COOWEE

SCOOWEE

2014

Cooweescoowee, a journal of arts and letters published by Rogers State University, features poetry, fiction, and art from outstanding writers and artists. The journal is edited by Rogers State University faculty and printed on campus at the RSU Print Shop.

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Cooweescoowee's name has its origins in Cherokee language and history. Now anglicized, the term was known in ancient times as the onomatopoeia for a large bird, gu'wi'sgu'wi', said to have been seen at infrequent intervals in the old Cherokee country of the present-day southeastern United States. Usually observed accompanying migratory wild geese, the bird has been described as resembling a large snipe with yellow legs and un-webbed feet. The word was also the Cherokee name for John Ross, Principal Chief of the Cherokee during the 19th century removal period, subsequent "trail where they cried," and re-establishment of the Cherokee people in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. Currently, Cooweescoowee is the name of the Cherokee Nation district where Claremore and Rogers State University are located.

Disclaimer: We are not responsible for the potty language herein, nor the seedy characters who seem to be like someone you know, nor the offensive art that is certain to shock your sensibilities. If you are considering legal action, what do you say we avoid the lawyers and just settle the whole thing with a game of high stakes poker?

FICTION & PLAYS

POETRY

ART

FICTION & PLAYS

BROWN, SHINY, PRETTY SHOES

RosaMaria Chacon

It started the night I met the man with the truck. He wasn't the only one with a truck. I met lots of men with trucks. But he had a big truck—the truck driver kind. Plus, he was the one who wanted to kill me. I met him in the bar, and I wanted him to buy me a beer, and he did. He had some money, and he bought me some potato chips too. He was nice. The jukebox was playing Engelbert Humperdinck. I was singing along: "The last waltz should last forever." The music and his eyes made me happy, and he said the truck was big enough to stretch out and have a good time. So after he bought me some more beers and after I went, wobbly, to the bathroom and stopped to call the kids, we went to the parking lot.

It was a big red truck and we kissed before we got in. He had to help me up because I'm 4 feet 11 inches. But I'm not short. And no one can say I am. He opened the door near the steering wheel and then he reached up behind me and lifted me up. I caught ahold of the foot thing and climbed onto the seat. It was high, really high. That's what made it so hard later when I wanted to get down.

He climbed in and started it up. The engine roared, and I laughed because I was tipsy, just a little bit, and it was a big, big truck. I couldn't even climb up to the seat by myself. He was handsome and sexy, and I knew we would have a good time. Then he shifted gears and drove out of the parking lot.

"We don't need no stinking seat belts," he snorted.

I laughed harder. But it was leaving the seat belt off that helped me later.

We drove up and down the streets. I don't know exactly where we drove, maybe Carson Street or Wardlow Road.

He said, "You look good to me," and I smiled real big. I knew he wanted to have sex with me.

Then he said "I had lots of women in my truck."

I smiled, but then I snapped, "Don't talk about other women."

"I have to talk about the women that been in this truck," he said. "I have to. I have to talk about the women I killed in my truck."

I didn't smile no more. I drank lots of beer that night and I walked wobbly to the bathroom but I thought I heard him say "the women I killed."

"What?" I asked, looking directly into his eyes.

Then he said, "I'm going to kill you too. You…."

A tiny giggle came outta me, like it was joke, and I slapped at his arm and said, "Stop playing around."

But then he said, “You wanna see their clothes. I got the clothes of every woman I killed. I go into the bars and find you women, and I buy some beers and then I bring you out to my truck. Everybody wants to see the truck—just like you.”

“You want to see the clothes,” he asked again with a big smile. And he reached around easy, just as he drove and pulled out a little red dress. “This dress is from the last one I killed.” Then he pulled out a blue blouse and black pants and little tiny silver pumps.

It was the clothes that done it. It was the clothes that made me think of the brown shoes. The clothes from the dead women made me think about them. They made me remember the brown shoes and the way they called out to me. I didn’t have much time to think about the shoes right then because I was starting to shake.

So when he drove around the corner, I pushed open the door real fast even though it was really heavy and I jumped out of the truck. I fell, and I rolled, and I hurt my butt. But I got up and started running as fast as I could run. He stopped the truck and turned it around and shined the headlights in the field. I ducked down and crawled but I could hear him calling my name. And I kept shaking. I wasn’t cold. But I was sweating because I thought he would catch me. I was shaking and sweating. He kept driving back and forth, back and forth, and up and down the street. I took a chance and crawled to the phone booth on the corner and called my oldest daughter. When she answered all half asleep, I started crying right away because I knew he was going to turn the truck around again and come back. I started crying and begged her to pick me up.

I bawled, “He’s gonna kill me but I jumped outta the truck. Come now! Hurry! You gotta hurry before he finds me.” It was hard to tell her the intersection. I couldn’t see the street signs and I had to get out of the phone booth to see. I was afraid to but I had to.

I crawled back into the field and waited with my heart pounding ’til she came. It must’ve taken 20 minutes. I could hear the truck, and I could hear him calling me: “Elisa, Elisa.” But then I saw her car, and she took me to her tiny apartment. She borrowed some pills from the guy next door because I kept crying and crying. I finally fell asleep and the next day the doctor said I broke my tailbone. I didn’t tell him I jumped from a big truck. I just said I fell from a real high chair, maybe a bar stool because I’m short.

But the next day I thought about them brown shoes again. And I hadn’t seen them or worn them in about 20 years. But I remembered them, after all that time, and I remembered how they called me, and how

I loved to wear them. They were the best pair of shoes I ever had. I could do everything with those shoes.

They made me feel strong. Sometimes I felt weak like when my dad lined the six of us up and I hid under the bed while he beat the other kids. But I remember the first time I felt strong. It was on the overpass. I was eleven. That mean ugly girl kept calling me names: small fry, midget, and pipsqueak. I pushed her down the stairs. It was fun. She didn't call me no more names. I was strong.

It was like that with the brown shoes. It was good thinking about them. They made me smile. I remember the day I first saw them. My sister Connie and I went shopping. We took the bus downtown Torrance to go window-shopping. We walked and walked. We stopped at all the good windows. And we bought ice cream at Thrifty's—5 cents for a vanilla ice cream cone. Then we walked by the shoe store, and they were in the window—brown, shiny, pretty shoes. I kept looking and looking.

And finally Connie said, "Let's go in." We didn't have money but we went in. We walked past the Buster Brown high tops and Tom McCann loafers. We walked past the blue and red and black high heels, directly to the brown, shiny, pretty shoes. After I stared at them a long time the salesman came and asked my size.

Connie said, "Women's size 6" and he brought them. I stared at the box.

"Sit down and try them on," he said. They fit perfectly and I could not believe they were so pretty and shiny. It took Connie and me a long time to pay. We pulled money outta our bras and outta her socks. I had two dollars pinned in my underwear. We counted nickels and quarters. With tax we were six cents short. But the salesman wanted us to go.

When he said, "Just forget it," we ran out laughing. We had to walk from downtown because we couldn't pay the bus. But I had the shoes under my arm and I could not stop smiling.

When I got back to my apartment, after Connie and the babysitter left, I didn't know what to do. I put the shoes in the closet. I knew it wasn't time to wear them yet. I just stood in front of the closet and watched the door. I stood there and watched. I couldn't hear the baby.

I didn't wear the shoes for a long time. But many days I stood in front of the closet, and watched, and waited. I was waiting for the right time. I was waiting for the shoes to call me. I knew that I couldn't just wear them any old day. They were special shoes. I knew they were special shoes. I knew they would call me.

But they didn't call for a very long time. I had to wait and wait. Many

days I would just stand in front of the closet until my legs got tired. Sometimes, when I couldn't stand it, I opened the closet door and opened the box and looked at the shoes. Sometimes I touched them. I touched the shiny brown pretty shoe fabric. But mostly, I just stared at the white closet door and waited. While I waited, I couldn't hear anything else.

Two months passed. I had not worn the shoes yet. I had not tried them on again. But I spent many hours in front of the closet door staring. One Wednesday, I spent almost the entire day just standing and staring at the white closet door. I did not stop to get a glass of water or Kool-Aid. I did not stop to pee. I just stood in front of the door, waiting and staring. I waited more than six hours.

One day while trying to block out the crying and watch my show, I suddenly heard my name. "Elisa, Elisa." The shoes were calling me.

I poked my head up high in the air and became still, very still. I turned off the television and listened. "It's time. You know it's time."

I did know. I walked to the closet very slowly. I opened the door and picked up the box. I sat on the floor and took the shoes out of the box. As I caressed the brown, shiny, pretty shoes, one tear leaked out. I fitted the shoes over each foot slowly, very slowly. Then I stood up and looked down. Perfect. I knew it was perfect.

I walked to the blanket on the floor and stared at the baby. It was ugly—not worth all the trouble. Six months is a long time. The delivery was hard and, then, I got this. The family called her pretty little girl, and rocked her, and held her tight. But I saw the big birthmark on its back. I saw the red splotches on the body and on the face. It cried all the time. The diapers were always wet or smelly. It wasn't a pretty little girl. Instead, it was ugly and useless.

I knew. It was time. As I brought the shoe up lightly in the air, my head swirled with noise and I felt hot everywhere. When I brought the shoe down, almost gingerly at first, the noise stopped and I felt cooler. The first time was barely a kick but it felt so good. And I knew—these shoes were not for dancing or church or walking downtown. These shoes were for kicking. They were only for kicking. I kicked it several times but I didn't hear it cry.

Later, after I wiped a clean rag over the shoes and put them away, I felt relief. I sat down, a bit tired, a bit sweaty, but I felt good, real good. This was the best I felt in a long time. This was the best I felt since Don, my husband, left.

I could not wear the shoes the next day. I had to wait until they called me. I hated waiting. I'm not patient.

But a few days later, I heard my name again: "Elisa, Elisa."

I ran to the closet and put on the shoes quickly, my hands trembling. I kicked longer this time, much longer. I kicked harder, too. It was so much fun. It was like the day I pushed the girl down the stairs and watched her roll to the bottom. It was like the day I saw her crying and crying, struggling to get up. It was so much fun just like that day. The shoes made me strong, really, really strong.

Sometimes there was a little blood on the shoes and I didn't like that.

Sometimes the old lady who lived next door said, "Your baby cries a lot," and I would wait a few days, and make sure the door was locked and the curtains pulled. One time, Connie came over and I had to stop and throw the shoes in the closet. But mostly, it was okay. And I always slept well after wearing my special shoes. I never heard anything those nights. I never heard it cry.

It was really good to remember the brown, shiny, pretty shoes. I had to sit on a plastic donut for six weeks, and my tailbone hurt a lot. It was scary to think about the man with the big truck. He wanted to kill me. It was better to think about the brown shoes. It was fun and it made me smile. It made me feel strong instead of weak. The broken tailbone made me feel weak. The man with the big truck made me feel weak.

Sometimes, even my kids made me feel weak. They were growing. Most of them taller than me already. It wouldn't be too long, and I would be weak. But maybe what I'd done before would help. As long as I had my belt, it would be okay for a while but not for long. It was better to think about the brown, shiny, pretty shoes.

It was late at night when Connie picked up the phone. Elisa's oldest daughter talked about the weather for five minutes. Then she stopped talking.

"What is it?" Connie asked.

"I want to ask you, Aunt Connie, about when I was a baby. Did I ever have broken ribs? Did I ever go to the hospital when I was a real little baby?"

"No…no I don't remember that. I was young and you know…the drugs. It was a long time ago."

The next day Connie got her daughter to drive her to Gardena. They signed in and went to Station One. After they talked about the weather and hugged, she sent her daughter and teenage granddaughter out of the room.

"Listen, Elisa, I have to ask you about a long time ago. I have to ask you about the shoes you had."

"What shoes?"

"The shoes. You know which shoes—the shoes you loved…the shoes with the red stains on them. How did you get red clay on them shoes?"

She was glad Connie left. She left almost as fast as she came. She didn't come that often. She didn't want her to come and talk about the past. She denied it. But she didn't know if Connie believed her. She was afraid that now she'd be caught as a crazy person. Maybe they would take her shoes away just like they took her cane away. But then, she remembered, she was already in a place for crazy people.

Still, I don't want them to know about the shoes.

What if they find out everything? What if they find out about the fires? I'm not like that truck driver with his blue blouse and tiny silver pumps. My brown, shiny, pretty shoes are different. They were the best pair of shoes I ever had. They were shiny and pretty and they called me. I could do everything with those shoes. I really could.

I lie back on the bed and look slowly around the room—the faded, orange wallpaper, the three beds, and tiny, single closets. I feel tired. "They were special," I mutter.

It's time for a smoke break, and I really need a smoke, but I'm tired, too tired to line up for a cigarette. I feel wobbly, really wobbly.

I need more than a cigarette. I need my shoes.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY

Irving Greenfield

Anna was thrilled that her niece, Tippy, was flying up from Raleigh to have dinner with her, and spend part of the next day schmoozing before leaving for her return flight. She and Tippy always enjoyed a special relationship. Mother of two sons, Tippy was her surrogate daughter. She looked forward to quiet dinner during which they would talk about the family, something Anna relished. It meant more to her than the expensive trendy restaurant Tippy would insist on taking her to.

Sam, Anna's, husband would also be there. But he was a supernumerary. Partially deaf, he wouldn't hear much of what was said. Besides, he'd heard the stories so many times that she knew he tuned them out whenever she started to tell them.

Anna, a diminutive eighty-four year old woman, cared nothing about the food and less about the ambience of whatever place Tippy chose. The wife of a high risk orthopedic surgeon, Tippy was wealthy and her choice of restaurants generally reflected wealth.

The night before Tippy's flight, she phoned several times. Once to tell Anna her flight would land at LaGuardia at two-thirty; then again to say she'd found an Asian fusion restaurant on Murray Street and asked Anna if that was all right?

Of course she said it was, knowing she'd probably be limited to steamed pork dumplings.

The third call was about the name and address of the restaurant. Tippy wanted to be sure Anna knew it, and Anna gave the phone to Sam, who had a better sense of where places were located than she.

"It's in the food court," he said.

"The reservation is for six thirty," Tippy informed him.

He relayed this information to Anna, and ended the conversation with his niece. "She must be slumming," he said. "It's not up to her usual choices."

"For as much as I eat, I don't need fancy," she answered defensively. "I could make do with peanut butter and soy pudding."

"Some people do," he said. "Besides, a little 'fancy' now and then breaks the monotony."

Anna didn't answer; there was no point to it. They had different views about it. He enjoyed eating; she didn't. For her it was a necessary chore, for him it could be a satisfying experience. But she wasn't thinking about food, she was thinking about how nice it would be to be with Tippy.

They had company intermittently in December, her nephew Harry and his two sons, Michael and Stanly; then their son Robert and his wife, Julia. They used Sam's office as one bedroom, making do with a day bed and inflatable mattress spread out on the floor in the living room and rolled up during the day. Having company was a pleasant but tiring experience.

For her nephew and his sons and their son and his wife, Anna insisted on roasting two chickens, one for each arrival. It was work and it was exhausting, especially the clean-up. And each visit required them to take part in the entertainment activities, though both times Anna admitted she wasn't up to it; and once Sam agreed to take his nephew and his sons to see *The Hobbi*t, which he intensely disliked and was ready to leave after the first few minutes, but out of courtesy stayed. Then just after the New Year, and before Anna's eighty-fourth birthday, which fell on January 7, their granddaughter Paula showed up with her boyfriend, Tyler; but they had the good sense to rent an apartment for a few days in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Sam, as he always had, treated them to dinner at Mark Joseph's Steak House. Going there was almost a ritual, though he did not enjoy himself as much as he usually did. It seemed to him, he later told Anna, the steak didn't taste as good as it had the last time they ate there. But now Tippy was coming. She would spend the night across the street in the Ritz Carlton Hotel, and dinner would be her treat.

They sat in the living room; she on the couch and he in the high backed chair near the window that over looked the harbor. Each read a book, hers an Anna Perry mystery and his *The Swerve* Steven Greenblatt. Though it was only one o'clock, they were already dressed for the evening's event and waiting for Tippy's phone call that would tell them she was in the city.

By three o'clock the phone hadn't rung.

"There must be a delay," Anna commented, looking at her watch.

Sam agreed, and went back to his reading.

"I told her not to come," Anna said, "especially since the snow was in the forecast. And that reminds me, weren't Paula and Tyler supposed to leave today?"

"This morning, but they're going by bus," he answered. "It's ten hours back to Montreal. I wouldn't be able to move after a ride like that."

"You used to drive to Raleigh in one day; that was easily a ten hour drive."

"After a while we broke it up and spent the night in Fredericksburg,"

he said, without looking up from his book.

The next time Anna looked at her watch it was 4:15, and she was suddenly filled with apprehension. "She always calls as soon as she lands,

"Maybe—I'll check on the computer to see if the flight was delayed," he said, closing the book and putting it in the basket next to the chair.

Anna wasn't computer-literate. By nature she was a Luddite, anything electronic or mechanical fazed her. Yet, when she was younger she drove a car until an accident sent her vehicle up a telephone pole and nearly killed her. The other driver ran a red light. After that Sam did all the driving until they sold their house in Staten Island and moved to Manhattan and Sam also stopped driving.

"Nothing," he said coming back into the living room. "No delays. All the flights from Raleigh are on time."

"I'm frightened," she said, leaving the couch. "Maybe she never left?"

Sam shrugged. "Certainly a possibility, but not probable. I'm sure if she hadn't left, she'd have called."

"Well, I'm not going to sit here and do nothing," she told him. "I'm going to call the South and find out where she is." The South is the way she referred to the members of her family who lived in various cities in North Carolina. There were four phones in the apartment: one on the windowsill next to him, another on the kitchen counter, a third in his study, and a fourth in their bedroom. She preferred that one, claiming she heard better on it than the other three. Slowly she worked herself off the couch, went into the bedroom to the night table where the phone was, and punched out Tippy's number. No one answered. Tippy's husband, Darrel, was supposed to be home taking care of the kids. She tried Harry's number. He answered and didn't know that his sister was going to be in New York. Mark, Tippy's other brother, she remembered was on a cruise. Frustrated, she set the phone back in its cradle, and hobbled back into the living room. Walking was painful for her.

"Darrel wasn't home, Harry didn't know anything about her trip up here, and Mark, I remembered, is on a cruise," she said.

Sam looked at his watch. "It's five," he announced.

"What are we going to do?"

"Make sure we're at the restaurant at six-thirty," he said, then added, "Maybe she forgot to call you or had some business to care of and couldn't—"

"She'd call no matter what she was doing," Anna answered. "This is not like her."

Sam didn't answer. It wasn't like Tippy, but people did all sorts of things that weren't like them.

"What's the sense of going to the restaurant if we don't know if she'll be there?" Anna asked.

"Because she might be there," he said just as the phone rang. He grabbed hold of it. Tippy was on the other end of the line. He looked up at Anna and nodded.

"I'm still on the plane," Tippy said. "We just landed."

"Where is she?" Anna demanded to know.

"On the plane. Just landed," he said.

"I'll meet you at the restaurant," Tippy told him.

"Maybe we should cancel and I could call and get—"

"No. No. Don't cancel anything," she said. "Everything is fine. I'll see you at the restaurant." And she clicked off.

"She'll meet us there," Sam said.

"Didn't she want to speak to me?" Anna asked.

Apparently not, but he wasn't going to tell Anna that. Instead, he lied and said, "Our connection was broken; she was on her cell phone."

"I hate those things," Anna said.

Sam let that pass. It was the Luddite in her manifesting itself.

"Well, at least we know she's safe," Anna commented.

"She probably had some sort of an adventure," he said. "I'm sure she'll tell us all about it at dinner."

Feeling much relieved, Anna lowered herself on to the couch. Tippy was a beautiful woman, and all sorts of untoward things could happen to a beautiful woman.

"Do we take a cab or the jitney?" she asked.

"Whatever comes first," he answered. "We have at least a half hour or so before we go."

"Maybe I'll order something different," Anna said. "I'm really not that wild about steamed pork dumplings."

"That's a good idea," he said smiling.

It was already dark outside when they left their building. Bundled up against a raw January night, they walked slowly. Each used a cane. Anna's steps were exceedingly small. Sam's stride was naturally larger, and he sometimes took off dragging her along with him until she angrily reined him in. But now he kept in step with her, especially when they crossed the street to get to where the jitney stopped.

A biting wind blew off the Hudson as it usually did during the winter, and Anna said the cold went into her bones. "If it was anyone else but

Tippy, I wouldn't be standing here."

"Our son? Your brother? Harry."

"You know what I mean."

"Sure, special people; all of us have them."

"Tippy has always been that way with me ever since she was a little girl."

"The bus is coming," Sam announced, as it rounded the curve of the street.

A moment later it stopped in front of them. It was one of the big buses the Downtown Alliance recently acquired, and its first step was high and difficult for him and Anna to mount. He stood in back of her; and with his hand on her buttocks pushed her up, while she simultaneously grabbed hold of the inside railing and pulled herself into the bus. It was an awkward maneuver, taking more time to accomplish than an ordinary boarding; and, because they had gotten to know all of the drivers, Anna invariably began a conversation with whoever was driving, which slowed her movements even more. This time, she announced, she was going to have dinner with her niece from Raleigh.

The driver wouldn't start until they were safely seated.

Sam urged her into a seat. He sensed the impatience of the other passengers. She was usurping their time and their expressions reflected their annoyance.

The actual driving time was less than ten minutes and that included stopping for several red lights along the way. The ambient noise inside the bus precluded any conversation between them, but it gave Sam the opportunity to play out some ideas in his head about the confusion between 2:30 and 6:30. Of course, he would never tell them to Anna. She could have misunderstood 2:30 for 6:30. It was possible; her hearing was not nearly a sharp as it used to be. But mistaking one for the other would be a stretch; they have completely different sounds. That left one other possibility; Tippy let slip 2:30 when she meant 6:30. And if that was so, what could the earlier time possibly mean? Sam found himself intrigued by the possibility Tippy had met and spent time with someone either in Raleigh or New York, possibly a man. Her husband, though an excellent surgeon, lacked anything resembling a personality. That Tippy might be having a clandestine love affair made him smile. He was fantasizing; she wasn't the adventurous type.

The bus stopped at the corner of Vesey Street and Northend Avenue. Getting off the bus was slightly less difficult than boarding it. Sam went first, hooked Anna's cane over his left arm, and waited until she reached

the last step before he locked his right hand with her left and leaned slightly forward to break her fall if her footing failed. But she reached the sidewalk without a mishap, and they walked toward the food court, a short distance away.

Once they were inside the court, they were out of the wind.

"It's twenty-five after six," Sam said, looking at his watch.

"I'm really looking forward—"

Sam suddenly stopped.

"What's wrong?" Anna asked.

"Paula and Tyler."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're here in front of us," and he called out Paula's name.

"Grandpa!" she answered and quickly joined them, leaving Tyler with their luggage, two very large pull bags. She gave each of them a hug and said, "We stayed for the party. We'll take an eleven o'clock bus."

"What party?" Anna asked. She was beginning to feel very uneasy.

"It's all very complicated," Paula said. "Lots of phone calls and rearranging things. Everyone is inside."

"Then we better go inside," Sam offered. "Besides, it's damn cold out here."

There were a few diners in the front of the restaurant, but, as soon as they passed them, they saw the long table in the rear and off to right.

"Why?" Anna asked, looking at Sam. She already hated it.

Before he could answer, her young and only surviving brother, Keith, stood up and came toward them. In his usual preemptive way, he took charge of Anna, just barely acknowledging Sam. And she let herself be led by him to the table.

Sam followed with Paula and Keith

Tippy and her mother Betty were already there; so were Keith's wife and children and their fiancées. It was a very long table.

Anna sat between her brother and Sam. She felt overwhelmed by what was happening; she didn't want any part of it. Parties weren't who she was, especially surprise parties. She had looked forward to something that to her was special and meaningful, and now that thing wasn't going to happen. She wanted to leave, go home, and try to forget what happened in its stead.

Sam said nothing; the voices around him dissolved into noise; with his hearing aids in place, it was only louder and more jarring. But he knew what Anna's feelings were; she had voiced them many times in the past. His take on the situation was somewhat similar. A big get-together

of any kind isolated him.

