touching.

"Soft-as-a-kitten, in't he?"

Bobbie Ann had to nod. The crinkly once-glossy texture reminded her of Carson's cock at rest, its limp plush skin. She tensed her fingers to keep them from trembling.

"So shape-ly. Aren't the Who shapely?" Rose reshuffled her stack to show a group shot pasted on a crudely cut construction-paper heart. An old shot, young sullen faces. Odds 'n' Sods. They stood in a row in bell bottoms and no shirts. Rose smiled, half her mouth rising. Thick chapped lips, crooked teeth, toothpaste breath. "Know how I earn head-phones?" She spoke from the live side, like an old lady who's had a stroke. "No butts," she recited. "No ques-tions, no 'gression."

"Oh." Bobbie Ann's shoulders tightened. Rose leaned closer, her glasses sliding halfway down her nose.

"I've got quite an im-ag-ination," she whispered in a housemother tone, as if trying to reassure Bobbie Ann. "What can you, you do to the Who?" Bobbie Ann shifted. A—what was it called?—inappropriate question. Prelude to aggr. behav.?

"You can rock them!" Rose jerked the scraps back and forth, her elbow poking Bobbie Ann's stomach, hard.

"Hey now, Rose." Bobbie Ann pulled herself to her feet. Rose stared up at her, unnervingly expectant, her mouth half-open. Wetness gathered on her lower lip. "Hey, we got to check that dough."

Bobbie Ann turned on her heel, imitated Mama's brisk housewife strides so well she wasn't even surprised to hear Rose fall into step behind. The kitchen doorway was solidly dark. As Bobbie Ann halted, too suddenly, Rose bumped her.

"Sorry, hon," Bobbie Ann murmured, her voice all at once as shaky as her hands. "Need light," she managed to add, patting the wall hard and fast in search of the switch.

You don't really need this, Babe, Carson had told her the last week as he'd switched on her nightlight, implying with his tone that there

was someone else, now, who did. Nineteen years old: that was all Bobbie Ann knew, had to know.

Under bright kitchen lights, inside comforting kitchen quiet, she punched dough. Rose leaned in the doorway, hugging the Who. Rain crackled on the pane, low voltage, temporarily tamed. Baking project lists and orange-red fingerpaintings hung around a magnetized flashlight on the refrigerator door. Bobbie Ann breathed in cinnamon and yeast, leaned on the heels of her hands to flatten, then reflatten, the springy pliant dough. Flour dusted her fingertips. She draped a clean dish towel over the punched lump, picturing May Mooney sunk in prayer, May's soul rather than her body expanding. Surprised to still be capable of such a sweet special-ed-teacher-type thought, Bobbie Ann looked over her shoulder. "Hey, where you from, anyhow?"

Rose recited her answer, her voice flat and matter-of-fact. "I lived in New-ark New Jer-sey till I was five and my mother started sex-u-ly a-busing me." She paused, sucked in her spit. "Then they put me in the Center. Then here."

"Good Lord." Mama's words. Bobbie Ann blinked, cleared her lenses. "Are you . . . Do you like it here?" Here on earth, she thought. "I mean, now?"

Rose nodded, impatient again. "You gonna do the count?"

In obedient relief, Bobbie Ann knelt by the lowest cabinet and began to count cans, marking ballpoint numbers on a clipboard nailed inside the cabinet door. Rose leaned on the counter behind her, breathing through her mouth. Wet intent breaths.

Five spinach, one creamed corn, six cling peaches. Bobbie Ann took care not to jangle the ring of keys hanging by the chart, not to break the peaceful rain-patter silence. Her pen scratched. Maybe Mama was right, Mama and her perfect curtains, her days divided by tasks. Two split pea and ham, one Dutch Cleanser, surely misplaced. Her pen faltered. Rain thickened.

"Who that?" Rose sucked in her wet breath.

"Oh, no-thing." Bobbie Ann hefted the powdery can, Mama's old brand. A poisonous whiff of ammonia. On the faded label, a Dutch housewife in kerchief and ruffled apron raised her broom against a spunky tumbleweed of dust. As Bobbie Ann rose on her knees, intending to shelve the can higher up, out of reach, she felt her lips quiver. Her first natural smile in weeks.

That was when—with a sky-splitting wall-quaking clap—the lights went out. A flashbulb clap: aimed straight at Bobbie Ann’s foolish Mama face. God’s Candid Camera. As she sank heavily onto her heels, she felt her smile give the bitter thin-lipped twist she’d made many a mental note to avoid. Rain lashed the walls and windows, holding back nothing now. Even in the dark, Bobbie Ann could feel Rose watching her, still leaning on the counter, her wet breaths coming only a little quicker. Papers shifted, the Who pressed closer. Somewhere above, a moan rose. Inside Bobbie Ann’s chest, the night-time cloak—having begun, briefly, to lift—dropped back down at twice its usual weight. She set the Dutch Cleanser on the floor with a hollow clank.

“Well, shit,” she muttered, her Mama impersonation fading fast into the black.

Armed only with the bright but unsteady kitchen flashlight—she jerked it to revive it, batteries clacking like castanets—she crept back into the living room. Rose lagged behind, not letting her hand be held. As they inched toward the couch, separately, Bobbie Ann skidded. Light and paper slid wildly under her feet. The floor tilted, slammed her ass. She sat in a wide scatter of incidents, still gripping her light. Thunder gave another cosmic chuckle.

“Wha?” Rose sounded plaintive and impatient both as she stared down from above. The flashlight glared off her glasses. Night stop signs. The moan upstairs droned louder, though Rose seemed not to hear it. “Wha we do?”

Bobbie Ann clenched her back teeth, hot tears beginning to brew. Her tailbone ached. Years before, she’d watched a tearful Miss North Carolina tell the pageant MC she was majoring in special ed. The audience applauded. Certainly Carson, a brash business major, had been charmed at first, even impressed. After she’d quit UNC to marry him, Bobbie Ann actually had worked for a time, part-time, in a special ed class for toddlers. Mildly retarded, only mildly aggressive. Even so, she hadn’t managed to duck a hurled toy truck. That evening, Carson kissed the plum-pit bump on her forehead and took hold of her shoulders and quietly insisted she quit. She had cried: tears of pure secret relief.

What to Do in an Emergency. All on its own, Bobbie Ann’s flashlight sought out those bold yellow words in the bookcase, trapped them.

One good thing about tears: they wet her contacts, kept the darkness clear. Shakily, she pulled herself to her feet, her breath rasping. *A Rapid Action Guide: When Seconds Count.*

When do they not? Bobbie Ann wondered, taking hold of that solid spine. Sunk on the couch beside Rose, she flipped open the oversized book and skimmed with her light down the boldfaced—no, frantic-faced—headings, each one printed on a large dictionary-style flap for easy flipping, no matter how shaky or bloody your hands.

Bleeding; Burns & Scalds; Choking; Drug Overdose; Electric Shock; Unconscious Person; Burst Pipe; Power Outage; Leaking Tank.

In her jittery spotlight, Bobbie Ann flipped pages, hearing the moan rise again like an alarm bell she couldn't keep ignoring. Rose snuggled closer. Power Outage, Bobbie Ann told herself, her fingers cold and tense. One sketch appeared over and over, each victim placed in *recovery position*: the body curled on a floor, the head low, the legs bent as if the victim might in fact be running, running on an endlessly downward slope.

. . . time to read these instructions is BEFORE an emergency strikes. Just as the middle of a darkening forest is no place to begin learning how to use a map.

Upstairs, a second moan joined the first. Bobbie Ann's grip on the flashlight tightened. But she couldn't flip the next page, her eyes swimming along italicized lines. *Bleeding* alone held infinite possibilities: *Large Foreign Body in Skin; Bleeding that Will Not Stop; Bleeding from Nose, Ear or Mouth.*

Two moans now, competing against the rain. Bobbie Ann locked stares with the bulging spotlight eyes of a child demonstrating a universal choking sign. *Immediate intervention is in order, too, if victim clutches throat or turns blue.*

A mama stretched her mouth so it covered a baby's mouth and nose, so the mama seemed to be sucking up the baby's face. Bobbie Ann turned the page hurriedly, kept turning. "Power Outage," she read out loud, flattening the words with her palm. She held the flashlight steady. "'Pow-er outages are al-ways un-expected and never pleasant.'"

"But we—" Rose elbowed Bobbie Ann, much harder than before, her Yankee voice hardening too. "We were talking about the Who, weren't we?"

She shoved her pictures into Bobbie Ann's light, hiding the page.

Print showed through behind the luminously lit faces. Rose pointed. "See? That's Roger Dodger, that's Perfect Pete, an' that's Little Keithy Moon. See how lit-tle he is?"

"Hey." Bobbie Ann pushed the photos to one side, trying to take on the cool authoritative tone of *What to Do*. "Hey listen, now: 'Switch off elec-trical ap-pliance, po-tential fire hazards—'"

"You lis-ten *me*." Harder than Carson, Rose gripped Bobbie Ann's bare arm. One-handed, left-handed. With her right, she shoved her pictures back over the print. "Keithy died in 19-68." Rose's right finger froze over his tiny dazed face. Abruptly, her glasses jumping on her nose, she raised her frozen finger, pointing to the moans. "Drug over-dose!" She sang in a high-pitched falsetto. "Keith-y? Can you hear me?"

"Shhh!" Letting the flashlight droop, Bobbie Ann took hold of Rose's rigidly pointing fist. From her own fist, Rose's finger stuck up, clammy cold.

"Hear him?" In one swift city-girl motion, Rose twisted from Bobbie Ann's amateur grasp and swept all the photos off *What to Do*, its pages flapping backward. Her arm jolted the flashlight beam up the walls to the cracked ceiling and down again. The light hung in Bobbie Ann's hand, pointed to the mass of incidents and Who faces strewn over the floor. Bobbie Ann stared down, her contacts all too clear.

"Who that?" Rose demanded, stabbing an ink sketch of a man in recovery position. From Bobbie Ann's skewed angle, he looked like he thought he was running, but really was falling. Dumbly, Bobbie Ann stared at his bent arm: the poor guy about to pray or suck his thumb.

"Keithy Moon!" Rose gripped Bobbie Ann's knee like a gearshift, her elbow sticking straight up. Going off, they'd always say at the day care center. "He's in re-hab." Rose tightened her grip, her fingers pressing bone. "He needs care," Rose whispered, this time in a tentative reverent TV voice. The same voice she'd used to say *sex-u-ly a-bused*. "Care, not de-spair."

Bobbie Ann could only nod, her legs stiffening against the steady squeeze of her kneecap.

"Right!" Eagerly, Rose bent forward to nod with her. Their heads butted, bone bumping bone. A deliberate jaw-jarring butt. The flashlight faltered, failed.

"No!" Rose smacked her own cheek, her slap echoing in the new dense dark. "No, bad, bad." As the flashlight flickered back on, Rose slapped it too, knocking it out of Bobbie Ann's hand. It rolled on the floor, lighting the Who, the ceiling, the Who. They both watched, hugging themselves, suddenly shivering.

"Cold—" Bobbie Ann gasped as the light rocked to a halt, inches from her feet. Her knee smarted; her bumped skull vibrated. "The heat's off, see? We're cold!"

This was a revelation. Upstairs, both moans rose in agreement, competing with each other.

"Cold?" Rose scrambled to her feet, her breasts swinging behind her nightgown, spotlighted by the light she bent to grab. "They cold?" She backed away from the couch, barefoot, stepping between the scattered Who.

"They?" Bobbie Ann stared into the dark space where Rose had spun on her heel, the light vanishing. Bare feet pounded carpet. Bobbie Ann stayed slumped, *What to Do* weighing her down. Through the open kitchen doorway, feet slapped linoleum. Drunken applause. "Deaf-dumb-an'-blind kid—" Rose sang. Something gave a quick hard click: the cabinet hinges? A plug tugged out of the wall? "Sure playz-a mean Pin-ball!"

Above her, the moaners had quieted again, respectfully expectant, encouraged by the kitchen clatter. Tin cans clanked: yes, Rose had opened that lower cabinet.

"How you think he *do* it?" she sang, louder now, more confident. "I Don' Know!" Another can clanked, this one hollow. Powdery.

"No!" *What to Do* slid from Bobbie Ann's lap like a sled, ramming her big toe. "Don't touch that, Rose—"

Bobbie Ann stumbled up and over the shifty rustling mass of incident reports, Who hearts.

"Plays by sense o' smell—"

Keys jangled. Grit scraped under Bobbie Ann's rubber sneaker soles: bitter blue-white powder, less crunchy than sugar. "Don't—" Bobbie Ann ordered in a stage whisper, conscious of the dark listening silence that surrounded the kitchen. "Don't *touch*."

"Who?" Beyond the counter, keys jangled louder. Rose rose over the edge, her glasses askew, her jagged hair sticking up like a crown. She clutched the flashlight and key ring in one hand and raised the Dutch Cleanser in the other. More powder spilled.

"No—" Bobbie Ann lunged over the counter and seized Rose's elbow. Keys clanged; the dough bowl wobbled; the light cracked down hard on the countertop, rolled, then swooped to the floor, clattering and faltering. Everything dark.

"Where *key?*" Rose wrested herself from Bobbie Ann's grip and dropped to her knees. She slapped linoleum like a tom-tom. "Where it go? Where go, Ro-ger?"

"Shh!" Bobbie Ann dropped down beside her, groping too. Her hands beat their own hard rhythm. No wedding ring clicks. Just bare palms against the gritty floor.

"Who?" Crouched on her hands and knees, Rose threw back her head. "Where go, Who? Who-*ooh?*" Her shout came out fine and loud. Bobbie Ann's own throat tightened. Through her tear-blurred contacts, she took in Rose's profile, its coyote tilt. "Who-*ooh!*" The second shout was shriller, higher pitched. A child's whine. Would they all join in now, a rising whining chorus of complaint? Unmuffled, unstoppable? "Who-*ooh!*" Rose clanked the Dutch Cleanser can on the floor, a crazed judge's gavel, poison powder puffing up. "Who-*ooh?*"

"Hush!" Bobbie Ann clamped one hand over Rose's wet wide-open mouth. The Dutch Cleanser thudded. Locked together like blind wrestlers, Rose and Bobbie Ann rocked backward, hot breath snorting out between Bobbie Ann's fingers. Rose's lips contracted: thick chapped muscular lips. City lips. Her mouth moved under Bobbie Ann's palm, her teeth scraping skin, closing in.

Bobbie Ann's own scream left her throat satisfyingly stripped. Her ears echoed, full of the sound. Only the moans answered, no louder than before. Everyone already *is* awake, Bobbie Ann told herself, pressing her bitten hand to her stomach. Her other hand reached for the faintest of gleams. Cold metal tube. She shook the flashlight hard. Its weakly awakened beam illuminated Rose's sturdy bare feet. Her toenails had outgrown their pink dabs of polish. Panting, Rose pulled herself up and stepped over the Dutch Cleanser, bent toward the counter. Powder crunched.

Bobbie Ann tasted blue ammonia grit and sputtered, spat at the floor. In the back of the kitchen, Rose's barefoot steps halted. Keys jangled wearily. Squinting above the flashlight beam, Bobbie Ann noticed that the dark had grown less dense. Metal scraped metal. Rose sighed, tried another key. It clicked; a door squeaked open. A sup-

ply closet? The door thumped shut; Rose stalked back into the flashlight's range. She stepped past Bobbie Ann without a glance, her back straight, her steps slow and steady. Her arms were filled, now, with blankets.

Bobbie Ann lowered her hand. The meaty mound below her thumb smarted: a surface wound, bleeding but not deep. Carpet muffled Rose's steps. Upstairs, the moans continued, slower and sleepier. An end in sight, in sound.

Bobbie Ann pulled herself up, her breasts hanging down inside her bra. Batteries clacked in their metal tube. The light seemed dimmer, the living room much less dark. Bobbie Ann's fingers tightened, cold yet sweaty on the metal. Paper rustled under her sneakers as she followed her downcast beam. Rose stood at the foot of the stairs in shadowed silhouette, bent under the weight of blankets. Her back faced Bobbie Ann, her nightgown rumpled. Hair shone on her calf.

The moans slowed almost to a stop, setting Rose in motion. They climbed slowly. Rose shouldered open the first door—a Who poster flapping, half-torn down—and stalked inside. Her roommate—Belinda?—was whimpering, curled up in her sheets. Bobbie Ann spotlit Belinda's tousled brown hair, cut short like Rose's, but more evenly. Belinda gave a suspicious slit-eyed stare. Had she tried to rip down the Who?

Rose hurled the top blanket, covering Belinda up, head and all. Underneath, Belinda mumbled, either in gratitude or complaint. Bobbie Ann stepped back. At the doorway, Rose stared over her shoulder, maybe pleased to see Belinda gone. Her octagonal glasses flashed. Leaving the door half-open, they padded over to the next.

A boy sat hunched in sheets and one lightweight quilt, arm-wrestling with himself. Jackie J.? Light shone on his dark profile, his kinky close-shaven hair. His knucky double fist trembled. A window stood open, chill wet air drifting in. Jackie's moan was the gentlest, the lowest. Leaning back, Rose balanced on one heel. She hurled the blanket over Jackie as if over a piece of furniture, her movement bored and matter-of-fact. It hit with a cloth thud, knocked Jackie on his side. Or maybe he rolled by himself, lowering his soldierly head at last. His moan and the bedsprings' whine ceased, both at once.

Rain crackled. Bobbie Ann inched over to the window and strained to pull it shut, one-handed. The wood frame creaked as it shuddered

down. Her hand hurt. Rose stood in the doorway, hugging the last two blankets, maybe waiting. One corner trailed the floor.

The last moans, the slowest and loudest, had led the others. The last dark cubicle smelled of chilled piss. Philip—this must be Philip—lay twisted in his sheets, his skinny boy's body made bulky by diapers taped on under his flannel pajamas. Oversized Dr. Dentons, specially ordered by his dad? Little Philip Purdue raised his head to stare at Rose, his hair orange in the flashlight. He blinked, his lashes orange too. Freckles covered his pale face like spots on a tropical fish. "Muh-uhh?"

Here, Rose hesitated, hugging the blankets as tightly as the Who. Philip's eyes didn't shine: a pure pupilless orange. Locked in his stare, Rose let Bobbie Ann take hold of one blanket. Aiming her flashlight, she managed a sloppy left-handed throw. The blanket landed beside Philip in a heap. As Bobbie Ann stepped toward him, he wriggled under it by himself, burrowing in, curling up tight. With a last moan, he stuffed a blanket corner into his mouth and began to suck. Rose and Bobbie Ann watched, both breathing through their mouths.

Three diapers, May had told Bobbie Ann. No need to change him, she'd murmured as she left. Ought to, Bobbie Ann thought. Ought to anyhow. But she followed Rose, let Rose kick shut his door behind them, sealing in the smell. Rose shuffled over to her own half-open door and halted, unmistakably waiting. Bobbie Ann shuffled forward too, her light flooding the hall floor. For the first time, Rose stared at Bobbie Ann's bloody hand, then up. A new panicky gleam danced behind her glasses.

"Who you?" Rose asked from one side of her mouth. Suddenly playing dumb.

"Barbara," Bobbie Ann told her, trying it out. Rose hugged her blanket tighter and studied the falling-down poster on her door as if she didn't know what was wrong with it. Or only pretended not to know, so Bobbie Ann would step forward and smooth down the Who, their sheen completely worn away. Through thin paper, Bobbie Ann pressed a rolled bump of tired-out tape, making it stick.

"Where Ro-ger?" Rose asked, still using that self-consciously dumb voice. She stared again at Bobbie Ann's nose, maybe waiting for Bobbie Ann to say Roger Daltry was downstairs in rehab with Keith Moon, that Roger would sleep tight.

"He's in England," Bobbie Ann answered flatly. No trace of baby-sitter softness. "You know."

"Oh." Rose stared at Bobbie Ann's nose. "He 'sleep?" The quaver in her voice sounded genuine.

"I . . . don't know," Bobbie Ann answered, sticking to her course, but uncertainly. "It's different there. You know. A different time zone."

Rose gave a slow nod. Her semicrossed stare inched up so their eyes almost met. The gleam of Bobbie Ann's nose hovered between them. Rose closed her lips at last.

Downstairs, Bobbie Ann clicked off the flashlight. The kitchen was shadowy now, not dark. Her hand was bloody but dry. Bobbie Ann wiped the floor and counter, shelved the Dutch Cleanser high above the sink. She popped out the driest of her contacts, tilted back her head to squeeze drops into both eyes. In the dim living room, she slid *What to Do* onto its shelf, knelt on the floor, gathered the Who and the incident reports into a single pile. Her eyeballs burned. Her throat and hand burned too, less painfully. Her arms were only lightly marked. She had long since passed the threshold of being sleepy. She was so tired now she didn't feel tired at all. Sitting on the couch, half-blind, she folded socks. As she heard the kitchen door rattle, she let her shoulders slump.

She spent the last minutes of her shift standing in the doorway of the downstairs bathroom watching May Mooney strip Philip Purdue. Hot water exploded into the porcelain tub. With only one contact lens in, everything looked half-flattened. "Muh-muh." Philip strained his whole body toward the water. He squirmed as May peeled off the wet sweaty pajamas, expertly untaping the top diaper. Her arms jiggled, heavy but strong. No, Bobbie Ann thought. No, I couldn't do that. Philip lunged for the tub—scrambled in, splashing May's sweatpants.

"Whoa, hon." May took firm hold of his waist and tore the last diapers. Two round feces bobbed in the water, clean and natural as miniature logs. May used his plastic underpants like a scoop, letting him settle back, his hair afloat. Liquid fins. His orange-brown eyes misted in the steam; his tropical-fish freckles wavered underwater. May

crammed the diapers into a trash bin, then washed her hands at the sink, humming. Real cheer, false? The distinction seemed silly. Philip was humming along, tunelessly. His breath made minute ripples in water, his natural element.

"So." May Mooney glanced at Bobbie Ann, her green eyes deepened by the overbright blue-green of her morning sweatshirt. Eyes she must have wished more people would notice. "You gonna come back sometime, hon?"

"Don't think so." Bobbie Ann swallowed, slipping her bitten hand into her pocket. Her sleeves were rolled down. Day care, she told herself. She'd ask Helping Hands for an ordinary day care job, something she could stand to do while the divorce came through. Something to keep her from moving back to Mama's. "I mean, I know I won't. Come back."

May answered with her first genuine smile, showing China-doll teeth. Her eyes and tiny gold cross glinted. Her initial impression of Bobbie Ann confirmed. Bobbie Ann nodded, letting her think whatever she wanted.

"Oh yeah." Bobbie Ann turned to the softly lit living room. Behind the couch, papers rustled. "The power's off," she told May, realizing as she spoke that it wasn't, anymore.

"Ba-ba?" Rose stood up behind the couch and shuffled into view, still in her nightgown. She pressed the Who photos to her chest, the red construction paper heart on bottom. "Ba-bra?"

It might have sounded like a nonsense word, to May. Rose shuffled closer, her jagged hair sticking up on only one side, her glasses gone, her nose marked by their purplish dents. Without lenses magnifying them, her black eyes no longer blurred. Crow's feet stood out around her squint. Definitely older than Bobbie Ann: a teenager in the 60s, at the height of the Who. She cocked her head.

"It's the temp girl, Rose." May Mooney already sounded tired of explaining things.

"Uh-huh." Rose shifted to her slower dumber voice. She squinted from May to Bobbie Ann's pocketed hand, leaning close, no trace of toothpaste left. Sour grown-up morning breath. Behind them, Philip sloshed. A moan, this time, of pleasure?

"Your time sheet's in the kitchen, hon." May rotated herself toward the tub, rolling her sweatshirt sleeves further up, her bruise a pinker purple.

"You com-ing back?" Rose gave Bobbie Ann a lopsided smile. Grateful, maybe, that she'd hidden the bite. Or did Rose even remember?

"Sure I am," Bobbie Ann heard herself say, avoiding Rose's eager cross-eyed gaze. And she turned away, accidentally catching the house-mother's eye. May Mooney winked. Flushing, Bobbie Ann felt Rose notice the wink.

"You come next week-end?" Rose shuffled close behind her, suspicious now.

"Gotta go." Bobbie Ann slipped into the kitchen doorway. Leftover grit scraped linoleum. "Hey." She lifted her time sheet off the counter. "You checked that dough yet? See if it rose?"

