LEO'S PEKING PALACE: STORIES AND A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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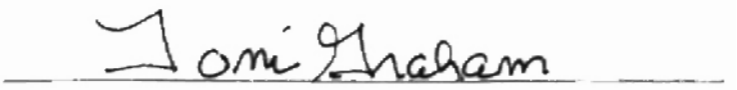

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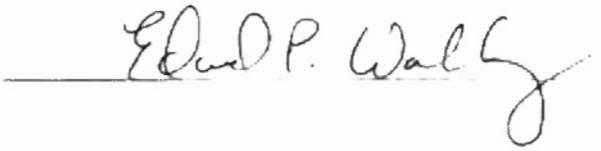

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

All Roads Lead to Oklahoma *or* My Interesting Life in a College Town

Four years ago, I quit my professional stage-managing job in Lansing, Michigan, and moved back to my hometown, Stillwater, Oklahoma. Lansing is no buzzing metropolis – its college town counterpart, East Lansing, is not unlike Stillwater in many ways – but Michigan lacks Oklahoma's sense of downtrodden Western misadventure. I had returned to Stillwater for holidays and even spent a couple of summers there, but moving back was another prospect altogether. I had gone off to seek my fortune and come up empty-handed. My return reminded me I was both fond of and embarrassed by the university town where I grew up, and that paradox has been the source of much of my impulse to write fiction. During the three years of my degree program, I adopted the rhetoric of what I have come to understand as The Prisoner-Artist's Writing on the Jail Cell Wall. Put in other terms, I did what is socially acceptable in a place like Stillwater: I complained. I quickly learned the lingo of the ghost town bar, the tumbleweed campus, the desert of academic despair. Trapped in a forgotten land, the hip prisoner-artist asks himself – and I use the male pronoun quite deliberately in this case because, even though I myself openly complained of Oklahoma's isolation, I still associate hip-prisoner-artist talk with the men who so often speak it – a series of routine questions. *What is this place? What am I doing here? When can I leave?* People don't ask questions like these in Michigan, or at least, they don't ask them with the same odd combination of grandiosity and self-loathing. In Oklahoma, though, these questions are our bread and butter – or perhaps more appropriately – they are our beans and franks.

My writing has changed a good bit over the course of the last four years. I have deepened my understanding of character, narrative point of view, dialogue, setting, and concepts of psychic distance. In other words, I have done what graduate students are supposed to do – I have developed my craft. What I've learned about writing short stories is really too much to effectively address in this short essay, but I do want to speak to some of the fictional elements the stories in this collection have in common. In so many of these stories, the setting itself is a kind of character. Like a country cousin who stows away in the back of someone's car, the Oklahoma setting stuck with me throughout the writing of these stories in ways I cannot exactly explain, but I will certainly try. Also, comedy plays an important – if not always effective – role in many of these stories. This element of my work is in some ways the most elusive: I will admit to the irrational fear that too much talk about my sense of humor will make it go away. In any case, the desire to make readers laugh does inform much of my work, and I associate that impulse with particular successes and particular pitfalls. In addition, I would like to speak to some of the ways in which my political sensibilities show up in these stories. I use the term "show up," here, because even as my work unfortunately can tend toward the didactic at times, the ideal fiction-writing scenario would allow the politically-minded - and most likely feminist – dinner guest to "show up" in my stories without the laborious and art-killing process of official invitation. Finally, talking about my progress as a writer requires a look at some of my literary and theatrical influences. Regardless of whether or not the work of writers past and present manages to cause me immediate anxiety, I am beginning to understand the process by which *all* writers *always* inform what I do when I sit behind the keyboard. In spite of this understanding, I cannot help but cringe when I

wonder just how ridiculous I'll sound when I make the hollow proclamation that my work is influenced by Willa Cather's and Eudora Welty's and – perhaps even more ridiculously – Shakespeare's and Shaw's. I likely will sound somewhat foolish when I make these proclamations, but I'm willing to take that risk. By addressing my theatrical and literary influences, my comic and political impulses, and my unfortunate fascination with the Oklahoma university town where I grew up, I hope to introduce the stories in this collection and begin to make some sense of them as a unified whole.

What is this place?