Anna leaned close to him; almost shouting, she asked, "How much did you know about all of this?"

"Nothing. Nada!"

He could see that she didn't believe him.

"Ask Tippy," he said.

She made a moue. She was angry at Tippy and barely spoke to her, though they sat opposite each other.

A waiter came to the table and began to take orders.

Anna studied the menu. Given her mood, she lost whatever appetite she had. She could have just as well ordered nothing, but, when the waiter came to her, she pointed to something that turned out to be broiled lamb cutlets when they arrived at the table.

Sam chose sea food soup with noodles; he had eaten it several times before and found it satisfying. But now the soup was tepid, and the only traces of sea food were two large mussels. He should have sent it back to the kitchen, but he didn't want to create another problem.

Anna asked if he wanted to try her cutlets; she was seething.

"I'll stay with what I have," he told her, and looked at the other guests. They seemed to be having a good time and enjoying what they were eating, though Tippy seemed to be put off. There were uncharacteristic lines on either side of her pursed lips. He wondered if she realized she had made a mistake.

Suddenly, Anna's brother began banging a spoon against a glass and stood up. "Toast," he announced. "I want to make a toast."

Sam thought it was going to be to Anna, and he wasn't at all sure how she would acknowledge it.

"I can see everyone here clearly. For the first time in my life I know what each of you look like." He was referring to the results of his recent eye surgery that amazingly gave him vision where he never had any by correcting a congenital anomaly. "To everyone a happy New Year with great good luck! L'Chaim, to life."

Wine glasses were appropriately touched and Keith smiled broadly. He was obviously a very happy man.

A few moments after Keith sat and the people at the table returned to whatever they were doing before he offered his toast, Anna suddenly announced she had something to say.

Again the guests went quiet.

Sam was surprised. He hadn't expected her to say anything. He guessed it would be about her brother. But he knew he was wrong, the

moment she said, “I want to tell you a story.” And so began a long, the circuitous story with many asides about what happened to them when hurricane Sandy struck the city.

In less than two minutes, she was rambling and difficult to follow. She spoke slowly at first, moving from a description of the firemen who came to their apartment to evacuate them, and even slower when drifting away from the firemen to an incident that occurred fifty years ago.

Sam wanted to stop her; but he knew from previous experience that if he did they would argue, and she would accuse him of never letting her speak. Something similar to what was happening now happened at his cousin’s Thanksgiving dinner, only then she commented that no one was listening to her afterwards when they were on their way home in the Access-A-Ride bus. Now, he could do nothing other than wait and let the situation play out as he knew it eventually would.

Across the table Tippy toyed with a spoon and studied the table cloth. He noticed she too hadn’t eaten much of what she ordered; she was obviously disturbed.

Suddenly Anna said, “I’m not feeling well; I want to go home.”

Sam nodded.

“No one was listening,” she whimpered.

He put his arm around her shoulder; and drawing her to him, he said, “We’ll go home and everything will be alright.”

“I’m so sad, I could cry,” she said and did.

FENCES

J.S. Kierland

When the deep shadows finally came in, he sprang out of the cluster of junipers and made a run for the mountain's stark cliffs. He'd come down from the rim country, circling the ranches that flickered in the growing darkness. This flat open country hadn't given him much protection, and the only way he could get to the mountain was to jump the fences that covered the darkening pastures.

Brenny pulled the pickup in close to the swing gate. His back stiffened as his legs took the rise. A gentle rain began to cover his face and he opened the gate. Stoner, the new dog, got up and wagged his tail. Brenny patted him on the rump and leaned over into the back of the truck to check on Busher and Chloe. Boog and Skeeter didn't budge. He didn't like the monsoon season. The dogs tended to get lazy.

"Pretty soon, guys," he whispered, and drove onto the ranch. He got back out to lift the wires over the end-post and secure the gate again. In a few minutes they'd be at the bunkhouse and he'd get a hot breakfast before starting out.

Ed Ruttner, the ranch manager, appeared in the headlights, and Brenny had to drive around him to park in the back. Ruttner was at the truck's front door before it even stopped.

"Bad business," he muttered.

"It's only bad business when you start using the place for a playground," Brenny said.

"They're all over the place. Execs and their wives...one of them even brought a nanny for their kids."

"They still in bed?"

"They're getting Ostrow up now."

"I could use some pancakes."

"Jesus, Brenny. Ostrow's pissed. He's expecting you to get out on this right away. We're trying to keep it under wraps." Brenny reached in between the dogs to pull out the blankets and saddle while Ruttner picked up the empty thermos. "I'll get you some fresh coffee," he said. "Sorry you won't have time for breakfast. Didn't mean to spoil your birthday. Mary sounded angry when she answered the phone."

Brenny's wife had taken Ed's emergency call. The job had finally become a strain between them. She kept telling Brenny that he was spending too much time out on the trail. When he denied it, she

surprised him with a packet of torn off calendar pages. Every time he went out she had colored in the days with a red crayon, like he'd been missing-in-action.

"Yeah, I can understand my wife being angry," he finally said to Ruttner. "We were going to celebrate my big fives. Guess it'll have to wait."

"I tried not to drag you out here," Ruttner said. "Even tried taking care of it myself. We waited for the cat to come back but she never showed."

"How do you know it's a female?"

"Well, hell, one of our calves is ripped to shreds. You know how messy lion cubs can get. Trees are clawed up too."

Brenny knew the female. He had left her alone because she'd never gone after the stock. He hadn't seen her for months. She'd probably gone into heat or even had a litter. She might've run into a problem feeding her cubs and went after a cow to make it easier.

One of the cowboys opened the stable door. They'd already taken out his horse. Old Dusty stood in the barn's dim light. Brenny set the blanket and swung the saddle on her. He'd almost finished tightening the cinches when Ostrow showed up in pressed jeans, bright plaid shirt, and a new ranch hat covered with a fitted piece of shiny plastic to keep off the rain. Brenny figured he'd probably bought new boots for the occasion too because he moved toward him in a slow and stiff motion.

"We don't like this business any more than you do," Ostrow said in a tone that made Dusty take a nervous step backwards. "I've been trying to keep a cap on things until you got here."

"I'm just heading out to look at the damage," Brenny said, and another young cowboy handed him his thermos and a package of sweet rolls. Brenny led Dusty out into the light rain and they headed for the truck to get the rest of his gear. Ostrow kept pace with him through the muddy driveway.

"This is probably just a lot of bullshit to you, Hartrey," he said, in that same annoying tone.

"Things like this happen out here," Brenny replied.

"My execs work their ass off all year and look forward to coming out to the ranch, having a good time, and getting some work done at the same time. I don't want anything to get in their way."

"Mountain lions come and go. They eat, sleep, drink, and have their cubs. Last thing they want is run into a vacationing corporate

executive," Brenny said, dragging his old saddlebag out of the truck and reaching back for his Winchester.

"I want that damn lion out of the way, and, if you can't do it I'll get someone who can. I expect results, Mr. Hartrey," Ostrow said, and started back to the barn.

Tritech had acquired Webb Ranch for intensive corporate meetings. A lot of city dudes flying in from all over the country for seminars, fishing, and horseback riding. Ostrow didn't want his executive's fun ruined by some mountain lion getting in too close to the lodge.

Brenny watched the little man walk away in the rain. He felt like quitting but knew it'd only take a few hours to replace him. Up to this point he'd been the sole protector of the Webb Ranch for nearly twenty years. In his own way he'd kept the balance. The cattle grazed; the mountain lions had their young, grew old, and moved on. The original owner had hired him to protect the cattle, but times had changed. Now the Corporation was in charge. They were sending him out to kill a lion so the executive's families could feel safe. Three of Tritech's calves had been ripped apart and Ostrow wanted the lion's ass, which meant six feet of fur to hang on some office wall in Dallas.

The pink light of sunrise barely began to break across the sky. Brenny slipped the rifle through the worn leather scabbard and let the dogs out of the truck. They ran across the driveway, sniffing and pissing on the corners of the bunkhouse. The soft drizzle began to let up as they made their way to the fence. He heard Boog's low growl, warning the new dog to stay in close. The sounds of morning melted into Dusty's clopping steps and the squeak of the saddle. Brenny began feeling good again. There were a whole lot of *noes* waiting for him out there. No phones, no wife, no home, no Ostrow, nada. Once he passed through that fence, rode through the grove of trees along the edge of the pond, he'd be alone again. The only true peace he knew anymore.

An early glow broke over the mountains as Brenny headed for the pasture where the feasting ravens had gathered. He turned the horse, clucked at the dogs, and headed straight for the shade. He tied Skeeter, Busher, Chloe, and the new dog, Stoner, to separate trees so they wouldn't get in the way. He and Boog didn't have much time. The cat had probably hung around the kill for the past few nights, and headed off in a different direction each time. There were always a lot of tracks around a carcass. Boog's job was to find the freshest one.

When they approached the kill, the ravens squawked and flew into the trees. Boog sniffed at the carcass, looking for a track. The ground around the dead calf had been torn up just like Ruttner had said. When Brenny glanced over at the birds he saw where the trees had been clawed. The marks were too high for lion cubs and female pumas rarely did anything like that.

Boog moved easily through the grass and Brenny followed him to a second dead calf. This kill was even older. Insects had taken over. Boog high-stepped around it, sniffing the ground, whining in frustration. It was difficult to pick up an old scent in this weather even for a good strike dog like Boog.

When they started back, he lost sight of the dog in the tall August weeds. Then he heard him bark and a raven took flight. Brenny stopped to look for the carcass. The calf's head barely stuck out of the grass. The Webb Ranch brand, a W with a wavy line under it, had been clearly marked on the calf's quarters. Boog circled the carcass. Brenny froze so he wouldn't destroy any tracks the dog might find. When he looked down, he saw the fresh paw prints all around him. Going and coming. The lion had come back to the kill several times.

Brenny knelt in the wet soil to get a closer look. The dampness seeped through his jeans as he took out his reading glasses. The kill had been made about fifteen or twenty yards away, then dragged into the dense brush. He guessed, from the size of the tracks, that a male lion had done the damage. The cat made the kill with a blow to the neck, and followed it with a spine-severing bite. He had to be big. It took great strength to drag that large a calf into the brush and hide it.

A transient male was probably moving through the territory. He made the first kill, and the female must have stumbled onto it with her cubs. The male returned, saw it'd been eaten, and went searching for another kill. He was young and looking for a territory to settle down in. These days that became harder to do for the lion. There was too much development going on. The ranchers were selling out, and tract houses were pouring in with man-made waterfalls and pools. Land was running out. Solitary predators like the puma were being forced into a smaller territory where there was less game. In the end, this transient cat would have to fight for territory somewhere down the line.

Boog's sharp cry bit the morning air. The other dogs barked back. Brenny got up stiffly, making his way around the dead calf to the other side of the high brush. He caught up with the dog where the

high weeds ended. Boog's dark tail waved as he stood protecting a small patch of matted grass.

"What you got, boy?"

Brenny knelt, put his arm around the dog, and stared at the fresh print between Boog's front paws. If the lion had been in that close, he must've heard the dogs barking. Still, with a fresh new track like that the dogs could probably catch up with him before he bedded down in the heat of the day.

"Good boy," Brenny said, patting old Boog. He left his yellow slicker to mark the spot, and headed for the other dogs.

Brenny had been up on Dusty for over an hour. Boog trotted along next to him, letting Skeeter lead them up the ridge. Sunlight broke over Simmons Peak and rushed down over the miles of ranches below. The Santa Maria Mountains were caught in a mist, but he could see that the sun would eventually win the battle. He hoped the lion's scent wouldn't dry out. The prints moved out of the brush, and he had to hang down off the saddle to track them. The spacing between them was bigger than he'd ever seen before.

When he turned to look for the dogs, they disappeared around a bend, heading for Granite Mountain and the long rocky washes that ran straight to a peak about eight thousand feet up. He heard a lot of yapping but couldn't distinguish the sounds. The dogs were all barking at once.

He turned his horse in toward the hill, riding her on a sharp angle through the scrub oak. Leaning forward he coaxed Dusty toward the barking and rode the small crest. He wrapped the reins in the brush, took his rifle, and ran to the rim. The barking had become a riot of noise. Chloe had staked out a dead doe. The lion must've jumped her higher up and the struggle had gone down to where the carcass had finally been dragged under some shade trees. It'd been a dangerous kill. The lion couldn't reach the top of the deer's neck so went under it. The deer's flank had been ripped open and was still bleeding.

Brenny heard barking on the other side of a large boulder. He found Boog and Skeeter guarding a juniper tree. When they saw him coming, their barking turned into whines. Brenny stopped about thirty feet from the tree, and searched its branches until he found the mountain lion hissing at them from a narrow crotch about half way up. It was the female. He looked around for her cubs, hoped the dogs hadn't killed them, and only then realized that Busher and Stoner were under another tree further down the hill. Two of the female's

cubs hung precariously from a scrub oak just out of the reach of his new dog's playful leaps.

"It's all right, Busher," he said. The dog came running to him but Stoner kept leaping at the cubs.

He reached inside his jacket for the package the cowboy had given him in the barn. Busher and Chloe stood watching him undo the rubber bands while Skeeter and Boog came up the hill after them. When the outer package came undone, Brenny pulled the last few sticky pieces of wrapping off the sweet rolls and cut off a large piece with his jackknife. The smell of cinnamon sliced the air.

"You first, Skeeter," he said. The dog took the piece of roll from his hand. "Good boy," Brenny whispered, rubbing the dog's ears. Somewhere the lion tracks had crossed one another. The dog had picked up the female's tracks instead of following the large male. "You're still the best, Skeeter," Brenny said. "Anyone could have made a mistake like that."

He gave the rest of the roll to Boog, and cut the next one into thirds for Busher, Chloe, and the young dog, Stoner. The treed lioness looked hungry too and she kept growling to reassure her cubs. The litter had been a strain on her. It might've even been her first. They looked healthy though. She'd done a good job and he knew she wouldn't leave that tree without them.

If he killed her and toted her back to the ranch, the whole matter of satisfying the corporate picnic would be over. He'd be an instant hero and probably get a raise. The only loss would be some lioness wearing a government collar.

"All right, gang," he said. "We're leaving this lady and her pups alone." The dogs wagged their tails. "Let's get it right this time." Boog started up the hill to where Brenny had tied the horse. The old dog was ready to go again.

It took Boog over an hour to find the spot where the tracks had crossed. The dogs moved in tandem, finding the male's smell on the brush and along the rocks. Deer are a lot easier for a dog to follow because they leave a sharp track. The lion has a soft pad and it's harder to see. Skeeter might have been the best track dog in the territory but it was Brenny's job to keep them all moving in the right direction.

When Brenny saw the fresh scratch marks on a large cedar he clucked at the dogs, heading them up along the boulders. The lion they were chasing had to be eight feet or more. Brenny had worked

these mountains over twenty years but never seen a cougar that big. The dogs raced past him in a rush, moving toward the peaks. Granite Mountain's the perfect place for a cougar. Enormous rocks tossed together like a petrified salad. Its highest peaks are stark, and the rest of it spreads out across miles of rock.

Brenny cut across a switchback to catch up with the dogs. Boog was waiting for him, but he didn't see the others.

"What's up, boy?" he asked.

The dog stood in front of a barbed-wire fence hidden in the overgrown brush. If they crossed that wire, he'd be into a government wildlife area. Dusty cantered easily to where Boog waited. The rest of the dogs were already on the other side.

"You know what happens if we get caught in there. Lots of screaming and threatening," he said to the dog, as he opened the worn saddlebag to take out the clippers. "There's a big buck-ass-fine for cutting government wire." Boog yawned.

Brenny narrowed his eyes against the glare of the sun. He scanned the trails below, making sure there weren't any stray hikers, then snipped the barbed wire and bent it away from the post. He pulled the fence out to let Dusty through, then forced the wire back into place so the cut couldn't be spotted.

Storm clouds rolled in over the mountains. The big cat watched the lightning tear through the curving shapes. An intense heat made the air feel heavy and slowed the climbing. He came up on a rim of low juniper and reached in to sweep away the loose rocks. He took a deep breath, smelling the rain in the air. A movement shimmered in the heat below, darting in and out of the brush. Coyote. He slumped down deep under the juniper, into its damp shade, and waited for the storm to hit.

Brenny lifted the heavy canteen off the saddle and Boog and Skeeter turned back. The new dog, Stoner, trotted easily behind them. "That rain could cut into our day," Brenny said, pouring water into a pan. Boog moved to drink first. Then Skeeter squeezed in next to him. They drank together in long, loud gulps. The younger dog edged in closer. "You've been pretty good today, boy," Brenny said, pouring some water into his hand. The young dog trotted the last few steps for the earned drink.

When Busher and Chloe didn't show, it usually meant they were getting close to the lion. Brenny poured another handful of water for Stoner, and listened for Busher's bark. The only sound was the flat

growl of jet planes leaving their white streaks across the sky over them. Granite Mountain stood directly under the New York to Los Angeles flight pattern. Every hour the businessmen, tourists, and their plastic food trays hurtled over the struggle between man and beast below.

Brenny poured more water into the empty pan. Skeeter took a few gulps before disappearing into the deep shade. Stoner hesitantly approached, drank the rest of the water, then sat at Brenny's feet.

Dusty danced a nervous step as a sudden wind rushed down the mountain. "Easy, girl. Just the rain coming in," he said, as a crooked stick of lightning hit. Brenny counted the seconds before he heard its low rumble. They had about an hour to find the lion or it'd be just another long walk home in the rain.

Stoner whined and the brush began to wave in the breeze. Brenny glanced over at Boog and Skeeter but they didn't move. "You hear something, boy?" Brenny asked the young dog. Stoner turned to stare up at the peak. He barked sharply, waited, and barked again. Boog jumped up to move in next to him. The older dog's ears stiffened, and he started up the trail with the new dog behind him. Brenny grabbed Dusty's reins and they moved out so fast the horse nearly stepped on Skeeter who had run under her to catch up with the others.

They were there on top of him and he rolled out from beneath the juniper, catching one of them under the chest. It howled. Then he felt a sharp pain run up along his back leg. The other one had gotten in behind him. Springing to higher ground, he looked back through the flying dust. They weren't coyotes. The smaller one kept barking at him while the other crawled through the dust along the narrow wash. He shrieked at them and their barking stopped. A sharp pain ran up his back leg where it had been ripped open. A quick nausea hit him and he slid between the boulders, looking for a place to hide.

Brenny heard the barking but had lost sight of the dogs. When he reached the ridge, just below the steep climb to the top, he had to go around a pair of huge boulders. Boog stood rigid on the other side, guarding something in the wash. Busher was lying dead among a rash of loose stones. He covered the dog's broken body with his jacket and hid her under the juniper. Tying the horse in close to the rocks, he pulled out his Winchester, and noticed the fresh blood. He smeared his fingers in the heavy red splotches and raised them to his mouth. The blood lingered on his tongue and knotted his throat. It was the musty taste of the mountain lion.

He finally caught up with the dogs and they followed the cat's trail up the mountain together. Lightning ripped the low clouds, with splitting roars of thunder behind it. If he stopped now they'd lose the track in the rain. Brenny glanced up at the stark cliffs on the north face and the three dogs ran ahead. Skeeter, his head low, sniffed along the large rock formation leading to the peak. Boog stayed in close, but the new dog dropped back when the cat's high scream rushed down at them.

Brenny took off his slicker, threw it aside, and made a wide turn to come up behind them. The cat had placed himself along a granite wall that split straight to the top of the mountain. If he fired a shot, he might force the cat out but didn't want to lose any more dogs. The only other choice was to climb to the peak while they still had the cat trapped.

His hind leg pained and he shifted his weight away from the growling dog that paced back and forth in front of him. A brown muzzle snarled in close and he screamed at it in anger. The dog retreated so fast it nearly stumbled off the narrow ledge.

He pulled back as far as he could, waited for the dogs to come in closer, then jumped at the granite wall. His long body arced off the flat stone, catching one of the dogs full on the shoulder. It rolled in the dust and he swiped again. The dog tumbled away. He turned swiftly to face the large black and tan standing his ground. A younger dog stood behind him, whining in the wind.

He leaped up across the boulders. A sharp pain ran through his back leg but he managed to scratch his way out of the cleft. He had another long jump to the far ledge and couldn't be sure if his leg would hold. A drenching rain hit in large heavy drops, turning everything into a blur. He crouched, looked up into the downpour, and jumped.

The storm hit Brenny just below the deep cleft in the mountain. He took off his boots so he wouldn't slip on the wet algae. His clothes had gotten so heavy he could hardly move. He ripped off his shirt, letting the cool rain bite his bare back and shoulders as he slipped out of his soaked pants. The water gushed across the rocks in a rushing stream, falling off the cliff on the other side. He finally reached the top of the cleft, dropped to his knees, and peeked over the edge. The cougar was gone.

A chill ran through his naked body. Sensing something, he looked up and saw the huge, powerful head staring down at him. He cradled

the Winchester and tilted his head toward the sight. Like a pagan god, the lion looked as if he were part of the mountain itself. There'd be no second chance. A blinding light suddenly hit below the ledge, bouncing in a thin blue flash toward his rifle barrel.

A bolt of heat hit Brenny's chest, throwing him backwards into a pool of sizzling water. He felt an incredible thirst, and there was no sound to the hail bouncing off his face. He'd been hit by the lightning and thrown into a gushing stream of rainwater. Pieces of ice were melting on his eyes. Raising himself on his arm, he felt a deep weakness and fell back into the water. A familiar smell moved over him. It was old Boog. He tried to call out to the dog but his strength faded like the rushing water that ran past him and disappeared over the edge.

The lion limped across the rocks, waiting to see which way the men on the horses would go. He took a last look at the lifeless form on the lower ledge. The black and tan had crawled up on the man's chest to protect him, and he could smell its panting fear.

The line of men had started their final climb to the peak and he heard them urging the horses as he limped down along the other side of the boulders. It'd be slow going because of the bite on his leg, but he'd try to get down the mountain before daylight ran out on him.

FOOD THAT'S EXTINCT

Leslie Pietrzyk

Hannah Westcott was taking her husband of six weeks, Jason Smith, for dinner with an old lady, a friend of her grandfather's she had never met. And at the old lady's private club, of all places. She suspected it was a bad idea, but her mother had pushed her: "You're right there in D.C. now, so it won't kill you to make an effort to see this Lillian and make Grandpa happy. She's filthy rich, so I bet she'll pay for dinner." It was embarrassing to have a mother who talked about scamming free dinners, but that was the line Hannah herself had used to convince Jason to go with her.

Actually, a free dinner was significant. She and Jason had come to Washington right after college graduation, right after getting married in a tiny campus chapel on the bank of the Iowa River. They were unpaid interns at the Institute for Policy Change, living together in the dark basement of a row house in Columbia Heights; the people upstairs cooked spicy, cumin-laden food at odd hours, so that nights when Hannah was lying on the futon at four in the morning, unable to sleep, she counted Jason's soft snores and made mental lists of food—*food that's red, food you eat with your fingers, food that's round*—but nothing worked; she would never sleep normally again, it seemed—and she felt so starved that when it was finally time to get up, she tore into her toast (*food with the same letter to start and end, toast, tart, Oreo, pop, oregano*), longing for something more flavorful.

For this big deal dinner, Hannah put on a black skirt and a sleeveless black sweater, both of which she had shoplifted from Marshall's. The guilt she felt for stealing added a certain frisson that made her feel especially confident in the ensemble. People at work complimented her whenever she wore it, some of them for a second or third time. Originally she had vowed to stop stealing after she graduated, but that vow hadn't lasted more than a week.

Hannah got Jason to agree to the good jeans and a striped thrift store shirt with snaps, though it was his idea to scrunch up the sleeves to show off his Asian water dragon tattoos.

The metro to Dupont Circle was crowded and hot. They had boarded a car with broken air conditioning and were wedged into the middle of the crowd of commuters. Armpits were every direction Hannah turned her head, and a giant backpack stuffed with something pointy pressed into her spine. She wore new shoes (purchased from Marshall's) and several agonizing blisters had popped up on her heels.