She edged toward the back door and Rose shifted the Who to one hand, then reached for the covered bowl, bending close to see without her glasses. Bobbie Ann unhooked her raincoat from the door, its plastic dry. The knob turned.

"See you." She ducked out into the dawn light before Rose could look up. Sea legs. Wobbling, she made her way down the gravel drive to her VW bug, parked askew and plastered with leaves. The air tasted like cool wet leaves. As she cleared them off her curved front window, she wondered if she could drive with only one contact lens. Inside the glove compartment were glasses she hadn't worn in years, not wanting Carson to see. She reached for the car door, but a distant tap on glass made her glance over her shoulder. Rose's face pressed the kitchen windowpane, her nose flattened, her sleepy full-lipped smile lifting both sides of her mouth. Bobbie Ann wiped wet leaf scraps off her hands. Sighing, she shuffled back up the gravel slope.

The uncovered bread dough had swollen. Bobbie Ann's stomach stirred at its sweet yeasty smell. Its flesh-colored curve nearly overflowed the bowl. Through the walls, the bathtub was draining. Bobbie Ann held on to the kitchen's wood doorframe.

"Listen," she told Rose, making her voice firm. Rose stood barefoot by the sink, pressing the Who to one slack breast. "Good-bye."

Rose blinked. "You . . .," her chapped lips quavered. Her voice held its hard challenging Yankee edge. "You not?" She squinted, the creases around her eyes deepening. "You *not* com-ing back?" Behind Bobbie Ann, Carolina morning air drifted in, temporarily clear, rain-washed. Trees dripped. Bobbie Ann hesitated. Was she about to hurt

Rose just to make herself feel honest? Would Rose even remember her a day from now? Trees kept dripping. Rose kept staring at Bobbie Ann's nose. Her black eyes shone, all pupil. Nodding slowly and drawing breath to speak, Bobbie Ann wondered how much, without glasses, Rose could see.

Gone

Nothing's changed, Kyla thought for one moment at 6 AM as she and LaDonna fed the puppies together. Elbows brushing, they bent over the steel bowls. Their bare feet stood side by side. Then they sat cross-legged in the grass behind the doghouse.

"We're safe out here," Kyla said, though she did not believe it. Puppies chewed the dry food. "God, Mama was mad at us last night."

Mama had actually yelled only at LaDonna, caught making out with Randy Fowler deep in the downstairs couch.

"Remember how mad Mama used to get 'bout our rabbits' feet?" Kyla looked sideways at LaDonna. Leaning back on one arm, LaDonna sat bare-legged in her long yellow T-shirt. She'd wandered

around the house in it all summer. "Remember we wore them taking baths and all even after Mama said they smelled?"

Genuine dyed rabbits' feet: red and yellow, their official favorite colors. Bought at Myrtle Beach and worn on chains all summer, all year.

"I still got mine," said Kyla. "Red. You got yours, LaDonna?"

LaDonna shrugged. "How would I know? What made you think 'bout those smelly old things?"

Old. This word offended Kyla. She was nearly thirteen, but the rabbit-foot year still seemed particularly vivid: red and yellow bicycles, pup-chasing contests, and every night a hushed conference under one tentlike sheet.

"I just asked, that's all. I don't know why." Kyla narrowed her eyes.

"Well I got other things on my mind today." LaDonna was violently scratching a mosquito bite on her bare thigh. She never woke up early anymore, but this morning Mama, washing sheets, forbade her to 'sloth around in bed.'

LaDonna yawned. "I mean, Kyle, mornings like this I wish I could've flown away to Georgia with Daddy. Shit, the whole summer wouldn't be going half as bad if I had my license." LaDonna was fifteen and had just flunked Driver Education. "This way we've wound up stuck."

"Yeah. Plain stuck," Kyla said.

With Daddy away working in Georgia all summer, Mama ventured only a weekly trip to the Winn Dixie supermarket. So they were locked up together. A dangerous situation, Daddy had decided, three females all alone way out in the country; and so, partly to keep the puppies from chasing cars, Daddy strung around their yard an electrified security fence that he said would—Kyla smiled at this foolish word—keep his girls "safe."

LaDonna gazed off across the yard with slaty convict eyes. "I'm going crazy. I got a funny feeling when I woke up today. Like something's finally gonna blow up around here."

So LaDonna felt it too: Kyla marked this moment. A year ago she would have leaned close and whispered that she too had awakened scared. Instead, she chewed a warm-juiced blade of grass and said only, "Guess we're all three going crazy. At least *I* got the pups. And my garden. It's quiet out there."

"Yeah . . ." LaDonna toyed with a long dandelion stem, her half-smile smeared by slept-in lip gloss.

Sighing, Kyla turned away to watch the fat puppies lick the bottoms of their bowls, tongues loud and wet.

It had been a summer of jarring noise: fence-shocked pups yelping, Mama and LaDonna and Kyla all shouting, the gospel station radio, the phone ringing all day because LaDonna was steady-dating Randy Fowler and every afternoon he called and every night he pulled up in his father's VW van and blew the horn till she came running.

All summer Kyla had felt restless. She thought her heart was to blame: pumping with the new oils of her skin, the slight beginnings of her breasts. No friends, no healthy interests, Mama said—only biology class, the garden, and those poor puppies, the orphaned sons of Daddy's huge-pawed Labrador retriever, Foots. Foots had chased cars and chased cars till finally, in full sight of Kyla, he got knocked soaring into a red-clay roadside ditch. Now his black pups bounded across the acre-wide yard in the morning sun—safe, safe, safe, thought Kyla.

At breakfast they were all on edge. On *the* edge, Kyla felt. Mama fried an egg, cracking it one-handed with the brisk wrist flip of a woman who could hold three eggs between her fingers and crack them in quick succession. Mama had gone to Bob Jones Baptist University at age seventeen, and never in all the years since had she let Daddy buy a TV. "Something the matter with you, Kyla?" She set down the plate. Yes, Kyla thought. "No Mama," she said.

"You look so sad and nervous, you make *me* nervous."

"I'm not sad."

"You need yolk. You get that egg eaten by the time I come back." Mama tapped the plate and went upstairs to ceremoniously down her morning diet tablet. LaDonna lit a cigarette, pushed at her chopped-looking hair, and, with the same impatient motions, began making herself a mayonnaise sandwich. In the window sunlight, a purplish mark showed on her throat.

"Something happen on your neck?" Kyla asked, wanting LaDonna mad at her instead of at nothing.

"Mind your own business. I don't got to take that from *you*."

LaDonna sat down, lowered her head self-consciously, crossed her legs, and began jiggling her right foot.

Kyla looked at the fine hairs on her own bare legs, and then at LaDonna's legs. A razor nick below LaDonna's knee was blotted with a speck of toilet paper.

"I can't eat this," Kyla said. The fried egg stared up at her from the plate, cold. "I feel sick all of a sudden. I just can't."

"Then don't," said LaDonna, and as Mama's step sounded outside the door, she crushed the cigarette into the yolk.

"What d'you think you're doing?" Mama, always a little glassy-eyed since beginning her diet, stood in the doorway, gathering breath. Kyla braced herself, feeling LaDonna beside her answer in exhale, the last lungful of smoke blown in Mama's direction.

"I couldn't eat it, Mama," Kyla said weakly, knowing it was too late, that a fight was inevitable, both sides having silently squared off. They would take their time, though, for summer days were long. LaDonna let the cigarette stand in the blackened yolk and took a bite of sandwich, Mama watching, her dieter's eyes narrowed.

Slowly, with one foot, LaDonna pushed her chair back from the table and posed, one leg outstretched, one hand smoothing her T-shirt while she gazed from Mama to Kyla as if, having exhibited her body as evidence, she could now do what she pleased. Cold-eyed, she took another bite of sandwich. Kyla edged off her chair and began backing toward the kitchen door.

"Mayonnaise is 100 percent oil," Mama began, lifting chilled lemon jello from the refrigerator. "An' about a hundred calories every tablespoonful, an' the way you eat potato chips, you better watch your oil or your skin's gonna break out like that Jeff Finley's you used to run with."

At this, LaDonna scooped a glob of mayonnaise from the jar and shoved the whole spoonful into her mouth. "I eat what I want."

"I can't stand it," Kyla announced, surprising herself. "I just can't."

"Something *is* wrong with you," Mama said. "Looks like you've got some heat rash. You feel all prickly?" She set down the shaky jello.

"Nothing's wrong with me!" Hand already on the knob, Kyla swung out, letting the screen door slam behind her. She took a jump

from the stoop and pounded across the lawn, puppies yipping at her feet.

"Kyla Lee! Kyla Lee!" Mama called, and from the kitchen LaDonna said something that made Mama turn and answer sharply.

Kyla ran straight down the long yard to her square patch of garden, Mama's and LaDonna's shouts drifting after her across the grass, sounding almost peaceful. With a jump, Kyla cleared the knee-high chicken-wire fence and landed on her hands and knees in the dirt, panting. As her heart slowed, she looked around at row after row of tomatoes, potatoes, cabbage.

She sat back and wondered, Did LaDonna speak to distract Mama? They used to protect each other like that, but LaDonna had abandoned their old ways. After parking with Randy Fowler on their driveway twenty-seven minutes last night, and then sneaking in at 1 AM, LaDonna had immediately faked sleep and pretended not to hear Kyla's whisper. Always LaDonna locked the bathroom and mumbled about privacy, which seemed to Kyla a hateful word.

Changes in the body develop with the onset of puberty. Often lately, trying to explain LaDonna's behavior, Kyla had studied this passage in the eighth-grade biology book. *At around thirteen, the book said, a girl's ovaries, located deep in the female body, begin to produce eggs. The release of a ripe egg is known as ovulation.*

The luckier fertilized eggs were destined to grow in a *pear-shaped, muscular pouch known as the womb (woom)*. Kyla liked that: *pear-shaped*.

She liked the solid vegetable shapes of her garden, the clean smell of damp dirt and quiet juicy vines. And the smell of her own hair, warmed by the sun. Bending now, she studied one dusty cabbage-head. Its squat folded roundness reminded her of the way she and LaDonna used to sit when they held huddled conferences: cross-legged, facing each other, leaning in, knees touching. Back then, they made one whole.

They all had quarreled again at supper. Now Kyla sat on her bed, rocked slightly, and watched LaDonna rush about before the mirror. Spiky hair and mascara, smacking lip gloss, cut-off shorts packed

thigh-tight, a black T-shirt ripped on purpose on one shoulder, no bra. All for Randy. At no other time did LaDonna seem to Kyla foolish.

"Where in hell's my mousse stuff?" LaDonna's eyes sparkled, over-bright. "What time is it?"

Kyla rose on her knees, the mattress squeaking, and checked her own reflection.

"L'Donna," she said, just to hear her own voice.

Outside, as if deliberately interrupting, Randy's horn howled. Ape-like, Kyla always thought, remembering glimpses of Randy in school halls, a bully on their swaying bus, remembering how hairy he was even though he shaved his head. Black hair grew thick and aggressive across his forearms.

"Shit!" LaDonna ducked under the bed and groped for her sandals.

"Hey," Kyla leaned forward and gripped LaDonna's shoulder. "LaDonna, don't go. Tell him you can't tonight—please tell him."

"What?" She shook herself loose.

"Tell him you can't come. Stay here. I feel like something's gonna happen tonight." Her heart pumped with warning.

"Well, you might just be right about that." LaDonna gave her crooked half-smile, and slipped out the room door, swinging the sandals by her fingertips.

"What d'ya mean?" Kyla called from the doorway as LaDonna started down the stairs.

"Nothin' you'd understand . . ." Her voice trailed off, and Kyla heard her bare feet light and quick across the front hall. The door slammed.

Mama ironed that evening with gospel radio on, and lonely radio voices chased Kyla from the porch down along the dark yard to her garden. Thoughts of LaDonna somewhere out in this darkness with Randy Fowler made Kyla feel half-gone.

Sitting among the vegetables, she pressed two fingers to the vein in her throat and counted the beats, estimated fifteen seconds and then multiplied by four. My heart is beating, she told herself. I have lived twelve years and six months. My pulse is seventy-two.

In bed that night, Kyla could not sleep. She had glimpsed something in the kitchen as she came back late from the yard—Mama with all the lights off, standing against the white-lit open refrigerator door, hunched over a jar of cold chicken salad, pushing fingerfuls into her mouth. Kyla had stolen upstairs, feeling she'd seen a stranger in the house. She pulled on a thin nightgown over her undershirt, lay taking her pulse a second and then a third time. All her blood, she reasoned, had pumped down to the veins below her stomach, where dull pains had begun to gather so that her lower body grew heavy and sleepy while the upper half lay awake, beating.

Still counting, Kyla at last slept fitfully for half an hour, and sometime past midnight awoke in a sweat and found blood on the sheets.

My heart, she thought the first instant, and then right away knew this was something much different. For a long while, she sat there in her stained panties and sheets. She didn't hear LaDonna coming in until bare feet sounded in the hall. Intending to jump for the closet, Kyla flung back her covers and started up as the door opened.

"Go away!"

LaDonna flipped on the bedroom light. She saw the blood on the open sheets, saw Kyla's face, drew in her breath.

"Don't be scared," she said, quiet and direct, the way she used to give orders.

She herself looked shaken: lip gloss all rubbed off, clothes loose as if hastily thrown on, eyes smudged. Blinking in the light, she got a pair of clean panties from the dresser, then took Kyla's hand and led her across the hall to the darkened bathroom. LaDonna smelled of sweat and of something foreign. Her hair was mussed, and Kyla wondered if it was Randy Fowler she smelled as LaDonna bent close, shut the door.

The bathroom was silent, tiles lit by one bulb. LaDonna turned the faucet slowly, the only sound in the house. She pulled off Kyla's nightgown, telling her again not to be afraid, and gave her the clean panties, an aspirin tablet and a sanitary pad from somewhere beneath the medicine cabinet. Then she seated Kyla on the hamper in her underwear. When the sink had half-filled, LaDonna dunked the nightgown and held it under cold running water.

"You know what this is, don't you?"

Kyla could barely speak. She didn't dare say "female troubles," for that was something private that Mama whispered about on the phone with her church friends.

"What?"

"You really don't know *anything*?" LaDonna shook her head, sloshing the nightgown. "That's what comes from no TV. Shit, you been in an awful fog. No wonder you look like a nervous wreck."

Kyla strained forward on the hamper, her neck muscles tight.

"Is it ovulation?" she asked in a small, embarrassed voice.

For the first time, to Kyla's relief, LaDonna in profile cracked a thin smile. "Well, yeah. Sure, I guess. But listen, don't call it that." LaDonna turned around slowly, hands dripping, and looked at her sister. "Well." She had not really looked at Kyla in a long while—lately only in an annoyed way, as if at a pesky child. Now she studied her, head tilted.

"Well," LaDonna repeated, and Kyla held her breath. "Lemme get a cigarette."

As she turned, Kyla sprang from the hamper to stop her.

"Jesus Christ, Kyla Lee," LaDonna whispered loudly from the doorway. "Just sit down an' let me think out what I'm gonna say."

She disappeared into the dark hall, letting the door swing shut. Kyla hugged herself and rocked back and forth on the hamper, her heart pounding more than ever. At last LaDonna came in, closed the door behind her, leaned against the white sink, and propped one foot on the edge of the hamper next to Kyla. She bit her lower lip, just like she used to do when she'd decided to let Kyla in on some secret. But her face was older now, the expression different, more cautious.

She lighted a cigarette, threw the match far over her shoulder into the tub, took a deep draw, and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

"Kyla," she said, "You're damn lucky to hear this first from me. Next year in health class, the gym coach will explain it all in this real loud voice like she's yelling from way across the basketball court."

LaDonna paused again and blew a perfect smoke ring. Her face still seemed drained, but she met Kyla's eyes and spoke with something like her old assurance.

"Okay. Listen, Kyle, I haven't really been noticing, not till just now when I saw the blood. But I should have seen this coming.

Mama didn't tell *me* much, an' if I didn't read those magazines I never would've figured it out. You saw all that ovulation shit in the biology book. Well, that's what this is, all right. You know you've got eggs inside you, and if you make love with some boy and you're not on the pill, you might get pregnant. See, when you start bleeding, it just means everything inside you's all set. I mean it's really pretty simple."

"Yes," Kyla said, though it sounded amazing.

"Well, shit. You got anything you want to ask?" LaDonna threw her cigarette into the toilet and sat down next to Kyla on the hamper, much too small now for both of them. Their faces close in the bathroom light, Kyla stared at LaDonna. She saw the faint rashlike pink around her lips and the usual purplish mark on her throat, saw LaDonna's eyes, soft and glittering. Kyla had glimpsed this expression before by the hall light when LaDonna came in late.

Kyla said, "You and Randy have made love, haven't you?"

LaDonna nodded. "Yeah," she said, and then paused as if listening to the echo of her own voice. "Yeah, we have. There—I've said it. See, I haven't told anyone. I mean it only just happened, just in this past week. I'll tell you, Kyla, it's been a long fight, all summer." She rested one hand on her knee and studied her fingers.

"Listen," LaDonna said. "Let's sit on the floor."

Kyla understood, and in the narrow bathroom, both their legs almost too long now to squeeze between the cabinet and bathtub, they sat Indian style on the tile floor, facing each other, knees touching and backs curved.

"I'm gonna tell you what it's like," LaDonna said. "It's not like what Mama will say."

She explained in a hushed matter-of-fact voice, facing Kyla, her crossed legs wide apart. Kyla stared down at LaDonna's legs as the explanation went on, amazed by what LaDonna had done and by her looking now no different. Kyla tried to imagine Randy Fowler's hard hairy legs pressed against that skin, and she forgot to keep control of her face. Her eyes widened.

"I never could imagine it either," said LaDonna, "till me and Randy started up. I mean, I was scared. But it just got *different* after a while. I kind of stopped wanting to fight."

Kyla shifted her weight, feeling she couldn't make any reply without somehow intruding. So she avoided LaDonna's eyes. They sat

quietly awhile, Kyla chilled in her underwear on the tile floor but not wanting to move. The house lay silent all around them. Through the kitchen vent below, they could hear the refrigerator door open.

"You don't like Randy, do you," LaDonna whispered suddenly.

Kyla was cautious. "Well, *you* used to think he was pretty much an asshole when he beat up that guy on the bus."

LaDonna grinned. "Well, I think different now."

"You sure do."

"Everybody's scared of him, Kyle. Except me." Kyla recognized LaDonna's look of satisfaction as an expression she wore when alone and quickly cut off if anybody came near. Less abrupt now, LaDonna simply pressed her lips together as if she had decided to say nothing more. Neither of them spoke until LaDonna whispered, "You feel okay? That aspirin working?"

"Well, I just feel sort of funny," Kyla said. "I don't know."

All summer she had wanted to tell LaDonna the details of her heart and stomach troubles. But now, as they finally sat face to face, close together, Kyla didn't want to talk about it at all, with anyone. Private, she thought, though she still hated the cold sound of that word. And she remembered the softened voice LaDonna sometimes used for the word *cramps*. Not stomach cramps, as Kyla had thought at the time, but this other kind—this feeling located, the biology book had told her, *deep in the female body*.

Gently, not speaking, Kyla moved her knees away from LaDonna's and began to stand up, her legs stiff and one foot asleep.

"L'Donna," she said, balanced with the good leg, her numb foot propped on the hamper. "At breakfast today when I was running off down the yard, did you . . . you know. Did you say something to Mama so she'd leave me alone?"

LaDonna straightened her own legs, then hugged one knee to her chin. "Sure," she said. "I figured one of us might as well get away."

Kyla liked the "us." She sank back onto the hamper, moving herself with care.

"Listen, if you're tired or anything," she said, "you can go on to bed. I mean I think I'm just gonna sit here and wait for the aspirin to work."

"Yeah. That's what I always do. Just lock myself in the bathroom and wait." LaDonna stood up stiffly too, smoothing her black T-shirt in an absent way, as if she were already lying in bed, staring at the

ceiling. But as she opened the door behind her, she said, "You tell me tomorrow morning if you still got cramps," and she gave Kyla's *cramps* the same soft emphasis she used for her own. Then she turned—"Yell if you want anything"—and slipped out of the bathroom, shutting the door quietly. Just a click, a wood-soft thump, and her bare footsteps crossed the hall.

The familiar closed bathroom door. Kyla looked up at it, this time from inside. LaDonna, she knew, had hidden here, bewildered, at age thirteen. "Mama never told me much," she had said. LaDonna must have been scared. Alone, hunched in panic on this same hamper as her little sister banged on the door, resenting the lock.

Now, Kyla shifted her weight uncomfortably. She looked down at herself, at the thin girl's undershirt Mama had bought years before and the clean panties LaDonna had just fetched. Under the cotton, barely noticeable, her breasts were small and soft, her skinny stomach unimpressive but really, she knew, hiding a pear-shaped pouch. Kyla's face felt hot. Her body shapes had taken on a new importance, like LaDonna's legs.

Years before, during baths, she and LaDonna used to compare bodies: both wet and boyish, climbing from the tub together. LaDonna would rub her hair furiously with her yellow towel; Kyla would stroke her own chest and stomach with her red one. Then, half-dry, they would dart naked across the hall.

In Kyla's mind now they seemed two ghostly girls, far away from the LaDonna lying in bed across that same hall and from Kyla herself, crouched on the bathroom hamper in her underwear. Outside the open bathroom window, down in the yard below, the pups weren't making a sound. Kyla could picture them, asleep in one soft heap.

Cupping both her elbows in her hands, she tried thinking far back to this morning, when for the first time in so long, she and LaDonna had wakened together. Nothing's changed, she remembered herself thinking then, and she smiled at those words. Till near dawn, she rocked the hamper with her cramps and gripped her knobby elbows and tried without success to think of anything around or inside her that was not now changed: growing or grown or gone.

Losing Weight

In happy November she weighed one hundred and forty pounds, had a new, noticeably softened, surprised-looking face, a swelling white curve of stomach, and big upward-tilting breasts that she paraded around the office, her back straight, her newly rounded-out thighs rubbing together as she moved. It was November. The Phoenix sky made a huge solid swoop of blue. The only thing that looked *real* in a city designed by Frederick's of Hollywood, Andrew once said. He used to make the two of them bulging salami and mayo and cream cheese submarine sandwiches, thick Black Forest chocolate cakes, heaping plates of buttered spaghetti and chunky sausage sauce. Their lips would gleam.

They'd eat nothing all day, meet for wine before work, after work

race to her cluttered apartment, devour the meals, and then fall into bed with that same abandon, Dorothy almost literally breathless the whole time, struggling like a swimmer to keep aware, to enjoy every second. Because she knew from the start how long this would last, liked knowing it.

“Hey you,” she’d said to him at first.

He had been standing halfway across the white and beige maze expanse of office that night, and even from a distance he didn’t look at all like Arizona. He was pale, exactly as pale as his white shirt, the only pale man in the whole damn building. He looked to her something like Edgar Allen Poe: Poe’s eyes and forehead, but long shaggy hair and an incongruous body, tough and stocky and big-shouldered, the body of a hood or a lightweight boxer. At work he never spoke. This was back when she was “Dottie”: small and buxom, tightly packed, straining against hated fat, chatty in flashes, fast-moving, efficient, somewhat hard-looking. Andrew was the first man she ever took seriously, the first person really, aside from her mother. And her mother had been dead for five years. Dorothy had since become “Dottie,” a name she truly hated. She kept the long tan office people at a definite distance, made no close friends off duty. Her three-inch heels clicked past like heavy Ping-Pong balls; her hair and eyes were shiny snapping black, her blouses too tight and too bright and worn with an air of defiance that was not at all flirtatious. She slouched slightly no matter how fast she moved and dressed in overbright colors, electric green or red orange. She thought of her breasts then as personal weapons. Go on and look, she seemed to be saying. See if I care.

He was the first man she took seriously. They both worked the four-to-eleven shift, typing test results and sorting computer chips in a sealed glass building deep in downtown Phoenix. That first night she found him at the coffee machine, tragically Poe-eyed, his hands too shaky to hold the Styrofoam cup because, he told her—“Hey you, anything wrong?” she’d asked loudly in her Dottie voice—because on his way to work he’d glanced out of the bus and into a car below and had seen a woman’s face peering out the back window, her eyes enormous and, he thought, desperate, and then in a flash a man’s hand

had reached up and pulled her down, and then the lights had changed and the car disappeared and now he didn't know if he should call the police or what, since he couldn't be sure *what* he'd really seen since he was, to tell the truth, a little drunk.