Jonathan Franzen's 1996 essay, "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels," makes the now infamous assertion that "any given issue of the typical small literary magazine … reliably contains variations on three generic short stories: 'My Interesting Childhood,' 'My Interesting Life in a College Town,' and 'My Interesting Year Abroad'" (46). When I first read that sentence, I immediately felt defensive. And while I've never written the "My Interesting Childhood" tale my childhood wasn't all that interesting – and my actual year abroad consisted of little more than an uneventful six months in London, I certainly have written the "My Interesting Life in a College Town" story – I have written it to death. Of the twelve stories in this collection, nine of them take place in a town not unlike Stillwater, Oklahoma, the home of Oklahoma State University. But these stories are not just tales that happen to take place in an academic environment, they are stories that treat the college town setting as perhaps the primary reason for many of the characters' despair. In "Leo's Peking Palace," the story's narrator says, "If I were writing a paper about the Life and Times of Leo

Chang, it would only take up about a paragraph because all I'd have to say is that I was born in Stillwater, Oklahoma, I'm sometimes a prep cook and sometimes a host, but mostly I'm a waiter at Leo's Peking Palace and no, I'm not the owner." In "The Musical," the narrator fears he'll be "stuck in the Oklahoma State University English Department teaching 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' year after year after year." Even "Plague Year," a story that does not take place in a university setting, depicts a main character who laments, "Oklahoma [is] not exactly known for producing fame and fortune."

This pattern of setting-inspired isolation might simply reflect my own fears about living a life far removed from the opportunity to do what Franzen later calls "rub[bing] shoulders with the teeming masses" (46). I returned to Stillwater and found myself running into old acquaintances who, when greeting me with their inevitable "what are *you* still doing here?" reminded me why I spent most of my adolescence talking about the million and one ways I would blow this town for good. But the setting's role in these stories also represents a very deliberate attempt to undermine just who and what qualifies for candidacy in Franzen's "teeming masses." An unpublished young(ish) writer of short stories takes issue with the ideas of a National Book Award-winning novelist at her own peril, but here I cannot help but find Franzen's remarks insufferably classist: when he explains his decision to "rough it in the free market world," he seems to imply that academic settings provide a greater degree of safety than their non-academic counterparts provide (47). As soon as someone tells me what exactly is "safe" about trying to teach the humanities in a world that increasingly wants to obliterate its humans, I might be convinced of the university's relative sense of harmonious, head-in-the-clouds bliss. The university setting, plagued by corporate initiatives like Strategic Planning – note the

capital letters – and ever-deafening cries for financial accountability, hardly manages to separate itself from the dehumanizing forces of multi-national capitalism. City-dwellers may be "roughing it in the free-market world," but I have some bad news: the rest of us are, too. Franzen's self-described "gut aversion" to the university represents something of a demand for greater access to capitalism's symbolic movers and shakers who, for right now at least, reside in densely populated areas. He resists the idea of writers sequestering themselves in academic settings precisely because university professors, and particularly those university professors without easy access to oceanfront property, lack the prestige we have come to associate with urban existence. The stories in this collection represent a deliberate challenge to the set of beliefs that supposes the absence of traffic lights in states that happen to commit the geographical crime of failing to border an ocean or one of the Great Lakes. There are real people in Oklahoma. That their struggles happen to take place in a university setting does not and should not disqualify them from "real" status. The Oklahoma academic, complete with cowboy boots and briefcase, is every bit a member of the "teeming masses" as her leather-clad urban counterpart. I want to write about people in Oklahoma and I want to write about them with fairness and generosity. Oklahoma, as the state's license plate used to say, is OK.

What am I Doing Here?