Hannah could barely breathe, almost as if she had forgotten how in the still, heavy air…*suck this into my lungs; are you insane*? Jason stood quietly next to her. Last night, she had counted four hundred and thirty-six separate snores. *Food you eat mostly in the summer: watermelon, popsicles, corn on the cob, peaches.*

Finally it was their station, and they rode the escalator to street level, emerging into a smack of hazy July humidity. At the top, Hannah moved aside for a moment to gather her bearings as commuters swirled past them. In Washington, there were always too many people around, and they seemed so purposeful, with important destinations in mind, their BlackBerries bristling with White House phone numbers.

They joined the crowd of people streaming across the street and followed the curve of Dupont Circle until they crossed Massachusetts Avenue. The club was located ahead on the corner, but they could see it from where they stood.

"Shit." Jason tugged at his shirt collar.

The large stone mansion had turrets and took up the whole block, fronted with a circular driveway and spiky, black iron fencing. The sleek, dark cars pulling in seemed to idle impatiently, and the people emerging from them were grayish men in dark suits, accompanied by grayish women in jewel-tone suits.

Hannah was nervous, too, but she said, "What did you expect? It's a private club. They don't even have a website."

"What are we supposed to talk about?"

"The weather. I don't know."

"Who's this lady again? Why's she so loaded?"

"She grew up with my grandfather in Illinois. She moved to Washington when she was sixteen to be a secretary, and she ended up marrying some government guy. When he died, she married some political guy. Each of them had a ton of money. There was some story like maybe she murdered the first husband." Where did that come from? There was no such story, but apparently now there was: Hannah had invented it to steady her nerves. She was so damn tired. "Poison," she added. "But no one ever proved anything."

"Really?" Jason lifted one eyebrow. Hannah knew that he loved her b.s., loved that she'd tell a story instead of the truth just to be interesting.

"That's what my mother claimed."

They proceeded up the sidewalk to the entrance along the curving driveway, and Hannah found herself wishing she was wearing a strand of pearls—not that she owned a strand of pearls, but she might feel better

with one around her neck. A young Latino man pulled open the door, saying, "Good evening," without sounding smarmy, as if of course Jason in his thrift store shirt and Hannah in her stolen skirt belonged here with everyone else in the Excelsior Club.

She and Jason stood in a tiled entryway. There was a scent, not distinct—the way air sometimes smelled like lemons or pine trees—but something soothing. The traffic noises from outside and the swirl of commuters and the metro jammed with armpits felt distant, and in unison, both Hannah and Jason drew in deep, lingering breaths.

"May I help you?" A woman wearing a nondescript dark blue suit appeared. She held a clipboard. The twenty-five-year-old who supervised Hannah at the internship also carried a clipboard that she waved like a signal flag when she needed someone's attention.

"We're meeting Lillian Webster for dinner," Hannah said.

"Mrs. Peter Webster is waiting at her usual table in the dining room," the woman said. "Let me assist you," and she escorted them along a hallway that passed through a sitting room filled with lush antique sofas and chairs, perfectly arranged to create intimate conversational groupings, and then another such room, and another, and then into a room where several couples were sitting closely, sipping cocktails and nibbling nuts from tiny silver bowls, and finally into the dining room, which was filled with round tables topped with white tablecloths, bowls of pale roses, and flickering votives. There were mirrors and chandeliers, and an ornate marble fireplace took up almost one whole wall. A row of standing wine buckets was lined up in the far corner.

Hannah wanted to say something like, *Wow*, but she kept silent as the woman with the clipboard maneuvered to a table in the far corner, where, in the power seat against the wall, with a view of the entire room, sat Mrs. Peter Webster, a round mass of a woman with swirls of white hair like cotton candy piled on her head. Though there wasn't one, a tiara would not be out of place amidst all that hair. She wore an ivory silk suit and, yes, a triple strand of fat pearls. She held a flute of champagne in one hand, and she smiled a tiny smile as they approached.

"Your guests, Mrs. Webster," the woman said, bobbing her head slightly, almost a bow. She turned to thread her way back through the tables.

Mrs. Webster pointed at the chairs with the hand that wasn't holding the champagne flute, and Hannah and Jason sat down, awkwardly, because out of the blue he tried to pull out Hannah's chair for her, though she had already started moving it herself. They ended up in a peculiar tug

of war that she let Jason win.

A waiter sidled forward to pour champagne from the bottle into two more glasses. Hannah couldn't read the label, but it wasn't one that she recognized from the Safeway wine aisle. The bubbles soared upwards like tiny birds.

"So you're Rudy's little granddaughter," Mrs. Webster said.

Hannah nodded. "Hannah Westcott," she said. "And my husband, Jason Smith."

Mrs. Webster extended her hand to Jason, who raised it and gave it a fervent kiss. Hannah almost burst out laughing. Did Jason think he was starring in a black and white Turner Classic movie? What next, waltzing Mrs. Webster around the room to the piped-in smooth jazz?

"You're too young to be married," Mrs. Webster said with a benign smile, as if she were selecting an elevator button, not passing judgment.

"I guess not really," Hannah said. "I mean, the state gave us a license and everything and let us do it, haha." She couldn't stand when people spoke the word "haha," as if that would turn something that wasn't at all funny suddenly funny.

"Afraid she'd change her mind?" Mrs. Webster said to Jason.

His face reddened, and he glared at Hannah. She looked away. She had been pregnant. They had agreed to tell no one else, and then. Well. Then she was no longer pregnant. Haha.

"We're in love," Jason said.

"Good for you," Mrs. Webster said.

There was a silence as she lifted her champagne glass. "Cheers," she said, and Hannah and Jason clinked glasses with her and drank. The taste was rapture, nothing like the sweet, sodden champagne Hannah had had on graduation night or at her mother's three weddings or at the brunch after her own wedding; this was buttery and tingly, like a delicious shiver. Even though all of Mrs. Webster's comments so far were technically quite rude, Hannah liked her—or was it the champagne and the heavy, rich air she liked?

After a pause, Jason said, "It's been hot lately, huh?"

"Washington is hot every summer," Mrs. Webster said. "Weather is predictable that way."

Hannah sensed Jason trying to meet her eye, but she looked instead at Mrs. Webster's gnarly hands, each of which had a diamond ring on the ring finger; the diamonds were about the size of gumballs, not even counting the stones on the side. Hannah tucked her left hand under her right, so Mrs. Webster wouldn't think to ask about her ring, which had

once been her grandmother's. All of her tiny diamonds stacked together wouldn't come close to adding up to one of the gumball's sidebars. A big diamond was simply showing off, and she hadn't expected or wanted a ring in the first place—everyone knew there were better ways to spend money, like graduate school, or a house, or a new car (the Jetta had barely gotten them to D.C.)—and even those things were out of the picture until there were real jobs and a dent in the student loans. Where would she wear a diamond the size of a gumball or a strand of pearls? She was an unpaid intern living in a basement with her college boyfriend who had turned into her husband. They couldn't even afford a dog.

Mrs. Webster caught that quick shift of her hand—Hannah suspected there wasn't much of anything that Mrs. Webster didn't catch—and she gave Hannah another tiny smile, as if to say, *I know what you're thinking*.

Hannah said, "This champagne is divine." Now she was the one in the black and white movie, tossing out a cornball word like "divine."

"The first time I had champagne," Mrs. Webster said, "was on the train from Chicago to Washington, and I vowed to drink it every day."

"So do you?" Jason said.

Mrs. Webster turned to him and rolled her eyes; the tiny smile flipped into a sneer. "Of course not," she said. "I don't know anyone who would drink it every day. But I drink it often." She finished the last bit in her glass as if to prove her point.

"How long have you lived here?" Hannah asked quickly.

"My entire life, my real life," Mrs. Webster said. "Illinois disappeared—poof. Once I was gone, I was gone. The only one I cared to remember is your grandfather. Rudy." Mrs. Webster leaned forward, as if expecting Hannah to challenge her statements.

"What about your family?" Hannah asked.

Mrs. Webster flicked one hand. "Those Neanderthals are why I left without looking back."

That was what Hannah might like to do, not look back. Her disappeared father—married to someone else when he was having affairs with Hannah's mother and also another woman—was, according to her mother when she drank too much red wine, "a fucking bastard" who had exactly one thing going for him: "that rock hard dick." As for her mother, she was married now to a guy who managed a struggling indie band, so she was on the road with him, hanging out in bars, selling T-shirts and posting Twitter updates for the band's ten thousand followers. He was about fifteen years younger than her mother, and Hannah instantly thought of Peter Pan and Wendy when she first met the guy, only her

mother was Peter Pan. They had skipped Hannah's wedding, but maybe because Hannah had only told her about it the week before, only because Jason told her she had to. Jason's parents sat in the back, because Jason and Hannah were headed to hell and they didn't want to catch those cooties. His mother passed out religious tracts to the guests.

The waiter stepped forward to pour more champagne into everyone's glasses, though Mrs. Webster's was the only one that was empty.

"We'll order now," she said.

The waiter looked at Hannah and Jason and said, "Allow me to tell you what the chef is presenting tonight," and he rattled off too many choices to keep track of. Hannah didn't feel comfortable asking him to repeat himself, and Mrs. Webster immediately said, "I'll have my usual," which helped not at all, and the only thing Hannah remembered was salmon—which she remembered because she didn't like salmon (*food that's inedible*)—but that's what she ordered, and so did Jason.

In the waiter's absence, the room seemed quieter than before. There were several other couples and a few parties of four seated across the room, at a distance. Hannah wondered what it might be like to have the "usual" wherever you went and a team of people dedicated to ensuring that everything you encountered would be exactly the way you expected, exactly the way it was the last time. *The usual.*

The waiter brought a cut glass dish of cold vegetables—carrots, celery, radishes, tiny pickles, and canned black olives—each in its own compartment, along with a silverweave basket of crackers and a small bowl of soupy-looking shredded cheese speckled with unidentifiable red chunks. None of it was food Hannah would expect to see in Washington.

"Try the pimento cheese," Mrs. Webster said, motioning to the bowl. "The recipe is from one of the maids here, who grew up in Richmond. Her mother worked in the kitchen of the governor's mansion, and she was famous for this pimento cheese."

Hannah had never heard of pimento cheese, but she scooped some onto a cracker. It tasted like cheese and mayonnaise—apparently the vivid red chunks were pimentos—but she nodded enthusiastically, and murmured, "Mmmm," as she chewed. A new one for *food that's red*.

Mrs. Webster said, "I don't know what your grandfather told you about me…" and she let the sentence dangle invitingly.

Hannah swallowed. "He used to tell us that, um…." What he had said was that she was as rich as a Rockefeller. Since her grandfather lived in a dinky farm town in Illinois, she doubted his judgment; any time he had come to Chicago to visit, he and her grandmother had said,

"Holy moly," if they went to a restaurant where a cup of coffee cost more than fifty cents. Her grandmother had died last year, two days after the fiftieth wedding anniversary party. Now, according to her mother, her grandfather was "a scarecrow, skin and bones and nothing holding him together but a stupid flannel shirt." He'd checked into a nursing home that her mother described as "a zombie warehouse," not that she was volunteering to stop in one place where she might take care of him or anything. She didn't even have a mailing address.

Hannah said, "According to him, you were the prettiest girl he knew." Actually, he said that about her grandmother, but it seemed like a safe enough lie…who would challenge that? *No, I wasn't!* She expected maybe the tiny smile, but there was just silence, cold Antarctica silence. She quickly said, "Try the cheese, Jason. It's delicious." Luckily, Jason scooped a heap of cheese onto a cracker as the two women watched.

Then Mrs. Webster said, "Of course he would say that. But what else?"

"There was a story about something at school," Hannah said, trying to keep the question mark out of her voice; a school story seemed vague, a safe bet. "That—."

Mrs. Webster banged her hand against the table so the glasses rattled. "No—what did he really say?"

Hannah looked at Jason, who had just bitten into the cracker. The sound of his chewing seemed to echo. A crumb briefly stuck to his lip, distracting Hannah until Jason licked it away. "I'm not sure what you mean," Hannah said, as if her comment were directed at anyone, not specifically Mrs. Webster.

Mrs. Webster lifted her champagne glass. Her hand shook, and the glass tinked against her teeth as she sipped. When she finished, she continued to hold the empty glass midair with her shaky hand. "I mean, how he was in love with me. He only married her because I left." She, too, kept her voice neutral, and it took Hannah a moment to absorb what she had heard.

Hannah gripped the edge of the table, but then let her hands unclench. It wasn't any big thing. People loved all kinds of people. Look at her crazy mother.

Jason said, "He was married to Hannah's grandmother for like fifty years. So, I guess he got over you, you might say."

Mrs. Webster set down her glass, and as the waiter swooped in to refill it, she turned to concentrate her glare at Jason. "He didn't."

"Well," Hannah said. She should be polite since Mrs. Webster was

buying them dinner, and she was this sad, old, loaded lady drinking way too much champagne. But her grandparents were like a fairy tale. The whole town had shown up for that party and then for the funeral. They had their picture tacked up on the diner wall, sitting side by side in a booth, smooching up a big kiss. "They were married for fifty years, and he sobbed when she died. He's wasting away—literally—without her. They held hands wherever they went, and he made up songs rhyming her name like, 'handy Helen, whatcha sellin?' Honestly, I never heard him once talk about you. I'm sorry, but that's a fact. *She* was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen. That's what he said all the time. He was totally, utterly, fully in love with my grandmother."

"I broke his heart," Mrs. Webster said.

Jason and Hannah exchanged glances, and Hannah scooped pimento cheese onto a cracker to keep herself from laughing, but when she looked at Mrs. Webster's tight face, her stomach flipped and she set the cracker on her bread plate.

Jason gave his head a quick shake, signaling, *Let it go*.

"My grandfather was happy," Hannah insisted.

"Who sees the bones of a marriage?" Mrs. Webster said. "He begged me not to go to Washington. I was certain he'd follow me, but three weeks later, he was standing up in church with Helen. Getting back at me: he never cared one whit for her. I felt so sorry for her." She finished off her champagne and turned to Jason. "Do you like that pimento cheese? Remember, it's the recipe served in the governor's mansion in Richmond." Her voice turned pleasant and chatty, like a sudden, unpredictable breeze.

"It's great," he said without enthusiasm. "It sort of reminds me of soggy cheese. But in a good way."

Hannah stood up. "You're telling me terrible things! Stop it."

In unison, she and Mrs. Webster glanced at the other diners, whose low hum of conversation stopped as they swiveled their heads to check out what was going on at Mrs. Webster's usual table. She gave her tiny smile, and people immediately looked away. Mrs. Webster said. "Sit down, dear, and don't make a scene," and Hannah sat down, though she didn't know why; she should have walked out. Jason kept wolfing the cheese, then grabbed some olives and celery, as if he sensed that he and Hannah wouldn't be sticking around long enough to get much of the free food.

"So he never came for you, and *now* you're sorry, *now*?" Jason asked, as he crunched celery. "Pardon me for saying so, but that's truly fucked."

"There's the distraction of *this*." She swirled one hand through the air, as if that were the only explanation of "this" that was needed. "And yet what I'm talking about is heartbreak, real and true heartbreak, my truest and deepest regret. I should have stayed. If I had stayed with him, I would have been—well, happy. He, too. The waste. It sickens me." But she didn't look sick; she seemed enlivened. Her eyes glittered as if filled with champagne bubbles. "One mistake and I lost everything."

Again a lurching sensation in Hannah's stomach. So much felt suddenly wrong. Wearing a shoplifted skirt to a private club. Calling something divine. Introducing Jason with his last name. *Names for a girl. Names for a boy. Names that work for either a boy or a girl.* She spoke quickly: "I don't believe you. Your story is ridiculous, and even if it's true, it's silly to be mooning over someone from fifty years ago. That's like a lifetime away."

"I have his letters," Mrs. Webster said, and she dragged out from under the table a battered Nordstrom holiday shopping bag.

Jason peered into the bag. "Bunches of envelopes all rubber-banded up."

"I never had children," Mrs. Webster said. "So I'm passing them on to you. Rudy's granddaughter."

"I don't want your stupid letters," Hannah said automatically.

Jason tried to reach inside the bag, but Mrs. Webster tugged it out of his reach. "This is the history of a great love affair." Her voice quivered, but she went on, "You kids don't know about that."

After a moment, Jason said, "I'm in love with Hannah." He reached across the table for Hannah's hand, the hand with the ring of tiny diamonds. His hand felt clumsy, like a paw.

Hannah tried to speak normally, instead of shouting or whispering the question as she wanted to, "Are you also sorry you never had children?"

"The bother," Mrs. Webster said. "Honestly, I never saw they were worth it." She gave a hard, dry laugh, or maybe it was a cough, and the waiter showed up to distribute iceberg lettuce salads and a lazy Susan of four dressings, each in its own individual metal bowl.

"Italian, French, bleu cheese, ranch," he recited, and Hannah was startled to realize French dressing still existed (*food that's extinct*).

"I love Jason," Hannah said. "I do."

Mrs. Webster stirred either the bleu cheese or the ranch—the two containers of white, viscous goo looked identical. "You married him, didn't you?"

It sounded like an accusation. Or possibly a different question.

Mrs. Webster ladled spoonfuls of dressing on top of her lettuce.

Jason slid his hand away and crossed his arms. Candlelight caught the small diamonds of her ring, and she tilted her hand, setting off glinting sparks. She barely spoke, "I don't know if I want children either."

There was a fragile stillness to the air.

Food that's noisy. *Celery, crackers, corn on the cob again—*.

Jason leaned over roughly and snatched the Nordstrom bag. He pulled out a packet of envelopes and after riffling through them for several moments, said, "These are old electric bills! From 1987."

Mrs. Webster dredged her fork into the globs of dressing on her lettuce and brought it to her mouth, licked it. "He loved me," she said. "No one loved me more than that man. I could always think, at least I had that." A few tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes, and she reached for another spoonful of salad dressing which she dumped on her dressing-laden salad.

Jason stood up, pushing the chair back far enough to bang into the wall. "Come on," and he grabbed Hannah's arm. "Enough of this crazy shit already. We don't even like salmon."

Hannah stood up and set the cloth napkin neatly on the table. She picked up her purse, smoothed her skirt (which she knew she would never wear again), looked around at the other diners who weren't staring overtly but who definitely had paused their own conversations to eavesdrop. She hoped Mrs. Webster had someone nice caring for her. She didn't seem upset or surprised that they were leaving; maybe this happened to her all the time. Maybe she didn't even know where she was or what was going on.

"Take the letters," Mrs. Webster said. "They're yours. Please, dear." That quivering voice, the squeeze of tears: an unsustainable note of pain.

Jason grabbed the handles of the shopping bag. "Yeah, Hannah will take real good care of these," he said. Mrs. Webster thrust one gnarled hand upwards, and it lingered there, waiting, surprisingly steady.

"Oh, fuck," Jason muttered, and he awkwardly took Mrs. Webster's hand, gave it sort of a half-shake, half-squeeze, but then leaned in and kissed it again. Hannah imagined that papery skin, the ridges and maps of Mrs. Webster's exhausted veins.

Mrs. Webster said, "Your grandmother knew. She loved him anyway. That's what some people will do."

It seemed as if the whole room turned silent as she spoke, as if everyone had been waiting to hear those exact words, and once they had been uttered, people could finally return to their own conversations. Even

the waiter had paused with a tray of coffee cups that he now whisked to another table.

Hannah felt everyone pretending not to stare but staring anyway, as she and Jason trudged through the dining room and through the rooms where couples were eating nuts and drinking clear drinks, and back to the entryway where the Latino man held open the door. "Good night," he said in the same tone of voice he had greeted them with.

They cleared the circular drive and were on their way to the metro, Jason walking so fast Hannah was barely able to keep up in her uncomfortable shoes. He stopped at the crosswalk though the light was green. "Jesus Christ," he said. "Jesus fucking Christ." Without looking at Hannah, he said, "Why did you say that?"

"I told you that," she said. "When we discussed it."

"I know, but."

The light switched to red and several taxis swished by. People bunched up around them, all off to somewhere, busy even at night. Only Hannah was aimless.

"I thought," Jason started.

Hannah was conscious of her own breathing, even as a bus lumbered through the intersection; and someone shouted into a cell phone that it was P Street, not Mass Ave. so why would they have said Mass Ave.; and cigarette smoke wafted noxiously behind her.

"Let's not," she said. "Not here."

"Fuck you," he said.

The light turned, and as soon as Jason got across the street, he beelined to a trash can and shoved the Nordstrom bag inside, crunching and smashing, jamming it entirely into the narrow cylinder. Without looking at Hannah, he said, "They were just old bills. Not even real letters." His voice was dull. "Woodward & Lothrop, Garfinckel's. Stores that don't exist anymore."

It could be that none of it was real, Hannah thought, the tasteful rooms unfolding like a paper doll chain in the club, the diamonds glittering bits of candlelight, this soggy curtain of Washington humidity, her long lists of food at night, the stolen skirt, the way sunlight pulsed against the windows in the tiny chapel along the Iowa River that day when she held Jason's hand and promised forever, the wedding brunch, the baby. None of it belonged to them. None of it had happened. None of it was real.

VIRGIE'S ORDER

Patricia Schultheis

March and still wintry in western Pennsylvania, the women getting their meat at Brommel's Butchers had separated themselves into two scrums: one, red-faced and knock-kneed; the other, silver-haired and tidy.

Virgie looked more like the last: leather shoes, not tennis; her jacket quilted, not puffed, although none of the other tidy ones had a Liberty of London scarf bought in Heathrow poking out of hers. She felt their curiosity grinding her up. If she said she was from Hoytsburg, their rising eyebrows would wrinkle up their brows like the new "Romanesque" shades she saw in magazines—who would drive all the way from Hoytsburg to get meat? Brommel's was good, but, still, forty miles for meat? Why would anyone do that?"

"Anything else, Mam?" With every cut she'd chosen, the cockiness of the kid behind the counter had grown. And Virgie'd played along, letting him think she didn't have his number…didn't know he was egging her on just to goose up her order. She'd taught hundreds like him, the mediocrities who think charm can camouflage ignorance.

"Well, let's see…we've got my chicken, right? And my pork chops, and leg of lamb. Did I forget the meatloaf mix?"

"You most certainly did not." A suggestion of a wattle hung from the kid's jaw.

"He's fat and scant of breath"…the remarks of pitiless Gertrude about her loony Hamlet just before he died. Virgie smiled. This kid wouldn't know Hamlet from Ham Steak. He had the same flirty attitude as that long-legged Todd she'd taught her second year. She'd been living with her parents, trying to save so she and Albert could get married. And every day, fourth period, there would be Todd lounging in the back, handing in bad tests and late papers with sorry excuses and slippery grins.

And then that June, Albert's letter had come from Vanderbilt: "Hoytsburg was a wonderful place to grow-up in, Virgie. But you're the poet; you know how they say you can't go home again. For me, that's true, but I honestly can't imagine you being happy anywhere else. And I don't have the heart to take you from all that." A week later she'd slammed down an F as Todd's final grade. Whatever happened to him? Maybe living in San Diego like Albert. Maybe dead…she still had the letter.

"We've got a great special on stew meat. Really good," the kid said. "Just didn't want you to miss out. That's all."

A wave of country music spilled out behind a ruddy man pushing through the swinging doors to the shop's rear. Coils of black hair covered his head, arms, even the back of his hands. His mouth was simian-shaped, and he was carrying a tray of pork chops.

Billy Tilson…he looked like Billy Tilson. Virgie calculated: she'd taught Billy her final year—"The Tilson kid's in Iraq…enjoy your retirement, Virgie." Steve Keyser had whispered at her farewell dinner. But that was nearly five years ago. So now Billy Tilson would be what? Twenty-three…Four? And this man was older, not by much, but clearly older. Through the case he glanced at her as he arranged the chops like overlapping roofing tiles of flesh, fat, and bone. Virgie's sixty-six-year-old bladder began to twitch.

"Mam? The stew meat…sure you don't want some?" By the register, the kid's smile had turned brittle.

"Just a pound." She had enough…two-thirds more than enough. She'd get her stew cubes and get home.