"That's funny, so am I," Dottie said. "Just can't get through this job any other way."

It was late October 1979. They sat together on Dorothy's mother's overstuffed blue sofa, surrounded by the dark scrolly walnut tables and footstools that seemed out of place in Dorothy's small stucco tan-carpeted Arizona apartment, designed for lightweight aluminum furniture and lots of sun. The window was wall-sized, cut around the enormous sky that had opened up over Dorothy in the long U-Haul drive west. Trees had disappeared.

"So you're from Ohio?" he said.

Her old oversized furniture was making them both feel so small. They wound up moving close on the couch and talking about back east. The rain, the green, the heavy humid air. Dorothy thought that no man had ever stared so frankly at her breasts.

He used to work as a store detective at Zayre's in Newark, he told her three hours later, in bed. His voice, New Jersey hard, sounded that night like he was putting on a Jersey accent.

"All day I stood behind this two-way mirror thing," he said. "And I'd watch *women*, you know, stare them up and down any way I wanted. Just stare at legs and cleavage behind that mirror."

"Did you catch people?" she asked. She was lying against his chest.

"Sometimes."

"What'd you say? I mean when you caught someone?"

"Well I'd step out—"

"With a card or something?"

"Yeah. Yeah, and I'd flash my detective card thing and I'd say . . . Uh . . . Yeah. I'd say, Excuse me, Zayres Security, Come with me please; no—not even *please*, just Come with me."

And somehow she had still been a virgin at age twenty-two. In 1977. Incredible, but then her eighth-grade breasts had been incredible too, taking everyone aback. If they'd voted, she'd have been chosen Girl Least Likely to Be a Virgin. Woman, her whole bewildering

body seemed to say. Her locker door brushed against her breasts whenever she opened it. Boy's arms just barely touched her in the hallways. Excuse me, sorry.

Please no, she told them on dates.

They thought she had an older man somewhere. It was eighth grade and she was the girl whose father had died. Car crash, she'd learned to say, because it was short. They felt awed—thought she was tough, somehow much older than they were.

Then, again incredibly, in her senior year, in this small Ohio town, incredibly her mother had cancer. For two years she was the girl whose mother was dying.

All through high school Dorothy had lived alone with Mother, and every evening Mother lay on the overstuffed sofa sipping red wine in the gentle blue-white TV light. She let Dorothy sip wine too. Both their lips would stain a dark cracked purple by the time they kissed good-night.

Dorothy read a lot then, modern novels full of neurotic women. Her mother lay unconscious on the couch downstairs while Dorothy took notes till 2 AM, writing down the things she, Dorothy, must never do.

If you feel yourself craving something/someone, she wrote at fourteen, *then FAST.*

The main thing, she always thought, was not to let what happened to Mama happen to her. For Daddy's presence—his temper, his violent headaches, his disappearances—all had given her mother a definite purpose, that of keeping the family together in spite of him. Without him, Mother had lost her old drive. That Mother, Dorothy thought, was gone for good.

All through high school, Dorothy made their suppers, did the shopping, woke Mother up every morning, helped Mother prepare for her Bible study group. They were both quiet, both shared a nearly wordless alliance when Daddy was alive. Mother would give Dorothy a silent significant look as a door slammed behind her; the two of them would dry dishes together, rubbing plates tenderly, saying with their quiet, Isn't it better this way?

Then Daddy really was gone, and they had little to say to each other, still. What to have for supper, what was happening at the church.

Usually Dorothy slipped upstairs as soon as Mother's soft chin be-

gan to slacken, Mother's eyes drifting shut. But upstairs, lying in bed, Dorothy could feel Mother downstairs on the couch, then later across town in the hospital, could feel it in her stomach when Mother wasn't there anymore.

Dorothy was twenty-two. She talked herself through the months before and after the death like she was talking herself off a ledge. One step, one step.

At first the chemotherapy in Cleveland was working—Mother losing her hair, nauseated for hours afterward—then not. Mother had her stiff blond wig, and chemotherapy wasn't mentioned anymore; it was something they'd tried long ago. The hospital became home to both of them in the last months. When it was over, Dorothy called her Uncle Sid and told him she was staying with her Grandma, then called Grandma—who was, it turned out, only weeks from dying herself—and told her she'd gone to Sid. Then she took a motel room outside of town and stayed there a month, living off the beginnings of Mother's life insurance.

She read. Looking back two years later, the main thing she felt about this time was alarm over how unconscious she'd been. No plans, no ideas. *Is There Life after Death? Beyond Life's Sunset. Essays on the Spirit World.* She read avidly, not believing, not disbelieving. She ate little but her body remained heavy. She hated its heaviness. In early visits to the hospital, Mother's body always seemed to have undergone a shocking amount of change. Smaller and smaller.

And sometimes, Dorothy told Andrew in November, one of the few things she told him about her past, sometimes as she sat in the L & K restaurant across from the motel sipping coffee and watching the truck drivers, she'd feel that she herself had been *added to* in some way, that she was carrying around what she secretly thought of as a spirit, an aura, something coming from the skin.

Even months later, she said, when she had taken a job, when she was sitting in a beery restaurant booth full of people, even then she'd still feel it. Something more than just the sorrow, something glowing off her skin like a blue gas flame, setting her apart.

"I believe in it," Andrew told her. He was slightly drunk. "I never saw how anyone could, you know, *not* think there were spirits like that."

As they lay there, Dorothy halfway believed in it again herself.

But no. She thought it through plainly the next afternoon in the

clear fluorescent blank of work. No, the spirit feeling itself simply had not lasted. It was something she wanted to believe but couldn't. Though she couldn't believe the other either, she thought just as plainly—that things completely disappear. No. No to both.

It was important to her then, in November, to keep a grip on the clear way of thinking that she'd worked out for herself, by herself, since Mother's death. At the dentist's, she'd always been determined to remain aware of what was happening to her, and even as she breathed the gas she struggled to think: Now he's got the needle, now he's inserting the needle cotton too some metal sound a needle? No it's over, now it's over.

In the motel, in 1977, on Route 101 just outside of Clague, Ohio, she'd lost her virginity to a truck driver, a small-boned smooth-skinned red-haired man on his way to Idaho. He bought her a bag of peanuts from the vending machine down the hall, bit her ear as they began to make love because, he told her later, he'd read somewhere that this would distract a virgin, make it less painful. She liked him. She was proud of herself as she watched his truck pull away, proud that she'd separated things so neatly. Sex first, then love—how could anyone handle both at once?

And with Andrew, she decided from the first, it would be sex, pure sex. It would have to be. Andrew was twenty-one that fall, younger than Dorothy by three years. He'd lived alone since he was seventeen. When he talked at all on the job it was in tense teenage bursts. He hated the name "Andy" as much as she hated "Dottie," but used it too, in the same way, letting the men at the office dismiss him with it, letting the women enjoy their maternal crushes on him. He kept to himself. He and Dorothy would watch each other sometimes across the wide room, not meeting eyes. Dorothy often thought about how young he seemed, always, even from a distance. Too young, really.

And she knew what was going to happen, liked knowing, liked it that he told her the very first week about the older woman in high school, the one in Newark, in Philadelphia, in Kentucky, how he'd been equally in love with each of them, too much in love, every time. For when he was having these affairs—and he was always having affairs, intense, monogamous three- to six-month-long affairs—he could do or think of nothing else, nothing important. It was very feminine in a way, did she know what he meant?

"Sure," she answered.

"Sure," he repeated, looking at her, intrigued and maybe a little disappointed by how calmly she'd taken it. He couldn't figure her out, she liked to think. And she liked to let him do the talking. Not so much to keep up a distance but because that fall she was usually happy when they were together, creature-comfort happy, and there was no point, she told herself, in messing that up with talk. They ate. They made love.

"Can't . . . ," she told him in November, her mouth full of spaghetti or cake or sausage. "Can't hold all this."

Before, one day a week, she'd cleaned out her system with cranberry juice, apple juice, lettuce, and vinegar. She would lose one and a half pounds per day exactly. It was exhilarating, fun even. Now fun was wolfing down a double helping of Cookies 'n' Cream: whole cakey-thick oreo cookies swirled into vanilla ice cream. Their own discovery, their favorite dessert.

"When I first saw you," Andrew told her one night after a huge meal, "You looked like you were sucking in your whole body the way some people suck in their stomachs."

It was late November, and she had gained ten pounds. She'd begun walking with slower, looser movements. It was a relief to be so round, fat really, and not to worry about it or flaunt it or particularly hate it. Or even think about it, about anything much at all that fall, early winter. The Phoenix weather was glorious—sun all day in an absolutely cloudless blue sky, cool air, light breezes. She began walking to work. She stopped wearing high heels, stopped clipping her black hair, let it grow long so it brushed her face and eyelashes, always fringing her sight.

What she loved most that November was watching Andrew cook. She'd let her hair fall over one eye and sit cross-legged and silent on the cool-tiled kitchen floor in her underwear, watching him crack eggs with an elaborate one-handed wrist flip. He spattered sauce as he stirred, threw out wide green or orange arcs of oregano or paprika. He beat cake batters with exaggerated force, the bowl grasped between his knees, his shirt off, his thick forearms knotted. He always worked up a sweat when he cooked.

Once, he told Dorothy that he liked to smell his own sweat at the office. "Lets me know I'm still all there," he said.

At work Dorothy began to notice the smell of her own thick hair, the faint oyster trace of last night's contraceptive foam. She noticed

the fruity perfume and avocado sandwiches of the woman next to her.

Sometimes she'd lazily wonder what it would feel like to be pregnant. She'd try to imagine it after a meal, in bed, resting her hand on her tight strained stomach, or at work, pushing out her stomach muscles and holding them like that, forcing her stomach into as round a shape as possible. But it was too hard, hard to imagine at all. She'd let her muscles relax, sneak off her shoes under her desk, rub her feet idly back and forth on the nubby beige carpet.

She and Andrew made love long and slow, sometimes both at night and the next morning, sometimes eating both before and after.

Even the talking they did seemed to Dorothy primarily physical. What she would remember afterward was how warm and cool at the same time the new silky sheets had been, how his voice had slurred and his breath, hers too, had smelled of wine. What had they talked about? Him. The woman in Kentucky he thought he still loved. Stories Dorothy took in sleepily, picking up on the details—strawberry blond hair dyed orange to spite him, the jerk she finally slept with, one day by the river; he said she'd considered suicide more than once, made him weep more than once.

"Ohh," Dorothy would say, drawing out the word. Tasting it. "Mmhmm."

Privately, almost as an exercise, she went over things he said, mimicking in her mind his tone of romantic suffering, his theatrical use of those deep-set dark eyes. She'd think of his general lack of interest in her, in asking about her own past. Not that she'd have told him much. But often she became secretly annoyed with him. Meanwhile, their sex got better and better.

It was Christmas week, a peak period of sex for them, *the* peak as it turned out, that he told her one night about the month he'd spent in the mental ward of a Newark hospital when he was nineteen. In general, she didn't take seriously his occasional references to mental problems. And he didn't bring up such things often. But this, an actual certifiable breakdown, this felt different. Even if it wasn't completely true, which she knew was possible, the idea of shock treatments still fascinated her—much more than she let him know.

"What was it like?" she asked, sleepy-sounding.

He couldn't remember, he said in an unusually flat voice. She was lying against his chest then, feeling his voice vibrate in there, inside

her chest too. He remembered only the helpless sensation of lying down, rubber in his mouth, as they prepared the treatment. A touch of metal on either side of his head. Then the trouble remembering what people looked like, certain faces.

What faces, she wondered, but didn't ask. Are you telling the truth? she wanted to say, for the first time. Really?

Instead she got out of bed and drank a slow glass of water alone in the kitchen.

She didn't call him the next day but thought about him, it, the rubber in his mouth and the touch of metal, the whole idea. It was unimaginable; it made her think of the time when the doctor first talked about removing one of Mother's large soft breasts, and Dorothy had been unable to believe it, up to the day it happened.

She wondered where exactly the electricity was channeled in a shock treatment, how it felt as it happened, even if the feeling couldn't be remembered afterward.

She didn't call Andrew for a week.

It was late January 1980. Things were winding down. The Phoenix weather was still gorgeous, but normal by now. Andrew had begun staying over three, two nights a week instead of five. On New Year's Day, the woman from Kentucky phoned him drunkenly long distance, said she wanted him to fly out and visit, just visit.

"The thing about her," Andrew told Dorothy after a near-silent late-January meal, "The thing is you can never tell when she's serious because *she* never knows. What she feels one day has nothing to do with what she feels the next. I mean it—she changes completely. But she has this way of making each man she's with feel like the only one . . . and he *is*, see, for *her*, that moment."

"Mmm," Dorothy murmured, and she stood to begin clearing the table, embarrassed by his overbright black eyes.

Often around this time she would give brief, deliberately closed-off answers. She watched herself do this, faintly pleased, then, the times she noticed herself being pleased, faintly embarrassed. But she couldn't help admiring her own calm. And she kept inviting him over, at least twice a week, and he kept coming. She wanted to keep up the sex as long as possible.

By mid-February she was definitely losing her appetite. She noted her own gradual loss of weight, sporadic loss of sleep, the general dulling of her lately overcharged senses. At work she did not return to her former quick Dottie style. Instead she still moved slowly, still looked at him across the office.

Though he seemed more foolish to her now, more self-indulgent than ever when he talked, which was seldom. But the sex, when they had it, was still good, better even, sometimes.

"Listen, I mean how do you feel about it?" he asked the night he told her, gently, that he was leaving. He wanted some kind of scene, a tender scene, she could tell, and she wasn't going to give it to him.

She shrugged. He kept staring at her, like the laid-back Phoenix people used to stare in the office as she clicked by so fast.

"But I just can't tell," he said finally in his flattest voice, sulking. "I never could tell what you were feeling, you know?"

She nodded. This gave her a lift, seemed a kind of triumph, almost, as she drove him to the airport the next week. It was mid-April. She wore green sunglasses and a short-sleeved cotton dress, pale yellow, and she drove without talking. He was nervous, she could tell, but she made no effort to figure out what else he might be.

"I bet she changed the locks," Andrew said out loud as the first TO AIRPORT signs flipped by.

"What locks?"

"Our apartment together, the one we still had when I left." He was speaking more to himself than to her.

In the past weeks she'd managed to hear little of his plans. Now, as the car was pulled into the winding maze of parking ramps and terminal signs, she felt curious.

"So you've still got the key?"

"Sure," he said. Then, after she'd backed the car into a slot, "God, I'm starving."

They ordered gin and tonics, chili, taco chips, and guacamole dip at the Cowboy airport bar. Dorothy's stomach had shrunk drastically in the past weeks. She picked at the chips, watched him eat. In the dim reddish-brown leather booth he looked again, like the night she first saw him, as pale as his shirt. His black deep-socketed eyes were shadowed. He'd lost weight too, she noticed for the first time. She watched the bones of his jaw as he chewed. She touched his foot lightly with hers under the table. She wanted to move her foot slowly

up against his leg, move over next to him so she could touch him under his white shirt. When had they last slept together? For a moment she couldn't remember. Certainly she hadn't known as it happened that it was the last time.

"Know what they oughtta have in airport bars?" she asked, her voice too loud.

"What?" He was chewing chips, hunched over his gin and tonic, elbows on the table.

"Little closet rooms where people could go and screw for the last time before a flight. Or businessmen and strange girls, you know?"

"Yeah." He swallowed, just starting to look at her.

"Do you think that'd be a good line? To use on some man—I mean if I went up to some man and said, You know what they oughtta have in airport bars?"

He was looking at her now. She brushed her hair out of her eyes.

"You're not gonna do that are you?" he said. "After my plane goes?"

She shrugged. In the red-lit bar mirror, she caught a glimpse of herself as they stood up to leave. She looked, she thought, unfamiliar. Her hair was full and dark all around her face; her dress seemed baggy, her bare arms surprisingly thin.

Then they were walking down the vast canyon expanse of terminal and talking about back east. How thin his jacket and white cotton shirt might be as he stepped into a Kentucky spring rain. Would the woman meet him at the airport? Dorothy wanted to ask. Instead she found herself saying, "God, I *miss* Ohio, you know? It was so wet there and green—"

And she was standing in a ladies' room booth, covering her face with her hands, overcome by an unexpected wave of longing for drizzly tree-darkened Ohio: the old white frame houses and mud and squirrels and her fourteen-year-old self, lying awake all night reading so she wouldn't make any mistakes, ever, in her life. Had she believed that? Dorothy stood there sniffing and not quite crying. Really? She couldn't remember.

A little girl was banging on the stall door, and outside a far-off loudspeaker voice announced a flight—his?—so Dorothy pushed out and wiped her face on a brown paper towel, disgusted with herself.

Her heels clicked across the bathroom tile in weak echoey imitation of her old walk. She ran down the long orange carpet to his bench,

saw him from a distance looking paler than before, his traveling case clenched between his knees.

"Sorry," she said, out of breath as she sat down beside him. "It's just that I felt so dumb and sentimental all of a sudden. No, I mean—" she shot a glance at the terminal clock, late, less than ten minutes to go, "—I mean back in the bar I just felt so *horny*, watching you."

"Me too." He didn't look up. He took a long breath. "Something about us eating together, I guess. Does it every time."

She half-nodded, not looking at him either. After a moment more, she stood. She had wanted to be the one to stand first. They held hands walking to the gun-detector machine.

"If the apartment was half my rent, even if it is in her name, I'd think they couldn't arrest me for breaking and entering, wouldn't you?" His voice as they approached the line was the same Jersey voice he'd used that first night. An accent he must, she realized, fall into when especially nervous. "See, I can imagine her changing her mind about me in the time it takes to fly out there and changing the apartment locks fast, the whole works. But it's half-mine, still."

He took his place in line and paused, breathless, seeming for once to be embarrassed by his own talk. When he spoke again, it was quietly, slowing down, leaning close to her. He was next.

"See," he said, "Even if she does feel nothing for me anymore, I feel like she's still part mine, don't you think?"

At that moment, right in front of the gun-detector belt, this seemed an extremely complicated question, and Dorothy felt she was way back at the office coffee machine hearing the equally unanswerable story of the woman in the car. Andrew's face looked as strange as the airport faces all around him, his inky madman eyes a wholly unknown quantity.

"Hey you, let's go have a drink," Dorothy said, almost shouted. For they were announcing his flight, now boarding.

She turns when he turns, starts off down the terminal moving fast, as if she too is hurrying to catch a plane—though she's conscious as she moves against the crowd that she carries no suitcase or overnight

bag, not even a purse. She swings her bare arms, walks faster. Toward what? The bar?

Maybe. When she reaches it she slows, hesitates, glancing into the open doorway at the reddish shadowed men. She stops completely, thinking of the truck driver, her own secret triumph as she'd watched him roll away. She ducks her head, continues walking.

Her past month's half-conscious sense of victory feels silly and hollow now, feels childish. She moves faster, pushing through the first giant glass doors she sees, rushing outside into the noon sunshine and breeze and the enormous airport parking lot. Half-hour parking. Out here, she can feel how loose her dress is, how her short cotton sleeves blow around her arms.

She drives straight home; once home, walks straight to the kitchen. She eats. Cheese from the package, standing in the open refrigerator door, milk in gulps from the carton, three slices of Wonder Bread with more chunks of cheese, more milk.

Her stomach stretches. Maybe it will never again be as flat as it's been these past weeks, or as round as it was last fall.

What had he said? That before they met she'd looked like she was sucking in her whole body. When had he said that? It's hard to remember exactly—near the beginning, she thinks. She pulls the last slice of cheese from the wrapper, the refrigerator door propped open against her back. In the bar, she'd felt such an unexpected and immediate desire for him. She still feels it, that urgency, though she knows it won't last. By next week, or next month, it may still be painful, but it will be something she remembers, gone as an actual live feeling.

Why don't you get rid of the pictures? she'd asked him early on, when she saw photos of the Kentucky woman in his bedroom drawer. Why don't you burn them or something? You'd like that.

"Hell no," he'd said, slurry drunk. "That's like burning up someone's *soul*. I mean it—African natives get scared out of their minds if you show them a photo of someone. They know. It's the *soul* in that little square."

He believed things like that, Dorothy thinks now. Or at least she guesses it must be true. He must really believe.

She doesn't. But still. As she stands in the kitchen holding the empty cheese wrapper, she wishes she had some photograph of him to prove he was here, that they were, and that they had something.

The sheets. She lets the wrapper drop to the floor and steps into the bedroom, pulls the silky bed sheets they bought together off the mattress, rushes into the living room trailing them, then rushes back empty-handed and pulls open her drawers, finds, immediately, one of his socks, then, moments later, on the closet floor, its mate.

Then she remembers the special no-stick frying pan he bought and she fetches that too, dumps all of it in the one clear space on her tan-carpeted living room floor. It is a small pile, unimpressive, and her heart is still beating fast. She looks around the crowded room, all that old Ohio furniture, then looks down at herself. Her body. The right place to look, certainly. Because if there was anything, it was that. She presses one hand against her stomach, her damp cotton skirt.

Maybe I'm pregnant, she says to herself quite clearly.

It's possible. Unlikely, but possible. Because, she thinks slowly, being pregnant is a purely physical phenomenon. A pinpoint hole in a diaphragm, a heart stopping. She presses her warm stomach even harder, tries to imagine it stretched out unrecognizably. Only this time she adds, tries to add, a baby. When my stomach gets that big, she thinks, it's not completely mine anymore. Not completely. She stands still, considering this.

Then she unbuttons her dress, fingers stiff. She slips it off over her head, smelling sweat as she raises her arms, then unhooks her bra, pulls down her thin panty hose, her underpants. She walks naked into the kitchen, where it's light, and stands on her bare feet on the cool floor and looks down.

Her breasts are not melon-shaped anymore, not sturdy-looking, but heavy and loosely packed, almost hanging. And her stomach has lost its curve. It stretches down pale and flat, only slightly rounded from the bread and cheese. Her legs are looser versions of their former shape, the packing gone there too. Even her feet seem different, the bones showing more, or maybe not. She can't tell.

She sits on one of the cold wooden chairs, Mother's, and still looks down, trying to get used to it, this new body, still hers all right. She stares for a long while, and one thought keeps coming back and back.

Where did it go?

Where does solid living fat go when it disappears? There had been so much of it—heavy and soft as Mother's, an extra heaviness Dorothy had felt when she climbed stairs, her heart beating faster.

Where had it all gone? Burned up into energy? What energy? Nothing she's done in these past weeks seems to have used any energy at all, not a single movement. She has not even really cried. She can't get over this. Her fat.

Where is it?

Tell Me about It

1

He tends to ram his head against the wall. Or, when moved far from the wall, against the edge of his desk. His nose was broken twice, the teacher told us that morning. A football helmet had to be strapped on every day, his wrists and ankles tied to his seat by strong strips of cloth called posy ties. *Posies*.

“. . . tends to go in cycles,” she explained to the group of us, nine pale brown or blondish heads and one dark, the one I’d already chosen. My stomach pressed the edge of the conference table as I leaned forward, trying to read the name on the dark-haired woman’s observation visit badge.

“ . . . often a way for him to get attention, our theory being that he *can* control this behavior, which is exactly what we tell Paulie, what you’ll tell any of them, very firm. Take hold of their chin and look them in the eyes and say *Con-trol* it.”

It. Yes. Nine women nodded, most of our faces nearly as pale and fat as mine, most straining for the right expression: timid and vaguely respectful, my mother’s expression when I described to her places like this. I nodded too, my eyes widened.

Hers not. No: the dark-haired woman’s black mica eyes narrowed, moving restlessly in her otherwise motionless face. A face like an arrowhead. *Suzanne Flynn*. This name came clear at last when she bent forward to stand. Flint, I thought as we all lined up at the door. A fierce shiny chip of something hard.

Hard-edged and thin and taut—unlike the rest of us with our soft prematurely maternal bodies. Suzanne wore a black knit top, no bra, her breasts small and wide-spaced and lazily tilted upwards. Flynn, flint. Her eyes skimmed past me. Her hair was black and springy, her strides tense and springy too. I craned my neck like a turtle as we filed out of the stale-donut-smelling conference room into the school’s main corridor. Muffled voices and groans echoed behind the peach-colored cinder-block walls, the closed classroom doors.

Severe neurological impairments, we’d been told. Was Suzanne, like me, drawn to the word *severe*?