My initial answer to the above question is a resounding, "I don't know! What the hell *am* I doing here?" Looking back at the previous section's last paragraph doesn't help. Oklahoma is OK? A professor wearing cowboy boots? While those images strike me as both ironic and just a little bit pathetic, they also provide me with what is perhaps a

better answer to the question of agency in a place like Oklahoma. What do thoughtful, intelligent people *do* when they find themselves stuck in a Starbucks-free wasteland? For me, the answer is fairly simple: they laugh. What else can a member of the teeming masses do when the most exciting part of her day probably involves killing a rattlesnake in her front yard? The comic elements in these stories, at times reminiscent of the cliché about what to do to keep yourself from crying, arise from the Oklahoma setting and from the human fears of the characters themselves. And while I think I've finally managed to polish some of the stories' funnier moments, my writing has come a long way in terms of its ability – or failure – to make use of my natural comic sensibilities. Simply put, I'm a sucker for cheap jokes. When a story's action becomes stale, it is all too tempting for me to take the easy way out and force one of my characters into a stock situation in which she must do something FUNNY such as slam her head into a wall or spit out the remains of her half-eaten hotdog. I might as well have littered every road with banana peels. I'm still guilty of this and other kinds of glibness from time to time, but by and large my work has progressed a good deal since those old, head-slamming, hotdog-chewing days. Though "Honk, Honk, Dead" still makes use of the old hotdog-chewing maneuver, in that case the gaffe serves the additional purpose of demonstrating a particular character's lurking menace. And while I hesitate to point out specifically humorous moments in individual stories – what if the moments I deem absolutely hilarious are to everyone else little more than junior high groaners ? – I like to think the comedy in these stories arises from recognizably human challenges, recognizably human longings, and recognizably human fears. Since living in Oklahoma presents its residents with all three of these –

challenges, longings, and fears – the setting of many of these stories provides ample opportunity for humor.

In these stories, I have attempted to use comedy as way to conduct what Wylie Sypher calls "honest self-inspection" (252). The comic spirit, Sypher reminds us, keeps us on the level by "requiring that we regard ourselves skeptically" (252-253). In "Recital Day," the fourteen-year-old girl tells herself that "her father love[s] the sound of her clarinet, but somehow [can't] stand the way she look[s]." This character's statement, at first glance, might not seem funny at all, and really, it isn't. I don't mean to suggest the simple act of self-deprecation should draw immediate guffaws, rather I mean to explain the process by which I've come to learn that humor very often works best when characters are in pain. By pain, I don't so much mean bee stings or terminal illness; the stronger, more life-like characters in my stories usually suffer from nothing more serious than a particularly intense case of self-doubt. Many of the story's narrators have this trait in common, and perhaps more importantly, they're able to see themselves as ridiculous. The secretary in "SWOT" sometimes makes professional mistakes on purpose. The narrator in "Leo's Peking Palace" suffers from the nagging fear that someone will see the scabs on his legs and deem him unworthy of human company. And, returning to the fourteen-year-old girl in "Recital Day": her insecurities lead her to the conclusion that recital clothes make her "look like an oil slick." In all three cases, I have tried to portray characters who manage to become more than pin-up clowns at a fictional birthday party; these characters are (sometimes) funny, but their comic value, I hope, arises from emotional honesty. Only very recently have I started to understand the necessity of this emotional honesty, and I hope my work will continue to progress as a result

The comic value in these stories arises not only from the Oklahoma setting and from attention to emotional honesty, but also from a conscious effort to understand and accurately portray the political consequences of constructing a woman's narrative within the boundaries of "Oklahoma-ness." Frances Gray's introduction to *Women and Laughter* explains a woman's historical comic value as follows:

> Comedy positions the woman not simply as the object of the male gaze, but of the male laugh – not just to-be-looked-at but to-be-laughed-at – doubly removed from creativity. Hence the relentless stereotyping of women into roles which permit them to be looked at, judged, and laughed at as sexual objects: the dumb blonde, the wisecracking tart, the naïve virgin, the dragon who doesn't realize she is sexually past it. (9)

The women in these stories actively resist Gray's list of stereotypes, or at least I hope they do. While "Plague Year" is a kind of coming-of-age story, the narrator's transition into adulthood does not depend exclusively on her sexuality. In "Plague Year," I wanted to portray a woman whose coming of age more closely paralleled a typically male-gendered narrative for growing up: the story's narrator begins to see herself as something more than someone else's offspring, rises up to meet the challenge of a father figure, and makes a plan for getting out of town. In "Grammar Town," the story's narrator gives her version of Oklahoma womanhood by saying, "and the girls? Sometimes they tried to imitate their male counterparts, but mostly they looked for boyfriends who might intimidate their fathers and then married young. They joined book clubs and took up teaching piano lessons." Just as Shannon wants her entry into the world of adult behavior to "differ from the usual Grammar Town narrative," I have tried to show the actions of