Down the counter, a pasty little girl held onto the trunk of her mother's leg with one chubby hand and with the other gripped a pink plastic doll like the ones who had lived in the dollhouses their father had made for Virgie and her sisters. Except the doll the little girl held was naked. Virgie watched as the child walked its pink, plastic legs up the meat case. Then the child turned, leaned her back against the case and, insouciant as a teenager, stuck her dolly's pink plastic head into her own wet mouth. Virgie fluffed her scarf.

One of the other women wanted a particular eye of round, forcing Virgie to move down the case, until she was face to face with a crown rib roast.

The kid caught her looking at it. "I can take that in back for you…have them cut that down a bit."

"No…no. I have more than enough already."

"Sure? How about three ribs…just three?"

"No thanks." Still, her father had loved a good rib roast. Sundays, after church, the two of them smelling it in the oven while he watched the Steelers and Virgie graded her papers. And, at the little table down the hall, her mother would be making her Sunday calls—Beth in Boston, Linda in Raleigh.

"Okay, how about two, then?" The kid's square-toothed grin was You-Know-You-Want-It wide.

"Well, maybe two."

The kid pushed the swinging doors to get the roast cut down, and Virgie caught a glimpse of the black-haired man sawing a lamb carcass.

"Wait a minute," she said, —that coffee shop across the street had to have a Ladies Room. "Would it be possible for you to put the roast with rest of my order while I get a cup of coffee across the street?...I've got a long drive."

The kid hadn't been prepared for a pop quiz. His eyes fished for an answer. "Sure. I'll have it all ready and waiting."

"Thank you so much."

Outside, the cold air dropped like an ice cube into her bladder. She had to stand at the top of the concrete steps and work her lower muscles. For distraction, she studied the brown mountain rising against the gray, late winter sky. Earth and air gathering themselves for one last storm.

She should just drive away…leave everything, the meat, even the house in Hoytsburg…she didn't owe anyone anything. Not at sixty-six.

She'd paid her dues. Been the good daughter. The one who'd stayed behind—her sisters, Beth and Linda, had families, juggled careers and hardly ever came home. While she'd been the one who'd been forced to act as cheerful as could be, spending Saturday afternoons wandering up and down the aisles in the craft store behind their mother, hearing church bells chiming for someone else's wedding.

The shop's steps were steep with a single iron pipe for a railing. She clung to it as she went down, and then crossed to the coffee shop where wilted pastries held back red and yellow jelly floods like doughy dikes, and crude folk craft items, children's knitted caps, birdhouses, miniature furniture—lay scattered on the counter and tables. After the Ladies Room, Virgie chose a table with a tiny wardrobe and a little card reading "Crafted by Peter Hauser in the Bavarian style."

Stylized hearts had been painted onto the wardrobe's wee doors, and inside its shelves were smooth and bare. There had been a poem about a servant girl, Virgie recalled—she had never taught it; it was to too subtle for even AP students, but it had been lovely, so lovely and lonely…how did it go? One morning the servant girl, not really a girl, sees the sun shining on green grapes in a crystal bowl, so they glimmer like succulent worlds, and the girl suddenly realizes that her

life will never hold anything more than what it is: rotating woolens and linens through her master's wardrobe season after season.

The little blonde waitress came over. "Isn't that chest or whatever you call it, the cutest thing? It sort of makes you wish you were little again, you know, so you could play with it."

Virgie closed its doors. "It's very sweet." "Our little Virgie, she'll be the princess who'll find her prince charming," her father had said when she told him she wanted a castle dollhouse, not a regular house like Beth's and Linda's. She had it still in the attic back in Hoytsburg.

"And know what the best part is?" the little waitress asked.

"What?"

"Everything he makes?...you know?...he gives to the volunteer fire department. They're trying to get a new ambulance, so everything he makes goes to that."

Out the window, the sky had grown darker.

"That's nice. I'll just have a piece of cherry pie. Make it to go." She opened the wardrobe again when the waitress left. She'd once dated a volunteer EMT. His day job had been at his father's dry cleaners, but his heart was at the fire station. The pancake breakfasts and spaghetti dinners she'd gone to, trying to fit in with his buddies… their wives' conversations looping from couponing to children's soccer games. After six months he told her what she already knew: it wasn't working. "Admit it. You don't get my hose couplings, and I don't get half the stuff you talk about."

Two weeks later, a tearful junior followed her out to the parking lot, "Please, Miss Thomas. You got to pass me. I got to graduate. My brother's in Afghanistan. And I need to get a job…my mother, she's on dialysis. Even Mr. Keyser is giving me a make-up project. Please, Miss Thomas."

Girls always had been worse than boys. Their parents' divorce, a brother's suicide, a grandmother's stroke—girls wore the details of their messy lives like badges.

When the little waitress brought her pie, Virgie put her handbag on the table and knocked the wardrobe to the floor. The little waitress picked it up and let out a long "Awwww." One of the tiny hinges had been bent and now a tiny door flopped open.

"I'll pay for it," Virgie said.

The little waitress kept trying to shut it. "Awwww. I guess it's broke."

"Here." Virgie handed her a fifty dollar bill. "Whatever change,

give it to the firemen." She grabbed her bag of pie and crossed back to the butcher's where the kid who had waited on her flashed a quick, discounted smile and shouted through the swinging doors to the back, "Hey, could we have some help out here?"

The dark-haired man came out and went to the register, looked at Virgie's order slip then at her. "Ninety-seven dollars and sixty-seven cents." His voice was uninflected and rose from a place devoid of commiseration or even faint warmth. Yet it held her, as did his black eyes as she fumbled for her credit card. And when he slid it back to her, "Sign here, Miss Thomas," and handed her a pen, one finger of his, for the briefest moment, grazing the center of her palm, and she not looking up, but sensing a slight twitch in the corner of his simian-shaped mouth.

"I'll carry these to your car." He picked up her meat bags.

"No…no…you don't need to do that. It will be fine. I'm fine."

"I better…they're heavy."

"It will be fine, really."

"The steps are tricky."

He was obdurate, impenetrable; she had no choice but to follow him out.

"Don't forget those." He nodded toward the bags with her pie and wardrobe. By the time she'd slipped them over her wrist and got to the top step, he was already all the way down.

He was already heading toward her gray Civic, as if he'd read her as the type of woman whose extravagance extended to Liberty of London scarves, but not cars. The bags dangling from her wrist made digging out her keys impossible. A high-pitched stream began babbling out as she groped…"The coming storm…March snows…a long drive home."

"Hoytsburg…right?"

"What?" Her fist closed around her keys. "How do you know I live in Hoytsburg?"

"Your name was on your credit card…Virginia Thomas. You're a teacher in Hoytsburg. I remembered the name…Virginia Thomas… you taught my cousin Billy."

"Billy Tilson?

"Yeah, Billy."

She popped open her trunk and composed the teacher's mask she wore every morning no matter what she had done the night before. "I thought I saw a resemblance. For a minute I thought you were Billy."

He off-loaded her meat, then thudded her trunk shut. “Yeah, Billy and me, we always looked alike. People always thought we were brothers. But we’re just cousins.” He took a step and blocked the space between her Civic and an orange pick-up. “He told me about his English teacher over in Hoytsburg.”

Her voice wouldn’t stop chirping. “Yes, I remember Billy very well…very well. I heard that he had joined the Army.”

“Iraq. Billy was in Iraq.”

Nothing would shock this man…he was beyond surprise….He loomed like a mass that had existed long before time had been neatly sliced into civilized segments. If she told him how she had driven forty miles over the mountain because she couldn’t risk buying her meat in Hoytsburg. Or that she needed so much meat because she couldn’t stop cooking for three, even though her father had been dead for a year, and her mother for two. And that she still heaped food on her parents’ empty plates and chattered to their empty chairs every night. He’d only see a confirmation of what he already knew: the dark energy of the universe was madness.

“IED got him.”

“What?”

“IED got Billy. Two years ago. He’s in Walter Reed.”

She squeezed past him and slid behind her wheel. “Down in Washington?”

He stayed in her open door. “Yeah.”

“Well, when you go down there, will you please tell him I’m very sorry that he was wounded. Please let him know I think he’s a real hero. Will you do that?”

“I’ll try. But my wife and me don’t get down there much. We try. But we got his little girl, and it’s hard to get all the way down there.”

Her fingers fished blindly for her wallet she had to give him something “So Billy has a little girl?” her fingers extracted two bills she didn’t know how much—she didn’t care.

He took the bills and his fingertips touched hers. “Yeah, my wife and me, we got her. When Billy got hit, his girlfriend couldn’t handle it. So my wife and me took his little girl.”

Virgie turned her key. “Well, in my book, that makes all three of you heroes. Tell your wife and Billy when you see him that for me, will you?”

The pupils of his eyes were lagoons, maybe of contempt. Maybe of something else.

"I'll make sure to tell him you said that, Miss Thomas."

She backed away.

By the mountain's first switchback, her bladder had begun twitching again. She tried distracting herself with a CD, but her disks had gotten mixed up and instead of Yoni, Patsy Cline began spilling out — "Crazy, I'm crazy for feeling so lonely. I'm crazy for feeling so blue . . ."

The disk had been a gift from Steve Keyser.

"Try it," he'd said, leaning against her blackboard in that way he had. "You might be surprised. It's so old, it's new again. You might find you like it, Virgie." Tall, Steve had been taller than any man she'd ever been with, his height and easy way of moving making her classroom his without him even trying. The sun almost down behind the mountain, the students all gone, and Steve Keyser, his elbow on her board smudging her Emily Dickinson: "I dwell in Possibility—a fairer House than Prose"…and Steve coaxing, coaxing. "Try it, Virgie. You didn't think you'd like that thing we did the last time, but then you found that you did. You found that you really did, didn't you? So try Patsy. It's just music."

"Crazy for thinking that my love could hold you. I'm crazy for trying and crazy for crying. And I'm crazy for loving you"…. She hit the eject button and threw the disk next to her tiny wardrobe and pie.

A light, silky snow had started, so fine it could make her tires as bad as bald. She wanted another disk—the leaden silence felt like a rebuke—but she couldn't risk taking a hand off the wheel. Her chest began heaving up tearless sobs.

It wasn't her fault, what had happened to Billy Tilson. Over and over she had told her seniors they would lose points if their research papers were late. And Billy's had come in three days past due, and two pages short. What was she supposed to have done? If his test grades had been better, she might have passed him, but he had never gotten better than a C or C-minus. She doubted that he had even read *Macbeth* or *The Old Man and the Sea* —all his answers sounded as if they'd come out of a "Dummies" book. There was no way she could have passed him.

And Steve Keyser coming into her room, as if he still had the right, just, weeks after he had told her he had decided to stay with Joanne—he had their kids to consider—and saying "Virgie, for God's sake…can't you give the Tilson kid a break? You know he's been

shunted from relative to relative since his mother died. This football scholarship to Shippenberg State is his only chance. For God's sake…."

She'd told him to get out. "If you don't, I swear I'll tell Joanne everything you did to me…every filthy thing you ever did."

The snow was falling faster, and she couldn't adjust her defroster. Cold air blasted on her feet instead of her dash and made her bladder worse. She had to crane her neck to see over the misty scrim at her windshield's base. When she took her hand off the wheel to slip into a lower gear, she swerved and the wardrobe and Patsy Cline disk tumbled off the seat. The wardrobe fell on the passenger side, but the disk landed near her gas petal.

She was afraid it would get lodged and she wouldn't be able to decelerate. The only thing to do was to keep her foot exactly where it was and hope the disk would roll away when she came to a curve. But when she crested the mountain, at the first downward switchback, she needed to brake, and felt blindly for the disk, but her foot pawed air.

She felt no traction at the tight curve where two Hoytsburg students had crashed, a freshman girl and senior boy, both killed. The turmoil she'd returned to from chaperoning her senior honors class to London…the grief counselors…the memorial services. No one should have to come home to that.

Earlier, when she was driving to get her meat, the plastic flowers marking the crude memorial had been so faded she almost missed them, but now the snow had obliterated them completely. No loss stays fresh forever.

At a shoulder wide enough to pull over, she stepped out and was bend double by the accumulated carelessness of youth their silly aspirations…their assumptive familiarity…spilling their cheap broken hearts all over her desk. She threw the Patsy Cline disk into the woods.

It was all that stupid Joann Keyser's fault. If that idiot Joann hadn't come up behind her in the Hoytsburg Safeway check-out line and brayed, "My god, Virgie, who are you shopping for?...a tribe of gypsies living in your attic?" she wouldn't have had to drive to over the mountains for her meat. She popped open her trunk, and began throwing the white-wrapped packages toward the disk. They landed silently, sinking into the snow like shrouded sailors buried at sea. Around her neck her Liberty scarf was a wet noose, and she couldn't feel her feet. But she didn't stop throwing until her trunk was bare.

She reached Hoytsburg still in lower gear, so she was forced to drive past all the familiar places slowly as if the town was an unspooling film of memory. The library where she'd fallen in love with Heathcliff. The beauty shop she'd had her hair done for the prom. The bank where she'd saved so she and Albert could get married. The craft store whose aisles she had walked up and down with her mother—"I don't know what your father and I would do without you, Virgie." The church where she'd been her sisters' bridesmaid—"Your turn next, Virgie." And her father's pharmacy—"Little Virgie here was our second-thought child. The second Joyce and I thought we were through having kids, along came our little Virgie."

The future she'd dreamed for herself and Albert had been laid out on a grid of Hoytsburg streets, and she navigated them blindly, trusting the circuitry of her mind to follow the pattern of the little streets. She felt she was driving through liquid time.

Two blocks from home, the high school loomed. Three stories, brick, solid in a swirl of snow—she remembered mirrored balls in the gym. No buses, now. Only a few cars. No lights in the upper floors. Only two on the first. One in the library. The other in the office. She'd heard that Martin Kelso was retiring as principal in June, but she wouldn't go to his farewell dinner, although Martin had arranged hers. He'd done that much for her, trying to cover up how she was being eased out. Her mother on one side of her, her father on the other, and Steve Keyser whispering in her ear, "The Tilson kid's in Iraq, Virgie. I hope you're happy." All the while, Martin Kelso toasting her—"To our beloved Miss Thomas,"—as if he hadn't called her to his office all those times there'd been calls from the School Board about how she'd failed some football star. Or from some parent who'd seen her drunk in a bar over the mountain. Or from some mother saying she'd flirted with her son…"If you ask me, that Virgie Thomas could find sex in *Goodnight Moon*."

At her house, she took her little wardrobe to the attic. Her father had made her castle so its whole front swung open to a warren of stairways and little rooms. She set the wardrobe beside a little plastic king and queen sitting on red plush thrones, then took the little plastic figures and smashed them together, making their heads and their bodies against each other go click, click, click. But the dolls wouldn't break. So she set them back on their thrones and closed them up in their castle again. She needed to get out of her clothes. They felt filthy.

She got into the shower, closing her eyes to her body with its downward cascading flesh, letting the relentless water pound and pound her while imagined the steam filling her lungs and her blood warmed. She got out and pressed her face to the towel, which assaulted her with the scent of her mother's meticulous housekeeping.

"Virgie? One egg or two?" How many mornings she'd step out of the shower and heard her mother calling that? Trying to scrub away the memory of the night-before man, and she'd step out of her shower to "Virgie? One egg or two?"…her regret of the night mingling with her resentment of the stifling voice, and trying to compose the appropriate face because beneath the regret and resentment, the bonds of familiarity ran deep and comforting. Middle-aged by then, Beth and Linda long gone, and finally herself the only daughter her parents needed, the only one they had to talk to over the dinner table.

She put on her robe and went downstairs to eat her slice of cherry pie. She was at the kitchen table when headlights suddenly strobed through the little window over the sink. The snow was thick, but not thick enough to completely muffle the car door slamming or the footsteps she heard mounting her back stairs. She licked her fork and slipped it into her robe. "Who's there?"

"Billy Tilson's cousin. I forgot your rib roast, Miss Thomas. I brought you your roast."

The man with the simian-shaped mouth stood on her back porch. Over his shoulder, two white faces, a young woman's and another, vacuous and small like a white bobbling balloon looked out from a SUV.

Virgie fingered her fork—a man intent on no good doesn't bring a woman and a child, but still…she opened her door, but not by much. "You didn't have to bring it all this way. Especially in this snow."

"I forgot it."

She opened the door wider, and the man stepped in, rooting himself on her little braided rug. "I forgot to put the roast with the rest of your order, and a cut like this costs a lot." His tone wasn't defensive but not apologetic either—if he had been a student standing over her desk after the last bus had left, she'd be hoping some other teacher, a man teacher, was down the hall.

"It was so good of you to bring it. But you really didn't have to. Mistakes happen. It was such a long way, and in this storm."

He carried the meat cupped in his hand like a skull wrapped in white and tied with string. "We had to come Hoytsburg anyway. My

wife…well, her cousin takes Billy's little girl….I should say 'our little girl.' We need a break sometimes, my wife and me."

In her pocket, Virgie stopped strumming her fork's tines long enough to take the meat from him. She held it with both hands, so it filled the space above her waist and below her breasts. "Was that Billy's little girl, the one I saw with your wife in the car?"

"Like I said, we got her now."

She didn't know how much Billy had told him about that afternoon when Billy had begged her to let him pass, telling her how his girlfriend was pregnant, and how the girl's mother had said she'd watch the baby while he and the girl went to Shippenburg State. As if a baby they had been too dumb to protect themselves from was any excuse for not doing the research paper she required of all her seniors.

How could she possibly have given an extension when she hadn't given one to any of the others? What was fair for one had to be fair for everyone.

His cousin's eyes were black holes stripping everything away, sucking it down. He knew how Billy had cried; she could tell he did… the way he looked at her…the contempt.

She had to get rid of him. She put the roast on the table and whirled toward her handbag on the counter. "At least let me pay you. For your gas…you came all the way over the mountain, I just need to get my wallet, and I've got something for your little girl too, if you can wai…a doll, two dolls, actually a king and a queen. They're just little dolls." She started pawing through her wallet.

"That's okay, Miss Thomas. My little girl…she don't play much. She got dropped."

"Dropped? Dropped how?"

"On her head."

She had bills in one hand, her wallet in the other. "What?"

"She got dropped on her head. Billy's girlfriend when she got the call 'bout him getting hit so bad, she had baby at the top of the stairs, and she fell…I don't know…fainted or something…I don't know. Anyway, Cassie, she was only three months, she went down, too. They keep working on her, and we keep hopin', but I don't know how she'll do. I don't think anyone does."

"But they're just dolls…all little girls like dolls."

"Cassie, she just likes an old dishtowel. It's the only thing gets her quiet. Go figure. She loves that dishtowel. "

"But…."

In two steps he was to her. So close she could smell the melt off his jacket. And beneath that, how they all smell: musky and ammoniac.

"I will, however, Miss Thomas, take these." He took the bills from her hand. "And this." His black eyes laughing now…enough intelligence to laugh when he had the advantage. Swift as a cat, he took the remaining bills from her wallet, and handed the empty thing back to her. Then he was across the kitchen and at the door. He turned. "Enjoy your meat, Miss Thomas." And he was gone.

He had known about Billy all along, she knew. And probably all the others she'd failed, too. As if their names had been tattooed on her forehead, he had known. Just as all Hoytsburg probably knew what she did with all those men…what she was.

She stood alone in the kitchen of the house where she had always lived. And where she'd die. "Our little Virgie. Our little Virgie." Her sisters were gone, she'd finally shone, her parents' sole moon. What was any man compared to the sweetness of the three of them at the table….

And now the silence so dense and deep, it was like a downy bed where she could just lie forever. When she moved it was to turn on the oven. The roast would be done by midnight. She'd have to set out three places.

DO I KNOW YOU?

Thomas L. Small

Alice had been dead for just over four months when Bert sat down at her desk for the first time. This was the desk where she sat to pay bills, balance the checkbook, and write birthday cards to their grandchildren. He was looking for a stamp.

There were none in the middle drawer. There he did discover several letters addressed to Alice from the nursing home where Bert's sister Ebba lived. She had lived for the past ten years there, at the facility in Salisbury, the town where Bert and Ebba had grown up.

We're having a problem with your sister, they had written. Please call us at your earliest convenience. The letters were signed by a Mrs. Knox, Nursing Supervisor. On each Alice had penned notes to herself regarding the phone calls she made to the facility in response to the letters. Needs baby doll, said one. Suggested a visit from Bert, Alice had written on one. Told her Bert out of town. Will call after radiation, said one dated six months before Alice died.

In the left hand drawer Bert found a stack of post cards bound with an elastic band. The collection went back almost forty years. He looked at them, not recalling them as he held them in his hands. All were addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Schoerndahl, and were signed by his sister Ebba.

"Down at the heels in a Somerset Maugham kind of way," said one postmarked Djbouti.

"Grace wasn't home, Ha Ha," said another with a picture of the palace in Monaco. There were many more, no two from the same place. He was surprised to discover that his sister, Ebba the second grade teacher, was as widely traveled as the cards indicated. He sat at Alice's desk for almost an hour looking at the aged post cards.

I have no recollection of ever having seen these, he thought. When did you go to these places? he wondered. That his sister had ever left Salisbury came as a complete surprise to him. He knew he hadn't paid much attention to Ebba during his life, but had he paid so little that he hadn't even read post cards she sent? He left Alice's desk with the beginning of a headache and without ever having found a stamp.

"Oh, I'd given up on you," Mrs. Knox at the nursing home said when Bert phoned. "Those letters were sent so long ago."

"My wife handled all that. She recently died."

"My condolences," she said. "What I'd like to know is, can you visit

your sister Ebba and bring her a baby doll?" Her voice was soft with a hint of a southern accent.

"A doll?"

"Yes. I have several ladies regressing at the same time. Ebba is taking the dolls that belong to the other old ladies. It's part of the regression that accompanies age."

"I don't know; I'm retired," Bert said. "It's a long drive and I'm alone now."

"The forecast for Tuesday is for pleasant weather. You shouldn't have any trouble at all and remember to bring the baby doll. I'll see you then." She hung up before Bert could object.

"I'd like to buy a doll," Bert said as he stood in the middle of the Wannamaker's toy department at the mall near his house. "It's a gift for someone."

"And how old is the young lady you're buying this for ? " the saleslady asked. She removed her half-lens reading glasses and smiled at Bert.

He had been unable to say, "eighty two." All he could manage was "eight," thinking that it was only partially dishonest because if one looked at the numerals, 8 and 2 the figure eight was one of them. He had just failed to reveal the second. Besides, whose business was it that he was buying the doll for his sister who lived in a nursing home?

He didn't want to explain that much of Ebba' s memory was gone, that she now thought it was 1958 and almost everything that had happened to her since had disappeared like ice at spring melt out.

"You know many of the girls today just adore Barbie. Over here we have Silver Screen Barbie which has turned out to be one of our best sellers this season. I have a few left, but they won't last."

"No, not Barbie." You wouldn't bring someone who thinks Eisenhower is still in the White House a doll with playboy boobs, would you? "Something that looks like an infant, I think. Preferably one without any bodily functions," he told the sales lady whose name tag identified her as Mrs. Held, in black engraving against a gold background.

"Well," she said, stepping to the back of the department, "we do have these. I don't sell a lot of them. They're very traditional." She smiled and handed him the box, which had My New Born written in pink script across the top above the cellophane window.

Generic baby doll, he thought, the playtime equivalent of a Ford Taurus.

"It has a diaper, but that's just to make it realistic." Mrs. Held was wearing a dark two-piece suit and high heels. Her half lens reading

glasses dangled on a gold chain about her neck. “For a girl with traditional interests, this is an ideal choice.”

The baby had a soft plastic head, in which two blue eyes fluttered as he moved the box so that the doll went from a supine to an upright position. As he held it before him, it seemed to stare back, appraising him. The eyes seemed large for the head and as unblinking as an owl’s. He squirmed slightly as the doll stared at him while he held the box. Bert looked at Mrs. Held who stood smiling at him. Is this the type of doll appropriate for an older woman? he wanted to ask, yet couldn’t. The doll’s mouth was curved in a tiny satisfied little smile that he remembered from the years when his own children were infants and he would look in on them as they slept. If the tiny hand were raised to the mouth, it would rest there comfortably, as if the doll were sucking its own thumb. The body was fabric with a soft stuffing that gave it the appearance and lack of muscular control of a chubby infant, clothed in a pink night gown. It was the type of soft bodied doll that little girls used to want to take to bed with them. Nowadays, little girls probably wanted to take Ricky Martin to bed with them.