“*Time to brush your teeth,*” someone called in the overly distinct singsong voice that accompanies sign language. From deep inside another room we heard another voice, painfully hoarse and not identifiably male or female. “*Jus’ once,*” it shouted. “*Jus’ once Jus’ once Jus’ wa-unce.*”

The Quiet Room at the end of the corridor held one desk, one chair. Paulie in his football helmet sat posied to the chair, his wrists tied with a foot or so of slack. His teacher bent over him, both their backs facing the door.

“One more, Paulie, ” she said in a firm tired voice. As we edged into the room, her mannishly broad shoulders half-hid him from view. Was he fumbling with a puzzle piece of some kind? His loose-jointed hand groped along the desktop numbly, like a seal’s flipper.

“*Wan a ca-nee.*” Paulie brought out the words with thick angry effort. He turned his broken-nosed Indian profile toward our silent faces and rocked in his seat.

"No can-dy till you try *one* more."

Our group had begun to edge back out the door. Only two of us lingered, jostled by the others as we stole a last look at Paulie: his thick-lipped slack-lipped mouth, his slumped yet tensely held shoulders, his intent broken-nosed profile. The nose he'd broken himself, twice.

My stare felt unusually unabashed. This observation visit was scheduled to last only one day, all of us scattering back to our separate college degree programs afterward. I'd probably never see these women again. Dovelike and distant, their voices murmured in the corridor as Paulie began to rock faster.

"Con-trol it." His teacher stepped around him, squared her shoulders, took hold of his desktop and scooted the whole desk back quickly, efficiently, just in time.

Paulie was rocking forward in his chair, his knees spread, his football helmet making a white blur, his head swinging down fast and hard against nothing. Then up again quick as a bounce, and before the teacher could move Paulie had squeezed his knees together. Inspired this time, he lunged forward hammer-style, his chin braced on his collarbone. His forehead thudded dully against his knees.

Bone on bone. Something jarred my stomach as if a parade drum passed too close. Paulie's head sprang back up almost as fast as before. His teeth were bared; his face was clenched like a fist regathering strength.

"*Male staff,*" the teacher hurried around the desk, her voice ringing yet unalarmed. Then our own teacher pushed back in to herd me and the other woman out to the corridor, Paulie's groan of protest cut short as the door shut behind us. Only then did I look over to make sure it was her, Suzanne Flynn. She startled me by meeting my eyes. The women I chose to watch almost never looked back, certainly never so intently, as if we'd caught each other in the act.

Of what I wasn't sure, couldn't have named. But I could hear a tiny click in the flicker of Suzanne's black mica gaze as she registered me.

I looked down at her close-fitting top, her nipples erect through the black cloth. Hurriedly, I raised my eyes. Suzanne's body was a tom-boyish teenage girl's. But her face looked strikingly older, her features both angry and expressionless: her mouth a thin sly line, her dark eyes pushed back deep beneath her wide low forehead. A murderer's forehead.

Yes: something in her face as it turned away gave off the subtle, blurred intensity of a murder-trial newspaper photo. Suspects hurried into cars, heads ducked. I always studied them, tried to catch their eyes.

Suzanne's eyes fixed now on the closed Quiet Room door. A muffled struggle had commenced in there, Paulie whimpering. "Male staff," someone called again. But Suzanne had already turned at another sound, one no one else caught. Her gaze cut past the round hushed faces of our group, far down the corridor.

A tall blond man was jogging toward us casually, cowboy style. Even as he ran, his tan face looked bored.

"Mmm." This sound came from deep in Suzanne's throat, the first I'd heard her make. Everyone turned toward her for a second, then either pretended not to have heard or giggled. I brought out my own stiff half-smile. Mother's lifelong Fat Girl smile: tolerant, modest, modestly backing away from any competition. A smile that had begun coming much too easily.

Could it eventually become *real*? I stumbled back a step, let the cowboy man brush past and skid to a halt in front of us, his back visibly muscular under his T-shirt. My shoulders tensed with Suzanne Flynn's desire to spring forward, follow him as he pushed open the door. A brief electrifying glimpse: both teachers crouched over Paulie, Paulie's loose-jointed splay-fingered hand thrust up, hurling a puzzle piece. Then the cowboy's back blocked the scene, and the door thumped shut behind him. The kind of man who has to be present, constantly present, in a place like this.

Abruptly—everything she did was sudden, unexpected, only occasionally graceful—abruptly in the staff lounge a half-hour later, Suzanne Flynn spoke. Like the students we'd overheard all morning, she brought out her words quickly but with effort: speaking, for her, a not-quite-natural act.

"Y'know, I started doing this kind of thing when I was fif-teen." She crackled open a bag of potato chips, not looking at anyone in particular. "It was in this state retarded ward for severelies, an' my first day there some real crazy giant guy jumped me. And y'know, he wasn't just trying to pull my hair. He was trying to pull off my head."

She crunched down a handful of chips. "He tore my shirt, y'know, an' later when they were ban-daging me I said, 'Je-sus, shouldn't he be *locked up* somewhere?' An' one of the other attendants, she just looked at me an' she said, real slow, she said, 'Well honey, where in all hell do you think you're working?'"

A quick grin at this, and a laugh like the crack of a nut—no one joining in but me. My laugh barked out from deep in my throat and shook my whole body, my eyes squeezed shut. As the fifteen-minute break buzzer sounded, as I struggled to pull myself to my feet, I couldn't stop. The other six women brushed past Suzanne and me, left us standing at the table side by side, swaying and gasping. "Oh jeez," Suzanne reached over and took hold of my arm as if for support. My bare upper arm, the flesh so heavy and slack under the cupped sleeve of my blouse that I pulled away slightly, not wanting her to touch it.

Deliberately, accidentally? An instant before her abrupt release, Suzanne squeezed the flesh of my arm between her strong index finger and thumb—so hard it hurt.

2

Observe. A bruise—oblong, thumb-sized, pink at first—gradually formed throughout the rest of the morning, visible just below my sleeve as I sat beside a teacher with my notebook. Across the desk, sullen fourteen-year-old Maria peered at us suspiciously from under her glossy brown helmet of hair. Scabby scratches marked her pale rounded cheeks; her eyes shone like huge moist prunes. My own eyes drifted past Maria's dark head to the open classroom door.

"Bo *out* there." Maria turned in her seat to look at that door.

"No he's not." The teacher continued arranging plastic spoons on the desk.

"Bo *out* there."

"Maria." The teacher looked up; Maria averted her eyes.

"I say a-gain?"

"You know what will happen if you do."

Official procedure. The teacher paused a beat, making sure that Maria wasn't going to repeat it one more time. Too often, the teacher

murmured to me, Maria would say the same thing over and over, louder and louder. Perseveration, I knew. The compulsive repetition of certain phrases, certain questions.

"Basically," the teacher told me under her breath, "she does it to get attention." Special ed teachers had given me this same explanation at so many other schools I'd visited that I privately thought of the phrase as a perseveration of their own. Our own, I reminded myself, meeting Maria's intent prune-dark stare. My fingers strayed up to my bruise, my proof.

The moment after she'd pinched me, Suzanne's arrowhead face had looked so oblivious that I'd wondered if it had happened at all, her fingers on my skin. The one I've chosen, I always thought when I began to watch a woman. Chosen, so far in my life, only to observe. I shifted as the teacher clicked down the last plastic spoon. And I tried, the way I'd done with other women, to imagine us naked together. Suzanne and I: my stomach in thick folds, my legs and arms flabby, my breasts beginning to sag as if I were forty-three instead of twenty-three. Had she squeezed my arm derisively?

"There's this certain male staff member Maria likes." The teacher raised her eyebrows. Then, louder, to Maria: "Bo will be here after lunch in gym, don't wor-ry."

"He be here don't wor-ry." Maria's earnest hollow voice exaggerated the teacher's professionally soothing tone. Then Maria twisted around again to gaze toward the door, a warm breeze from the classroom window stirring her bangs.

"And if you *count* your *spoons*, then . . .," the teacher stared through her glasses at my name badge, ". . . then Mary Ann will give you a candy."

No reply. Still turned away, Maria rose as if in her sleep and stepped toward the door. Pretending to stop her, I pulled myself up too, bumped the desk.

"No, Maria," I said in unison with the teacher. I pushed past the desk, already sensing as I stepped into the doorway beside her what we'd see.

There. Down the hall not twenty feet away: Suzanne and the cowboy man leaning side by side against the peach-painted cinder block. Suzanne's black hair hid her face as she looked up at him.

He was strikingly long and long-limbed and blond, *she* just as strikingly short and dense and dark. The same simple contrast that must

have been drawing them to each other made my own pale skin go hot, fast. A variety of what they felt as they leaned there so close?

"Back to your seat right now."

I blinked, unsure whether the teacher meant Maria or me.

"Ma-ri-a." Above a rising groan from another closed classroom, the teacher's chair scraped back. Suzanne and the cowboy man ambled toward us now, nonchalant: *he* a grown version of the popular high school boys I'd always liked to imagine trapped in tornados or fires or earthquakes, anything to wipe those cool, eternally bored expressions from their faces.

"*Buh.*" Maria began to step forward into the hall, her bare arm brushing mine. Her scabby scratches looked especially dark against her pale cheeks.

"No—" From behind, the teacher grabbed her arm. But Maria strained against the hold as Suzanne and the man named Bo stepped closer.

"*Buh-oh.*" Maria's eyes grew darker; her fists clenched. Bo barely glanced our way, his own eyes curiously flat and smooth.

"Looks like she's about to go off," the teacher whispered.

"Go off?" Automatically, I gripped Maria's other plump arm. Suzanne and Bo stopped, Bo's gaze unchanged. Pale blue glass.

"You *here.*" Maria cocked her head to look up at Bo from under her bangs, her brimful eyes drinking him in. She pulled against us, her muscles surprisingly hard under the soft flesh of her arm. That palpable extra energy: yes, I always spotted the truly violent students. My flushed skin prickled.

How did it happen? We were pulling Maria back into the doorway when Suzanne leaned toward me, so close I could smell her thick dark hair, not quite clean. Her warm cigarette breath filled my ear, both words fiercely enunciated.

"*See you.*"

3

I'll see you? Or, I see you, see you watching me? Or both? I stood on the concrete-block stoop in the noon sun, a moist tuna sandwich Mother had made me wrapped in wax paper in my hand.

Bodies—five or six—lounged across the back lawn. Up next to the school building, apart from the other women, Suzanne Flynn crouched on her knees under a wide half-open window. Muffled shouts and silverware clatter echoed over the grass.

“Hi,” one of the other women called in a mild friendly voice.

“Hi,” I called back, not at all friendly, and I stepped down from the stoop, turned away from them. My sleeve fluttered around the tender spot on my arm; my crustless tuna sandwich dropped to the ground behind me. Mother always nibbled the sliced-off crusts as a cheat on her perpetual diet, her face pale with genuine fear should I happen to catch her. Just crusts: ridiculous timid crusts. My arms swung free as I stepped toward Suzanne through the overgrown grass. Like a high school kid craning for a glimpse of a locker room fight, she was staring up into the window. Her black hair gleamed.

“Wan’ spoon.” The hoarse sexless voice we’d heard this morning rose in the cafeteria. “Wan’ spoon Wan’ spoon Wan’ spoo-oon.”

At the round hard thud of an apple or orange thrown against the window screen, Suzanne’s shoulders tensed.

“Just *once*.” A man—Bo?—said firmly. “Say it just *one* time.”

“Jus’ once,” the raggedly hoarse voice answered, “Jus’ once Jus’ *once* Jus’ *wuh-un*—”

Plates clattered, hiding the crack of my knees as I crouched beside Suzanne, a foot or so away. The tall grass felt warm but the ground was still cool and winter hard. Through the window screen, I could barely make out the tables and a few shadowy male figures moving toward a doorway, the hoarse voice beginning to die down.

“What’s going on in there?” I asked, sure she sensed my presence though she hadn’t yet turned. A door thumped above us.

“They just got done draggin’ Paulie out.” She sank back on her heels, her smell unexpectedly strong. Fresh fishy sun-sweat mixed with the cafeteria steam and the warm damp of the surrounding grass.

“I couldn’t make out the whole thing.” The door thumped again. Then a relatively calm clang of silverware, a resumption of murmurs and giggles. “Wonder what new shit he’s started.”

Suzanne seemed to speak to herself though her face was turned toward me. Her mouth looked a little swollen, as if she’d been necking with Bo only minutes before. Her eyes were dark and overbright, almost like Maria’s.

But how does it feel? I wanted to whisper to her, to Maria.

How does what feel? Suzanne might have asked, and her eyes narrowed now in the sun, focused at last on mine. My clear blue-grey eyes: I'd always wished I could block out the rest of my face, my body, and make someone look only at them, the way Suzanne was doing.

"They got Bo on Paulie now, y'know." This time she was definitely speaking to me, seeming to bask in my frank stare.

"Oh?" My word was a sound, a breath.

"They told Bo to watch him all through lunch. An' then I heard them say Bo's gotta stay with him in the Quiet Room too. Said they're gonna tie Paulie by the waist *and* the chest so he can't bend an' get at his knees. Maybe that's what he was doing when I couldn't see." She yawned, leaned back on her hands in the grass and raised her face toward the sun, eyes shut. Under her black knit top, her breasts looked boyishly flattened.

"Bet he'll think of something new." I made my voice quiet so no one across the lawn could hear. "Paulie, I mean."

"Won-der what," Suzanne said, low-voiced too. And we sat silent for a while, a wasp humming a slow wobbly loop between us.

"He's like me," Suzanne murmured. "I mean he'll try any-thing." She drew out that last word, tasting it. Her face turned toward mine again, her eyes still strangely shut. "Y'know who Bo is, don't you?" Only one of her eyes opened.

"Yeah," I breathed, not wanting to jar her.

"I'm going home with him today." Both her eyes opened at this, a child telling a secret. I could hear the wasp veer toward the other women, the unbroken murmur of their conversation. I shut my eyes.

"Sounds good to me . . ." My voice trailed off into the wasp's retreating hum.

"Mmhhh." Suzanne liked the words, the sun on her face. My own skin felt warm and soft, dough expanding. Above us, a student gave a drawn-out moan.

"Good-looking man." My right hand strayed up to that tender spot under my cupped sleeve, the voices across the grass seeming to slow as the cafeteria moan rose.

"Tell me about it," Suzanne answered, and I opened my eyes, her face startlingly close. She had pulled herself onto her knees again and was leaning right up next to me, braced by her hands. Her skin was

shiny, her grin wide and crooked. A small sharp-featured monkey face. That monkey glint of curiosity showed in her eyes as she leaned even closer. The voices across the lawn almost stopped.

Stalking cat pose. Suzanne's elbows bent; her dark head lowered so her warm coarse hair brushed my arm.

"Bruise yourself?" She was examining my upper arm, sniffing it. My fingers still absently stroked that spot, Suzanne's face inches away. I couldn't answer, knew that anything I said would be heard across the grass. The quiet over there was conspicuous now.

"Want me to lick it next time?"

I blinked. My fingers stopped moving. I couldn't look at her, could only feel the brush of her hair as I lowered my hand to my lap. The curve of my thighs was outlined by my cotton skirt. I stared, relieved that the cotton covered my pale lumpy flesh. Suzanne shifted her weight. She moved in even closer, almost nuzzled my arm, then cupped one hand over her mouth, her breath warm again in my ear.

"Want me to bite it?"

I stiffened—my shoulders, my throat. I looked up from my lap in a kind of panic and squinted toward the other women. Suzanne tracked my gaze, her dark head turning as she pulled away from me. She stared frankly over her shoulder. Those round white faces stared back across the still shimmer of the lawn. My sandwich lay in the grass by the door, wax paper dull in the sun. Above our heads, the cafeteria window had grown quiet too, chairs beginning to scrape, plates to stack.

"Hey." Suzanne twisted her whole body around, stood up on her knees, her back squarely facing me, finished with me. Both her hands cupped around her mouth. Her voice broke through the warm grassy haze.

"Hey, want me to bite her?"

4

Single file. Back from the cafeteria, back up the long corridor. The students' groans seemed subdued; their heads bobbed listlessly.

Suzanne Flynn had ambled off across the lawn, her ass swaying

cowboy style in her jeans. Her words still hung over the warm unsettled grass as the other women stood hurriedly and bent for their paper lunch sacks. Suzanne stepped over my sandwich. The rear exit door swung shut behind her, slow and careless. I was the last to pull myself up. Lightheaded, almost dizzy with hunger. I stood in a classroom doorway a few minutes later, my skin still shiny and flushed as I watched the last of the students disappear behind doors. Only then did Bo and Paulie turn a corner far down the corridor, near the nurse's office.

Behind them, Suzanne's dark head slipped into another open door. With one hand, Bo held a thickly wadded terry-cloth towel over the lower half of Paulie's face—Paulie biting into the cloth maybe. With the other hand, he held a posy tie knotted around Paulie's waist. The posy strained like a leash as Paulie lurched forward, his white football helmet nodding and nodding.

"Shut that door please?" the teacher's voice said behind me. Paulie lurched again, closer, a square bandage taped to his forehead. Leaning out into the hall, I saw that the bandage was stained iodine-dark around the edges, as if it hid a gouged third eye. I shut the door lightly.

"I don't want Maria to see Bo." The teacher stepped up next to me. "Bo's usually in the gym with her this hour, you know. But I want you to keep an eye on her today."

I nodded. One of the other observation visit women was watching me with open curiosity.

"You've had some kind of PSI training, haven't you?" The teacher lowered her voice. PSI: Personal Safety Interventions. I nodded again.

As we started down the hall toward the gym, Maria and I trailed behind the others. Maria's steps were as painstakingly measured as her words. Step, stop, step.

Stop. Halfway down, Maria twisted to look over her shoulder, her eyes brimful again. Her scarred face had grown soft and sullen.

"Just *ig-nore*," the teacher murmured to me as we filed into the gym. She guided Maria and me past a boy struggling to lift a birdie from the floor. Beside this boy, Suzanne Flynn leaned on her leg and swung two metal badminton rackets. Her eyes flickered toward me, a sunburn flush already heating my face. My heavy pink arms felt exposed, on display as I took a paddle from the teacher. Smiling

gamely, she steered numb Maria into position on the other side of the gym's Ping-Pong table, then lifted Maria's hand and fit a paddle into her grip. Already, Maria was clenching her fists.

One nod: the teacher stepped back from behind Maria, telling me with her nod that she would stay right there—no male staff in sight.

I lobbed a gentle serve. A hollow click, then the ball made a slow dreamy bounce past Maria and off the end of the table. Maria didn't blink, her eyes filled with a liquid that looked thicker than tears.

"When- Bo- *com-* ing?" Her voice quivered along with that moisture.

Ig-nore, the teacher mouthed from behind Maria's shoulder, her word doubly silent. The hesitant *thwoks* of the badminton game had halted.

"Pick up the ball, please." I bent and peered under the table, saw the white ball lying innocently beside Maria's feet. Behind Maria, the teacher's feet in sensible sneakers began to advance.

"Pick it up," the teacher said. I straightened at that firm tone, quick enough to see in a blur Maria's hands flying to her face, fingers clawed. Her nails dug into her own round cheeks. Instantly, the teacher lunged forward, grabbed hold of Maria's wrists from behind.

Beside me, I felt rather than saw Suzanne Flynn advance a step, her hollow metal racket clanking on the floor. Maria strained against the teacher's grip, blood bright on the white curve of her cheek, her eyes bright as that blood.

"Ig-nor—" the teacher started to mouth over Maria's shoulder.

Maria's head jerked backward—a spastic-seeming movement—and butted the teacher on her chin. The teacher staggered with the blow, her glasses knocked sideways. That butt was a bell, a shot: Suzanne and I both rushed forward, the other women hanging back as we scrambled around the Ping-Pong table, nearly rammed into each other in front of Maria but then didn't, then skidded into position. Me in front, Suzanne behind.

"When- Bo- *cum?*" Maria reached again for her face, one hand still clawed. This time she lunged at her own hand with her mouth open, bit that hand as if biting an attacker.

"Con-trol it, Maria," the teacher called from the floor.

It, it: Maria kept hold of her hand like a wild pup, the shock of bright red streaking her chin, a sticky drop on my arm. From behind,

Suzanne reached forward and gripped Maria's wrists, strained to pull back her bloodied hand. Always go for wrists, wrists and ankles. I fell onto my knees and grabbed hold of Maria's legs, her thick calves.

"Bring her down," Suzanne told me in a low urgent voice, the two of us moving together.

"Male staff," the teacher shouted distantly. Maria's blood-wet mouth gaped open, inches away. Suzanne's face behind her seemed even closer. We strained together, lowering Maria heavily onto the floor. My arms trembled with the strength of my grip.

Male staff, someone else shouted from the hall, that voice distant too. Below us, Maria lay stretched on her back, Suzanne and I crouched at either end: holding her extremities, our incident reports would say. All my weight leaned on the square solid bones of Maria's tensed-up calves. I felt but did not see Suzanne at the other end of Maria's body. Neither of us looked up, both of us braced for the second surge we felt coming, gathering.

"Buh-ohh," Maria choked out, "Buh-ohh."

Her body bucked up, pelvis thrust forward, back arched. Her bent knee rammed my nose, knocked me off balance. As I fell, heavy running footsteps closed in behind us on the echoing wood of the gymnasium floor. Men's feet, a smell of man's sweat. A man built like a nightclub bouncer knelt in front of me, his back blocking my sight as he grabbed hold of Maria's kicking legs.

"Buh-ohh."

Suzanne lugged Maria up by her armpits, hustled her to her feet. Then—too soon, I thought; *Don't*, I thought—then Suzanne surrendered her to this man. Maria's chest heaved up and down as if she were crying but she wasn't, her eyes no longer brimful. No tears at all as he led her away. The dry heave of her sobs echoed off into the corridor.

Neither of us moved. Suzanne stood and I sat with nothing in between. My face felt sunburned, half-numb. A dull throb had begun at the bridge of my nose.

The door shut gently. Take a little break or something, a woman's voice had said, and someone else had handed me a dry ice pack, this someone warning me not to leave the pack in a classroom trash can

because some kid might try to eat it, you know? I know, I think I said. Then I sat on a worn beige couch and held the dry ice against my nose, Suzanne and I alone in the empty staff lounge. Suzanne paced by the window, seeming unaware of my presence.

"Well," I said cautiously from behind my pack. My voice came out small and congested. "That . . . was really something, wasn't it?"

Suzanne didn't bother to stop pacing. In the twitch of a shrug she gave I saw, I thought, an offhand disdain for the question.

Offhand, disinterested. As if nothing had happened between us out in the grass. Her steps began to slow, her attention fixed now on the open windows that faced the school parking lot. She stopped moving. Under her black shirt, her shoulder blades curved out. I'd sunk so heavily into the couch cushions that I didn't raise myself as the distant revolving light appeared in the corner of the window. The ambulance glided across the parking lot, eerily silent.

Only the light was visible from my couch, Suzanne's face lit by its red slow-spinning glow. Her profile was shiny with sweat. A race-horse after a race, I thought. My own hands felt dry; my nose throbbled but didn't bleed, dry and drained too. Yet my heart still beat quickly, my pulse thin and fast in my throat as doors slammed outside, so close. Muffled voices drifted through the open screened window. Then the ambulance began to pull away, still as soundless as Maria's sobs had been tearless.

I pressed the ice pack harder against my nose, wanting and not wanting Suzanne to look over at me. My face felt pink with sunburn and with another growing flush.

"What was that?" The silent red light had disappeared from sight. Suzanne's shoulder blades were no longer quite so beautifully tensed.

"Paulie." She answered flatly, her back beginning to slump. She slid her hand into her jeans pockets, pulled out a crushed plastic pack, a matchbook.

"Paulie?" I repeated as she lit her cigarette, a ridiculous fallen sensation in my chest. She hadn't let me watch too. "You mean they sent him to a hospital?"

"Bo told me after lunch that they were prob'ly gonna do it." She dragged on her cigarette. "Paulie started—I don't know—*chew*-ing the inside of his mouth, Bo said." Another drag, her face still turned toward the window.

"Chewing really *hard*, biting an' biting an' no way to make him

stop. I mean they couldn't stick a fucking posy tie down his *throat*." Another drag, deep this time, and Suzanne's voice slowed. "So *any*-way, he was starting to choke on all the blood, I mean there was a whole shitload of blood. They had some kind of towel draped over his head on the way out."