women who very much want to become something more than the objects of the male gaze and fodder for the male joke. In "Leo's Peking Palace," Moira actively resists the stereotype of the "dragon who doesn't realize she is sexually past it." The same is true of Sara and Jeanne in "Winter Carnival." The secretary in "SWOT," hardly a "dumb blonde," defies her designated role by consistently outsmarting her powerful boss. In "Job Switching," the main character demonstrates her awareness of the potential for sexist stereotyping in the business of theater: she knows the world is always ready to see her as "the wisecracking tart." Describing Alice's foray into the world of professional sports, the story's third person narrator says, "The baseball players all looked at her with a cold diffidence that said are you good for a fuck? Or not? Not she wanted to tell them." The entire story is something of a nod to the comic genius of Lucille Ball. In all the stories in this collection, I have tried to create women who are more than just foils or decorations for their male counterparts. I want the women in my stories to actively participate in situations that reveal comedy's potential for increased self-awareness. If I ever learn how to tell a good joke in my stories, I would like that joke to act as a kind of feminist project: women, rather than hearing more and more jokes told at their expense, will themselves construct, perform in, and laugh in their own comic rites.

The women in these stories not only find themselves in comic situations, they also establish and react to their positions within the academic hierarchy. Since so many of the stories take place in settings reminiscent of the mythical "Grammar Town," readers should understand these characters in the context of a woman's conventional role in the often turbulent atmosphere of university politics. When I was a child, dinner table conversations centered around tenure decisions, budget cuts, and other bits of faculty

gossip. I write about university politics because I have spent so much of my life in the company of academics that characters like Sam in "The Musical" and Usher in "Grammar Town" and "Winter Carnival" always manage to invite themselves into the corners of my imagination. Since so many stories that fall into the category "my interesting life in a college town" treat the male characters as default subjects – and "The Musical" is a fairly good example of this phenomenon in action – many of my stories attempt to give voice to the women in academia. And while women certainly enjoy certain successes within academic environments, not enough progress has been made since Adrienne Rich wrote "Toward a Woman-Centered University" in 1974:

> The university is above all a hierarchy. At the top is a small cluster of highly paid and prestigious persons, chiefly men, whose careers entail the services of a very large base of ill-paid or underpaid persons, chiefly women: wives, research assistants, secretaries, teaching assistants, cleaning women, waitresses in the faculty club, lower-echelon administrators, and women students who are used in various ways to gratify the ego. (136)

The secretary in "SWOT" represents a deliberate effort to portray the ways in which women in university towns are so often sentenced to a life of service. The same is true of Carol in "Tragedy and the Common Woman," Eleanor in "Honk, Honk, Dead," and Sara and Jeanne in "Winter Carnival." The second person "you" in "Come to the Tall Grass Prairie" is herself a kind of faculty wife, though her means of resistance depends on what is perhaps an ill-conceived plan to have children. As a writer of fiction, I have a certain responsibility to depict reality as I see it, and though I often would like to depict women in higher status positions, my stories acknowledge and reflect the truth of university

women's continued subordination to male interests. By writing about the experiences of women within the academic community, I seek not to dismantle the existing hierarchy within the university system, but to make real the notion that women deserve more often to be at the top.

When Can I Leave?

Faced with a political atmosphere that is unfriendly at best and dangerous at worst, many of the characters in these stories long for escape. The woman in "Come to the Tall Grass Prairie" never thought she would end up in Oklahoma. The same is true of Shannon in "Grammar Town," Leo in "Leo's Peking Palace," and any number of the collection's other characters. "My Darling Dear," one of the few stories that does not make use of the Oklahoma setting, still makes occasional reference to the narrator's transplant from New England to Tulsa. I titled this essay "All Roads Lead to Oklahoma" for a reason: this collection's characters, even those who find themselves in Chicago or Peterborough, New Hampshire, remember where they came from. For so many of them, the answer to the question "When can I leave?" is a melancholy and resounding "never." But I did not – and do not – want to sentence them to a life of regionally-inspired torture. The women in "Winter Carnival" make the most of their Oklahoma existence. The woman in "Honk, Honk, Dead" is so accustomed to the occasional tornado warning that she handles the threat of a major storm with a good deal of grace. And Leo, dear old Leo, becomes The Sun as he crosses Hall of Fame Avenue on his 21st birthday. Perhaps it goes without saying that I want these characters to be happy so that *I* can be happy, but I sincerely would like to change what the Prisoner-Artist scribbles on the jail cell wall:

instead of counting off the days with desperate and deliberate tally marks, this collection's Prisoner-Artist might draw a buffalo calf, a standard poodle, or an end-of-winter parade.

But the Prisoner-Artist does not conduct business in isolation; he or she listens to voices from the literary past. Just as I always react badly to the inevitable question, "Who is your favorite writer," I dread the discussion of influence because I fear it will expose my ignorance. In any case, it's high time I got over that fear. I read Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* shortly before writing "Winter Carnival," and its influence on the story is notable. Cather's protagonist, Professor Godfrey St. Peter, does his work in a third-floor study that doubles as a sewing room: "During the fifteen years he had been working on his *Spanish Adventurers in North America,* this room had been his center of operations. There had been delightful excursions and digressions ... but the notes and the records and ideas always came back to this room" (16). Fixing on the idea that women should have access to the traditionally male center of intellectual endeavors, I decided St. Peter's sewing room would become Usher's old office, and Sara and Jeanne would spend part of Winter Carnival in the strange, otherworldly atmosphere of the unheated attic. And while Cather divides her novel into three separate "books," the choice of separate narrative points of view parallels the different narrative voices in my collection. Her choice of subject matter, too, influenced my decision to make an attempt at unifying my collection by highlighting the stories' common setting. So many writers write about academia at some point in their careers; as an aspiring writer of fiction, I was sort of hoping I never would. I had grand visions of myself sitting in front of the computer screen busily thinking of *more original* subject matter. But I was raised in an

academic environment. That academic environment happens to be the very same one where I spend much of my time today. I think about professors, I think about the professors' houses, and just as faculty members populate Cather's novel, my fiction enjoys their presence as well. For a long time I fixed on an idea of a story called "The Parade of Lost Scholars," a story I never actually wrote. In my head, the professors, tormented by their Oklahoma existence, started a rebellion. They put on their caps and gowns, marched down the highway, and headed toward greener pastures. They carried pitchforks and dictionaries. Another version of the parade ended up in the final paragraphs of "Winter Carnival," but my vision of rebellion remains intact in this collection.

The writing of "Recital Day," influenced by my reading of Eudora Welty's "June Recital," taught me a good deal about manipulating narrative point of view. Accordingly, my "Miss Christie" is in some ways a tribute to Welty's "Miss Eckhart" and to Welty herself. Compare the following passage from Welty's "June Recital" to another passage I'll quote from my own story:

> In the studio decorated like the inside of a candy box, with "material" scalloping the mantel shelf and doilies placed under every movable object, now thus made immovable, with streamers of white ribbons and nosegays of pink and white Maman Cochet roses and the last MacLain sweetpeas dividing and re-dividing the room, it was as hot as fire. No matter that this was the first night of June; no electric fans were to whir around while music played. The metronome, ceremoniously closed, stood on the piano like a vase. There was no piece of music anywhere in sight. (Welty 63)

How I wish I could write like that. Here's my recital:

> Miss Christie is not the kind of woman who would host a recital without refreshments. In fact she's brought three punch bowls – two cut crystal glass and one pewter. She lights the candelabra and spreads rose petals on the tablecloth. Earlier she polished the floors and set up ten rows of wooden folding chairs. In each chair she placed a velvet cushion and on each cushion she placed a program; she did the calligraphy herself.

This is *precisely* why I don't like to talk about literary influence. Comparing the passage from my story to the passage from "June Recital," reveals my embarrassment, my horror, – I'll say it – my *anxiety* – about never measuring up to Welty's wonderful prose. But the influence is there - not only in Welty's choice of subject matter, but in the carefully constructed images of the piano teacher's studio.