Mrs. Held smiled and handed him the receipt. “Can I gift wrap this for you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I understand. You have to travel and you don’t want it the gift wrapping to get torn. Very thoughtful.”

No, I’m not really, Bert wanted to say. The nursing home had to write a letter to my wife to tell me that my sister was abducting dolls from the other old ladies. I’ve never visited my sister at the nursing home. My wife did. You’re more thoughtful than I am.

“What I’m going to do then is to cut a length of gift paper and some ribbon and put them in the bag with the doll. Ohh.. You know, I can quickly make a bow for you, too. If you’re anything like my husband,” she laughed a little, “good intentions, but.... This will only take me a minute.”

Struggling for what seemed several minutes tying an elaborate multi-looped bow, she trimmed the ribbon’s ends at decorative angles, “and don’t forget your gift card.” She placed one with tiny balloons in the upper corner, inside the shopping bag. “Now, when she gets to her destination, you can quickly wrap her up.”

Bert stood for a moment, looking at Mrs. Held, who returned his gaze over the top of her glasses and handed him the shopping bag.

“Can I help you with anything else?”

"No. Thank you. You've spent so much time. The wrapping paper, the ribbon, and the bow." Actually, Bert thought, I should sign the gift card, from Mrs. Held and your brother Bert. No, maybe it should just say from Mrs. Held; after all she exerted more effort.

"You're going to make someone so happy! "

For reasons unknown to him when he started out the next day, he had taken the old road, the blue route, the one that had handled most of the traffic before the interstate went in. Emboldened in red on recent maps, the new highway by-passed the small towns between the leafy suburb where he lived and the small town of Salisbury in the western part of the state where he had grown up and his sister Ebba had lived her entire life.

He had almost completed his trip when most of the radio reception died out and he could receive only one local station. The radio announcer exhorted the listeners to stay tuned for more of the station's morning *Oldies and Goldies* program. Dusty Springfield, whoever the hell she was, sang "Stay a While." The words annoyed him, so he turned it off, as the shadows of the trees at the road's edge splashed quickly and silently across the hood and windshield.

These were the same roads Ebba had traveled in that week ten years ago, when she last had a driver's license. He looked at things as he passed, recognizing some of them, a hardware store, the movie theater, the local dairy store. Had she too seen these things at that time and passed by, not recognizing them, the insurance office, the real estate agency, driving past as if it were the first time she traveled this road? She had been driving around for a week before the Salisbury Police called him.

"Frank down to the Gulf Station says she's been coming in two, sometimes three, times a day telling him to 'fill it up.' It never takes more than two or three dollar's worth at a time and off she goes again. Just like she knows where she's headed," he'd been told when the police called him.

"Well, where is she going ? Doesn't Frank ask?"

"He thinks she's going to the Foodliner over in Washington Depot. The back seat's full of grocery sacks. Always the same ones. This morning she stopped in before seven. Said she had to get an early start. Frank had a hunch and asked her if she wanted him to check the air in her spare. When he opened the trunk, it was full of groceries too. He says some of them have been in there for a while judging by the smell. The chief is afraid she's going to wander onto the interstate and we'll never see her again, Mr. Schoerndahl."

"You've know me long enough to call me Bert."

"Mr. Shoerndahl, this isn't like that time she had gold fish in the bath tub. We've got Ron Bergeron waiting for her down at Frank's Gulf the next time she stops in. Chief wants a family member down here when we pick her up. That's you."

"You've sent a motorcycle cop to pick up an seventy-two-year-old woman who drives an Oldsmobile Cutlass?"

"She knows Ron. Had him in her second grade class. Always says he was a good student."

"That was over thirty five years ago."

"So. She didn't forget him. Had his kids in her class too. You're the one left town. The rest of us are still here."

Ebba made a grudging adjustment to life in the nursing home, the nurses had told him when he made his occasional phone call, usually at Alice's behest. The first month is always the hardest, they'd said, especially for people like Ebba, who are fine basically as long as they keep taking their medication. If no one's there to make sure it's taken, that's when the problems arise. After her medication was straightened out, she improved.

Angry, she was mostly, about the way it happened, never forgetting and talking about it often. Ron Bergeron had taken away her car keys and brought her into the nursing home in the front seat of a police car. She could have died from embarrassment, she still told the nurses when she repeated the story. There had been no other way, they tried to tell her; really, it was for your own good. Couldn't she at least have her car keys back, she pleaded daily, I've owned my own car since 1962.

Ron Bergeron visited after Ebba had been living at the home and taking her medication for almost three months. He'd gone into the day room dressed in his uniform, boots and all, gotten down on one knee beside her and returned her car keys. "Promise you'll tell me before you go out for a drive," he asked her, "And forgive me for the way it had to happen. I had no choice Miss Ebba," he'd said loud enough for the other residents to hear. "I didn't want anything bad to happen to you."

She'd put the keys in her pocket. "The only thing I'll never forgive you for, Ron Bergeron, is not going to college," she'd said.

"There's nothing to worry about," Ron told the nurses as he stood pulling on his black leather gloves and helmet. "I gave the keys to her and the distributor cap to Frank down at the Gulf."

Bert got off the blue route and wandered past the Foodliner in Washington Depot where his family had been purchasing groceries since 1942, and into Salisbury, past Frank's Gulf and parked in front of the

nursing home where Ebba had lived for the past ten years.

He was early for his appointment with Mrs. Knox so he sat in his car and looked out at the building. While he was waiting, a uniformed cop came out of the building. After putting on his helmet, he threw a leg over his motorcycle and left the parking lot. Bert's mind began to wander.

His mother, he thought, had actually died when Gustave, the middle child, had died unexpectedly. She had taken to her bed, rarely leaving the bedroom, except for those long and unexplained absences, of which his father refused to speak. All the pictures of Gustave had been gathered from around the house and were on her night stand, where she could see them without lifting her head from the pillow. Gustave as an infant, as a toddler, sitting with a litter of puppies, on his first day of school, sitting on a bicycle, the tiny nine years of his life was arrayed beside her bed right at eye level. He was a handsome little boy who smiled easily with lovely blond hair. My own son wasn't as good looking a baby as Gustave had been, Bert thought. It was as though Gustave were one of those cursed jewels, stunning in their beauty and rarity, though destined to bring unhappiness to all around them.

Their mother lingered for almost thirty years before a death certificate was issued. In the meantime, she took everyone else with her. She took their father's life. The stress of having a wife sick for so long, with something that no one really understood at the time, took its toll on him. There was no one he could confide in, and he died at his desk at the bank at age sixty one.

Ebba gave up her youth taking care of everyone else. By the time she was done, all she had left was middle age. She might have married and had kids of her own instead of having to borrow everyone else's as the second grade teacher in Salisbury for over forty years. My fear is that I helped take that from her and I can't face it, Bert often thought. I left Ebba holding the bag and she never complained.

"You've been lucky Mr. Schoerndahl, and you don't realize it. Many other families have to remain heavily involved in the care process. Ebba's stay here has been remarkably uneventful until just recently. Surely you can take the time to help her now."

Her name tag said, Anne Knox, Nursing Supervisor. Although shorter than he, she was unflinching in her posture and walked like a boxer entering the ring. Her white nurses' hosiery rubbed together as she walked, so that a soft murmuring sound, like whispering, seemed to surround her. The nurse's cap, with its wide, sharply pointed ailerons aimed heavenward, seemed to stay on her head by some invisible force.

"Come in and sit down, Mr. Schoerndahl."

There was a hint of pink lipstick remaining, but that was the only makeup she wore. With the door closed, her office was warm and feminine. Her desk top was empty of any of the usual distractions that others keep on hand, photos of family, an ashtray, perhaps a pottery container with extra pens and pencils, with the exception of a large, black stapler. The walls were covered with photos of her with patients and family members. Often there was a birthday cake with sufficient candles to set off the fire detectors set in front of an elderly resident who stared blankly into the camera. The one chair that faced her desk was straight backed and wooden. It was, Bert imagined, the type chair in which condemned prisoners were seated while being told their plea for clemency had been denied.

"So let's see," she took a manila folder from the top drawer and opened it flat on the desk in front of her. "You're here today to visit your sister Ebba? Is that right? You're her brother Bertil?"

He nodded, "Yes," while looking at her, although her eyes were not raised to his.

"Bertil and Ebba those are unusual names. Are you the only sibling?"

"My parents were Norwegian, we were named after grandparents. Most people call me Bert. I shortened it. Yes, it's only the two of us."

Mrs. Know smiled at him and nodded. "It says here you're ten years younger than she?"

"Yes, ten years, that would be about right. There was a baby between us, a boy, Gustave. He died after I was born. Rheumatic fever."

"Oh, isn't that sad. I'm sorry to hear that." Her brow knitted as she said this.

He tried to take a deep breath.

"And it says here that Ebba has been a resident here for about ten years, is that right also?"

He tried to smile at her, "Yes, I think that would be about right."

"Who is Alice, who came by periodically around holidays?"

"My wife. She died recently."

"And this is the first time you've come to visit?" She closed the folder slowly and caught his eye, smiling slightly.

"I've tried to call every so often. They usually said she was well. I thought, if there were no problems...." he shrugged. "It's a long drive from Gladwyn; I'm widowed and it's a difficult trip for one day." His mouth had dried and his tongue seemed the size of a sausage. "Alice took care of those responsibilities."

Mrs. Knox leaned back in her chair slowly and continued to stare at him across the wide glass topped expanse of her desk.

Yes, he nodded, in a motion that was so slight that had she not been staring directly at him, waiting for his reply, she would not have noticed it.

He remembered Ebba as a girl, tall and gangly. Her height could have been an asset had she tried athletics, lacrosse or soccer. Possibly she would have made some friends. But, she had done none of those things. She never started wearing makeup as the other girls her age did, not even lipstick. At the close of school every day she hurried home and it seemed to him, spent all her spare time with their mother who never recovered from Gustave's premature death. Bert could remember his mother spending weeks on end in bed, mostly crying. There were several prolonged hospitalizations that his father would never discuss. Ebba did most of the housework and helped their father with the meals. On Saturdays Ebba and their father would drive to the Foodliner in Washington Depot to shop.

Bert had stayed late at school every day to play sports. Although only of average height, he played basketball, and he was nimble on the soccer field. Both of these pursuits brought him some athletic recognition and a high degree of popularity among his peers. Most especially, his interest in sports had provided him with enough reason not to go home, and Ebba never complained that he was not doing his share.

He remembered her hair chopped into a plain page boy haircut which she sometimes wore with barrettes at the sides. By the time she got out of high school she was wearing glasses, horn rimmed with round lenses. Even then she looked exactly like what she'd become, an unmarried second grade teacher who lived with her ailing mother.

When Bert graduated from college, Ebba attended the ceremony, driving their now-widowed mother the two hundred miles in her aged Packard Patrician. Bert pointed the two of them out to one of his friends who stood near him during the ceremony.

"That's my mother and Ebba," he had said.

"Your mother and your aunt?" the friend had asked.

"No, my mother and my sister."

"I never knew you had a sister."

He had retold this story several times, usually at college reunions, each time thinking his friend a fool to make such a mistake. It was only recently, at the fortieth reunion when he retold the story that, as other people laughed, he realized who had made the bigger mistake. As he

recalled these instances, he flinched now to think how many times he had repeated the story without realizing how much he had revealed about himself. By the time this happened, Ebba was already living in the nursing home.

After he had married and his children were born, he had selected friends from college for godfathers and had rummaged through his wife's family for godmothers. When he thought of that now, he could not recall any specific reason that they had overlooked Ebba. It was puzzling to him now to try to recall what he had been thinking, or rather not thinking about Ebba when they were both younger people.

Was it all his fault, he wondered? She had contributed little to conversation when he and his wife entertained both her and his mother, perhaps at Thanksgiving or Easter. She would drive the ninety miles between Salisbury where they lived and she taught in the elementary school, and Gladwyn where he lived. Early on they arrived in Ebba's robin's egg blue Studebaker President, and in later years, her grey Oldsmobile 88.

Following whatever meal they had shared with Bert and his wife Alice, Ebba made the return trip in the dark. At the time he thought nothing of it, not giving them a second thought after he closed the front door on them. When he recalled that now, he realized how fearless she must have been, setting out in an old car for a long drive over back roads with her aged mother as company.

After he left for college, neither had recognized the others' birthday in any way. But he remembered too, that she never forgot either of his children's birthdays. An appropriate card would arrive with a generous number of bills stuffed inside. Other holidays, Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving were noted this way as well.

Now, he and Mrs. Knox stared at one another for a moment and as the silence dragged on. Bert became increasingly uncomfortable and felt someone had to say something, and so was the first to relent, "Now where are we?"

"I see you brought it."

He lifted the paper bag to Mrs. Knox's desk. "It's been a long time since I shopped for dolls. My daughter is almost forty years old." He tried to laugh a little hoping that it would make Mrs. Knox laugh and perhaps lighten the mood, taking the focus from him and what he may or may not have done for his sister in the past.

Mrs. Knox took the doll from the shopping bag and set it on the desk. As she put the bag on the floor, he heard her mumble, "And this?"

Reaching back into the bag, she removed the wrapping paper, the ribbon, bow, and gift card and placed these on the desk top also. She stared at the little array for a moment then looked up at Bert. "This is very sensitive. It's exactly what Ebba needs. And you intended to wrap it for her too." Is it possible I may have misjudged you, he hoped to hear her say, but didn't.

"People like your sister, often turn into the sweetest, funniest old ladies. But the days can get very long for them here. It breaks my heart." She made a moue as she faced him.

Bert sat in silence looking at Mrs. Knox.

She pushed her chair back noisily. "Let's go visit Ebba."

Mrs. Knox walked at a brisk pace, her stockings whispering a warning of her approach. "Until this past year, when she started to fail, Miss Ebba was the life of the party. She talked often about her travels. The stories she told about visiting Havana in the early sixties. And the pictures, her standing at Hadrian's Wall, in the ruins of Machu Picchu carrying a Foodliner shopping bag!"

Havana in the sixties, Machu Picchu, what was this woman talking about? Bert looked over to Mrs. Knox whose eye caught his. She stopped walking and without speaking, looked directly at him for a moment, the two of them standing in the middle of the hallway with the procession of orderlies, nurses, and patients eddying around them as a stream splits around an immovable rock.

Her nurse's cap seemed to quiver as she looked at his face, and Bert knew what she was thinking without her speaking the words. You never knew any of this did you?

"She sent us post cards," Bert said.

Perspiration was beginning to cling to the sides of his shirt. Mrs. Knox resumed walking. "That story she tells of visiting St. Thomas in the early seventies is so funny!" When he did not return her glance, she continued. "Miss Ebba and a couple other teachers hired a driver to tour the island. While they were eating lunch at Mountaintop, that place that's famous for the banana daiquiris, the driver was in the back with other drivers drinking his. He got so drunk they put him in the back seat to sleep it off and Ebba got behind the wheel. She drove a Cadillac, one of those huge old ones with the fins, on those narrow mountain roads. They visited Drake's Seat, they found St. Stephen's Priory, they went to Magens Bay. The whole time the driver is dead to the world. And the others took pictures of her standing next to the Cadillac in these places holding a Foodliner shopping bag." Miss Knox laughed aloud. "God, she

must have been a real card!"

I never knew any of those things about her, Bert wanted to say. When did she turn into a person who did these things, did anything for that matter? I thought she spent her life perfecting the art of making weak tea and dressing in dowdy clothes. It's not possible, he thought, his sister Ebba, the one with horn rimmed glasses and a page boy hair cut that made her look thirty years older than she really was, that Ebba visited Havana and drove a borrowed Cadillac all over St. Thomas? His stomach knotted as the words sunk in. The Ebba he knew was a quiet second grade teacher in the town she grew up in, who had lived at home with her invalid mother until her mother died. Having lived in the same little town so long, everyone called her Miss Ebba, because she had had them, their children and in some cases, their grandchildren in second grade.

Her room was spare in the style of all hospital rooms Bert had visited. The walls were an institutional color green, and the air had the faint scent of disinfectant. There was a single bed and a chair positioned near the window. There were several framed pictures hanging on the walls, which, when Bert approached, turned out not to be pictures at all. They were collages of old photos. In them he could see Ebba standing in front of landmarks that he recognized. Each was labeled: Ocho Rios 1978, said one. Eiffel Tower 1985, Marble Arch 1991, said another. He recognized other landmarks, the Lincoln Memorial and the Desire Street Car in New Orleans. In most of them she was holding a Foodliner shopping bag.

Ebba's hair was now white, or perhaps blue, depending on point of view, and was cut short with a curly perm. Her glasses were silver framed, the shining temples glinting light and drawing attention to her just done hair, where they disappeared into it by her ears. He probably wouldn't have recognized her if he hadn't been told this was his sister.

Her skin was slack, draped over the bones of her face and hands as sheets cover the familiar furniture of a summer house, now shuttered for winter. Its color was white, pale, and instantly recognizable as not having been exposed to sun for a long time, rather than the vivacious white of a peaches and cream complexion. With the loosening of the skin on her face, the lifetime of lines on it were easily read. Long gently curving creases on either side of her mouth were the vestigial remains of years of laughter. Her forehead was lined, but high up, where it had been held while smiling.

"Mrs. Knox tells me you have been entertaining everyone with the tales of your travels," he said when finally seated opposite her in an uncomfortable vinyl chair.

"Oh, that," she said, waving a hand dismissively. "Ancient history."

"I never knew you visited Havana?"

"Batista." She smiled wanly at him, her eyes seemingly focused, large and watery behind the lenses of her glasses. "It's probably not the same anymore."

He sat looking at her waiting for her to say something to him, hoping to engage her. But, she just smiled benignly.

"I didn't know you had photos of yourself taken all over the place with Foodliner shopping bags. Was that some kind of an inside joke?" he asked. Bert leaned in to her and smiled, hoping that he would coax some conversation out of her.

"We always shopped at the *Foodliner*. Since 1942."

Her face crinkled into a smile, the smile, Bert thought, that warmed the hearts of countless second graders. He couldn't recall having seen her smile like this before, sweet and gentle, almost enraptured as though she were listening to music only she could hear. For the first time he imagined her in her classroom, putting puppy stickers on the top of children's penmanship papers or down on her hands and knees finger painting with them.

"Priscilla always uses the paper sacks. The ones with the handles." She made a gesture with her hand, her fingers closed.

"Are those the ones you used to take with you so that your friends could take those funny pictures?" He leaned into her once again, hoping that she would continue the story. For the first time he could remember, he wanted to hear her say something about her own life, about the things she had spent her time doing, to share her life with him, now that he learned she'd had one. He waited while she looked at him, continuing to smile, seeming so peaceful. Bert sat back, the creaking of the chair the only sound in the room. Several minutes passed with nothing more than a smile being exchanged between them.

"I don't like those plastic ones," she said finally, continuing to smile faintly.

"Neither do I," Bert said. Were these the only thoughts going through her head, as she sat, so peaceful and calm? Was this all she could think to say to him? Or was this all that was now left?

They sat together for five minutes, looking at one another, she continuing to smile, he hoping she would say something. Your eyes are so blue, he thought, I never knew they were so blue.

"That might be true," he said aloud. But, he continued with his thought, I never thought they'd seen anything worth talking about. I was

afraid Salisbury would eat me alive. The way I thought it had eaten you. "I've never seen Machu Picchu, but Mrs. Knox tells me you have." You could tell me about that; I thought you were just an elementary school teacher, that all you would have to talk about was Salisbury, he thought as he looked at her.

She sat looking at him, smiling slightly, almost enigmatically, her hands folded together and still, in her lap. "Those old stories. You don't have time for that."

Bert reached down and took the doll from its box and handed it to Ebba. She took it wordlessly with outstretched arms, but rather than examining it, tucked it immediately into the crook of her arm, settling its head and arms properly, so that, if it could, it would be comfortable. As she continued to sit in silence, she looked down at the doll, periodically straightening a fold of its night gown, caressing its head, or touching the back of its hand with her fingertip.

They sat together for another short while, before the silence began to pound in Bert's ears. He could think of nothing to say, and apparently neither could she. He could prattle on about how his children were faring in the world, but he couldn't remember when she'd seen them last and was unsure what she remembered about them. Too much time had passed for him to be able to say anything about them without the huge gap in time between them being painfully apparent to them both, so he said nothing. He did this, he told himself, for her sake. With so little to talk about, maybe he should just leave.

"I'm going to go. It's a long drive and I'd like to get home before dark."

"That's a good idea."

He stood before her not knowing whether to begin the process of saying good-bye by leaning down to kiss her. There was little motion from her, except for her to shift the doll from one arm to the other where she spent a few moments settling it once again. He was unsure of whether or not she knew he was still there, or worse, whether she cared. The process of saying good-bye, he realized now, he had initiated decades earlier when he stayed late at school to play sports.

"Would you like me to come by and visit again?" He wanted her to say yes, and to encourage him, perhaps to indicate that there was no grudge being held for past absences. Bert could feel his heart beat begin to accelerate as he waited in the silence for her reply. "Would you enjoy that?" He touched his palms to the sides of his trousers, allowing them to linger there until they were dry.

“Oh, I’d have to see.” With one hand, she continued to stroke the doll that lay in her arms. She looked up at him and her face unfolded into a smile.

“I could come next week,” he said.

She stared up at him, her eyes a blue that reminded him of the endless sky on a perfect day in the Caribbean. Her smile was slight, but wrinkles on her face parted the loose flesh in the most charming way, making her appear so very warm and approachable.

“Do I know you? ”

“It’s me, Bert. Your brother.” His mouth dried as he spoke. “You remember me, don’t you?” It was important now. She had visited so often in years long past, bringing their mother for meals on holidays. Surely, she couldn’t have forgotten that? His children, on whom she had lavished cards and birthday cash, were they gone to her also?

Ebba continued smiling at him and hugging the doll to her.

“Next week. I’m retired. I have the time now. Alice died last year, so I have nothing to hold me at home. I’ll come back again next week. We’ll have another visit.”

She was smiling down at the doll, gently turning its face toward her, as a mother would, after feeding her infant. It was a gesture at once tender, as it revealed the qualities that had endeared her to decades of second graders, and wretched, as he realized she lavished her attention on a doll, while he, her only brother, stood before her.

Her clavicle and shoulder were bony and hard under his hand, as he rested it there momentarily, before turning to leave the room, saying nothing. She looked at him briefly, then returned her attention to the doll.

He stopped in the doorway and looked back to where she sat, to where his sister used to be.

MR. GUMMI WORM

Scott Winokur

His half-brother's back porch was home now, rain or shine, crop dusters or no crop dusters, mosquitoes, glassy-winged sharpshooters, or sooty valley air. He went indoors only to use the toilet and restock Benadryl. Until a few months ago, he'd traveled by car, train, and cab to a doctor who pronounced him "as good as can be expected, considering what we're dealing with here: the inscrutable medical disorder known as MCSS, multiple chemical sensitivity syndrome." Nonetheless, Robert Charlton, M.D., his internist/allergist/immunologist, prescribed without fail a new drug or an old one with a new use, few in the formulary of his insurer, but cheap enough, coming as most did from Thailand, Malaysia, and Vanuatu. In any case, not to worry: Charlton had "every damned official's seal of approval" for experimental protocols, off-label uses, "colonic hydrotherapies, acid trips, and concealed weapons." These privileges, he protested immodestly, cost "extortionate" licensing fees and subjected him to the indignity of "playing patty cake with tight-assed government zombies" in Silver Spring, Maryland, and Sacramento. He was certain the chief side effect of his unorthodox treatment—weight loss, accounting for the patient's wraith-like appearance—was reversible.

Grateful for the doctor's inspiriting humor and comforted by his frothy confidence, the patient neither would be shaken by half-brother Buck's denunciation of Charlton as a "fake, fraud, and phony," nor given pause by Ma's judgment of him as "a Rasputin, more likely—though I for one believe the Mad Monk really *did* work wonders." Ma was fascinated by the hemophiliac Romanovs, especially ill-fated Tsarevitch Alexei and the royal family's holy man/healer.