She sighed, then blinked into the smoke of that sigh. She shifted her weight, stubbed out her barely smoked cigarette on the windowsill and began to pace again, idly this time, her movements slow, maybe bored. Out in the grass, she had turned away from me an instant after leaning so close. Had she actually been coming on to me? Maybe yes, I thought as I watched her pace. For a moment in the grass, why not? She'd try anything, she'd said, that monkey glint of curiosity growing in her eyes till I stiffened. I'd been afraid someone would see, and then there was nothing to see. Then it wasn't that moment anymore but another, Suzanne in another mood turning away. Now, in the staff room, she pivoted again to face me.

This movement was abrupt, but graceful too. Suzanne Flynn, *Flint*. Her arrowhead face shone with sweat; her dark eyes didn't meet mine. Sometimes students I'd been observing for hours suddenly stared at me without recognition, no connections tied in their minds from moment to moment.

"He's quitting y'know—Bo is." Suzanne stated his name pointedly, as if to remind me that she was going home with him. "He's getting sick of this kinda thing." She gave those words his bored offhand tone. Yet her eyes as she spoke were her own, not flat but mica bright. She glanced past me the way I'd done with students when they tried hard to finish their lessons: straining, struggling, trapped by their minds the way I felt trapped by my heavy sun-burned body.

"Of course *he'd* leave," I said, my mind clear as always. My voice was clearing too. "But you won't."

"Oh yeah?"

There. She met my eyes with a flicker of interest. I lowered my ice pack and let my hand stray up to my bruise, that spot already much less tender. Suzanne didn't seem to notice as she waited for me to go on. Attentive, self-conscious. The main attraction being, I guessed, my own attraction *to* her, the way I studied her as I spoke.

"Bet you'll keep on with this kind of thing. You're like me in that."

Suzanne nodded, her eyes shiny and tired from having watched

everything so closely all day. Though my own paler eyes couldn't have glittered like hers, what I felt—my head light from hunger, my body heavy and exhausted though my pulse pumped on quickly—this must have been a variation of what she was feeling.

"Suzanne? Mary Ann?"

The door creaked open, both of us jumping.

"You two all right in here?" Our teacher poked her head in—shyly, yet with maternal determination, a slight suspicious tension to her voice. One-eyed stare. One lens of the teacher's glasses was thinly cracked from Maria's head-butt; her short hair was ruffled as if she'd been outside. A blue terry-cloth towel draped over one of her arms, folded neatly, clean side showing. She opened the door farther and stood in the doorway, awkward with her broad shoulders. Quietly, she looked from my skewed plastic observation visit badge to Suzanne's and then back to me. Suzanne had turned to the window.

"You know," the teacher offered, adjusting her glasses. "When Maria first came here, I thought that her seizures were genuinely uncontrollable. But now, now . . ."

Here my blood began rising in my face. A pressure was building behind my flushed sunburned skin.

". . . Now I know it's more or less just something she does to get attention."

"Well shit," I cut in. My voice sounded choked, so loud that I felt Suzanne turn once more to look at me, my own eyes fixed on the teacher. "Shit," I repeated, "Why else does *any*-one do *any*-thing?"

*First
Most
Beautiful
Woman
in the
World*

“Look at us,” Mother, the star, calls from safe in the dark. Ice cubes clink in her glass.

Jersey Beach, August 1963. Long-gone sunburns. We—wobbly headed babies—splatter sea foam in the eye of Uncle Sam’s Brownie camera. Weird cousin Ernie, two years old, chews his toes. And behind slanty, sleazy movie-star sunglasses, Mother poses cheesecake, then steps back to pat her belly.

“I’m *preg-nant* there! Six months *preg-nant*,” she says loudly now from her seat among us, and is booed as she thrusts her splay-fingered hand into the dusty projector light. “I was lots of things, but never *fat*.”

In high school, in Akron, Mother was voted "Best Profile" (which meant "Best Figure"), and later, in Philadelphia, was nicknamed by one of the four men she almost married FMBWW: First Most Beautiful Woman in the World.

"That's *Esther*," she tells us now in an indignant stage whisper, slightly slurred. And she jabs her finger again through the light at the bulge in her young seaward-facing silhouette. "Look. *That there is Esther.*"

This sinks in. We are all silent.

"Yep. *Esther*. 1963."

Uncle Sam repeats this mildly from behind the projector, his eerily lit moon face glowing wizardlike with satisfaction. Uncle Sam, born on the fifth of July, keeper of archives. *Forposterity*, he says often, one word to him.

"What a couple of ham-bones."

Mother and June now watch Mother and June on the beach then. Mother sips her gin and tonic. More cheesecake. Miss America.

"Oh God, Sam," Mother sighs all at once, theatrically bored. But she lights a cigarette without once taking her eyes from the screen. "These things oughtta be *burned*."

Daddy—tall and quiet, always off to one side in still photos—never watches the movies. Tonight, after Aunt June's pot roast, he rolled his eyes, drank a bicarbonate of soda, and retired early, seeming glad for the excuse to be alone. He is not one of us, one of us whispers.

"He's too dig-nified," Grandma says, an edge to her voice. Behind Sam, she sits quiet too, the light in her glasses and Mimi in her lap. Mimi is Mother's mistake—a mean-spirited toy poodle who has lived twelve years longer than anyone had hoped, who is known to various family members as "wretch," "rodent," or "white rat," who now only Grandma occasionally rallies to with the one possible defense: "You stop that! She's a *living thing*!"

Mimi breathes in fitful sulky little poodle moans.

"Sounds like she's about to die!" one of us kids says happily.

On-screen, on Jersey beach, Aunt June, wholesome and buxom, ladles out her famous potato salad. Close-up of Aunt June's potato salad. Every stomach in the room stirs. Eyes are averted. Mayonnaise gleams in the sun.

Ernie's Birthday, 1968, reads Sam's next squarely lettered sign.

Weird Cousin Ernie, all bone, lifts a plastic toy dinosaur with his amazingly dexterous long-toed left foot. The cake had to wait so long for Sam to set up the camera that melting blue wax brims over its chocolate sides in the sudden hot lights. Candle flames—eight—quiver to stay afloat. Blackout.

Oct. 5, 1967. On the dark screen, two points of light twirl and leap like crazed fireflies. It is cousin Junie Lynn, shot from the bleachers of the Buckeye High School football stadium, captured by her daddy in the midst of her triumphant flaming baton routine. Quick switch to daylight: Junie in the driveway, in shorts, sheepishly spinning a nonflamed baton, then dropping it. Then watching it bounce.

May 1966, Philadelphia Zoo. Twelve spider monkeys and all us kids throw peanuts at each other. Mother, leaning by the gorilla cage, holds her nose with one hand and her cigarette with the other. Mother bored that day, distracted, her white summer dress nearly transparent. A red zoo balloon floats free. Tracking it, Uncle Sam tilts the camera sunward. Whiteout.

Christmas, Ohio, 1965.

"Old Alvin! What a ham-bone. God, what a *ham-bone!*"

We all wait, then laugh one moment *before* cousin Al, eggnog-happy, trips over tiny, sulky, Christmas-ribboned Mimi. We wait again and laugh again just before Al (close-up) mimes a prissy poodle face.

Cousin Alvin, the only one of us to actually make it to Hollywood. Played screaming crowd scenes in two horror movies, now lives in a California singles trailer park with a swamp of an unkempt swimming pool, but a pool nevertheless.

"Alvin's the family star," Grandma says as she smooths fretful Mimi. Grandma never bothers to add anymore, the way she used to, that she herself once met the man who wrote "Tea for Two."

"Oh Christ, *look*. We're gonna *sing*."

On-screen, Cousin Al (wearing a Christmas present chef's apron that reads "A Man's Got to Believe in Something and I Believe I'll Have Another Drink") leads all us kids (striped, price-tag-itching pajamas) in singing, not Christmas carols, but "Melancholy Baby."

Our peppermint-wet mouths open, our throats strain, maddeningly silent.

"What a little bunch of hams. Christ," Mother says. On-screen,

she poses under mistletoe—knee bent, ballerina foot pointed backward—and kisses a martini-holding neighbor man (his name long forgotten). A kiss so long that Mother now, watching, gives a nervous smoky giggle. Tactfully, the camera pans away and we kids go into our soft-shoe routine.

"Look at them. We *all* should've gone to Hollywood. That's what I think. They should've carted us *all* away to Hollywood." Stubbing out her cigarette, Mother's eyes are hard and glittery as a starlet's.

It is late. Time, Uncle Sam judges, to bring on the real show. Humming "You oughtta be in pictures, you're won-dah-ful ta see-eee," he threads *November 24, 1954*.

Mother and Aunt June groan but look toward the screen expectantly. Mother smooths her hair, then, at the first click, sucks in her stomach with a gin-scented breath of determination. There. Look right back at me—Go on and look.

Young bride (Mother) blows a black-and-white kiss from her newlywed apartment kitchen. June and Daddy, then June and Sam are shot seated at the supper table, all magically young and young, young and young. Mother, arms fragile, overbalanced by the platter, tremulously sets a bursting roast turkey before Daddy. Abrupt cut.

"My God. So *young*," Aunt June murmurs to Mother, who barely nods.

Next film. Mimi as a puppy. Young wife and tiny toy poodle frolic on living room rug. All boo. This is Mimi back when Mother spoiled her, dressed her as, we all suspect, she might have liked to dress herself had she been a movie star and not a housewife: nails polished blue, French-bow ribbons, rhinestone collar.

"Still a white rat," someone mutters.

"Shh!" says Mother, forgetting that she hates Mimi too.

It is now, Uncle Sam decides with his narrowed showman's eyes, late enough for the hard stuff.

May 11, 1953. Leaving for honeymoon. Honey. Moon. Mother stubs out her last cigarette, leans forward.

Bride and groom. Daddy, cut in half so far over to the side, holds his stiff arm crooked. Mother holds on beside him in a full-skirted dress, the dress that, though black and white turns it grey, we all know *really* was (Mother has said it so often) wine-colored.

"My God," Mother jerks further forward, eyes alight, and, with a

depth of feeling that seems to surprise even her, says from down low in her throat, "That *dress*."

Something is clearly unexpected here for her: her, this dark-haired sly-eyed twenty-two-year-old girl from Akron, from twenty odd years ago. Philadelphia. Rooming with Bobbi Martonini, throwing wine parties, throwing spaghetti on the ceiling to see if it was cooked, sweeping in full skirts past dance partners in suits and crewcuts.

"What a *dress*," Mother is saying now with relish and a kind of reverence. "Would you *look* at that dress?"

Mother keeps her eyes on the skirts, as if this is the only part of the picture she recognizes.

"Long ago," she breathes, distracted. She is squinting the way she does whenever she's had too much to drink, like she's trying to make out something. "Hea-vens."

We all sit quiet, all know certain unsettling moments in the movies when a teasing point of light will show through in our minds.

"Why the hell did I wave so long?" Mother is asking, only half out loud, for only she knows why. "We should've just left and been *done* with it. I must've been waiting to feel *married* or something."

On-screen, still waving, the bride looks as if she expects at any instant to vanish into nothing. She keeps waving.

"Good-bye already," says Mother. Good. She has stopped trying to remember. General relief; we can talk again.

"Who on earth is *that*?"

It is Sam, the best man, disguised under an unexpected head of hair. We all laugh, not only at the hair but at the way Sam stares into the camera with eager, anxious eyes. Not star-struck exactly, just *struck*—standing there unnaturally still.

Breezy day. Sam turns, begins taping a white square of cardboard to the DeSoto bumper. Camera zooms in. With black crayon, young hairy Sam draws out his first sign. In years to come, he will letter all the opening signs of all the movies—*Philadelphia Zoo* or *Jersey Beach*—in this same square careful hand.

JUST MARRIED.

He points it out to the camera a good long while.

"I'm going to burn these things," Mother says, but weakly now, with no more conviction than when she, like the rest of us, threatens to strangle Mimi. A living thing, after all.

GOOD LUCK. Rice rains. The newlyweds, Mother and Daddy, wave from the back seat of the De Soto, honeymoon bound. Blackout. Mother sighs.

"Hey, run it *backward!*" we kids clamor into the suddenly too-quiet cigarette smoke. Lights again. Action.

Backward, Mother in her wine-colored dress, trapped trying to disappear, waves good-bye forever.

Not Herself

My father, dead now, drove me to work that night. Through my reflected face, pine and birch rolled by, only the trees in front blurring. The trees behind stood tall and still. I shifted on the vibrating seat, tugged at the hem of my thigh-high skirt. Back home, Mother lay on our couch, farther and farther away as Dad drove us deeper into the greens and greys of Ohio dusk. I squeezed shut my eyes, actually prayed for him to turn on the radio, the usual nonstop news. All Things Considered.

“Oh, Alisa?”

I half-jumped, blinking. Beside me, his body filled the dark with its solid sunken weight, shadowed like some distant mountain range. It was late April, 1977.

I want, now, to be as honest as possible in describing this night: the first of many in my life when I've been, let's say, less than honest. Yes. When I think of Fred Weigle, I ask myself first what my father asked of Nixon, what he later would have demanded of Reagan: What did I know and when did I know it?

"Almost forgot. While you were . . . in the shower," Dad gave the car a slight swerve, my naked body bolting out onto the road. On my half-bared thigh, I was fingering my own yellowish bruise. "There was a call."

"For me?" My fingers stopped moving. White birches floated over my forehead.

Dad coughed. Falsely casual, too. "Fred something."

My reflection wavered. My nose looked bigger than usual, my eyes smaller. Hours before, for the first time, I had been—technically—kissed. A dry, rushed, fake-feeling brush of lips. Followed by a two-word command that carried far more visceral force. The punch line? Or did they—Kim and Dee—plan something even worse, coming soon? I stared harder out my window to make the car go faster.

"Thought he might be someone you met in the drama club, the Thespians?" Lesbians, I'd heard other kids mumble, drawing out the word the way some boys drew out Fred Weigle's nickname. "Anyhow, this Fred wanted you to know that he and some girls might be coming to the show tonight. To see you, he said."

"Uh huh." Dark rushed forward. I held my face stiffly, as if my goopy green acne mask was still tightening. Lana Turner driving to her doom in *Imitation of Life*.

Dad gave the radio a wistful glance and cleared—or failed again to clear—his throat. His breaths surrounded me as we swung onto the Cinema Capri lot, our wheels going quiet. At last, I usually thought, rocked to a halt under the marquee.

"So." He raised his voice hopefully, like the jocular dad of a popular girl. "Who is this Fred, anyhow?"

"Not . . . not a Thespian," I mumbled, sweating inside my zipped jacket. Though he attended the meetings, Fred Weigle was careful not to belong, officially. Fred stayed away from the actors, the boys he called fruits and others called worse names. Names I'd smile at vaguely, pretending I knew exactly what they meant.

Dad coughed like an old man whose throat won't ever, really, clear. The engine shuddered. Above us, twenty-year-old kleig lights blinked

like scared mosquitoes. *To Have and Have Not* 7, 9. In high school photos, Dad's smile was eager, his eyes overbright. He'd been a—the, he always said—fat boy.

"So he wants some kind of . . . date?" That hopeful note. My first, it would be. Dad's seat creaked. From Fred's voice alone, hadn't he sensed something strange? I thrust open the car door, ducked, pulled myself up into the relief of cool night air. Double doors faced me, lights off inside. Dark glass liquified my face, my own overbright eyes.

"Pick you up at the usual time, then?" Dad's voice blended with the engine rumble, both sounding, if I'd listened, nearly worn out. "Alisa?"

Lisa, said the nametag sewn above my left breast. I panted from my quick ducking run across the lobby, unzipped my jacket at last. No A. A Lisa. A queer name, Kim Carr had told me, laughing at me or inviting me to laugh too. I'd given my stiff in-between smile.

I ran faucets hard, plotting. What could I say to prepare them for Fred? All the stall doors were open, all the toilets clean. At home, in the shower, I'd punched my thighs, hating the jiggle. I bent. My fingers trembled as I dabbed globs of flesh-tinted foundation on the bruises. Luckily, my stiff flimsy skirt cut my thighs short, hiding my fattish saddlebag swells. My blouse, like a Barbie blouse, held its own shape, nylon puffing out over my soft fist-sized breasts. A miracle of deception, my uniform.

I dusted my not-quite-oversized nose with pinkish pore-clogging powder. For weeks, carelessly, I'd been dropping his name. Lisa's latest. Of course, when I used his name here, he wasn't Fred Weigle but another Fred, one I considered worthy of her.

Lisa. In the empty lobby, in the candy glass reflection, my nose looked smaller, my eyes bigger. I spritzed Windex. Swollen nose, puffy eyes. If you lay on a couch all afternoon, trying to sleep, you deserved such a face. If you didn't, you didn't. So I told myself, rubbing glass so hard it squeaked. Wipe it out, that face.

"Oh Lee-sha?" A Bogartian lisp. Across the dimly lit maroon-carpeted lobby, Mr. O'Moore emerged from his office, raising his clipboard in soldierly salute. His curly reddish hair was mussed as if freshly tousled by the twenty-year-old he claimed to date.

"Hey there," I called out, Southern style. Everyone at the Cin Capri thought Lisa had been born in South Carolina, not New Jersey.

"Glad one o' my girls made it on time!" Mr. O'Moore inhaled deeply, surveying the 1950s-style lobby. Gold trim peeled along the edges of the chocolate brown walls. I inhaled too, savoring that popcorn-and-cigarette smell. All afternoon, as I'd paced the hall above my sleeping, muttering mother, I'd longed for it. I waited to go to work the way most people at work wait to go home. "Something on your mind, schweet-heart?"

I blinked, quickly pulling together the lie I'd begun to form in the bathroom. "Some-one. I mean, just this jerky guy who's been . . . following me around at school."

"Oh?" Mr. O'Moore stared over at me, his eyes lingering where no one else had ever bothered to look. "Good ol' Fred can't put a stop to it?"

I flushed, so easily trapped. That name. Why had I ever mentioned it, here? One look at the real Fred Weigle, Lisa's supposed love, and Mr. O would know her to be a lie. The lobby lights would go harsh and bright, revealing my drab Ashtabula High face.

"What's this?" He turned, his eyebrows jumping. Glass doors were swinging. "Is Cathy B in trouble again?" She swooshed past him and Mr. O raised his clipboard as if to spank her.

"Is Tammy in love?" Giving her gummy slow-mo grin, Cathy fumbled to unveil the cash register. Her replies never quite fit people's questions. Her gums gleamed; her eyes didn't. Her blond hair swung forward, tinged chlorine green. As she bent, Mr. O eyed her muscular upper thighs. Cathy Bullock. Whenever I see the word *buttock*, I think of her. Swim team star, defrocked cheerleader. It had been my secret triumph that Mr. O'Moore grinned at Cathy and me in almost the same way.

"This's my favorite part," I called out in my Sweet Lisa voice, shaky that night. I switched on the metal popcorn bin, warming up.

"That right, kid?" Mr. O'Moore's eyes glinted under his pointy, perpetually arched brows. I was the baby of our work family.

"Shoot, yeah. I love to feel the heat!"

Laughing—a stagy Irish-lilted laugh—Mr. O sauntered toward me. In Ashtabula High, I never would've tried such a line. There, I slunk down the halls, books flattening my breasts. Weekend nights, watching TV, Dad gave annoyingly sympathetic throat rumbles.

When the phone rang and it wasn't—ever—for me, Dad would sigh through his nose. Wherever I was in the house, I'd hear him.

"Scuse-ee *moi*." Mr. O's pants leg brushed my bare secretly bruised thigh. I stayed bent. The supply closet door thumped. Once, Mr. O's hand had strayed from the small of my back to the curve of my ass. I'd stood perfectly still, my spine electrified.

"Wanna feel it too?" I lifted a cold popcorn bag from him, hoisted it, let loose an explosion of pale bouncing puffs.

"Mmmm, yes." His brows bobbed, capsized Vs. He had a pudgy middle-aged face, but his green eyes were a twelve-year-old boy's. He rested his reddish haired hand beside mine, the hairs tickling my thumb. Already the glass was hot. "Someday." He deepened his phony brogue. "I'll have to tell you my life story."

"Oh?" My thumb stiffened, but I didn't move it.

"You remembered! 'The Story of O.'" He elbowed me and I giggled like Kim or Dee. There, in the merciful chocolate and maroon shadows of the Cinema Capri, there and nowhere else, I passed. Pretty. Even—I imagined Mr. O imagining—popular. "A private screening, you and Freddy-boy both, right Lisa? Sweet Lees?"

I nodded, my smile stalled. My stomach retightened, coated from the inside now with chill goopy green, hardening fast. Why, *why* had I ever used his real name?

"Yo." Glass swung again. I stared up in alarm, then relief.

"Hey, Nolan!" I gave what I intended to be a bright but sad smile. Bette Davis in *The Petrified Forest*. Nolan nodded across the lobby, maybe meeting my eyes behind his shades. Duke Mantee, the world-famous killer who was *hungry*. He wrote poetry. The girl Cathy Bullock replaced had typed his poems for him, for a fee.

"Looks tasty." He leaned on my glass, opposite Mr. O. I gave a mock sigh, squeezing yellow oil from a dish-detergent-style bottle. Nolan smelled of unshowered sweat. Oil dribbled into the heating pan in thick soap globs.

"Mmm. Just like Ma used to manu-fac-ture."

I didn't raise my eyes. Nolan was thirty or so. Acne scars showed behind his beard and mustache and shaggy hair. Usually, he hung close to the lobby walls, blending into the chocolate. Someday, I hoped he'd ask me to type his poems. Sometimes I imagined him up in his dark projection booth imagining me, masturbating maybe. He had what Kim would call That Smell. Like, she'd say, he wants it bad.

"How come you never eat this stuff?" Nolan crunched corn.

I wiped my oily fingers on a paper napkin. "C-cause I know how long it lies back there." Even as my voice and fingertips trembled, my words come with an ease I felt nowhere else. "I-in those trash bags. An' I don't drink Coke anymore either! I mean, if you *clean* the machine and see what Coke boils down to. Sticky black crud."

"Someone call me?" Mr. O scooped a handful of corn, his arm brushing mine.

"Bet it's like bubble gum." I leaned on the glass to steady myself. Was this, I wondered, the last time I'd be able to flirt with them, as her? "If you swallow gum, it takes years to digest. Nine years!"

"Freddy tell you that one?" Mr. O'Moore gave his snort of a laugh; Nolan gave his twitch of a grin. I stared down through the hot glass.

"Look kinda pale, Lees. You OK?"

I blinked up at Nolan, his hidden eyes.

"Got some punk kid followin' her," Mr. O'Moore told him, voice Bogart low. "He shows up here, we'll hafta take care o' him, huh?" Mr. O elaborately cracked his knuckles, and I giggled again, letting myself feel—for a last moment?—safe.

"Time t' rock an roll." Cathy B swiveled on her stool, her greenish hair swinging. Glass doors swung too, slowly, pushed by someone who didn't expect their weight.

"Take it easy, Lees," Nolan told me, sidling off to his projection booth door. Mr. O'Moore, all business, strode across the lobby and stood behind two metal poles, which supported, between them, a velvet rope furred by dust.

Weigle, Wiggle. I scooped ice and popcorn, counted change for the scant Thursday night crowd. Each time the doors whooshed, I stared up, tensed up. Could I pretend this Fred wasn't the one I'd mentioned so often? That the jerk who followed me happened to have the same name? I slathered gleaming oil over dried-out popcorn. My cash door jumped open, bumping my pelvic bone. Who knew what he—they—might do if they really did show up? "Sorry!" Change clanked glass, my fingers slick.

"Oh Lisa, you're on." Mr. O'Moore nodded at me as the cheerful preview music rose up inside the theater. I cracked open a hard-packed column of quarters. The coins spilled into the cash tray with satisfying clatter.

"Coming!" Sweet Lisa loved to do the doors. I flicked wrapper from

my slippery fingers like eggshell. Maybe the phone call had been a fake, a bluff. My short skirt fluttered on my legs; Mr. O'Moore followed me, idly, with his eyes, warming my skin.

The theater's padded double doors stood propped open. In time to the heady beat of the Coming Soon theme, I took hold of the velveteen rope handles. Breathing in the fusty taste of the theater itself—a more potent brew of the lobby smells—I stepped back. Triumphantly, at the music's highest swell, I pulled shut the doors and turned with a wide starlet's smile. I stared: not Lisa, not Alisa, not able to find any new face at all for the boy who stood in the maroon and chocolate center of the lobby, looking at first utterly unfamiliar.