Creating images – using rich, descriptive language to create a backdrop for a story's action – remains one of my weaknesses as a writer. My theatrical background has something to do with that weakness. For three years, I spent virtually every evening of my life behind the scenes at the performances of various plays. I mentioned Shakespeare and Shaw in this essay's introduction because I stage managed more of their plays than anyone else's, but the overall theatrical influence is one that has both helped and hindered my progress as a fiction writer. When a stagehand work behind the scenes of a play, she doesn't watch the play's action. Rather, she listens. Listening to so many plays has given me a fairly decent ear for dramatic dialogue and a good, working knowledge of how writers construct narratives. I learned the old theatrical maxim about planting seeds: if a someone has a gun in the first act, it had better go off in the second. Listening to

plays – and watching rehearsals – gave me a good, basic understanding of how literary and dramatic characters can talk and walk. The stage manager's book is full of flat, informational sentences like "Romeo crosses stage left, picks up dagger," or, in the language I used to speak: "R X SL, dag." My working knowledge of how various characters behave in dramatic situations helped my fiction writing, but it also left me with a lot of holes that needed filling in. I could write a crisp conversation, but I couldn't adequately describe what the characters were doing while they were having that conversation. Even more difficult was figuring out how to describe what various characters were *thinking* while engaged in their terribly witty conversations. I'm still working on controlling those aspects of narrative design unique to fiction and separate from drama, but I remain grateful for my short-lived life in the theater.

When Can I Leave This Essay?

Welty's 1983 memoir *One Writer's Beginnings*, concludes with the following short paragraph: "As you have seen, I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within" (114). Like Welty, I want to be daring in the presence of a sheltered life. And while much of my sheltered life happens to have taken place in an Oklahoma setting, I want to allow that setting to reveal characters who actively participate in whatever part of our culture we deem "mainstream," rather than forever hiding in the neglected shadows of "regional" literature. I want the kind of daring that does not blink in the face of patriarchal ideas about "women's concerns." I want the kind of daring that will lead me to sit in front of my computer every day and acknowledge that yes, I have something important to say. I

hope the writing of the stories in this collection made some tentative strides in that direction.

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Leo's Peking Palace

People always ask me if I'm the owner, but I'm not. I say Hello, welcome to Leo's Peking Palace. My name is Leo. Would you like smoking or non? The men laugh and grab their wives around their waists and say, Tell us Leo, how long ya been in business? Or sometimes they say, Leo, huh? You mean the *real* Leo? The Big Enchilada? Or should I say the Big Egg roll, ya know what I'm sayin'?

I shrug, maintain my usual pleasant and welcoming expression, and then pretend I don't understand English. That strategy seems to work. But then the wives start to feel sorry for me and say, Look Ronald, the poor boy doesn't understand English. I just cock my head to one side and squint a little; then I lead them to their tables. I feel better unless they start speaking to me in Spanish. This happens more often than you might think.

The husbands say, Hola el chico. Te gusta Oklahoma? Then they take the toothpicks out of their mouths and put their cowboy hats in their laps. Not everyone wears a cowboy hat in Oklahoma, but more people do than you might think. The women look embarrassed while they put their plastic tennis visors in their purses.

The wives settle into their chairs and quietly say, Come on now, Ronald, the boy is clearly a Pacific Islander.

Come on yourself, Lucinda, the husband says. Everybody knows Spanish. I learned it in the eighth grade. I mean, clearly the kid's Chinese. Leo's *Peking* Palace, duh.

Well, then, Lucinda says, They really should call it Leo's *Beijing* Palace then, shouldn't they? Just think of all the young freedom fighters being slaughtered in Tianamen Square. What about you, Leo, do you have high hopes for democracy?

I have high hopes for a big tip. I have high hopes for getting out of here on time so I can get to the computer center. I have high hopes for leftover sesame chicken in the kitchen.

I say, Yes, I have high hopes for democracy.

Lucinda says, Splendid, now bring us some appetizers.

I bring them pot stickers and egg rolls and fried mushrooms. They laugh and eat while I keep running around and sweating.