Barring a reversal of fortune, however, the truth was that Alexander Arkady Kehoe's actual prospects ranged from bleak to hellacious, regardless of Charlton's mysterious ministrations or his family's nattering oversight. He wasn't getting better. If not done in by illness on a porch at the almond-treed western edge of the Central Valley, it would be elsewhere, for it had begun to appear that Alex might not stay. Ma had a neighbor who had a friend who had a rentable patch of desert, putatively allergen-free, in the low Sonoran just north of Tucson. It would seat the old family Airstream nice and level. Nothing on the property but a big Blue Palo Verde tree.

The plan—Ma's, actually—was to have Buck tow the trailer to Arizona, hire someone to gut and steam-clean it, and finally chauffeur his half-brother to the new home, where all Alex would have to deal with were pure air and metallic surfaces, nothing dirty, porous, or off-gassing. There would be electricity, heat, a water tank, a Porta-Potty, Wi-Fi, satellite television. To the northeast was ATV racing three nights a week on a twenty-acre track, but the sound shouldn't carry in all that open space, Ma's neighbor's friend assured her, there being nothing to bounce off in the arid Great Beyond (in fact, the opposite was true). Near the track were stands of saguaro and juniper, and, past those, polyester yurts, rinky-dink trailers half the Airstream's size, and other small structures housing Buddhists from Crestone, Colorado. Ma's neighbor's friend heard they were nice people, quiet as mice. She'd no idea what they did besides navel-gaze.

After nightfall, Buck, six years older, went out on the porch to survey the starry sky. Sometimes he wondered if his half-brother could get a life on one of those exo-planets he'd read about—if there might be an extraterrestrial Arizona for extreme allergy sufferers. Then Buck lowered his gaze to Alex, zipped to the neck in a ratty sleeping bag, no matter the weather.

"You awake, bro? You *alive*?"

There might be a wink or a nod, usually nothing at all.

Alex's troubles began after he moved from a Sacramento motel to an apartment re-done, floor to flocked acoustic ceiling, to justify an enormous rent hike. The unit was walking distance from Betty's Casa Elegancia, a salon popular with legislative lovelies into waxing and layering, as well as older officials with thinning and coloring issues, and those few but loyal local grannies whose aged egos demanded professional grooming and whose budgets allowed for it. Many customers deferred commutes home to El Dorado Hills and Granite Bay in order to be serviced by one of Betty's late-working stylists, ideally Alexander Arkady Kehoe—he of the sinuous snippety scissors, retro pompadour, coy girly-man manner, and tight little butt.

The apartment changed things. Six times during Alex's first two months in the place, Buck hot-pedaled it up from his Ripon almond orchard to rush his semi-sib to the ER for shortness of breath, palpitations, dizziness, nausea, and Richter-scale stomachaches. The doctors never could identify the cause, despite Alex's insistence that his apartment's wall-to-wall carpet, made of polypropylene or something else unnatural, was a dense forest of dust mites, mold

spores, and other microscopic ninja.

"If that's what it is, why don't you just move?" a young Indian-born doctor asked.

Not so simple. If Alex vacated, thereby imperiling his job (he didn't drive and buses gave him motion sickness), it would be a crying shame. Tips included, he was earning $75,000 a year, a handsome income for a young stylist outside L.A., San Francisco, or San Diego. It was a disturbing thought—and so much easier biding time on Buck's porch, telling himself he'd return to the salon when he felt better.

The cottage the Kehoe boys grew up in was a small Queen Anne with peeling sidings, rotting window frames, scratched floors, and splintered wainscoting. Ma treated it like a designated historic property, devoting Thursdays to scouring, whisking, and hand-wiping, always in the rubber gloves and smock she'd used in the years when Alex wet himself during what Buck called the "wee-wee hours." She kept her equipment in a canvas bag marked BARC, and, in smaller type, Bakersfield Association for Retarded Citizens.

Buck was gone by the time Alex achieved nocturnal continence. Ma had kicked the older boy out before he'd turned fifteen, allegedly for disobedience, disrespect, drunkenness, smoking, and tree-house trysting with the daughters of migrant workers. In reality, Buck's ouster was the culmination of years of acrimony after Ma gave birth a second time and found her younger son as obliging (urinary deficit notwithstanding) as the elder was not. The boys had different fathers, different looks, different builds, different personalities, different ways, different storylines conferred by their mother—Buck brutish, reckless, and intractable, even as a toddler; Alex delightful from the day he was born, tacking to whatever emotional wind she happened to be blowing. Buck was her "Geronimo," Alex her "Petit Prince."

Ma was certain her delicate younger one wouldn't have fallen ill in the state capital, two-hundred-sixty hot and windy miles north of Bakersfield, if he'd continued to ply his trade at nearby Hair Horizons, where he'd learned it, one of three androgynous-looking young males and half a dozen girls and women, all misfits, too fey or frail to fit in a conservative community where oil and agriculture reigned supreme. There was no reason to leave Hair Horizons that Ma saw. It would have been so nice for her—for them both—if he'd stayed. He could have come home lunchtimes for lamb chops and angel food cake; he could have spruced her up between times at the salon.

Though it took forever, Alex finally did get away. He was nearly thirty when he made what Buck called The Great Escape. The occasion was an advertisement Alex noticed while scanning newspaper classifieds for…what? He'd have known it when he saw it. Over the phone, the eponymous owner of Betty's Casa Elegancia assigned him chair nine, a large station on a mini-mezzanine overlooking the main floor—the showcase awarded featured artists. Male stylists, few and far between in the boondocks, had a certain cachet; they were presumed to be especially well-suited to serve a female clientele, like eunuchs in a harem.

Alex was at Casa Elegancia seven weeks when the receptionist had to start a separate appointment book for him. He'd a gift, obviously. His delicate looks and diffident manner evoked something maternal in the customers. Enid Nickles, a glaucomatous ninety-three-year-old who'd been in for a wash, rinse, and set every few weeks since time began (and was always served by the stylist in nine), called Alex "Poochie Boy." It was a term of endearment, evidently: the nonagenarian was joined at the hip with her four-legged pet, a beribboned Lhasa apso. Mrs. Nickles tipped Alex with fifty-dollar bills distributed by her Filipina attendant. The dog got gourmet poultry treats.

Dr. Charlton had been the only physician disinclined to attribute Alex's complaints to mental factors, or (despite the patient's denials) an incipient STD. Charlton focused on sinuses and skin: Alex had "blockages" and "seborrheic impactions." His reports of muscle ache and nocturnal drip, taken into account with the recurrent rash on his abdomen and groin, suggested "colonization of the gut" and "idiopathic rhinitis." Charlton started him on a potent antifungal. Besides pills, he went home with nasal spray, orders to eliminate gluten, and the names of companies selling grapefruit seed extract, Norwegian fish oil, fresh grasses, detox drinks, and goji berries. He was assured things would improve and took heart. Charlton had a maestro's confidence and a magician's flair.

Which made it very surprising when, at the next examination, there appeared a doctor physically indistinguishable from the first but otherwise unrecognizable, a shadow of his former self. Charlton was silent and subdued; Alex also smelled alcohol, not the medicinal kind. Did any of this matter? *He* was better; the poxy junk on his body was mostly gone and the pain had ceased. The doctor, whatever his moods and habits, must be doing something right. Yet when Alex

complained of something that had come up recently (nausea), instead of reducing what Charlton himself previously mentioned as a possible cause, the antifungal, he doubled the dose, and injected the patient with "enzyme-potentiated desensitizer," then left Alex in the examining room without another word. Charlton had gone from cheerleader to churl, from mirthful mastermind to melancholia, virtually overnight.

One morning soon after, Alex awoke to find that his tongue was coated with an odious cheesy substance, a side effect, he assumed, of Charlton's pharmaceutical prestidigitations. He scraped off the scum. It was back in hours. The next day, Ma's birthday, Buck drove up from Ripon and the half-brothers turned around and went back to Bakersfield. Things went smoothly enough there until Alex, who'd spoken hardly a word, opened his mouth to eat. Ma's raptor eyes widened.

"*Your tongue, boy!* Buck, see that? My God!"

Colleen Kehoe was little more than five feet tall, but she weighed as much as a man and moved fast. She clamped a hand on her younger son's jaw and squeezed. When the boys were small, she'd administered purportedly therapeutic home-cooked herbal concoctions recommended by a neighbor, Xenia, who ran a word-of-mouth "clinic" for farm-worker families. The boys battled back, but Ma had learned from Xenia that if she pressed hard behind the lower rear molars, patients opened up and swallowed the murky glop, or gagged. It might have worked this time, too, but Alex slipped her grasp.

"Leave him be," Buck said.

Ma turned on him.

"And you just sit there, Geronimo, like a wooden Indian, not lifting a finger!"

"But hounding him like that, Ma? He's grown up."

"If that's grown, mister, I'm queen of the Kern County Fair. A sick person needs attention, I don't care what age. If someone didn't fuss over little Prince Alexei, you think he'd have lived long enough to be murdered?"

For days after, Alex was so fatigued he couldn't put in a full shift at the salon. He moved tentatively, narrow chest caved in, shoulders curled like dry leaves. Outside his hearing, a consensus emerged that he should be replaced, temporarily, in chair nine. When he phoned in sick three days straight, Betty hired a pierced and tattooed

community college student who claimed to have worked at Vidal Sassoon in West Hollywood.

Flat on his back at home, Alex phoned Buck.

"Sorry to have to ask again, but—"

"Hate to do this to you," Buck interrupted. He was in his orchard, voice barely audible through the rustling of heavily laden trees and the whirring of mechanized equipment. It was the almond grower's use-it-or-lose-it season, the time of the year to harvest and make money. "Ma'll have to ride to the rescue. I can't leave now."

She arrived by Greyhound late the next day, with a vinyl suitcase and the familiar canvas bag.

"I can go to the bathroom myself," Alex said.

"Then how come it stinks in here?"

She seated herself on his bed. Alex scuttled to the side, facing away, fetal. Ma rubbed his back, rattling on about the latest Bakersfield brouhahas, most having to do with foreign-born newcomers. He drifted off, awakening in the dark, bladder bursting. Waves of dizziness rose behind his eyes as he stood over the toilet. There was a knock.

"Alexei? Need help?"

"No, Ma, I'm—"

In the next instant his knees buckled and he dropped to the floor, urine spraying. Ma threw the door open. She turned on the bathwater, grasped him by the armpits, and yanked him to a seated position. With one hand, she steadied him, unbuttoning his pajamas with the other. As she jerked him to his feet, the top slid off his shoulders and the bottom fell to his bony, blue-veined ankles. She guided his body into the tub, his back against the banked far end.

Inside the Bakersfield Association for Retarded Citizens bag were her rubber gloves, soap, and a sponge. She began with his face, stroking his forehead, cheeks and chin, then worked down his neck, shoulders, and back. In spite of himself, Alex luxuriated in the attention. Done with his upper body, she stood. He knew what was expected next: he was to tuck his penis between his legs so all that showed was a triangle of hair, and she could proceed with his lower half. Ma had done this for him when he was small and continued until early puberty. "*Hide your pee-pee*," she'd order then. If he'd been good—continent, that is—she might say something jokily respectful, like "Time for Mr. Gummi Worm to go 'Bye-bye,' " or "Weigh anchor, Captain Winky!"

Nursing him now, Ma harped on the benefits of oils from fish low in the food chain. He should be sure to consume plenty of "burp-less fish oil." Ma's health-care guru, Xenia, swore it was a marvelous anti-inflammatory and anti-depressant.

"And there's nothing better for a person, sick or healthy, than sunlight, which you better believe the poor Tsarevitch hardly got in Russia. The sun's a wonderful source of Vitamin D. You can't get too much."

Which was why Ma had knocked on Suzette "Sweetie Pie" Parker's door before leaving Bakersfield. Her neighbor had been a Las Vegas showgirl in the distant past. Ma's purpose was to confirm the availability of the desert lot north of Tucson where Alex could leach the poisons from his system. The site was owned by a former colleague of Sweetie Pie's, Blue Belle Hurdle, who got it in a divorce and was forever trying to sell.

"I expect you can have it," Sweetie Pie had told Ma. "Blue Belle's got as much chance of cashing out on that sandbox as she does of hiring on at the Chicken Ranch in Pahrump."

Once back on his feet, Alex would see that he'd no better choice than to relocate to entirely new surroundings, Ma said. She jabbered until he fell asleep again, then rose to inspect his cluttered nightstand. Dr. Charlton's number was on the medicine bottles there. Ma went into another room and called. There was no receptionist and no answering service, but after many rings the nurse picked up.

"This is Mrs. Kehoe. Alex's mother. I need the doctor."

"He's not available."

"I have to talk to him."

"Dr. Charlton *isn't here*, m'am."

"Where is he?"

"Sacramento."

"*Sacramento's* where I'm calling from, *miss*. My son's in bed. He can't work or do anything. If the doctor's here, he can come by."

"Dr. Charlton would not do that even if he were available. He's very busy now—occupied by professional things, *official matters*. In fact, he isn't seeing any patients. Dr. Wu is covering for him. I can give you his number. He's in the same building and he's an experienced family-practice man, herbalist, acupuncturist, you name it."

Half-an-hour later, Alex opened his eyes. Ma had resumed her bedside vigil.

"Alexei, promise me something and I'll go when you're even a

tiny bit better."

"This is about Arizona?"

"It's about what's necessary for you to get your health back. I opened a joint account at a bank on North Oracle Road, off the freeway on the north side of Tucson, not far from the spot Sweetie Pie's friend is willing to rent. Ten thousand's there, in the bank. Buck'll drive you when you're ready. Alexei? Don't tell him about the money."

Walking with a cane into the salon several days later, Alex was surprised to find chair nine occupied. He still had his job, Betty assured him, unconvincingly. "Work when you can," she said, administering a half-hearted hug.

That night, Alex told Buck he was ready to move.

"So Ma finally sold you on the desert. I guess the timing could've been worse; at least my crop's in."

"Not Arizona. Your place. I'll make it up to Sacramento when I'm okay to work. If you can't drive, I'll pay one of your Mexicans."

"Think they got driver's licenses when they don't got papers? Anyhow, you don't want to be along when one of them's behind the wheel, trust me. Besides, how d'ya know my place won't mess you up like where you are now?"

"I'll sleep on the porch. Breathe clean air. Weather's good in Ripon."

"Oh, it gets hot and cold enough. There's bugs, too. Plus, it's been known to rain. 'Clean air'? Dunno about that, either. 'Sides, I thought you had to be near Amtrak so you could get to your doc. Closest station down here's at least half-an-hour away."

"Looks like I won't be seeing him anymore…Bucky? Not a word to Ma."

Alex's hyperactive system reacted within hours of his relocation, the faucets in his nose and behind his eyes opening as wide as they had in Sacramento. Pesticides, a new source of mucosal misery, clogged his nasal passages; what they did to his lungs was unthinkable. He turned himself inside out vomiting.

Alex called the backup doctor, Wu, and was told he'd need a complete workup before his prescriptions could be renewed or new ones written. He said he couldn't travel. Dr. Wu's nurse advised an over-the-counter formula containing magnolia, licorice, chrysanthemum, nettle, and echinacea. He could get it online. Alex said he wanted "real" medicine. Come in then, she said.

Sleep was rare. Suspecting a foam pad of off-gassing, Alex

switched to the burlap sacks Buck used for almonds. Being outside did stimulate his appetite, but his diet of pills, granola, raw almonds, and liquids caused diarrhea. Only Benadryl gave comfort.

Early the seventh day, a windless morning, a military-surplus helicopter fitted with spraying booms stirred up chemical clouds the next spread over, a big asparagus and table-grape operation. Barely able to breathe, Alex made his way into Buck's orchard, to ask his half-brother to speak to the neighboring grower.

"No point in that, bro. He's got a lot invested on the ground. And this year we're *all* worried about West Nile Virus, which is a hell of a lot worse than a stuffy nose."

"But the shit he's spraying? How can it be good for your almond trees?"

"It is, actually. Orange worms and twig borers'll eat anything. If he didn't do it, I'd have to spend money myself. You got to understand something about life down here: *crops come first*."

Buck was in a stew himself. Exasperated by Alex's failure to answer in Sacramento, Ma took her frustration out on him, ringing Buck up several times a week to complain; everything was his fault, nothing more so than the mounting number of Burmese refugees in Bakersfield.

"All I tell her is, 'You probably call when he's at the salon.' Or 'in the bathroom,' since you're there so much. Got another idea, little bro?"

"Say I died. Whatever keeps her from coming to nurse me again."

Buck chuckled.

"Speaking of died, know who did? That skinny Mexican you worked with at Hair Horizons, Frankie something," Buck said. "Checked out, just like that. Wasn't more than twenty-eight or -nine. Ma keeps me filled in between rants. She knows his mother, the Mexican kid's, from the Von's checkstand. I guess she told me because I dated one of his big sisters, Serena, who's in real estate now in L.A., Ma says. Ogando was her last name…. So that Frankie, huh? You got to wonder…. No, no. *Tranquillo*, that's it. *Trankie Ogando*. You knew him pretty well? That's what Ma said."

"Not really."

"Ma said you brought him to the house a lot. I was gone by then."

"Ma mixes stuff up. She's getting senile."

Several weeks later—on the day after he'd sold the last of his thirty tons of almonds—Buck phoned Ma to announce that the little prince might be ready for the desert, judging by things he'd begun to let drop. The crop-spraying was too much. It got colder than he'd thought it would. His back hurt from lying on wood and burlap. There wasn't a day when he felt well enough to work. Alex didn't come out and say it, but it was clear he'd finally seen the impossibility of staying put.

"Well, hallelujah!" Ma cried.

Buck decided to approach the subject as if he himself had no desire to evict his half-brother, but merely wanted to know his plans: hang out until he was better? until the doctor reappeared and tweaked his meds? until hell froze over?

"Might be time to *come to Jesus*," Buck suggested. "Ma used to say that before whacking me with her push broom: *come to Jesus*. She got it from Xenia. That's what Xenia said before pouring her wicked brews down the throats of those migrant kids. I know because I worked at her clinic before Ma kicked me out. So I guess what I'm saying is, the desert's *gotta* be better than this…. Hey, you listening?"

Alex was fixated on the almond orchard. It had been one of his few distractions these awful weeks: watching the trees bloom, fruit out, and, in the case of those not timely harvested, drop their bounty to the ground.

"Sort of."

Both were silent several minutes. Alex had worn the same dirty denim shirt since his arrival. Buck was reminded of sick homeless men whose pictures he'd seen in the Los Angeles and Phoenix newspapers while making deliveries to bulk-food warehouses.

"So what're you gonna do? Not that your bein' here's any problem. But, hey."

Alex wiped his eyes with a soiled handkerchief.

"Yeah, I thought some. If I can't stay on my feet, no way Betty'll keep me on. So I got no cause to hang around here…. Besides, Ma's gone crazy; she put ten thousand in a Tucson bank for me. Supposed to be a secret. So Arizona's worth a try, I guess."

It was Buck's turn to be ill. Last year, a poor one for almonds, he'd asked Ma for a small loan to tide him over. She said she couldn't spare the money.

The air-conditioned drive to Arizona a month-and-a-half later

gave Alex the opportunity for Benadryl-free rest, and he was asleep when they arrived in the evening. The trailer site was a few thousand square feet of sand, lorded over by the Palo Verde and cleared of the cactus and odd-looking brushy plants covering much else all the way to the Catalina Mountains. Delivered by Buck three weeks earlier, the Airstream gleamed in the fading light. It had been stripped, scoured, and stocked with food. Buck woke him.

"This is it, bro. Paradise with an ocean view."

That first night, with the trailer's louvered windows open, Alex got acquainted with some of his neighbors: jittery dragon flies and tiger moths flitting through the hot, still air; bats playing ringolevio from a base in the Palo Verde; a yipping vixen hunting kangaroo rats. Lying in a steel bunk, like a chicken in the oven, he envisioned other denizens of the desert farther out, under masses of creosote and mesquite: scorpions, lizards, snakes, jackrabbits, peccary—and "Macho B," the celebrated solitary jaguar who roamed southern Arizona and northern Mexico. Alex had read about the big cat in a magazine at Casa Elegancia. At one-hundred-and-twenty pounds, it outweighed him.

He rose later than usual. Reckoning with the vastness in broad daylight, he saw that it was less fearsome than he'd imagined. The landscape was softened by cumulus clouds, sand dunes, and stands of sycamore, ironwood, willow, saguaro, and juniper. The desert floor, a splotchy riot of color, was here and there lush with hairy-leafed white primrose, pink verbena, and crimson-flowered ocotillo swaying gently even in the stillness. To the northeast, where he'd been led to believe ATVs somehow soundlessly contended on weekend and holiday nights, was a dry, pebbled wash. Beyond that, on higher ground, he made out light stanchions, or loudspeakers, or cameras—or all three—facing downwards. Still farther out, visible through the saguaro and juniper, were small flags—square and rectangular; blue, white, red, green, and yellow—and conical and cylindrical structures typical not of the American West but of East Asia. This must be Dharma Home Companion, the Sangha of the Sands, the community of Buddhists from Crestone, Colorado. It turned out that sick people went there to die. Blue Belle, having recently learned as much, told Sweetie Pie who told Ma who wondered if it could be the whole story because Xenia told *her* it was no accident the place was in the desert, "which is so good for restoratives like licorice, Mormon tea, and gum weed, and why'd you give those to complete goners?"

Alex passed the first full day and the next two under the Palo Verde. He was working his way through *Dragonriders of Pern*. Ma called repeatedly, her number showing on his cell phone. He ignored her.

On the fifth night, a sweltering Friday, he bedded down outside, midway between the trailer and the tree. Despite the heat, he felt better than he had in a long time. He drifted off with ease.

At eleven, he awoke to motor-vehicle backfiring and the screech of metal against metal. Out at the ATV track things had moved into high gear, literally. There was no chance of falling back asleep. Alex packed up and limped to the trailer. The racing didn't end until one a.m. Judging by crowd and traffic noise, it had been a popular event; lights blazed long afterward at Ristorante Azul, the taco-and-beer joint by the highway. The next night, a Saturday, was worse, the night after somewhat quieter. Each time, emergency-vehicle sirens interrupted the high-rev pandemonium trackside. By Monday morning, Alex had been without sleep maybe eighty of the last ninety-six hours.

He decided to hike to his Buddhist neighbors, introduce himself, seek sympathy, make common cause. Wasn't silence important in that religion? He took a Palo Verde branch in case weakness or dizziness overcame him.

Negotiating the small forests of saguaro and juniper, he crossed into Dharma Home territory, demarcated by a mesquite signboard inlaid with white stones quoting Buddhist scripture: *Bring to me a mustard seed.* Flanking the sign on both sides were Buddhas and mandalas bearing florid images of demons and deities. The latter brought to mind Japanese lacquerware in Ma's bedroom. He'd been allowed to try on the elegant box's contents, mostly barrettes, earrings and necklaces. Ma helped with clips and clasps.

The Buddhist settlement, laid out like an amphitheater, had at its base an adobe building larger than the other structures. Radiating outward were yurts pinioned with ropes and stakes, plywood domes, and aged, snaillike trailers. Through a triangular window in one dome's faceted siding, Alex saw an adolescent boy in cargo shorts and a halter-topped teen-aged girl, both at the foot of a hospital bed bearing a bald woman. The patient was covered by a white sheet rising and falling with her labored breathing. An ASU Sun Devils pint glass containing hand-rolled cigarettes sat on a table nearby, with a vase of wilting calla lilies. The young people played cards while puffing on mom's medicine. They also shared a name, Plunkett,

according to tags hanging from their necks.

A hundred feet away a trailer door opened, a frantic, head-shaven young Asian woman bursting out and rushing toward the main building, saffron robe flying. With one hand she struggled to keep a blood-filled plastic bag aloft, its tubing off the ground. Another bald, robed woman, much older, awaited her.

"Can't believe I mixed them up!" the first shouted, yards away.