Wiggle, he was called at Ashtabula High. One of his legs was slightly shorter than the other. Yet—in some way I couldn't figure—Fred Weigle hung out with, was “in” with, Kim Carr and Dee Laney. Kim and Dee stood side by side in the gym locker room, naked, laughing with perfect ease. Kim was the prettiest and poorest; Dee was her best friend, her straight man. Kim looked better than Dee in Dee's clothes. They lived in my new subdivision, Dee in the center with me and Kim on the outskirts. On the way to the bus, I'd walk beside Dee who walked beside Kim, swinging her backpack in imitation of Kim. Should I imitate Dee, become a blurred third carbon?

Kim Carr, Kim Carr. She belonged to no clubs, wasn't a cheerleader or a Deadhead, but she was everywhere, grinning. Her hair swung below her shoulders, permed into a tangled-looking frenzy of curls, ahead of its time. Her eyelashes were as blond as her hair but brushed with sooty black. Her mother was, she liked to say, a drunk. Whenever she said that, I nodded slowly, as if I understood. Whatever kept my own mother on the couch all afternoon couldn't be summed up so easily. Still, I nodded. Not that Kim bothered to notice my nod. Not that I expected her to notice.

We'd moved to Ashtabula in September. In October, I'd watched from the bus window as Kim had kissed her Mick Jagger-esque boyfriend good-bye in a swirl of new snow. Then she'd clambered onto the bus, sat down beside me, whispered as if to a spying child,

"His teeth felt so cold!" She gave her great wide friendly grin. The Kim grin.

In November, I began to loan her lunch money, buying myself a place at her table. I'd never get it back unless I asked; she and I both knew I'd never ask. Thanks a lot A-lisa, she'd say each time, pronouncing my name carefully, maybe mockingly.

In South Carolina, a gang of girls had followed me around. "Hey, Alisa. Hey there, Alisa." The first time, I answered in my stiff Northern accent: "Hey there!" They smiled, turned their backs, took one step away before bursting into shrieks of laughter.

Pretending to befriend. The next dozen or so times they tried that line, I didn't answer. In Ashtabula High, Fred Weigle and I sat at the ends of the table, the outskirts. Kim and Dee giggled over their trays in the center, barely touching their food, other girls flitting in and out of sight, in and out of favor. Some days Fred paid for Kim's lunch. Sometimes Fred told jokes, singing all the words to the "Brady Bunch" theme, acting out "Saturday Night Live" skits. Roseann Roseanna Danna. Me, I hardly ever tried to join the chatter. I never mentioned movies, the old stars I loved. I watched quietly, keeping, I felt, my cool. Nobody's fool. I'd bought myself a place to sit, that was all. A way to avoid standing like a wallflower with my tray. I liked disliking Kim, watching her roll her eyes behind other dumber girls' backs. I liked to think I was using Kim more than she was using me, my spare change.

By December, anyway, I'd begun my job, my secret life, at the Cin Capri. I'd never yet imagined I could be Lisa outside that dim lobby, out of uniform. But at lunch, I did like to imagine Mr. O or Nolan gazing through the steamy cafeteria windows, seeing Lisa at a crowded laughing table, just where they'd expect her to be.

In January, unexpectedly, Kim and Dee walked with me to the garage of a never-to-be-finished house being built in our subdivision. Never before had they included me in anything after school. We huddled behind a plywood-and-plaster wall and smoked cigarettes. I pretended to inhale. Wondering, warily, what was up. Fred likes you, Dee told me, her breath a smoky cloud, and Kim grinned, nodded. The next morning, in what I hoped was a detached way, I eyed Fred on the bus, wondering not so much *Do I like him?* as: *Is he presentable? Presentable, anyway, for Alisa?*

He had almost no eyebrows. He had a bobbing Adam's apple and

that wiggly walk. Still, he was tall and lean and he took care to dress in cool jeans. His T-shirts advertised not his own interests but everyone else's. The Bee Gees, The Fonz. His shoulders were bony but broad. He worked backstage on school plays, but—though he could be a ham in private—he never did any acting. Officially.

At Ashtabula High, when school clubs were to be photographed for the yearbook, a popular jock had announced photo locations over the intercom. Behind the bleachers, in front of the flagpole. When he got to the Thespians, the jock requested that "all lesbians rally round the Fag pole."

That year, I was a chorus girl in *Funny Girl*. Back row, as befit Alisa. Fred was a techie. All February, he and I hammered sets, together. We discussed '30s movies, '40s clothes, '60s songs. Only rarely ourselves. "Gotta build my pecs," Fred told me once in his flat nasal voice. "Coach Bo-bo, in gym class? He's really got it in for me." Here, still hammering, Fred met my eyes as if I in particular might understand why. "These football games, and he lines *me* up against the biggest hunk of jock he can find. And we stand there face to face, all of us waiting for the play, and I whisper to the Hulk, I mean I try to cut a deal with him. I tell him, Listen: you *know* I'm not going to *touch* your quarterback. I mean *I* won't make a move if *you* don't make a move."

Our hammers halted. It felt good, when we were alone, to laugh without effort.

With Kim and Dee, Fred's voice rose to an eager pitch, imitating teachers, criticizing their clothes. Polyester skirts, blouses with bows. Sometimes, he'd eye girls across the cafeteria, wiggle his thin brows, give an overdone Groucho Marx leer. "A guy can dream, can't he?" He'd avoid my eyes, both of us embarrassed by how loudly Kim and Dee would laugh.

Fred likes you, Dee murmured to me every morning as we huddled together in the cold, waiting for our bus. Her breath showed like the cleanest purest smoke.

I scuffed at slush. Dee gave her imitation Kim grin. Did she, like Dad, imagine me to be defective, sadly sexless? Did she suppose, mistakenly, no man would ever want to touch my ass? How little they know, I liked to tell myself on the bus, hiding Lisa's half-smile, studying the pale back of Fred's neck.

In April, *Funny Girl* opened. We shuffled through three tense anti-

climactic performances. Fred squeezed my hand after I took my back-row bows on closing night. He wants to talk to you, Dee whispered to me the next day in the steamy clatter of the cafeteria. Then, all at once, Fred and I were walking back from lunch alone together, down the long central corridor. None of it felt real, least of all the words Fred was saying, making himself say, I sensed.

“. . . long time now, I mean I really like having lunch with you.” He veered closer to me, his elbow bumping mine. Other eyes flickered toward us. How did we look together? I wondered uneasily, the first but far from last time I’d ask myself such a question. (Years later, walking in public with an all-too-handsome lover, soon to be an ex-lover, I’d worry that the eyes flickered only for him; in every couple, he had explained to me, coolly and unblinkingly, one person is . . . the lucky one).

“You being,” Fred lowered his voice, mock-reverent, “so popular and all.”

“Me?” For a dumb dream second, I wondered if this could possibly be true. If somehow, without knowing it, I’d turned into Lisa, for real.

“Of course,” Fred answered with such exaggerated enthusiasm that I stared. Was he trying to warn me? “Of course you know . . . you know you’re really really popular.”

I started walking faster. He struggled to keep up. Without looking, I sensed Kim and Dee’s presence, as if they were hurrying along not far behind us.

At the door of Home Ec, Fred and I came to an awkward halt. Both of us breathing hard. I stared at his long untucked T-shirt: *I Can’t Believe I Ate The Whole Thing*. There must have been other people around, voices and banging locker doors. Fred turned to me, shockingly close. His breath smelled of macaroni and cheese. His eyebrows were light as down. His pale grey eyes were averted. Lashes pale too. He seemed to be trying to remember something, some line.

“Fred?” I asked, feeling his cool breath on my neck.

“Alisa?” He looked up at me. His eyes were almost white, almost beautiful, like opals. Our gazes could not seem to meet. “I wanted to tell you . . . tell you to . . .” He bent forward. It was my first kiss, warm dry lips brushing mine. “Fuck off.”

I blinked. A punch line, misfired. A dud. A shocking pair of words, though, at the time. “Sorry,” Fred mumbled. The one thing he said that sounded natural.

I blinked again. And he was gone, Fred Weigle; he had bolted into the crowded clamor of the hallway, leaving me alone in the Home Ec doorway.

A bell rang over my head, shattering air. A second shock that made me jump and stare around. Maybe someone had seen the kiss but nothing else, nothing after. Alisa's single half-assed hope. The bell cut itself short.

In Home Ec, I sat at a sewing machine and watched a needle dart up and down, barely missing my finger. No doubt Kim and Dee felt sure I'd fallen for it, sure my hopes had been raised, then dashed. At least I had the satisfaction of knowing that wasn't so, wasn't true. I pictured Mr. O's hand on my ass, trying not to remember how it had felt, really. How it had frightened me. I hummed my favorite song from *To Have and Have Not*, changing the "we" as I so often did. How little they know. I closed my eyes, feeling the needle's motion, crazily close to my fingertip. Cross my heart, Hope to die, Stick a needle in her eye, Tell my mother it wasn't I.

The rest of the day I avoided them—in the halls, on the bus. That afternoon, like so many afternoons, I heard Mother turn on the TV as I came up the front steps. Frantic canned laughter. "Let's Make a Deal." When I slipped into the living room, she was lying on the couch, watching. She hadn't been watching before, of course. She'd just been lying there.

My smile was gone before I saw Dee and Kim hovering behind him. From across the maroon-shadowed lobby, Kim Carr met my eyes. Her blue eyes stood out in her face, intensified by a new blue-green top of Dee's. She met my gaze straight on, as if she knew I was imagining a needle through her eyeball. Slowly, she broke into her widest Kim grin. That friendly grin, shockingly genuine.

"He wanted to see this movie," she called over to me in a you-know-how-Fred-is voice. She flipped back her extravagant tangle of curls. Out, I wanted to tell her, order her. She grinned again, seeming eager for me to respond, almost shy. Shy but sly. With her unblinking blue gaze, she let me know that, yes, she made Fred kiss me, yes, she'd told me to fuck off, and what now—she was curious—was I going to do? How was I going to act?

Coming Soon music swelled up behind me, muffled by padded doors. Between us, Fred himself stood awkwardly, his Adam's apple bobbing. His downcast face looked unhealthily pale against the chocolate walls, his eyebrows all but invisible. No, I told myself clearly, feeling Mr. O watch from his post behind the dust-furred velvet rope. No: Fred Weigle was *not* presentable, not even as Alisa's boy. Not that Alisa mattered, here in the Cin Capri.

"Hi." I took a strengthening breath of popcorn-and-cigarette air. Brushing past them, I met Mr. O'Moore's mildly curious gaze and rolled my eyes. That felt good. The right tone. Mr. O raised his brows and cast an amused green glance at Fred. Then, all business, he turned to the cash machine with his metal cup of ticket stubs.

"No so-so," Cathy B murmured. I bent to straighten the jumbled boxes of jujubes and M&Ms and Red Hots, thankful no one had happened to mention Fred's name. His name, their names, had no place here. Inside the theater, muffled opening credit music had begun, a smattering of applause at the names of the stars. Slight, self-conscious applause. The padded theater doors whooshed open, then shut.

"Alisa?"

Without looking up, I knew Fred was standing alone in the lobby. Mr. O'Moore was murmuring to Cathy in his business tone, annoyed by something. Their heads bent together so his scanty reddish brown hair brushed her plentiful greenish blond.

"I just love Lauren Bacall in this."

Closer now. I glanced up, saw Fred standing at my counter. I tried to look through him the way customers looked through me. "And this lob-by," he went on in his nasal voice, carefully expressionless, harking back to the only natural conversations we'd ever had. Alone, away from Kim and Dee, hammering sets. "Got to be, I'd say, nineteen fif-ty . . ." Fred was narrowing his eyes, turning to appraise the gold gilt that lined the chocolate walls like nibbled bits of foil wrapper. "Fifty-seven."

For once, Fred's face was flushed. Two smudges showed in his sunken cheeks like blush powder, inexpertly applied. Backstage, I'd seen him eye those Thespian actors in their makeup. Now, Fred looked as confused as I felt. Silently, I willed him not to say anything about the kiss. Not here. He stared down. "Sorry," he mumbled for the second and last time. "Sorry, Alisa. Really." Had Dee and Kim put him up to this, too?

I bent and scooped a paper cup of ice. Then I turned on my heel and stepped into the dark supply closet, half-shutting the door behind me. I shivered in my short skirt, licked ice with the tip of my tongue. The air smelled of cold popcorn, what we called dead popcorn. White trashbags lined the walls like inflated brains, bulging with tiny bumps, popped kernels. The movie played its distant music. Bogart is striding into the bar, confronting Lauren Bacall. He knows she's just picked a man's pocket. At first she won't admit it, then she does. That's when he starts to like her. I touched one popcorn bag, expecting it to be heavy and dense, stupidly surprised to find it light as styrofoam. It moved: the bag, the whole wobbly pile. A blimp, ready to lift.

"Leesha?" Mr. O called in a Bogartian whisper. "Coast clear, shweetheart."

I poked my head out, blinked in the maroon light. The lobby was blessedly empty. Mr. O'Moore was leaning on my glass counter, crunching corn. "That was the . . . boy?" His reddish brows leaped. Sam Spade, sniffing Peter Lorre's perfumed handkerchief.

I took a breath, steadying my voice. "Yeah, the one who . . . follows me."

"Oh?" Mr. O'Moore arched his brows to their sharpest points. Behind him, across the lobby, Cathy B giggled, though not at us.

"He's kinda weird," I ventured with an uncertain smile.

"Oh?" Mr. O asked in a fruity Julia Child voice, and I widened my smile, all at once less uncertain. I thought of Fred's unconvincing Groucho leer, his careful clothes.

"Well." Mr. O'Moore set his clipboard on the glass counter, waved a rubber-wristed hand. Turning, he minced off across the lobby toward his dark cave of an office, an unmistakable wiggle in his walk. I laughed, loud and clear.

"Yeah, like *tell* me about it," Cathy B murmured.

I bent to count candy. On Mr. O'Moore's clipboard, I marked my numbers in Sweet Lisa's handwriting, rounder and firmer than my own. Jujubes, M&Ms, a dozen unsold Red Hots. Nobody liked Red Hots anymore. I retraced the numbers, pretending to add. Back home, Mother might be asleep, asleep till midnight or so. Sometimes I woke then too. The night before, I'd crept downstairs, turned on the latest late show, waited for her to join me. Knowing she could hear the voices: one of our old favorites, Ida Lupino. But she kept on pacing,

upstairs. And this night? I spritzed, wiped the glass clear. This night, I decided, I'd sleep; I'd make myself sleep.

It wasn't till near the end of the picture, when the first strains of "How Little We Know" reached me in the lobby, that Kim and Dee and Fred emerged, blinking and giggling. Anyway, Kim and Dee were giggling. Fred—walking in front, hesitating like a hostage pushed along from the rear—kept a straight face. His T-shirt was tucked in now, formally, showing only *I Can't Believe*. No doubt he'd rather have stayed in the dark theater with Bogart and Bacall. No doubt Kim and Dee's giggling annoyed him as it did me. I felt again, as he approached me, the old silent sense of kinship we'd shared as we sat with them at lunch, as we hammered the sets, side by side.

"I love Lauren Bacall in that dress," Fred touched my glass, then moved his hand back so not to smudge the clean heated surface. I didn't look up, picturing the slinky black dress Lauren Bacall wore as she sang, midriff bare except for the black ring that held the two halves of the dress together.

"I bet you do." I was looking at Fred, his palest grey eyes. Behind him I caught Kim's impenetrable blue eye, outlined in darkest soot. Both her light eyebrows curved up. Dee was watching Kim, waiting for some cue. Inside the theater, Hoagy Carmichael meandered into a solo on his piano. Across the lobby, Cathy B dozed with her greenish blond hair spread over the counter like something spilled.

"And that voice." Here Fred started to smile and I would have smiled back at him, a week before. Fred had a slow smile, one that needed encouragement. "I love it, it's so fake. D'you know who dubbed this song? I mean it's not really Lauren Bacall singing. It's a man, y'know? Andy Williams?"

Behind Fred, Kim began her own smug slow-spreading grin, as if what he was saying was some private joke, understood only by Dee and herself. As if I couldn't possibly get it. "How little we know," a sexy sexless voice was singing. Pressing my lips into a hard line, I leaned over the counter. Lisa, in full uniform. Soon to burst the bonds of that uniform. For the first time since the kiss, Fred met my eyes, his grey gaze turning translucent. Was he trying to cut a deal with me, a silent deal? My voice came out shaky but clear. "Bet you wish it was Andy Williams. In that dress."

Here Kim's grin froze, only half-finished. Her blue eyes bright-

ened. She darted a glance at Dee. No one spoke. Then, decisively, Kim threw back her head and opened her wide mouth. Then Dee, then me. Fred managed a tense off-center smile, watching us laugh, his opal eyes gleaming as they hadn't done when he kissed me. He stepped back from the counter, one twitch in his reddened cheek. I drew another breath of salt and smoke, feeling even more light-headed. Empty inside, exhilarated too.

"Shhh," I told Kim and Dee in a stagy whisper. "He's . . . he's not herself today."

More giggles, knowing giggles. My own smile faltered. Fred said "ha ha" in a dry, shaken sort of voice. But I began laughing again, louder, Kim and Dee joining in, loud too, as if we three were savoring some long-awaited punch line.

"Not her-self," Dee gasped. Always repeating what someone else said. Her blank bright eyes lit on mine. We started to laugh again, the three of us, my laugh loudest though I no longer felt like laughing at all. I hated the sound of it, my laugh mixing with theirs. Fred had taken a few unsteady steps. He studied the *To Have and Have Not* poster, leaning on his shorter leg.

Cathy stirred, groaned, raised her head, squinted as if through thick liquid.

"See you." Giggling, Kim Carr gave me a last glance over her shoulder. I looked down at my glass, trying to catch my breath. She and Dee were turning back toward the theater doors. Inside my stomach, I felt something small and hard and shriveled, something that might take years to digest. I looked up, my eyes narrowed as if to aim a shot at their backs. Dee's straight carefully brushed blondish brown hair fell neatly to her shoulders, making Kim's hair look even wilder. From behind, their shirts and jeans were identical, just like my own, hanging at home in my closet.

Fred Weigle turned too, more slowly, his broad bony shoulders stiffened as if to accept some unexpected weight. "How Little We Know" was fading fast. He followed Kim and Dee at a distance, managing for once to control the wiggle in his walk. The back of his neck looked especially white. I drew my breath to call his name. Maybe, all along, the kiss *had* been more of a joke on him than me. I let my breath go as the theater doors whooshed shut behind him. Salt, smoke. I drew a deeper breath. Maybe, I told myself numbly, I could make it seem that way, make Kim and dumb Dee believe that I'd

been in on the joke all along. That Fred was the one, the only one, who hadn't seen it coming.

At quarter till eleven, when almost everyone had gone, I zipped my denim jacket over *Lisa*. The candy counter shone, wiped clear yet again. The candy count was in, the hot butter machine turned off. Mr. O'Moore—all business at this stage, no Bogart lisp—sat hunched in the back office like a genuine gangster, counting the take. He'd lifted the cash drawer from my hands with a brief distracted nod, as if he'd never touched my ass. I'd nodded back. Cathy Bullock had wobbled off with her boyfriend to do some more of whatever drug it was they did. At the doors, she'd murmured to him, enigmatically, "Gidget grows up, y'know?"

And me. I was leaning on the front counter, blocking the shrouded cash register, facing the double door glass. Kim and Dee had given me an offhand wave as they'd left, and I'd found myself waving back. The moment I'd raised it, my hand had felt heavy. I wanted to give them the finger or something, as the glass swung. I still wanted to the next day, in the halls of Ashtabula High, when I found myself not only waving back, but walking over to them, walking away with them.

(Years later, I'd vow again and again to confront my lover, break it off—only to find myself, in his presence, overwhelmed by it: his sheer physical presence, his coin-perfect profile. The first time I'd woken up with him and met his beautiful though bleary blue eyes, I'd felt as if I had, at last, told Kim Carr to fuck off. Though even then, that morning, my own gaze wavered first; even then, I saw myself as he saw me: the 'lucky one').

I raised my eyes. The chocolate and maroon shadows had melted together. The peeling gold glitter that lined the walls was hidden. Fred Weigle must have left by the side entrance that night, invisible already, soon to be all but invisible too in the halls and cafeteria of Ashtabula High. A relief for him, maybe, to be dropped by them. To stop pretending. That's what I tried to tell myself at the time. Alisa's half-assed hope. Something she could understand. Yes: maybe he'd hated making Groucho leers at girls in the cafeteria, making himself kiss me so he wouldn't have to say another word.

I fingered my jacket zipper. Lisa. My parents had never seen that name. I washed my uniform myself, separately. Lauren Bacall had two names too. One real, one Hollywood. A-lissa, Kim had mispronounced it as she'd waved good-bye. Lissa, Liss, Lice: she'd made my name ugly, too. And it was, I told myself. My real name.

Behind me, I heard Nolan slipping down his stairs. How could he walk in the dark in his shades? I straightened as his secret door whooshed open. All winter, hearing my footsteps on the front porch, Mother had leaned forward on the couch to switch on the TV. I'd made my steps extra loud: her cue.

Nolan coughed, startlingly close. I was poised in front of Cathy's counter, leaning on my elbows. "Hey, Lees?" Nolan smelled of stale sweat and freshly smoked pot, his smell especially strong in the dark. His voice sounded huskier than ever. "What's up?"

I turned my face. If I'd first seen Nolan on a sidewalk, I'd have hurried past. Kim or Dee would have too, giggling. I liked the idea that gentle Nolan might scare them a little. His shades glinted. Only his white nose showed, his beard and shaggy hair blending into the lobby darkness. My own face felt shiny and exposed, all my makeup worn thin. No doubt my thigh bruises had darkened under those thin pink smears.

"Something wrong?" Nolan reached up, his hand white. He had trouble unhooking his glasses. His eyes emerged, moist and hopelessly bloodshot, barely any whites visible. He peered at me, squinting. His glasses must have been prescription after all, real glasses disguised as shades.

"I . . . I'm worried about my mom." I blinked, my eyes unexpectedly wet. "She," I hesitated, my voice as husky as his. South Carolina slow. "She—y' know—drinks a lot."

Headlights swung into the parking lot and lit the double glass, lit half my face. Could Mother, lying at home on the couch, sense my disloyalty? Could she tell that—for the first but not the last time—I'd invented a story to explain her, gain a moment of sympathy? Dad's car, outside, rocked into its halt.

"Hey, it'll be OK," Nolan murmured in his burnt-smelling voice. Then, his hand lit by Dad's headlights, he touched my shoulder. A shy friendly touch. I blinked.

Could Dad see us now, two shadowy figures? I glanced at Nolan's lit-up face as if we were, in fact, passing on a sidewalk: his eyes dark

and unfocused, his acne scars showing, his shaggy hair hanging down past his shoulders, years out of date. He gave my arm an awkward squeeze. I stood still, posing beside him in the light. Nolan's hand began to stiffen, ready to let go. Before it could move, I did.

I turned and bent toward him. His face expanded like a face on the big screen, his burnt wood breath stopping me short. My lips barely brushed his. It wasn't a kiss, not really, but it must have looked like one.

"Hey?" Nolan called behind me as I turned again, stumbling. The first but certainly not the last time I'd find myself making a move toward a man with no intention of following through. For weeks afterwards, I'd hurry out before Nolan came down. I pressed my hands on my cold glass reflection. Nolan's voice rose, hoarse and hopeful. "Hey Lee—" I pushed through before he could finish the name.

Not mine, I told myself. Before I even reached our car, I was bending, ducking. No: that hadn't been me at all. I slammed the door so hard my father didn't at first make a sound. No cough, no sigh, no attempt to clear his unclearable throat. But I felt him stare at me through the vibrating dark, felt the warmth of his silenced breath.

In *To Have and Have Not*, when a woman turns out to be a coward under fire—not Lauren Bacall but the second lead, poor pouty Dolores Moran—her French resistance fighter husband tells Bogart she must be forgiven. She eez, he says in his fake French accent, not herself.

"So." Dad gave a weary, suspicious-sounding sigh as he shifted into drive. Officially suspicious. Yet underneath, I heard, I thought, that hesitant note of hope. "So you met with this . . . Fred?"