There were other raised voices. Over his shoulder, Alex saw a third person, this one long-haired, in shorts and sandals, holding a clipboard. She was in the trailer's doorway, talking excitedly to others inside, but moving away from them, apparently intending to follow the panicked young monastic. Seeing Alex, she slowed. He tried to approach, too hastily, stumbled, and fell, a knee striking the ground, hard. The woman started for him.

"Are you all right? Who're you looking for? I really can't—we've got a man…. "

Her voice died away, the stranger's appearance distracting her.

"I wanted to talk…about the racetrack, the noise…I live out there."

Alex attempted to point with the Palo Verde branch. The woman began to follow with her eyes, but was distracted, again—now by the two monastics hurrying back to the trailer, the younger with another blood-filled sack, this one with large white lettering: "O Positive." She passed Alex and disappeared into the trailer, followed by the clipboard-clutching woman in shorts. The older nun, meanwhile, had veered off; she was coming toward him.

Alex rose slowly, awkwardly. He leaned heavily on the Palo Verde branch.

"You got problems with the track, too?" he blurted.

It took a few seconds for the question to register.

"Oh, the *race*track? They do make noise, don't they? We're glad it's only a few nights a week."

She had high cheekbones, but a wrinkled, downward cast to the eyes. She studied him.

"So how can I help you? I'm the abbess, Bhikkhuni Sundari."

"You're not as close as I am," he persisted.

The woman's concentration was total; she didn't blink.

"We're close enough."

"Doesn't the noise bother you is what I'm asking."

"Sure, it would be better if there wasn't any. But they were here first. And we want to be good neighbors…. Now, let me ask *you*

something. You seem rather ill. Can we help? We're nurses here."

The drapery of her robe extended to the ground, like the wings of an enormous orange butterfly.

"I'm fine," Alex said. "I'll rest a little, then go back."

The light was almost gone. How far had he come? He made out prayer flags, Buddhas, stupas, prayer wheels. Not far. He was on the ground again, telling himself it was only more rest that he needed, but actually unable to rise and regretting having declined the *über* nun's offer of miso soup, rice, a bed to spend the night. He shut his eyes and let go of whatever consciousness he had. When he opened them later, the light was gone, the heavens were bright, and, not many yards away, illuminated by a lantern, were four rosy, plumpish knees. There was a pungent herbal smell, as before. The Plunkett youths out for a stroll.

"That is *what*?" the girl said. "A patient? I don't remember him."

"Looks like a street person. Or a lost hiker. Maybe he escaped from Sierra Tucson, that big mental place. It's not far away."

"Whatever. You need to tell Sundari."

The boy groaned, but was quickly gone on coltish legs toward Dharma Home, at the moment distant lights beneath a plum-purple sky.

Alex said, hoarsely, "That's your mom back there, huh?"

The girl seemed surprised.

"Yup. Stage IV ovarian. That's the big thing here, cancer. What about you?"

"I can't walk right now, is all."

"But you're in the hospice?"

"No. A trailer out there."

She nodded, offering her mother's glowing medicine. Her right thumbnail had been chewed nearly to the quick. Alex sucked in several times, felt the top of his head lift off and drift away; he coughed violently, tears wetting his sunken cheeks. He would've gladly breathed his last there and then, in the desert in the dark, if he could have. And then, suddenly, the morbid reverie was driven away by uncontrollable trembling, every square inch of his body quaking—a reaction he'd often had to dope years before that was noticeable to drug aficionados like Trankie Ogando, who'd prance around singing "YMCA" and laughing like a hyena. Trankie never smoked and looked down on "Buggersfield butt holes" who did. His preferences were

pills, speed, and smack, the latter often enough for him to refer to himself, in especially manic, outsized states, as "Trackie." He was a funny, poisonous guy, whom Alex had worshipped.

The yurt he awoke in, naked to the waist, seemed to have been a Station of the Cross for a departed bleeder, probably the last. Wadded gauze and crumpled paper towels overflowed a cardboard carton; odors sharply medicinal and revoltingly necrotic lingered. Pinned to the soft folds of the vaulted ceiling, so it would have faced the tent's prostrate prior occupant, was a poster of a celadon Guanyin, the Chinese goddess of mercy. There were a pair of derelict chairs, a steel table stenciled Carondelet Health, and laundry baskets filled with bedraggled chemo wigs and cloth turbans.

An elastic brace had been applied to his bad knee over his jeans. He'd been slathered with a cream that left white slicks on his head, arms, and chest, all places where small dark epidermal growths erupted after Dr. Charlton's disappearance and the exhaustion of his meds.

Outside, low chanting and rhythmic shuffling, people in quasi-regimental step. This went on a time, Alex drifting in and out of sleep. Then he was dimly aware of the young Asian nun—she of the erroneous transfusion—inspecting him, extracting a thermometer from her robe, sliding it into his dry mouth. Under her breath, she said, "One oh two, like before. Low grade. Probably chronic infection."

The abbess entered.

"Please, Sundari," the younger one said, eager to talk, "last night I think, 'Torn meniscus, inflammation, nothing so very terrible.' But early this morning and now again I look and see: *not so simple*. His skin, the wasting, the fever. Like you say, maybe something systemic, a viral or bacterial infection? But we can do something, yes?"

Grimacing, Sundari blew through pursed lips to cool the coals of impatience and irritability monasticism was intended to extinguish. Young nuns wanted to care for every bit of human flotsam and jetsam that came their way in the naïve belief that everyone could be helped. When it became clear to them that they were mistaken, they felt betrayed. They could learn only from bitter experience, and some did, but not many.

"Ming, we have to accept the fact that patients like this can deteriorate very quickly, and we're helpless to save them. I've seen it happen. They fool you because they muddle along, then without warning it's over. Embolisms, galloping pneumonia, flu—I saw heart

attacks and strokes in patients even younger than he is at Denver General when I was in nursing school. They're often much weaker than we realize. They need all sorts of complicated testing and lab work, and, frequently, prolonged intensive care, but they don't belong in hospices, not yet, anyway. Another problem is we don't know anything about this guy. Where he's from. What coverage or family support he has. We may have suspicions about the underlying problem, but we don't have a clinical diagnosis, and he's not going to get one here. We're not equipped to deal with him. And we've got no room."

"He could stay in this yurt."

Sundari frowned. The young nun had heard nothing.

"What'll we do for critical care? Where will we put the next one? The shrine room?"

"Plunkett's close, no? He could go there."

The abbess didn't reply, which was itself an answer. Expecting a person to die was perhaps karmically neutral; wishing for it was not.

"She gets transfused about now," Sundari said, coldly. "Go. I'll stay with him."

An unfamiliar woman was at Alex's bedside when he surfaced from a hospitable depth many hours, if not a day or more, later. He wanted to sink back down, but she'd gripped his shoulders.

"You don't know me," the visitor said. She was big, blonde, and had a mannish cleft chin. She wore large brass earrings and a matching chain belt. A ring with a blue stone as large as a robin's egg encircled an index finger.

"I'm Pamela Hurdle, your landlady. *Blue Belle* Hurdle."

Her voice was deep. She let go of him, his head falling to the pillow.

"Well, you're still alive, at least. That's the main thing; it's what your momma's concerned about. She's joining you, by the way. I'm only here to check up, *Alex*. This is such a godawful place. So depressing! You'll be glad to be getting out, I'm sure. Say, that's a helluva job someone did on your Airstream. I'd swap it for a cancellation of your lease, if you can't go back. Do you believe those wigs? I'd *die* rather than wear one."

Sundari appeared after Blue Belle left. As the abbess reapplied ointment to his skin, Alex asked, "How does Ma know I'm here?"

The nun stopped and took a step back. Her gray-blue eyes were reflective and impenetrable.

"Did you assume in your condition you could just show up and

be cared for indefinitely and anonymously? *We went through your wallet.* We're monastics and nurses, not servants or civil-liberties lawyers. Listen, my friend. Outside this tent people are nearing the ends of their lives. They're suffering like you can't imagine. Our duty is to them, first and foremost. Unfortunately, we're busier, more short-handed, and poorer than I ever thought we'd be when we planned this project in Colorado. But now we're here and there's no going back, and we're forced to accept the fact that, even if we've taken vows, we can't give and give and give, and get nothing in return from those we serve, even basic information."

Alex had stopped listening at mention of his wallet.

"Ma's not in there. Who sent that woman?"

The nun's shaved head was sunburned. From the neck up, she seemed genderless.

"Ming called someone that *is*, okay? That led to…you have a brother? I think he contacted your mother and she arranged for that woman to look in. They have a mutual friend in California. Ming knows more. Does it matter? You're sick. But we're a *hospice* here, not a *hospital*. There's a big difference. People go only one place from here."

"How do you know that doesn't include me?"

"If you saw patients who are really dying, actively dying, you'd understand. There's a woman with children who's in the severest pain. Never sleeps, never gets out of bed, lies in her own filth, much as we try to keep her clean. Death would be a blessing for her. But death, even if it rarely changes its mind, *procrastinates*. It can be incredibly cruel that way. You're fortunate. Soon you'll be in your mother's care and out of here. She'll find the best place for you, maybe somewhere nearby, like Tucson. You work, apparently; there are loads of business cards in your wallet. You must have insurance."

"No more, I don't. But I've got money. Tell my mother not to come."

"Be thankful she is. Anyway, it wouldn't be our place to advise her."

After a brooding silence, Alex said, with urgency, "Those awful wigs in that box over there? They're not even good for funerals—not even mortician quality."

"New ones cost a lot. We depend on donations."

"You could buy them with what I'd give you: forty-six thousand dollars. That's my savings, plus what Ma staked me to. When I get my legs back, I'll wash, comb out, and set those wigs, the ones worth

keeping, and order new ones. I'll buy you silk turbans. Whatever you need. *Just tell Ma not to come, I'm begging you*."

The abbess nodded to show she'd heard and understood and was unmoved.

"There are no paying guests here. Only dying ones."

"And I'm *not*?"

"*Poor* people with no one and nowhere to go, not ones like you, who can afford the latest treatments, the drug cocktails, who'll probably live a good deal longer, like it or not."

Alex closed his eyes at that, wishing again that he'd the power to keep them shut, to disappear, like Mr. Gummi Worm. Ma arrived the next afternoon, with her vinyl suitcase and BARC bag. She took charge immediately.

REUNION AT THE DRIFTWOOD

Howard R. Wolf

Ludwig Fried, an aging bachelor, never really sure about anything, even at his age, was back at the Driftwood again, at last, at least for a while. But he was there in a way different from the times when he had visited his *late* mother in Florida over a period of more than thirty-five years—that long stretch of time when he was teaching what was called English at a small liberal arts college on the Finger Lakes. Not very liberal, not very artsy, and not Cornell, as these things were measured by those who counted in the profession and did the counting.

Cornell was the index finger, not one of the lesser digits. He had been given the finger once, big time, in Ithaca. No Odysseus, he had retreated to lead a quiet life, with roiling undercurrents, on a smaller pond. Teaching on the surface, but below, pseudonymously, as "Hemmy Zimmer," writing "lite" porn on the side, low-carb eroticism, like cole slaw, to earn a few extra bucks and perhaps to satisfy some other needs. Mercifully, officially retired, he was out of that loopy loop now.

The last visit, the funeral, more a pilgrimage than a round-trip, hadn't been like the other excursions over all those years when he had made first annual, then semi-annual, and then quarterly, like bank statements, visits to his aging parents. After his father's death, visiting his aging mother, seeking relief, he had gone to the beach at Lauderdale-by-the Sea virtually every day and a strip-joint almost every night to add some visual spice to the daily fare at the condo—usually matzo balls that looked like the pink "spaldeens" he had hit against the wall in his old P.S. 187 Manhattan schoolyard.

The funeral was, of course, more decisive than any other visit could have been. Not the funeral he would have wanted for her, but the best he could cobble together, given everything: few relatives, fewer friends, and two of her Caribbean care-takers gathered at the Memorial Park, as it was called, where the headstones looked like name-plates on mail-boxes and gave the impression that one could, if only one could find the key, open them and find a letter delivered belatedly from one's mother or father, or a place to mail one if one still had something to say, and one did, as a rule. When it came to family history, there always were unsent letters.

But death wasn't on his mind now. Now was the time to live in the present moment, what used to be called the Now at the height of the Viet

Nam war in the age of campus rebellion. He hadn't been ready for the Now when it knocked on the door of his consciousness in the heady 1960's. Now he was ready, he was pretty sure, to seize the Now. Now was the time for the Now. But with sciatic pains shooting up and down his leg, he might have to put the Now on hold.

Ludwig Fried, of pre-Nazi Bratislava a son, stared at the veil of mist that lay across the pond at the Driftwood. A lone egret stood on the whorled, upturned, and prayerful knee of a cypress tree. It was elegant, as he wasn't. Back hurting, he eased into the recliner, his father's last seat, and worked the joyless stick until he was at a psychoanalytic incline. Ex-poet, ex-Freudian, he was looking for a renewed grip on life.

He had trace memories of leaving Europe, 1938, with his parents on the last Botel for Vienna and beyond to safety, New York: his mother cradling him in her shawl, weeping joyfully, as their lost city, doomed, became a lambent blur as the Danube, still blue in those days, curved to the West. With a world in flames left behind, the word "family" always would be tinged for him in the years to come with an aura of anxiety.

It was hard to believe that he had traveled in his lifetime from the terror of those days to the safety of his mother's, *his late mother's* (he had to get used to saying it) condominium, now his. He never could possess it fully, nor was he sure that he wanted it or its possessions. This was something he had to sort out. This was part of his retirement project.

Semi-retirement, really, for he still had the writing. He could and would still flap those wings of poesy and float over the becalmed pond of the Driftwood to which he had come, a kind of refugee, from the cold North. He would assert himself in *his* new semi-home. He had some of the spars and splinters of his past life on display in the nooks and crannies where his mother had kept the faux flowers and cracked bisque. No golden bowls, they still were precious. He hadn't yet discarded the few Old World antiques his parents had managed to take with them on the run in the leather suitcase with the Cannes stickers on it: Rosenthal china, Bohemian cut-glass, Austro-Hungarian porcelain, a few pieces of Wedgewood. His condo unit was now an assemblage of his mother's lost and now-late world and his own memorabilia highway.

He wanted and needed to dive into the pool of life, not Thomas Wolfe's river of time and consciousness, not the Danube of his lost

childhood, the childhood that had been taken from him. But it wasn't easy to escape the aromas and tastes of the past: sitting on his father's lap at Kaffee Mayer, smelling coffee, a bon-bon capping a mound of ice-cream that looked to him then like a Himalayan summit.

The pool of life and the river of time always had run together. That had been...was…part of the problem. Now was the time to solve problems. There might not be much time left—it was a small step from the recliner to his decline—but as his mother always had said, "You're never too old for anything." It had occurred to him that she and Ben Franklin would have made a great couple.

He still might have to wait, however, before he could belly-flop into the swimming pool of life. Hobbled, stenosis of the L-4, prolapsed disk, deconstruction of the vertebrae, he might not be able to set sail on an Odyssean voyage, to revisit all the places where he had lived and loved after a fashion and, in some way, make up for past evasions and inadequacies, extract from the present the meaning he had missed in the past—America's inner theme park.

Seemingly, he was up a retirement creek without a paddle, a semi-affluent bindle-stiff in a time of sub-prime foreclosures who needed a Birkenstock. Just as his own Prague Spring and Velvet Revolution had come into view, he found himself virtually prostrate in his father's Barcalounger, contemplating the green light of an uncertain future. He could still write, but he wanted to act as well. No Camus, he still craved authentic existence. The Maquis of his soul longed to blow up a Nazi train as it made its obscene progress to the end of the moral world.

It was late in the day and he was on the Disabled List now, but the ball game wasn't over. He hadn't gone over Viagra Falls. Getting it up wasn't the answer in itself, of course, but it was part of the solution. He had written too much soft porn to doubt that his rod, a divining instrument of sorts, would lead him to some version of the promised land. But it was only an instrument, "equipment," as Hem called it in "Father and Sons." Still you needed a good rod to fish, especially when you were casting for the big fish, in his case, the elusive relationship that would take him to the far shore in a meaningful way. He wanted to be in deep, perhaps for the first time.

If he couldn't travel far and wide just now, still he could travel in a way. He had a psychological gimmick that might work. He had saved photos of all the women he had known in his youth which had ended, he figured, when he was fifty-nine, the last time a woman

under thirty would jump into bed with him. Not a bad run, but it had come to an end. The end had coincided with early Social Security and made it easier to take, compensation, of some kind, for becoming, as a famous French writer friend of his put it, "invisible." Nothingness was a French specialty of *la maison*, a three star angst. Social security made up, to some extent, for erotic insecurity.

But he had the photos, not dirty pictures, but suggestive in the usual 1950's ways : Vargas Girl images, WWII pin-ups, as much cleavage as children of the 1930's could tolerate. The shadowy rifts and gorges of their hillocks—breasts like white dunes—reminded Ludwig, ever a man of memories, of the rounded sand-colored hills of the Lower Golan that he had written about in one his antic stories.

He couldn't go back in time to be with these images again—yes, that's what they had been, nocturnal specters and ghosts with big knockers.

But he could, he just might, find their equivalents in the present. He could like an incognito pilgrim work the condo, beaches, strip-joints, strip-mall, synagogues, and orange juice stands, looking for the recreation of those first squeezes where he had been hard pressed in any case then even to know what he had been reaching for.

It would be a form of social work as well, and he might gather some new material for his writing, something deeper this time. Farewell to lite porn, hello significant other. He wasn't a young buck, but he had his mother's great genes and a pair of old Levis. With a frame that hadn't yet collapsed and a body that still could take a few jabs like the Sugar Ray Robinson of his youth, with a few golden flecks in the thinning haystack of his Ben-Gurion like puffs, he still might look attractive to a woman of a certain age at a certain stage of life in the half-light.

He would start, if he could find her, a *faux* Rosalie Prince and move on from there. He had known old Rosalie before he had lost his virginity in Denmark to a lovely—as he then had thought of it—piece of Danish, even though she was a Norwegian music student. *Ah, Malla*, he thought, *I have betrayed the lovely promise of your accepting arms*.

Ah, Rosalie! Whither art thou? She had been the first star in his Milky Way and firmament: a featured dancer, if not headliner, with boa and sparkling paste in the right places, at Levi's Landing on Loon Lake, the uppermost notch of the Borscht Belt, 1955. She was as shapely and comely a daughter of the Bronx as any piece of lass

which the, then, not-yet-rotten borough had fashioned. Beauty, if not relatives, was relative, but location was everything, and the Bronx, like Michelangelo, had come through in the sculpting of Rosalie.

She was so perfectly proportioned that he had thought at first—gazing at her sequin-outlined pair, during Maestro Popowitz's Saturday night post-Sabbath floor-show—that she was Rodin's last model. He had gazed and gawked and taken her measure, and she had taken the measure of his gazing and gawking. She had been for him, in that moment, his *winter dream*. He wanted then to lay a wreath on F. Scott Fitzgerald's grave to acknowledge his lasting influence on children of the Grand Concourse. He had to admit, looking back through the mist of years that hovered above the pond, that she had been only a beautiful body, not yet a person, though he didn't want even now to deny the power of the body and its immanent depth. As a poet had said, "the body's beauty lives."

He hadn't been the only suitor for her affection and Broadway affectations. Lou Handelman, the mellowest alto sax that Orthodox Jewish Kansas City could produce, had thrown his mute into the ring, serenading her cabin soulfully at nights when he wasn't leading the cha-cha competition. Even Ludwig had been moved by Lou's blues.

Lou blew his horn with his antique soul, this neither Rosalie nor Ludwig could deny.

But Ludwig possessed in Rosalie's eyes, if not his own, a touch of class, private school and something like an Ivy League pedigree—no small matter in the aggressively assimilationist years following World War II when American Jews wanted to forget the nightmare of Europe. And Rosalie still lived in the Bronx, though she was determined to dance her way across the University Heights Bridge to Manhattan, isle of glitzy dreams.

So Ludwig had prevailed over Lou that summer. He had bumped and dry-humped, but he hadn't scored. Lou played his horn, and Ludwig played with Rosalie, but the Maginot Line of her chastity belt held. If Lou had known this, he would have been less unhappy. Ludwig should have told him, but he had been too youthfully proud and competitive.

It was a wonderful, but sad, night when, after returning from his first necking and petting session in the Criss-Craft, his nose covered in talc and his testicles as enlarged as his mother's matzo balls to hear Lou wailing on his horn from the middle, it seemed, of Loon Lake.

Standing on the dock, holding his crotch for support, a momentary stay against contusion, he thought he saw Lou in silhouette on the raft fifty yards from the lakeside, horn lifted towards the moon, blowing "Strangers in the Night" as if it had been composed by an aged mourner at the Western Wall.

If Ludwig Fried, even in some pain, had not been so thrilled that he had just held Rosalie close to him, a true bosom buddy, his Chai tinkling against hers, anchors in the night, he would have wept uncontrollably and swum out to Lou and embraced him. But his sorrow hadn't lasted long. As selfish and predatory as the next guy in the 1950's, he had felt-up Rosalie for the rest of the summer.

She refused "to go below the waist without a ring," as she said in the heat of abrasion, and even then, "only to touch until the wedding," so he had given her, in a heady moment of youthful delirium, as a pledge, a token of "going steady," his beloved high school graduation ring: jet-black onyx and gold.

Thrusting up and down, rocking fore and aft, swaying side to side, yawing and pitching, water lapping at the beams, pitching, rocking and rolling, quaffing scents, hers, the pine trees, he had known more pleasure between the gunwales of that barque and her limbs than he would know for many years.

But the summer ended, Rosalie faded, and the ring disappeared from his life. He heard some years later that she had married a psychiatrist and moved to Geneva, New York, not too far from where he had lived his own concealed life. He couldn't quite imagine what sorts of problems they might have in Geneva, New York, but, then, neurosis was democratic.

It had occurred to Ludwig on some sleepless nights—and there were quite a few of them when he thought about his lost family and the family he hadn't had the courage to build—that he might break into Rosalie's house, if he could find it, and ransack the place. He wanted his ring back! But then he would think of her hubby, Doc Popowitz—asleep, nestled between the hollow of Rosalie's bosom, sagging, doubtless, but still cavernous—and the thought of rousing the exhausted ER mechanic from that sleepy hollow made Ludwig keep his cool.

Life had kicked him in the balls a few times, yes, but he still had feeling for his fellow man; and, sleepless, feeling guilty that he had displaced Lou Handelman, he would turn on *Music through the Night*, play with his own original instrument, and Rosalie's image would

become one of many pin-ups that spun through his mind—an erotic kaleidoscope that sometimes made him dizzy. And when a pattern came into view, he knew he had better come to his senses. He needed to commit himself to some one person. Only an engagement with the personality of another life-voyager could bring him anything like peace of mind.

Sex was short, but life was long. One *Playboy* center-fold was indistinguishable from the next, but he *still* cared about Lou Handelman. Once he had seen Lou playing his horn in the *Tonight Show's* big band, and he had kneeled before the TV set, the cypress knee of his soul upturned, begging forgiveness.

Maybe he was fooling himself about his moral renovation. It was late in the day, but, even so, one could work up from the old brain, the vibrations of the limbic system, to the higher cortical functions. He didn't have to spend his whole life frolicking in the hippocampus. He could recapitulate in his own life, small as it was, the larger movement of the species. He didn't have to become a convert, after all, to Orthodox Judaism or Emersonianism to improve himself.

The mist had cleared and the one egret primped on the Buddha-like and gnarled outcropping of a cypress tree. A rumba tune wafted across the lake from the area of the pool and the clubhouse through the grove of live oaks and the veils of Spanish Moss. Now that the Central, South American, and Caribbean community had moved into the Driftwood, it had become a place of music and dancing in the night.

The previous generation of mainly Jewish New Yorkers had preferred to while away the evenings of their diaspora lite playing Gin Rummy and Canasta. That generation was mainly gone to rest with Ludwig's mother and father in Mogen David Memorial Park, a mile or so from a McNabb Road strip-mall where Lud went now and then for aromatherapy and an exotic massage. He needed, among other things, to keep his hand in with the erotic life so that his pseudonymous writing as the author of *Titillation Follies* would have more kick and bounce to it.

Listening to the music, moving his feet to the rhythm of Xavier Cugat and the throaty voice of Abby Lane, Ludwig realized that his lumbar region now was free of pressure and pain. He no longer felt hobbled at the crossroad of his life. His Barcalounger had been louder than its bite. He was free to move again, to wander, to search, "to drink life to the lees," as Tennyson had said. He still could be

the wondering and wandering Jew. The burden of memory, like the pressure at L-3/4, seemed to have lifted.

He studied the sepia-edged photos of Rosalie. Her swan-like neck faded, like an ancient Galilean trail, into her milk and honey valley, but her green eyes still sparkled in the night-sky of her youth. He could hear the lapping of Loon Lake against the bank of memory. He was moved and moved out of the lounger. The music seemed to be calling the cell-phone of his soul. Everyone had a cell-phone. Not everyone had a soul as well. He was pretty sure he had both—at least that they could speak to each other under the right conditions.

Outside, he heard a song, "Strangers in the Night" with an Afro-Cuban beat, an unbeatable combination. He walked slowly and carefully through the cypress grove towards the pool where he could see the fading embers of several Bar-B-Q fires still glowing. Not Mt. Vesuvius, not Bedouin camp-fires, not even bygone Camp Leonard bonfires, foothills of the Berkshires, but something illuminating the darkness—a primordial need…*by Leonard Lake our vows we make….*

As he approached the gate, he saw one lone shadow swaying slightly to the melody. It reminded him—just about everything reminded him of something, every sound of a word, every word of a related word—of the spectral figures standing at dawn at the edge of the Dead Sea that he once had seen, figures that could have been mistaken for the Tomb soldiers at X'ian.

As he approached, he could see, in the dim light of one faux red Chinese lantern, a woman, near his age, slender, but built like a Mack truck, embracing a shadow. She was unaware of Ludwig's presence. Then, somewhat alarmed and embarrassed, she saw him and put her arms at her side.

"Sorry," he said, "I was taking a stroll; it's been a long night."

"I know, too many nights are like that down here, aren't they? I dance when I can't sleep."

"Right on," he said, "at a certain point, we all live in our heads too much."

"I'll bet you're a writer," she said, "I can tell, I was an English major at Brooklyn College in the 1960's. You have that look. I can see it, even here at this hour."

"Well," he said, "I have scribbled a bit. In fact, I'm an ex-poet, but then I turned to other kinds of work."

"I knew it; I knew it; my name is Sylvia, Sylvia Madeleine."

"Ah, that's a great name, French?"

"Yes and no. My parents were French, but they escaped in 1938 and came to New York."

"And what brought you here?"

"Arthritis, for openers, and then I was alone. My one son was killed in a mountain climbing accident, the High Tatras. He was doing what he loved."

He was silent for a minute. "Where are the Tatras?"

"Slovakia, former Czechoslovakia."

"Yes, of course, I was told about them."

She extended her arms towards him. "Arms—and you're the man. Shall we dance?"

"Slowly, very slowly," Ludwig said, "I have a lower back problem."

"OK, one step at a time."

She moved towards him and placed her arms lightly on his shoulders, keeping a discreet distance between them.

"He's gone," she said.

"Who? Who's gone?" Ludwig asked, as he looked around the empty poolside.

"Irving."

Irving, he thought, I don't know any Irving.

"My husband."

"Away on business?" Ludwig asked, as decorously as possible.

"Final business, he's dead. He died last year."

"I'm terribly sorry to hear that, Sylvia; I've never been married, but I can imagine your grief."

"That's a nice thing to say…."

"Ludwig, Ludwig Fried."

"That's kind of you, Ludwig, but it's okay. He's at rest now. He's gone home. He suffered a good deal at the end. He's gone home."

Not in one of those mail-boxes, I hope, he thought.

As if reading his mind, Sylvia said, "Back to Brooklyn, to be with the rest of the family."

"Yes, family. My mother, may she rest in peace, died a few months ago."

"Is she at rest in New York?"

"Who can rest in New York? She's here, Mogen David Memorial Park, in one of those mail-boxes."

"Mail-boxes?"

"It's a morbid joke. You know, one of those anonymous name-plates."

"Didn't she want to go home?"

"No, she always said that she didn't want to be shipped north like an orange."

"Funny, Lud, a funny thing to say."

"Yes, she was a wise and witty woman."

"Come closer," Sylvia whispered, "Irving would want me to have this moment, I'm sure of it. He was a jeweler, specialized in engagements and weddings; he understood sentiment, the human heart, a regular Irving Berlin. He would want me to go on living."

"Of course, Sylvia, of course," he said, drawing her closer, feeling, but not upset by it, her girdled bottom. He wasn't a matinee idol anymore, and he appreciated having something to hold onto, especially with his back problem.

They danced, sort of, for a while, more swaying than swinging. He felt like a regular Guy Lumbago.

"The night isn't young," she said, "and you're still recovering. Let's call it an evening, shall we? But I'd like to dance with you again. Shall we?"

"I'd like that, Sylvia, I'd like that. Yes, that would be nice."

"Till next time," she said, "I'm Unit 10, Blum, Sylvia Madeleine Blum. In the meantime, take this ring; it's Irving's. It doesn't fit me; I was wearing it as a necklace, but it feels like an anchor."

She hauled up the luminous blue sapphire and onyx ring from the depths of her cleavage, a mini-Alp in the moonlight, "A momento of the evening. You can give it back the next time we dance together."

"Yes, next time."

Ludwig was dazzled and stunned. Life wasn't a cabaret, but it felt now like a merry-go-round, a mythic tour de France. He wasn't a Hindu, but Sylvia in this moment brought back the mound of ice-cream at Kaffee Mayer, that mini-peak of his lost childhood, the moment of oneness with his father, the last time in history when the Danube was as enchanting as a Strauss waltz. His mind was flowing like a river. Thomas Wolfe was right, after all, time and language were rivers: *memory, mamma, mummery, memorial, mammary.* If you could clear the river of log-jams and driftwood, the river could flow again.

Yes, he had lost a great deal, but it was clear now that the past could be reinvented, if not relived, in the present, the Now, if he could let go of the pastness of the past and use it as a prompt, a reminder, a useful artifact. Then he and Sylvia could have a reunion at the

Driftwood and celebrate their first kiss at one and the same time.

It might not go well, of course. They both might crash into the past again. Even so, he had more photos. At worst, Sylvia might be the first episode of an epic journey at the Driftwood. And she was potential grist for Hemmy Zimmer's lite porn mill.

But he was being unfair to both of them. They really had a chance now to seize the Now. She had been open, warm, frank, needy, and giving, that more than anything else. Not an Anglo-Saxon princess, but a ring-giver, nonetheless. How could he be such a *momzer,* such a bastard, even to think in this moment about them not dancing again to the rhythms of the Big Band era of the heart.

The time had come to put Hemmy Zimmer in the bank vault and to throw away the key. He would visit his parents' gravesites in the morning to make sure that they were being tended properly. He didn't want any sawgrass growing over their name-plates which now seemed less like mail-boxes to him then they did e-mail addresses to which he could send messages.

Dancing with Sylvia, recalling Rosalie, paddling back through the river of time to Bratislava, a tribute of the current of his memory to the source, his parents' resting place had been transformed somehow for him, at least for the moment.

As he walked back, light of foot now, to his unit, he wasn't at all sure how much of his light-footedness and renewed belief in the possibility of living in the present with someone of his own generation was the result of being able to walk without pain, how much attributable to Sylvia's spirit, how much to his aloneness.

Hair gray, flesh sagging, Sylvia was no Rosalie, but, then, she was what Rosalie might have become. And, after all, he was only a late edition of his former self. So what was the point of looking, walking, driving, and gawking in the rear-view mirror of life? Whether he loved a young filly or not didn't matter now, it wasn't a race he could win. From now on, if a shapely *tochis* wiggled into view, he'd have to put on blinkers and look the other way, even if the odds were long and time short.

The time had come to face the Now, and the Now was Sylvia's extended and welcoming arms, a history they had shared without knowing one another, but one that they could now, possibly, explore together.

Improbable, but hope, like a kite, took flight in his soul. He now believed he might have one.

Whatever, it was time to give it all a rest until he saw Sylvia the next time. He would start with a bouquet of roses. He had more spring in his feet now than a high-bouncing Pinky, the "spaldeen" of his youth. As he rounded the curve of the pond, the lone egret fluttered overhead. The moonlight was reflected in its eyes.

POETRY

THE MULTIPLE EFFECTS OF GLOBAL WARMING

Alan Elyshevitz

The ocean inverts,
revealing its bottom
while the polar bear clings
to its lucrative ice.
Uncovered by receding lakes,
stones reinstate
their topography.
Each kernel of wheat
now a grain of sand,
a plover with rheumatic wings
alights on a lisping dune.
Even the foolproof cities regress
to sanctums
for mosquitoes.
This is a time
of scorch marks
when even newlyweds
must sleep
in separate beds.

HANDS

Sheila Golburgh Johnson

When I met him
he was walking
on his hands
along the beach,
a crowd of children
following.

A little girl
begged him
to teach her.

She did a handstand
and while he held
her feet, she took
one trembling step
on her palms
and then another
until she tumbled
on the sand.

Of course I married him,
but he always
saw things upside
down,
and every time
I tried his trick
I tumbled.

I CAN'T RISE TO THE OCCASION

Donna J. Long

I live by the dollop and the pinch.
Substitution's my art, my meditation.
Baking is one science I never mastered.

I have no patience for pre-heating or measurements
and Mother's recipes all require remediation.
She taught me to give by the dollop and the pinch.

Who still sifts flour? Who times their eggs?
Who replaces baking soda on its date of expiration?
Baking is one science I never mastered

thanks to Mom, who at Wonder's altar worshipped,
and to Gran, whose rolls rose twice. The indication's
I'm two dollops of Mother, of Gran not a pinch.

When I remember my mantra—don't overmix—
my muffins are fluffy, but of that bacterial invocation
baking with yeast? It's one science I never mastered.

I want a man who can cook like I think,
who doesn't take a fallen cake as interpretation
that he's less worth the dollop than the pinch.

Yeast breads I've attempted turned out like bricks
(though not as useful), and I accept this limitation.
I live by the dollop and the pinch.
Baking is one science I never mastered.

BY THE STILL WATER WHERE THE POET WRITES

Katharyn Howd Machan

Fox knows she is red and red,
so vivid against the pond's pale edge
even dragonflies shy away.
She smells a woman, sees a woman,
is certain she has been seen, too—
safe enough distance away?
Thirst compels her to continue
though afternoon shadows are small.
The woman sits and does not move,
her hand on a page, face turned.
Fox leans down and laps and laps,
sending tiny ripples widening.
Clear, the edges of her eyes
curve, soften, watch.

PINECONE LIZARDS

Dianne Turgeon Richardson

They live in a basket of pinecones
on the front porch. On sunny afternoons,
they lounge on the basket's rim soaking up
the native warmth. At the height of afternoon
heat the small one climbs to the top of his
mountain of sharp and dry and brown, unmoved
by wind or thunder or me when I come
to water plants. Like the pioneer
in a spiny frontier he has claimed this corner
of my porch as his. The large one with
the chopped off tail scuttles down the graying
wooden banister and into the bushes to bring dinner
home at the end of the day.

TACKLING SHOPLIFTERS

Troy Schoultz

Pushing shopping carts in the snow,
a thermos of schnapps hidden
from the managers in the parcel pick-up area.
It was thirty below, wind chill inclusion.
This is how
I celebrated the death of the 1980's,
working part-time, tackling shoplifters
no younger or poorer than I.
Singing to myself in the backroom,
feeling as lost as a chance
with a drunken dream girl
who had no chance
to find me again
once the cops closed the party down.
We drank together, all us 24-hour lost souls,
made mix tape soundtracks
of the hours and days we'd kill,
those promises spilling off beer-heavy tongues,
"You should move on college boy,
wasting your life in frozen food aisles…"
With box cutter knives, hoping the '90's
and our bad luck would finally
pay off in some dim way.
That night, a rented motel room,
a bathtub of ice and bottles,
captured and lost somewhere on video.
We held on to our lives at that point
like icicle-adorned handles of shopping carts
outside during the last day of December
or maybe the ankles of a panicked kid
falling face first on hard tile
broke and desperate for a pack of Malboro Lights.

AT KEATS' HOUSE

Jeffery Talmadge

I rise in a gush of wind
from the deepest part
of the dark underground
near Hampstead Heath
and a narrow bar
that serves warm beer,
then walk down a quiet road.

The rest is not so clear
and memory challenges
what is real:
the view of the grounds,
the faded chaise where he lay
while they wiped his brow
and the whole house shook
with his bloody cough.

Now letters and lines he wrote,
a lyre-shaped brooch
strung with his hair,
the ring he gave his love,
all lie under glass,
all protected like a heart
from our earnest grasping.

It is late afternoon
and with each opening of the door
the cool inside air presses out,
rattling the panes in the rugged windows,
a sound like breathing.

HOUSE OF WRATH

Buff Whitman-Bradley

I grew up in a house of wrath
And learned to try to make them laugh
To keep their rage at bay

I grew up in a house of blame
And learned the acid burn of shame
When Jesus did not wash my sins away

I grew up in a house of traps
With Byzantine rules and intricate maps
That changed from day to day

I grew up in a house of dread
And learned to hide inside my head
It seemed the safest place to stay

I left the house and came to see
The wrath was not because of me
But I was the boy who'd had to pay

PICHER

ARTIST STATEMENT

Jessica Chalfant

Jessica Chalfant is a photographer from Foyil, Oklahoma. She did her Senior Capstone project over Picher, Oklahoma. In life we all walk down roads. We start out on the roads our parents begin to pave for us. The road Jessica started out on was rocky. The longer she walked this road the steeper it became. She fell into the abyss of addiction trying to find her way in the dark, instead, she found a roadside station to rest at for a while. While sitting at the station staring down the crossroads of life Jessica had a decision to make. She could continue to stumble down the familiar road with all its twists and turns; or she could step onto an unfamiliar path. All she could see down this unfamiliar path is twelve steps and then the scenery was hazy. When the day finally came for Jessica to leave the roadside station she chose to take those twelve steps down the unfamiliar path and life has not been the same since for her. She has made many a discovery along this path, her love for photography and art are just two of them. She has found a guide to help her along the way. Together they have rebuilt bridges and mended fences. Sometimes Jessica can catch a glimpse of the old road off to her left. At any time she can choose to veer off this path she now walks on and once again walk along the old road. Picher, Oklahoma has become a visual reminder of the old road Jessica used to walk along. In Picher, with its abandoned houses and deserted streets one can hear the loneliness in the air.

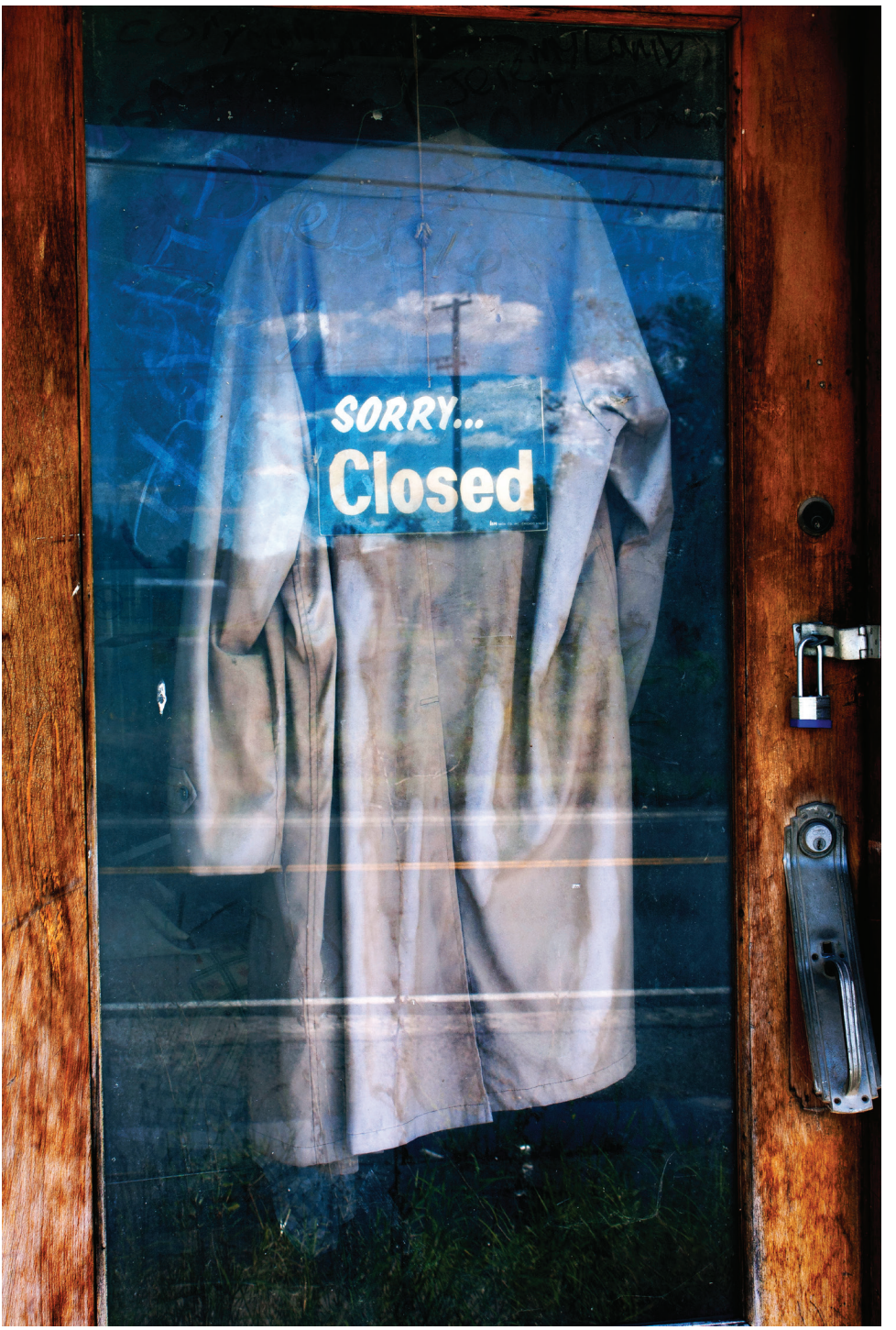
Baseball - Jessica Chalfant

Picher Buildings - Jessica Chalfant

Picher Church Front - Jessica Chalfant

Picher Church - Jessica Chalfant

Picher Door - Jessica Chalfant



Picher Closed - Jessica Chalfant

Picher Lock - Jessica Chalfant

Picher Table - Jessica Chalfant

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Alan Elyshevitz is a poet and short story writer from East Norriton, PA. His collection of stories, *The Widows and Orphans Fund*, was published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press. In addition, he has published three poetry chapbooks. He is a two-time recipient of a fellowship in fiction writing from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Currently, he teaches writing at the Community College of Philadelphia.

Buff Whitman-Bradley is the author of four books of poetry – *b. eagle, poet, The Honey Philosophies, Realpolitik: Poems of Protest, Outrage and Resistance,* and *When Compasses Grow Old*, and a chapbook, *Everything Wakes Up*! His poems have appeared in many print and online journals. He lives in northern California.

Dianne Turgeon Richardson is an MFA candidate at the University of Central Florida. Her work has appeared in *Sundog Lit, Zaum 17,* and *Blue Fish Digest* and is forthcoming in *Poem* and the anthology *A Sense of the Midlands*. She lives with her husband and two mutts in Orlando, Florida.

Donna J. Long is Professor of English at Fairmont State University and Editor of *Kestrel: A Journal of Art and Literature*. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Third Wednesday*, *Fourth River*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Louisville Review*, and the *Florida Review*.

Howard Wolf is Emeritus Professor at SUNY-Buffalo (English). Author of *Forgive the Father* (a memoir), *Broadway Serenade* (a novel), and many short stories, he was a Fulbright Lecturer in Turkey and South Africa, and has lectured in 20 countries. He is a graduate of Horace Mann School, Columbia U., Amherst College, and The University of Michigan.

Irving Greenfield and his wife, Anita, reside in Manhattan. His stories have been published in e-zines and in hard copy. He writes because he must.

Leslie Pietrzyk is the author of two novels, *Pears on a Willow Tree* and *A Year and a Day*. She teaches fiction in the Converse low-residency MFA program and in the graduate writing program at Johns Hopkins University.

J.S. Kierland is a graduate of the University of Connecticut and Yale University. He has been published in *Fiction International*, *Playboy*, *Colere*, *International Short Story*, *Oracle*, *Drash*, *Mount Hope*, and many others. He has also written two major Hollywood films, rewritten others, and promises he will never commit a crime like that again.

Jeffrey Talmadge is a graduate of Duke University, The Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers, and the University of Texas School of Law. His work has appeared in *The Texas Quarterly, The Greensboro Review, Witness, Lake Effect, Quercus Review, Spillway, Steam Ticket, Alabama Literary Review, Gargoyle, The Atlanta Review, The Broad River Review* and other literary magazines and journals. An award winning songwriter, he has recordings on the Corazong, Berkalin and Bozart record labels and tours in the United States and Europe. His seventh and most recent CD is *Kind of Everything*. Originally from Texas, he now lives in the Atlanta area.

Katharyn Howd Machan, Professor of Writing at Ithaca College, is the author of 30 published collections, and her poems have appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies, and textbooks, including *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* and *Sound and Sense*. In 2012 she edited *Adrienne Rich: A Tribute Anthology* (Split Oak Press).

RosaMaria Chacon teaches a wide range of literature including Chicano, African American, and Native American at California State University at Northridge. "Brown, Shiny, Pretty Shoes" is the first story she has published. Her articles include "Making Space for Those Unruly Women of Color" and "Two Voyeurs or One?: Gazing Across Borders."

Tom Small lives in northern Pennsylvania with his wife and a phalanx of Pug dogs. His fiction received an honorable mention in the Waasmode Fiction Competition 2006 and was a finalist in the Gival Press Fiction Competition 2006. He earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Rutgers-Newark in 2011.

Patricia Schultheis has had several essays and nearly two dozen short stories published in national and international literary journals. Her pictorial local history, *Baltimore's Lexington Market,* was published in 2007, and her collection of short stories *titled St. Bart's Way* was a finalist for the 2008 Flannery O'Connor Award and Snake Nation Press awards. She has been a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, has served on the editorial boards of *The Baltimore Review* and *Narrative* and is a member of The Author's Guild, as well as a voting member of The National Book Critics Circle.

Scott Winokur was a Bay Area newspaper reporter and columnist. He holds degrees in English from the Binghamton and Buffalo campuses of the State University of New York. He won The Chariton Review's 2013 Short Fiction Prize and *BOMB Magazine's* 2009 fiction prize. His stories have been published in the 2007 *Robert Olen Butler Prize Anthology* and honored in the 2006 Summer Literary Seminars Competition. His work also has been honored in the Nimrod/Katherine Anne Porter, Bridport, Dana, Mighty River, and Lorian Hemingway competitions. He lives in Berkeley, California.

Sheila Golburgh Johnson has taught English literature in the United States, Australia, and Mexico. A former student of the late British poet laureate Ted Hughes, her poetry has appeared in literary magazines such as *Poetry East, Blue Mesa Review*, *Connecticut Review,* and the *Amherst Review*, as well as in commercial magazines, newspapers, and anthologies. Last year three of her poems appeared in translation in the Russian literary journal, *Den' i Noch (Day and Night*). She has won awards including the Writer's Digest Award in Poetry, the Chester Jones Award, and The Rueben Rose award.

Troy Schoultz is a Wisconsin native and teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley. He has been publishing his poetry in university publications and the small press since 1997. His inspirations are folklore, ghost stories, abandoned places, the number five, and moments of desperation.

Original works of Poetry, Fiction, Creative Non-Fiction
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Send images of artwork to
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All art submissions must be digital.
Photos of 2D or 3D work must be in sharp focus.
Art should be 300 dpi, and approximately 8" x 10".
Your submission should include a short (50 word) bio, medium, dimensions and all contact information.

Art entries may also be mailed on CD to
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Rogers State University
1701 W. Will Rogers Blvd.
Claremore, OK 74017-3252

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