I managed a slow shrug, wondering how much Dad had been able to see. "Sure." Halfheartedly, I tried to give the word an insolent edge. A popular girl, a Lisa, engrossed in her sexual secrets. The sort of girl I imagined my father wanted me to be. Never before had I tried her voice outside the theater. But Dad's car, after all, was dark. As we pulled away, Dad sighed again and reached for the radio. Maybe too tired to push, maybe not wanting to push, find my lie. Maybe his breath was already growing heavier than ever. I wouldn't have noticed. I huddled close to the chilled windowpane, its shifting, quivering reflection. Oh yeah? Humphrey Bogart asks, cool and disdainful. Who is she?

White Eggplant

Since she's not in a hurry—not ever, anymore—Lydia Zimmer takes time to read the signs. Loose Carrots, Cherry Tomatoes, Pickling Cukes. She nods, stopping her cart beside a bin. Purple Top Turnips, Lemon Curd. And she squints, her eyes in the mornings clear but dry. California Seedless. Another cart pushes around her, a young mother with wild unbrushed hair, or maybe it's supposed to look that way.

"Ex-cuse me," the mother mutters over her bare shoulder.

"Accuse me," Lydia murmurs back, gripping the handle of her cart with both hands, her fingerbones aching. Bare-armed and bare-legged and smelling frankly of sweat, the mother noses her own cart between

the Loose Carrots and the Curd. Supermarket lights drain her white-blond hair of shine and color. Her blond fuzzy-headed baby is whimpering. Its hair, too, looks dyed. And could that be a thin cigarette in its lips?

"Hush up." The mother halts her cart. Sniffing, the baby twists in its plastic seat to stare back at Lydia, wide-eyed, wet-eyed. "Just you wait, you." Abruptly, the mother turns heel, her hair vanishing like a bushy tail. Her sweat scent hovers. Lydia feels herself stiffen, eye to eye with the baby boy. His cigarette stick bobs. His whimper jars the fluorescent supermarket stillness.

Usually, Lydia loves shopping alone. The smell of cheese and apples, the company of mute food. Thirty-some years ago, she'd leave the kids with Sid and sneak off on weeknights, lingering a bit even then, when she had to be back by nine to herd the kids into bed, Sid konked out on the couch. His snores sounded vigorous, impatient.

Lyd, he'd always say, chopping short her mother's lilting name. Lyd and Sid, he liked to introduce them, as if she were jaunty and full of fun too, as if she weren't, in fact, a true Lydia. Tending her African violets, settling into long intent Scrabble matches with her dear mother, dead now, her one worthy opponent. The two of them would bow over the board, seemingly tense. Secretly serene.

Look alive, Lyd, Sid was always saying in his last year, when he'd tag along to the supermarket, startling her from her trances. We haven't got, he'd claim, all day.

"Lah-ee," the baby is telling her now, insisting. He waves his stick in one chubby fist, conducting himself, trying to conduct her too. Nine AM or so, the other aisles nearly empty. Lydia looks down and picks at a filmy plastic bag, inching apart the layers, thin as onion skin. But strong, stretchable.

She lifts a head of lettuce—iceberg—pleasantly frosty and light. Her knees ache. A garden: that's what she'll never get, up on the thirty-third floor. Just three furry Africans. Lights hum now like the sunlamp she switches on once a day for them. Her shy Vies.

"Lah-lee."

Lydia looks up to see the baby hurl his cigarette into the Loose Carrots. No smoke. A lollipop, was it? Sucked and abandoned. He squashes his wet lips together, stares defiantly from the stick to Lydia. Sighing, she squints beyond his fuzzy head. Yes: his mother paws

through the frozen meat, bent in her halter top, her shoulder blades curved. Firm flesh, savagely tan. Lydia had hurried past Meat and its brutal signs.

Hog Maws, Bottom Round Rump Roast.

The baby gulps a mouthful of nothing. As Lydia begins maneuvering her cart around him, he lets loose a hungry howl. The metal bars of his cart seem to vibrate: a zoo cage. Lydia's head hums. Simulated African sun, a mere ghost of the real thing. Poor things. No wonder their purple has dulled to lavender, an old-lady color, pretty and pale, the sort Lydia wears but never did like.

She eases to a stop. His howl strains to reach her, a few feet behind her, but she studies her head of lettuce. Blinks, her lids sticking. Is she going to eat this? Ever? She works her jaw. The whole idea of chewing seems impossibly strenuous. She blinks again, a faint burn in her eyes. He half-chokes on a throatful of tears.

Swaying with her next step, an unexpected sway, Lydia pictures the bushy-haired young mother bent over an open fire, tearing meat with her teeth, chewing it up and spitting it out into her baby's gaping mouth. At the old supper table, Lydia used to slice the children's meat, chew her own. At the other end, Sid would bend over his plate. Careful to keep his mouth closed, for her. My, how he loved his Sunday roast. How he tried, in his last years, to keep chewing it, shifting his teeth. Funny thing, she doesn't miss them much, her own. Secretly, inside her mouth, her tongue touches her upper plate. It sticks.

Lettuce, shredded wheat, milk to soften the shredded wheat. Lydia peers again into her cart, squinting through the boy's last sputters. She shuffles forward another step, slow to lift her feet in her heavy rubber-soled shoes. A dirty brown root confronts her, ham-sized, chopped off at both ends. In the earth, it would plunge and plunge. Above its bin hangs a helpful sign, Peel and Boil.

Lydia blinks to wet her eyes, blur the words. Too many today. Only hours before, hadn't her breakfast box tried to tell her, persuade her that she might want to melt cheese and tuna fish—tuna!—over a square of shredded wheat? A Tasty Treat!

"Lah-lee," he squawls, freshly inspired. His mother is stalking back toward the cart, wielding a family pack of raw pork. Her skin tan, the pork pale. Her job to feed him, thank the Lord. Lydia licks

her lips, a quick lizard flick of her tongue. What she does these days instead of smiling, in public.

“. . . up, I said hush up or I'll smack you. Want me t' smack you?"

Yes, presumably. A small sound in the vast near-empty market. As if to make up for the disappointing smallness of the smack, the boy gives a hoarse shuddering sob that tightens Lydia's shoulders, sets a crick in her neck as she starts to turn her head, then stops herself, picturing his hot red face streaming. Wanting to touch that fresh wetness and yet at the same time glad she doesn't have to.

Red meat. She bows over her cart, shuffles forward, shivering under her blue cotton dress. Her flesh feels, these days, like a form of cloth, another thin inadequate covering. The straps of her brassiere bite into her ribs, the cups only half-filled. It's her bones that ache these days. Not her flesh so much, anymore.

"Lee. Wan Lee."

Lydia stops to rub her arms. Iceberg, Let us. Too cold in here to think of salad. Something hot, instead. Chopped vegetables simmering together in her old iron pot. That makes sense, doesn't it? Even in summer? The kid stops sobbing—another pop stuffed in his mouth, no doubt. Fluorescent lights resume their comforting hum. Lydia bends into Idaho's Finest, her hidden nipples tingling. Faintly, strangely. Stew, she thinks. Along with the word, she grips a potato. Hefts it, solid and dusty. Hold it, Lyd. Please hold it? Sid's slow wheedling salesman voice, the roast and onion smell on his breath, and sometimes, hushing him, she'd take it in her hands. Swollen and crinkly smooth, a rich dark purple, her favorite color. In a way, she liked it better in her hands, where she could touch it, stroke it, take her time.

She sets the potato gently in the cart, on the plastic baby seat beside the iceberg head. No bag; she doesn't want to bag it, poor thing. But she squints down at it and the lettuce together, something missing.

"Scuse us, dear!" Another Mother For Peace bends over Lydia's cart, grips two potatoes in one knuckly hand. Her T-shirt stretches on her broad back, the bright yellow words plain to see, no bra straps digging into her shoulders. Her hair hangs down, straight and brown. Another Mother. Lydia feels her cart jostle as this mother straightens, her unbound breasts swinging. Flesh melons. Her chunky brown-haired daughter watches Lydia watch. Lydia's breasts were more like

peaches, really, not much bigger than that. Steadying herself, Lydia blinks at the potato, its pinched underworld eyes.

"Me one too!" Gracelessly, Another Mother's daughter bends over Lydia's cart, her T-shirt shouting its own slogan in electric green letters. Save The Earth. "Please Mama?"

The girl's plump elbow pokes Lydia's bony forearm. Lydia stiffens as if one of her own had bolted out of the aisle and jumped her the way kids do, hungry for hugs, young and wild all over again. As if Sid hadn't been enough of a handful. Lydia clicks her tongue, remembering potato eyes gone wild, a sack of potatoes she'd bought and forgotten and one morning Sid had burst into the bathroom when she was in the tub, waving a monstrous potato head, its green roots vibrating like tentacles. She'd shrieked, splashed.

Then, even worse—Lydia watches the Earth girl reach out, straining her whole body, fumbling in the bin for the biggest ones—then there was the time with the pumpkin, canned pumpkin for a pie, quarter of a can left. Stupidly, she'd forgotten it in the back of the fridge, months maybe, Thanksgiving to Christmas. Christmas morning in front of everyone she'd unwrapped a second gift from Sid, a can, the pumpkin can, a lid scotch-taped back on top of it and an odd sour smell wafting up from it, and the kids all gathered round as she peeled it open. The girls had shrieked too, louder than her, though they didn't know yet what it looked like: the orange moldy mushroom thrusting up to the rim of the can and Sid laughing so hard his bald head turned its richest shade of red-purple and for two days, even after a bouquet of white violets, she wouldn't speak to him, couldn't smile.

Till now, thirty-some years later. At least Lydia starts to, her lips twitching. Earth girl straightens and glances at her, struggling to hold two potatoes in one hand. Sid Jr. and Sid and the girls had all stared so eagerly, their eyes wet with laughter. And what was wrong with her, what was so closed-up and shy, that she couldn't smile when they all wanted her to? Just like her poor mother, another Lydia.

Another Mother begins to pull away, slow as a train. Lydia's cart rattles, the handle jarring her lower ribs. Her heart.

"Mama, you bumped her!" The daughter's voice pipes up, and Lydia presses her lips into a tight quavery line, swaying. Can't take a joke, Sid had said, hurt in his way. A dirty joke, she'd answered in her mother's voice. Soft and yet not, not at all.

"You bumped that la-dy!" Beside Lydia, the brown-haired daughter stands on tiptoe, her adult-sized glasses sliding down her nose. "Say you're *sor-ry*, Mama." She exaggerates a nagging grown-up tone, armed with a potato in each fist. "*Ma-ma?*"

Lydia's hands tighten again on the cart handle, greasy plastic pressing her fingerbones.

"So sorry, ma'am." Another Mother sighs, side-glancing at her daughter. Lydia gives them both a brief dismissive nod. A denim knapsack bobs on the mother's shoulder as she pushes her cart forward, wearily. The daughter imitates her heavy tread, adding her own smug sway. Side by side, they turn a corner: yellow Peace, electric green Earth.

Lydia too takes a shuffling step, ready to follow the blue at a safe distance, out of Vegetables. Worn blue knapsack. Lydia stops, sucks in her breath. No weight dangles from her own elbow. Had she set it down somewhere, back before the Loose Carrots, the Pickling Cukes? Her shiny black purse? She blinks and her eyelids almost stick together, so dry.

"Make way," sings a low husky voice, a teenage black boy, a bag boy Lydia's seen before. Hasn't she? He jostles her cart, but gently, wheeling a tray of plastic berry baskets. He nods. Strawberries, yes. Their juice, their sweet heady smell, much fainter now than ever before. "Make way plea-ease."

Must everyone, these days, give the same sly half-mocking emphasis to the dearest old words? Sorry, please.

"cuse me," Lydia rasps, her tongue all at once dry, and she half-shuffles half-staggers forward, forgetting to turn. She leans on her cart, staring down into it. Shredded wheat, lettuce, potato. How do they, did they, ever connect?

Peel and Boil.

But what? Like a rowboat running ashore, her cart bumps into a last vegetable bin, refrigerated. A rear wall bin, lit up white. She squints, starts to back away. That's when she sees them. Arranged in a row above the avocados. When she sees them, she stops. Stops moving, breathing.

White Eggplant.

Slowly, two times, she reads those two words. Those letters. Scrabble squares, meaningless in themselves. Refusing to connect, make sense. She moves her eyes back down to the eggplants, set out

in a row alone, arranged on their shredded green cellophane like Easter eggs, outer space eggs. Something from another world, all white. They glow in their skins.

Slowly, Lydia Zimmer bends forward over her cart. She reaches out as if this is the last reach she'll ever attempt. She touches the eggplant as if it's the last thing she'll ever touch, the last she'd ever want to touch, hold.

Straightening up with effort, her head humming louder than the lights, she cradles the eggplant in both hands, strokes it like a breast in silk. That same weight. Years ago, in secret, she used to stroke her own full breasts in her nursing nightgown. Never again would she feel that swollen softness. But this in its way is better, perfect. On this eggplant, the silk is the flesh, one and the same. Its texture is slippery smooth yet not slippery at all. Oily yet not that, either. Lush. Silk made flesh. She can almost hear, almost feel the dense squishy mass of seeds inside, perfectly sealed. She keeps stroking the skin, shining it, drinking in with her eyes its creamy white sheen. Her knees wobble.

A stem presses through Lydia's dress, pokes her stomach just above her sunken navel, the stem prickly where it was chopped from the vine.

Might become a vegetable, they said of Sid after his last attack, as if nothing could be worse. And when, instead, he died, it was seen as a blessing. A vegetable, other old ladies say, their voices quivering. But, funny thing, Lydia Zimmer wouldn't mind, not really, not if she could become this vegetable, this eggplant, purest white.

Even harsh supermarket lights can't diminish its color, a white utterly unlike the yellowish white of Lydia's hair, drained of natural brown. No, this white is a color all its own, as rich as the deep purple of a regular eggplant. A color Lydia once loved, long ago, a word she once loved, secretly, one that began with the sound but not the letter O.

Oh, Lydia mouths in surprise. Mild surprise. All at once she is sitting on the supermarket floor beside the sticky rubber wheels of her cart, leaning against the refrigerated cool of the rear wall bin. A relief to her kneebones, her anklebones. And since she has—as Sid used to say, when he'd gotten skinny and old himself—no butt left, her tailbone presses the cold hard floor. Too much trouble to pull

herself up. She'd have to let go and she never wants to let go of it, this beautiful thing she's found at last.

Above her, the bag boy bends in his white smock, his motion brushing her skin, his brown face gleaming. The whites of his eyes gleam too, painfully expectant. Like Sid's oldest face, those last months when she'd inch out into the waiting room after talking to the doctor alone. He'd stare up at her, wanting her to tell him, as she always did, that he was going to be all right.

Peace, please. The bag boy seems to be speaking but she can't tell what he's saying. It's as if she doesn't have her hearing aid on, but of course she does.

Oh, she mouths again, this time to herself, still stroking the rich white skin, richer than any purple. How satisfying it is to hold, this shape: oval and yet not, its curves not evenly balanced. Its curves too smooth to be called lumps. Pear-shaped, yes, only more so. Rounder, fuller on top. A shape all its own, lopsided and whole. Oh Burr . . . something. She lowers her eyes and the white blurs. Oh, Burr and then a name, a name that could be both a man's and a woman's. Lunar white, moon grown. Cool plush dust on her fingertips. Oh, Burr.

Above her, hopelessly blurred, Another Mother waves something shiny and black and square. The brown-haired Earth daughter is bouncing on her toes, her glasses a gleam like the boy's eyes. A harder meaner gleam. She points her fat finger at Lydia Zimmer. How rude to point when everyone's staring at her already, aren't they? Lydia blinks, feels on her dry cheek a slight delicious trickle.

Another Mother hands the shiny square to the boy, holding it by its straps, trying to tell him something but he won't listen as he should. He turns instead to Lydia, bends so close she catches a whiff of his spicy sweat. He's hugging the black square to his chest and speaking again, enunciating clearly, his thick-lipped mouth opening like a baby bird's. Can't he see she's through with that, she's done all that? Can't he see?

Skin and bones, all that's left. She lowers her eyes. Its flesh, so much thicker than her own, has begun to grow warm in her hands. Her cold hands. Oh, Burr, Oh, Burr. She squeezes shut her eyes, feels another soothing trickle. She licks her lips, tastes salt, hot liquid salt, and she licks again, feeding herself now, only herself. She presses

it close to her stomach, low in her lap, thinking: Jean, Gene. And she clicks her tongue, secretly pleased, not caring how it connects, if it connects. Someone touches her shoulder but she has no intention of moving. She keeps hold of it, stroking its smooth cool sealed-up softness. Why rush? She's got, finally got—they can't take it—all day.

Number 8

Eyes like candy. Why should that frighten her? Hard candy, blue-green, smeared by a grainy sugar-dull glaze. This boy's skin is dulled too—soft, hairless, toneless. Thirteen years old, the teacher says. Ann nods, her skin prickling as the boy's stare fixes on her own but does not meet it. Something stirs in his eyes, though, underneath the glaze. Something stirs in answer in Ann's chest, that glaze just surface maybe. Lick it off, Ann thinks as she nods. Suck hard candy hard, crack it between your teeth. A sweet flood: the color gem-clear if you could see it, but of course, Ann thinks, you can't. And she makes herself turn from the boy to the teacher. Forces herself to look at the teacher's face the way she used to force herself to look at visiting mothers in the day care center—smile at them, nod

reassuringly, and all the while in her mind, in her mouth, she'd be sucking on their eyeballs or something. Anything at all. Amazing what comes to her head when she begins to get bored or begins to lose consciousness at night, always half-struggling against it, against sleep.

He bites, you know, Teacher says. The soft inner skin of Ann's arm tingles as Teacher lifts a chewed-looking foam-rubber ball.

Ball.

Ann repeats the word, obedient, holding the *ll* sound in her mouth, her tongue curved soft and silent. Her tongue is a smooth eyeless probe against the ridged backs of her teeth. Her eyes feel clear, feel green—an unexpected shiver of fear in her skin. Fear electric in the boy's kinky fox-brown hair. Severely autistic, Teacher has said. Brain dam-aged, Ann told her lover last night, that particular phrase drawing her to the help-wanted ad two days ago.

Begin the Beguine. A mysterious sound in that phrase once too. Be-gin, Be-gin, Be-gin. Certain words tend to repeat in Ann's mind, sounding stranger and stranger each time until they finally start to dull, the spell broken.

Ball—see the ball? Teacher says to the boy, side-glancing at Ann. Brain dam-aged, Ann thinks slowly, her eyes on him. Something stirs, swims stealthily back and forth in the clear green just under the frosted pond-scum surface of his stare. That slight movement in Ann's chest begins now to rise.

(Though only moments before, right before she was led up to this boy, hadn't she found herself glancing down at her watch, like usual?)

Down, down. The drugstore, the day care center. First those frequent glances at her watch, then those pictures begin to pop into her mind. Things she can see, almost feel herself doing. Sometimes she makes herself sink to her knees—one knee will do—the moment they appear: Ann kneeling to pick up a nonexistent scrap of paper, Ann kneeling in the day care center playground to hug the two-year-old boy she'd just imagined kissing, her tongue probing into his sweet narrow throat. Amazing what she sees, at least one knee pressed on the floor immediately after as if to pray for forgiveness. Not that she ever prays. No, it's just a superstitious game, another way to make time pass. But she always actually does it, knee to floor.

Yes, Ann says now, not sure to what, and Teacher sets the ball on the boy's desk. This morning, Teacher stood calm like that behind a

stringy-haired girl who moaned as if possessed, the girl's voice unnaturally deep. Her head jerked back and forth. Teacher's hands hung at her sides as she waited for the girl to finish, Teacher's face patient and at the same time partly annoyed, partly bored.

Potato Face, Ann thinks now as she meets Teacher's placid gaze. His meds, Teacher says, voice lowered confidentially. She lifts a dainty paper cup, syrup-heavy. Psycho-blacktive, she murmurs, some such voodoo word, and Ann cranes her neck to see the thick potent-looking candy-smelling circle of blue.

Aqua blue tissue paper is tacked over the classroom windows, only soft aquarium light filtering through. Students moan and mumble behind the partition. Teacher holds the cup, holds the back of the boy's neck. Bends his head forward. His hair and eyebrows are fox-colored, something foxlike too, sly, sexual almost, in the angular triangular shape of his face, in the corners of his mouth as the cup is withdrawn. A thin string of saliva, his lips shiny.

Ann's own face cat-shaped, she's been told so often it must be true. Her eyes are green, greener than this boy's. Curiosity kills thee, Mother used to say to her, drawing out the *e*, Mother so clever with words. Ann herself never could follow them: her eyes quick-skimming lines of print, never able to concentrate. Or able to concentrate only for intense fleeting moments. Just now, she watches the boy's shiny mouth like she's watching for a mouse to pop out.

A mouse, a tongue—quick and pink. Licks sweet, sneaks back, lips sealed. His tongue and his lips both unusually thick.

Sex-u-al. Experimentally, Ann turns over the word as Teacher sets the drained sticky cup beside the ball on the boy's desk, as she pulls up a chair. Something loosens in Ann's chest as Ann bends, seats herself opposite this boy. Anything can happen, anything at all. Months since she's felt this way. Begin Begin Begin the Beguine . . .

(Damn song going through her head now—the sinuous snake-charmer clarinet that made Mother's bone-thin hips sway so strangely as she vacuumed the rug, Ann watching from the stairs, a quiet child, Mother usually quiet too and yet she sang along above the vacuum's sucking roar, her voice deeper and fuller. *And when they Be-gin the Be-guine . . .*)

Ann leans forward. Cup ball cup ball, Teacher says. Get that over with first since he hates Language. Ann nods. A pulse lightly thumps in her throat the way it does when she's first alone with a new man.

Begin a second beginning, she used to think whenever Mother played that scary song. This second beginning, the Beguine, was somehow subtly different, dangerous: *B-e-g-i-n* plus a wicked boomerang *u*.

Ball, Ann says. Voice calm, steadied.

The boy's mouth is sealed, his teeth hidden as Ann scoots her chair up closer to the desk, Teacher standing behind. But Teacher can't see, surely, their knees bump.

Wolf teeth? Forward-thrusting wild monkey teeth? Bites you know. Yes, Ann can feel foam-rubber tooth marks—his?—as she lifts the ball, squeezes it. Her knees brush the boy's through the cloth of her blue cotton skirt, his jeans. His legs are long and thin, hers too. Gently, Ann squeezes the orange orange-sized ball between her thumb and first finger, as if juice might spurt out.

Ball, she repeats. This is. A ball.

His candy-hard eyes stare back unamused, his thick mouth inscrutably sealed. Or maybe a trace of a fox smile shows—not directed at her, not at anyone. Their knees barely brush; his indifference is annoying in a way, exciting in a way.

Be-gin, Be-gin, Be-gin.

(Once, months ago, Ann lay her hand flat on the coils of her electric stove burner, the action at first one of those pictures and then she was actually doing it, had actually begun to turn the oven knob, slow and deliberate and yet she snatched her hand away before the heat burned—Can't believe you really took that job, her lover had said last night with maybe a flash of the old interest, fascination . . .)

Set down the ball, lift the cup, say Cup. Turn and glance back at Teacher. Round-faced nod of approval.

(. . . and he'd actually kissed the palm of her hand, the touch of his lips tentative, almost reverent, Couldn't believe she'd try to burn herself that way, the two of them united in their disbelief, This was months ago, back when they'd first started up . . .)

Bending forward, Teacher rests her hand on Ann's shoulder. Leave you two alone now, Teacher murmurs. Surely, Teacher can't see the light touch of their knees under the desk, can't see Ann's tongue press toward him against the backs of her teeth.

And listen, don't look so nervous, he hasn't bitten any of us in weeks, and oh yeah, Save counting for last. He likes it best—I mean he'll really get off on it, y'know. Sometimes you can't stop him, he's

still going when we load him in the van . . . I mean he doesn't count one two three but there's this one number, you'll see . . . he'll draw it all up and down everything if you don't—

Watch.

That trace of a smile lingers in the corners of his mouth, the two of them alone at his desk behind the partition. Something might happen, anything. The same heady reckless feeling she'd gotten as she pressed her hand against the slowly warming stove coils has begun to well up inside of her now as she presses this boy's knees with her own. His knees numb, square, stiff.

"Cup," she says, voice perfectly steady. This is. A cup. Get the cup, the cup.

Harder now, his kneecaps surprisingly smooth. Careful, not too hard or she'll slip—gently, gently. If she was in a bar and he was a man, an ordinary teenage boy, what would she be doing? What would it be called?

Am I doing this? she thought in her kitchenette, at first only fingering the dial on the stove. Really? she thought then, thinks now, for though his legs feel tense, braced against her own, his dull white face looks perfectly passive, unconcerned, molded from rubber. As if nothing is happening, Ann thinks, and the rise in her chest falters.

Up, down. Predictable, unpredictable. In sixth grade, the school bus Ann rode had rolled over on its side into a ditch—fractured bones, spectacular bruises, Ann herself unmarked. Afterward, whenever the new bus would approach that particular turn, the other kids would grow quiet and Ann would chant in her mind *Begin the Beguine, Begin the Beguine*.

The *Beguine* some kind of afterlife, she'd decided by then: an afterlife where she perpetually re-lived those few electrifying moments when the bus was tilting, tipping. A glimpse of the driver's horrified face in the giant rearview mirror, his glasses askew. Then everything upside down, Ann's body suddenly weightless.

Cup, Ann repeats, and she clears her throat. Something flutters there whenever she remembers that full-throated many-throated scream, those hard tumbling bodies, that strange exhilaration.

Get the cup, she says, almost shouts.

The kid's hands are rooted in his lap. But his eyes seem clearer now as he raises them, as if the steady pressure of her knees has begun to wake him up. Yes—a slight extra tension in his face and shoulders, Ann's tongue pressing toward him against her teeth. Crack hard candy hard. The glaze dissolves: the color gem-bright but hidden, this kid's eyes quickly lowered again. Fox-colored lashes.

The, she repeats, Cup.

That pale rubber-soft shape is a boy's face, not a man's—but growing, Ann can tell. Bones pushing forward. Soon a man with a boy's brain, a baby's brain. What would it be like, to be him, be with him?

Unimaginable, unknowable. Ann pushes so hard now that his square kneecaps don't feel smooth anymore but knobby, grainy, complex. She can feel the texture of bone through cloth and skin. Unknown spaces begin to widen, Mother's hips begin to sway. Be-guine Be-guine Be-guine—

His knees.

Give way, splay open. Ann lurches forward, her stomach bumping the hard desktop, his knees spread wide, her knees ramming the exposed edge of his chair, his head jerked forward.

A spell broken. Ann straightens, scoots back, her pulse thick and fast in her throat. Fox-colored lashes. His eyes gaze down at his own spread knees. His face is jarred, tense, baby blank. Classroom sounds begin to rise back up the way sounds do after sex. Up, someone is saying, has been. Stand up. Shaky fingers, Ann smooths her hair, darts a quick cautious cat glance to each side, then back to him. Thirteen years old, only thirteen, his downcast face smooth and white.

What the fuck have I done now? This question had echoed in the quiet of her mind as she stood in her kitchenette and held her trembling not-quite-burnt hand under a stream of cold water.

His hands: folded, no, starting to move now in his spread-kneed lap under the desk. A small hollow thump as his knuckles graze the wood. Ann blinks, cranes her neck cautiously to see.

His fist. Thrust up from his lap like a war-movie submarine periscope, aggressively blocking her sight. His long thumb juts between clenched fingers: a fist suspended above a cup and ball. Awkwardly, angrily, it begins to move back and forth. A sign? One of the sign language signs she's supposed to be learning—yes, but which?

What has she done to this kid? Bony knuckly eyeless head; it wags and wags.

Dinosaurs have part of their brain in their tails. So which is the head? Ann had demanded. Wide awake for the first time ever in grade school science class, waving her hand at the teacher urgently.

What? Oh, 'Toilet' is all that means. Toi-let. Take him down but don't let him stay too long in the stall. Leave the door open, he'll be playing with himself and whatnot. And Ann, listen, Don't walk too close on the way down. Not that he's gonna jump you or anything, right? You're not gonna jump her, are you, Sweetie? Right?

(Christ, will you look at that face—Mr. Jaws, Mr. Space Ca-det.)

His hands. Trail along the cinder-block corridor wall, trace squares of tile in the dim deserted bathroom, sculpt the shape of the sink. His long fingers fumble like a baby's mouth at the nozzle of the soap dispenser, pink goop spurting out. His fingers shiny, stuffed into his mouth.

No, Ann says, standing beside him. Her voice echoes against the walls. No, she tries to sign. But she can't remember it, can only remember *Stop*—a karate-chop motion that comes out underwater slow, like she's conferred some sort of blessing on him, his actions. No one watching, Ann thinks, hand suspended in front of her as the boy fumbles with the faucets. From the corner of her eye, Ann can see the bathroom door propped open across the wide tile floor. The boy hunches over a sudden stream of water. His thick lips stretch greedily, monkey kiss, sucking, sucking, spitting out a pink-bubbled stream.

No one can see, Ann tells herself, not sure why this fact seems important.

(Yet hadn't something, some plan, some picture begun to form as she'd followed him down the corridor toward the bathroom? Hadn't she watched his hesitant blind-old-man movements as intently as she'd once watched the slow-motion movements of a doomed, vividly

green preying mantis on a city sidewalk? Visibly mindless, yet visibly complex: the top part of this insect's long delicate soon-to-be-crushed body bent as if in prayer—though the name, Mother told Ann later, is *prey*-ing not *pray*-ing mantis).

The boy's back—hunched in that same way as he moved down the corridor—curves now over the sink. His legs bend at the knees. A stiffness shows in the crotch of his jeans.

Thirteen years old, plays with himself and whatnot. It might have happened even had she not pressed his knees. Though of course, she had. Ann watches him lurch away from the sink. Water streams from his pointy fox chin, stains his plain yellow T-shirt. All at once, Ann feels intimately connected to him: his face blank as his shirt, so blank and confused he looks as if this is his first time, first hard-on. Though it's not, Ann thinks, couldn't be. And the boy backs hunchbacked into the middle stall, chin gleaming. The metal door swings halfway shut. Be-gin, Be-gin . . .

That snaky clarinet beat. Ann takes two slow steps, touches the metal door. She pushes the door with her fingertips, stands in the stall doorway while the boy positions himself in front of the toilet, facing out, facing her. His head bows; his hands grope for his jeans zipper.

Should she stand here like she used to stand with the toddlers in the day care center bathroom? She hesitates, half-turns her face. But sees—can't help seeing—his erection pop up as he pulls down his jeans, his small thick penis straining through his cotton briefs. Then it pops out again, pink and bare and he struggles to pull down his briefs, leaves them at mid thigh. The elastic loosely binds his legs. His knees bend; his hands return to his crotch.

His hands.

Cup.

Round. His thumb and first finger touch, his right hand covering his sparse frizzy fox-brown pubic hair. He holds his penis, maybe even displays it, though he still looks down, not up at Ann, his shoulders tensed. Ann tenses too in the stall doorway, leans closer—is she leaning closer? As if it's some kind of flower he's holding and she'll take a sniff, just one, the bathroom air dim and yellowish and warm.

Her fingertips still touch the metal door, hold it open with that single light touch as a picture begins to form in her mind, clearly.

Kneeling—yes, she is kneeling, sinking down on her knees here and now, in front of this boy, this close . . .

A smile twitches at the corners of her mouth. A strange scared laugh bubbles back deep in her throat. The boy's curved hand has begun to move up and down, stiffly at first.

Praying or preying? In her mind, Ann has begun to bend, to kneel, knees cracking—a real sound, startlingly loud. Ann's fingertips slide along the cool rusted metal as she eases down, as her bare knees touch the sticky floor and the stall door brushes her curved back and her ass sinks against her heels. That clarinet sound is snaking, snaking. Be-gin, Be-gin . . .

Sticky cold tile. Such a sickening sticky floor against her bare knees would count for more than usual in the old prayer game, but is this the old game? His hands move faster now, both hands curved; she can feel the motion maybe ten inches away from her bowed head, her wide bare forehead. Her eyes are downcast. Her bony knees touch the boy's bunched-up jeans, the soiled white toes of his sneakers, his feet close together because cotton briefs still loosely bind his thighs. Ann pictures the rolled cotton briefs, thinks of looking up to see them, her pulse rising in her throat.

Up, up. She could look up, lean forward and look up and raise her face, open her mouth.

She has begun to raise her face. She has begun to raise her eyes, is beginning to raise her body from her heels, his swollen purplish penis so close, the knuckles of his hands even closer. His hands move up and down intently, imperviously. Ann's pulse quickens. A farmer boy milking a cow, a baby's avid toothless sucking mouth.

Yet his face is still impassive, rubber-molded. His greenish half-lidded eyes look down toward her, but not at her. He doesn't meet her stare any more than he did this morning. That candy glaze is still intact, denser even in this dim light, his eyes so flat and indifferent that Ann sinks back slightly, pushing the stall door further open.

No one can see, she repeats to herself, eyes level with his bare knees, pulse halted in her throat. This thought feels disappointing, just as the same thought had disappointed her in the moment she'd begun to turn the knob on her stove, wanting someone to see, anyone, as if maybe that would bring it back: the exhilaration of only a

few moments before when the action was still a picture forming in her mind. Incredible that she might do such a thing, that it might really happen, just as the school bus really did tilt, tip, her body suddenly weightless.

Her body heavy now in the bathroom as she lowers her eyes. Heavy the way it gets when she falls against her pillow after she and her lover have tried and tried but she can't reach that release, not quite. And then he can't hold it anymore and they both fall back, Ann too exhausted to feel even frustration, Ann sunk fully now against her heels. Her eyes are shut, shoulders slumped; her knees have started to ache.

A sink drips somewhere behind her. Above her head, she hears a dull rhythmic sucking sound as his hands pump and pump, the pulse in her throat slowed, her lips pressed together. Can't tell her lover about kneeling like this, of course. Can't tell anyone. No: her tongue lies flat and still in her mouth. Bless me Father for I have sinned. Isn't that what they say, the Catholics? Mother an ag-nos-tic, she'd told Ann once, a vaguely depressing sound to that word. Ann sighs, blinks. Sees her own hand pressed flat against the sticky cold tile.

Her movements are slow. Her shoulder lightly brushes his knees as she pulls herself up, straightens, stands. Always difficult to move when that heaviness begins to gather in her chest, that slow sure slide back into boredom.

Down! a woman's voice calls out.

A real voice: distant, but not too distant. It echoes from somewhere along the corridor, coming closer. Keep those hands down.

Teacher's voice. God oh God oh God—

Ann jerks around, her elbow knocking the boy's forearm. His arm jars but then quickly resumes its motion, its rhythm, Ann just as quickly catching her balance. Her shoulder rams the metal door. The door swings half-shut as she staggers out, her skirt stuck to her knees.

Oh God please God.

She takes a quick sideways step, smooths down her skirt, her hair, fingers sticky. Please Please, Just keeping an eye on him, watching out like you said.

She swallows, tries to swallow back her pulse. Could she speak at all now, if she had to? Footsteps advance, Teacher's firm flat voice.

Good walk-ing. Let's see some good walk-ing.

Ann takes another slide of a step. Her right side faces the half-open stall, her back straightened, upright, sentry guard. Her skirt still sticks. She yanks on the hem, smooths it fiercely down.

Nothing to hide, Look firm, Don't turn around. Her throat tenses, ready to assume a Teacher voice should anyone come in, tongue poised. His hands pump and pump, that dry suck sound still audible. Stop, she should say—

Hands down!

Stringy-haired girl lurches into sight in the open doorway. Her head bobs, her hands heel up as if to bop a beach ball.

Sil-ly walk-ing, Teacher calls out, and she too steps in front of the doorway. The girl halts, sniffs the bathroom air. Silly walk-ing, Teacher repeats, glancing at Ann across the tile floor.

He's still in there? Teacher's eyebrows raise. She stands in the middle of the doorway. A suspicious edge to her voice?

Ann manages a stiff nod, and then—before Teacher can notice its stiffness or the sticky stain on her skirt—then Ann turns around, turns her face boldly toward the stall itself, the half-open stall door blocking Teacher's view. Brisk, businesslike, just a quick check.

His white thighs, his face half-shadowed, his eyes accidentally meeting her own.

She snaps her gaze back to Teacher.

He's . . . he's having a little trouble, Ann manages. A gasp for breath and she plunges on more confidently, covering the faint suck sound. A little constipated, I mean.

Her face flushes, as if these last words have embarrassed her. That's what Teacher thinks, isn't it?

The stringy-haired girl lurches forward, head bobbing. Wait, Teacher says, her eyes still fixed on Ann. But the girl doesn't wait, thank God she doesn't, and Teacher turns her head, turns on her heel with a last reluctant glance. I said wait—

Teacher disappears, the doorway abruptly emptied. Wait for me. No—No, don't—

A door slams wildly. Slammed with all her strength, Ann thinks as she slumps in place, deflated. Though she's still standing, standing guard, protecting him in a way. Jealous of him in a way. His eyes in that one accidental glimpse were gem bright, just as she'd imagined.

She pictures his eyes as the heavy familiar slide begins again in her own chest. Ann can feel it, feel him back there.

There.

Break.

Fifteen minutes. Ann sits on the staff room couch, unwraps a candy bar with lightly trembling fingers. At lunch an hour ago, she sat in the corner of this room and ate nothing, grateful for the surrounding flow of talk. Her face was lowered like the faces of suspects on the news, hurried into cars under coats. Now the staff room is deserted, and Ann half wishes it weren't. Though she can't imagine working up the energy needed to talk to anyone. No, what she needs now is this quick sugar high, stale chocolate smell: overwhelming the moment she tears the plastic wrapper, then all at once faint.

The scent of soap on her fingers mixes in, that same pink goop for both student and staff bathrooms. Ann had scrubbed her hands and knees before lunch and before this break, a damp spot now on the hem of her stained blue cotton skirt. She sighs, peels the candy wrapper down.

Her lips brush her fingertips as she takes her first bite. She chews, fingers sunk into soft waxy chocolate. A slight taste of pink soap, too slight to stop eating. She chews open-mouthed, the sounds from the corridor muffled by the door.

No one watching me, she'd told herself at lunch. But she'd kept her head bowed low. What had she done, started to do? Only started, nothing to it at all, really. His face is a boy's face, unmarked, unchanged. No reason to feel frightened now—though, in a way, she'd rather feel that rare flutter of fear than this usual dull slide.

Chocolate stale-sweet, caramel gluey, nuts stale-soft. Ann swallows almost without chewing, eats like she's afraid someone will stride in and stop her. A new kind of crime, her lover had told her a few nights ago. VCR snuff films, for people bored, he said, by simulated violence. You mean they kill real people, really? she'd asked, ashamed of the light goose-bump prickle in her skin.

And what about people who got tired of that? What next? she wonders as she chews. Not crunchy, these nuts—maybe not really

nuts at all. That soap taste is undeniable in the last glob of caramel, last bite, can't stop.

Swallow, soap sigh. Should've stopped, Ann thinks. And yet she begins to lick her fingers—then sees her hand spread starfish flat on the sticky bathroom floor.

His long-fingered hand hung heavy and passive as she held it under the cold stream of water, semen spiraling down the bathroom drain . . .

Down, down; Ann lowers her eyes. Her wrist twists automatically, the watch face a familiar white gleam. Chocolate soap aftertaste. Five minutes to go. Sugar high: quickly felt, quickly gone.

One—Ann mouths, draws. Late afternoon. He draws too, leans toward her over the paper. The same partition surrounds them, same desk between them. But their heads are so close that Ann can feel against her cheek the brush of his kinky static-quivering hair.

Not that he's aware of the contact. No: Ann senses his candy green eyes have begun to grow clear again behind his lowered eyelids. Clear and fixed on his own clenched hand, as if he has no idea how the stubby pencil he holds will move, which way the line will curve.

0, 1, 2 . . .

Three o'clock, nearly four o'clock now, only half an hour till the school day ends. His wiry-haired head bends even lower, his thick lips set in a line, his thick-leaded pencil slow and steady. Envy—does she study him now with a kind of envy? His absorption in the pencil line is so complete that the lead point never leaves the paper, a shiny grey snail trail. Umbilical lines connect the wobbly full-looped numbers. His 3 is pregnant, his 4 softened to a top-heavy 9, his 5 and his 6 indistinguishable. The lower curve of the 5 irresistibly closes into a circle, looks like he's about to skip 7 altogether.

After six comes what? Ann prompts, forcing her voice up with the question, imitation Teacher. What num-ber?

No way to stop him. The first circle already balloons out under his hand, this line much darker than the others, rounder too. Each preceding circle on the page looks lumpy and hesitant, like the first circles drawn by those toddlers at the day care center. Each curved line grows thick and hurried just before the point where the ends

connect, as if just at that moment the line itself caught on to the idea.

Ends meeting, endless curve.

What would it be like, to realize that all over again each time you drew a circle? No memory maybe, Ann thinks. Everything done for the first time, maybe. And maybe if she began to press his knees under the desk, his face would turn exactly as bewildered and baby blank as before. Not that the same pulse would beat again in her own throat. No, of course *no*, the whole plan too tiring even to contemplate. She shifts in her seat, the soft aquarium-lit classroom air too warm.

His pencil inches along maddeningly slow, her eyelids sleepy and she hates that. Curled like a cat, her lover told her back when he used to sit up late to watch her sleep, her supple long-legged body not so familiar to him then. Desultory dinner with him tonight, Ann senses as she shifts again, that heaviness in her chest near bottom if there is a bottom. This boy's eyes are carefully downcast, hiding, she knows, the strange gem flash. Yes, he'd keep it to himself. Only one accidental glimpse in the bathroom—the boy's eyes not candy then, but green stained glass, light pouring through. One time, that one time in high school, Ann had actually gone to a church service: curious, disappointed, all those slack faces stained yellow and blue from the windows. Fishbowl light. Sit straight, pews hard, careful, don't look restless in front of God. The minister is speaking, voice of authority, must drone on.

Num-ber se-ven, Ann says halfheartedly. Don't for-get . . .

Her tentative teacher voice trails off as she watches him lean his whole body into the second circle, loop it out under the first. Lake reflection of the first, the line continuous. Circle to circle. His kinky fox hair virtually crackles now with his infinite absorption.

What would it be like? The opposite of death, which she imagines as infinite boredom?

Num-ber? Ann prompts firmly, her feet braced on the floor. Maybe curiosity doesn't kill, but lack of it, infinite lack. Beguine, Beguine, Beguine . . .

(Some sort of South American dance, Mother had told her when she'd finally asked, Mother laughing at Ann's fallen face).

Num-ber, Ann repeats, much louder now, angry at Mother, at this boy, at the steadily intent movement of his pencil. Which suddenly

halts. His pencil, his hand. He sits, his fox-haired head bent down, his shoulders tensed. He seems to be listening. Not to her, surely, but to something, some cue. Why should that frighten her? His head rises, his thick lips part, a gleam of crooked teeth.

Bite? Speak? Is he going to speak?

Can he? Ann stares, the classroom sounds on the other side of the partition beginning to fade off. His head is raised, his shoulders squared. His narrowed blue-green eyes are clear now, just as she'd guessed. His eyes swim with green; his thick lips grope, curve.

Nuh—

The sound is a shape in his mouth, a marshmallow. Mmm, his lips close in on it soft, press together.

Muh—

Now open again, the *uh* an exhaled breath, the word coming out *nummuh* since he hasn't pronounced the *b* or *r*.

Numb-uh, Ann repeats to herself. Numb-er. Couldn't it just as easily mean more and more numb? His eyes teem with bright greedy green, so bright it hurts to look.

Numb-er and numb-er—is that what you'd feel if you started counting and just kept on and on? The boy's pencil recircles the second circle now, then back up to the first. How long can she watch this, really watch? How many seconds? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6—

Ann's eyes fix on his pencil and not his face, his fingers smudged with grey. Maybe if she did keep watching, she thinks, maybe it would turn out the opposite way, not numb-er and numb-er at all. Maybe this is how to do it, escape numb—pick a simple thing, the simplest thing imaginable. A circle, a number, the curved number 8 that he retraces now, again and again, and at first you'd have to let it grow, the boredom. Humid dark clouds of boredom gather, churn, so dense they'd have to break, crack with thunder—give way, spread open.

A new sky. Too far up to see but she can feel it sometimes, somewhere way beyond that high blank plaster ceiling in the church. Hadn't she wanted to drift up there in the blank, hear only the rise and fall of the voices, the songs, no words, no distractions. No words fill her head now as she watches his same curving 8, grey and shiny and thick and at first it's the number eight over and over and then it's

more like two circles, then one line. Then only the motion of his hand, endless and steady and slow. Her hands clasp together on the desk as it curves, curves.

Ay—Ay—

This scratchy urgent sound sputters up in the back of his throat, rises.

Ay- ay—tt—

The *t* triumphant, so hard he spits, a gleaming dot of wet on Ann's bare arm. She touches it.

- Other Iowa Short Fiction Award and John Simmons Short Fiction Award*
Winners
- 1987
Star Game, Lucia Nevai
 Judge: Alison Lurie
- 1986
Eminent Domain, Dan O'Brien
 Judge: Iowa Writers' Workshop
- 1986
Resurrectionists, Russell Working
 Judge: Tobias Wolff
- 1991
The Ant Generator, Elizabeth Harris
 Judge: Marilynne Robinson
- 1985
Dancing in the Movies, Robert Boswell
 Judge: Tim O'Brien
- 1991
Traps, Sondra Spatt Olsen
 Judge: Marilynne Robinson
- 1984
Old Wives' Tales, Susan M. Dodd
 Judge: Frederick Busch
- 1990
A Hole in the Language, Marly Swick
 Judge: Jayne Anne Phillips
- 1983
Heart Failure, Ivy Goodman
 Judge: Alice Adams
- 1989
Lent: The Slow Fast, Starkey Flythe, Jr.
 Judge: Gail Godwin
- 1982
Shiny Objects, Dianne Benedict
 Judge: Raymond Carver
- 1989
Line of Fall, Miles Wilson
 Judge: Gail Godwin
- 1981
The Phototropic Woman, Annabel Thomas
 Judge: Doris Grumbach
- 1988
The Long White, Sharon Dilworth
 Judge: Robert Stone
- 1980
Impossible Appetites, James Fetler
 Judge: Francine du Plessix Gray
- 1988
The Venus Tree, Michael Pritchett
 Judge: Robert Stone
- 1979
Fly Away Home, Mary Hedin
 Judge: John Gardner
- 1987
Fruit of the Month, Abby Frucht
 Judge: Alison Lurie
- 1978
A Nest of Hooks, Lon Otto
 Judge: Stanley Elkin

1977

The Women in the Mirror,

Pat Carr

Judge: Leonard Michaels

1976

The Black Velvet Girl,

C. E. Poverman

Judge: Donald Barthelme

1975

Harry Belten and the

Mendelssohn Violin Concerto,

Barry Targan

Judge: George P. Garrett

1974

*After the First Death There Is No
Other,* Natalie L. M. Petesch

Judge: William H. Gass

1973

The Itinerary of Beggars,

H. E. Francis

Judge: John Hawkes

1972

The Burning and Other Stories,

Jack Cady

Judge: Joyce Carol Oates

1971

Old Morals, Small Continents,

Darker Times,

Philip F. O'Connor

Judge: George P. Elliott

1970

The Beach Umbrella,

Cyrus Colter

Judges: Vance Bourjaily
and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Each of these stories is written in a language that strives to match the intensity of Searle's characters; each gives the reader an exceptionally intimate portrait of a unique female and the central, sensual mystery of her body.



Mikki Ansin

ELIZABETH SEARLE, a former teacher of autistic children and adults, has published stories in *Ploughshares*, *Epoch*, *Boulevard*, the *Kenyon Review*, and the anthology *Lovers*. She teaches fiction writing at Emerson College and is presently working on a novel.

The Iowa Short Fiction Award and the John Simmons Short Fiction Award

The Iowa Short Fiction Award has been conducted annually by the Iowa Writers' Workshop since 1969. In 1988 the University of Iowa Press instituted the John Simmons Short Fiction Award—named after the first director of the Press—to complement the ongoing award series; this competition is also conducted by the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Serious critical consideration is guaranteed by such judges as Frederick Busch, Alison Lurie, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, and Marilynne Robinson. For a list of titles, winners, and judges, please turn to the end of this book.

Jacket art: Norma Bessouet, *Sea Shell Murmurs*, oil on linen mounted on panel, 38 x 28 in., 1990

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