The lunch shift is a little easier. The customers' bosses want them back at their desks at 1:00, so people don't try too much chitchat. I always say, Your rice will be ready at precisely 12:15. They like it when I say that. I'm not sure why they like it, but they do. Something to do with control. But if I could have control over one thing in my life, I would not choose rice. I would choose something important like bicycle tires or vitamin supplements. My bicycle tires are a consistent problem in my life. They're always losing air, so I always find myself falling down in the middle of Hall of Fame Avenue on my way back to the dorms. Sometimes I think the Oklahoma State University ballerinas are responsible for this accident. While they point their toes all around the back parking lot of the restaurant, they secretly make fun of me and then let out all the air from

my tires while I'm inside in an unsuccessful attempt to chop frozen vegetables. Why they pick on my bicycle I'll never know. In any case, I end up getting my shoelaces caught up in the chain, falling down in the middle of the crosswalk, and bleeding from both elbows and both knees.

I'm a big bloody mess and I have to go home and change my clothes before I can even think about getting to the computer center, and that puts me at least a half-hour behind, so all the computers by the window are taken by the time I get there, and I can't think of anything even remotely interesting to say about the United States Congress, which is pretty dumb in the first place because how are you supposed to write a 15-20 page paper about the United States Congress when some people spend their whole lives writing volumes and volumes about the United States Congress, and here I am trying to write 15-20 pages on something so broad I might as well be writing 15-20 pages about Religions of the Western world or Religions of the Eastern world or Milton or Shakespeare or the life and times of Leo Chang, but if I were writing a paper about the Life and Times of Leo Chang, it would only take up about a paragraph because all I'd have to say is that I was born in Stillwater, Oklahoma, I'm sometimes a prep cook and sometimes a host, but mostly I'm a waiter at Leo's Peking Palace and no, I'm not the owner. And frankly I'm afraid I might end up spending the rest of my life doing what I've always done – serving hot plates of warmed-over food to people who don't even appreciate me.

Steven says, Do you have ambitions in poultry? Because poultry's big business. I don't pretend I can't speak English around Steven because Steven knows I have spoken English my whole life. We grew up on the same block. Our houses had the same

carefully landscaped yards. When we were seven years old, Steven taught me how to ride my bicycle without training wheels, so I gave him a Super-Stars U.S. Presidential Trading Card. He didn't like it much. It's all right though; it was only Franklin Pierce.

Steven majors in HRAD. That's what they call it – H-rad. It stands for Hotel and Restaurant Administration. He's about to go into the walk-in for a bucket of lettuce one day when he says, Hey Leo, all the H-rad guys are going out to Murphy's for tequila shots. Tell Amy I'm at the library would ya? Amy is Steven's girlfriend. She majors in FRCD – Family Relations and Child Development.

I finish my chopping and say, Okay Steven, I'll tell Amy you're at the library, but she might not believe me.

Steven says, You're a real pal, Leo, a true dude. This will be the last time, I promise. He takes off his greasy apron and dashes out the back door. I spy on him to see if he is the one letting the air out of my bicycle tires, but he just gets in his truck and leaves in a hurry.

I go back to Ronald and Lucinda – the tennis visor woman and her Spanish-speaking husband. Moira says Spanish is the third most beautiful language in the world, right behind French and Portuguese. I say, What about Mandarin, and she says, A close fourth, Tiger, a very close fourth. I say, Here's your rice and she says, Brilliant, Tiger, simply superb.

I ask Ronald if he's interested in the buffet. Ronald says, As always, my boy, you know me. I don't really know him; he's just saying that. He gets up to grab his buffet plate, looks at my arms and says, Check out those muscles, Lucinda, looks like we got ourselves a wrassler for a waiter. I say, Ha ha, I quit wrestling three years ago. He grabs

my arm and squeezes it. I want to tell him not to squeeze my arm, but I'm still thinking about that big tip, so I don't say that, I just smile and say, Right this way to the buffet. Ronald says, What's your future, boy? I tell him I'm about to graduate and get a degree in political science and he says, Lower those taxes, big guy, lower those taxes, and I say I'll see what I can do.

I think I want to leave. I think about leaving when I bring out pots of flaming noodles to university women and their husbands. I would like to go back to China, which is dumb because I've never actually been there in the first place. I'd like to see the sun rise in China and know that everyone in Oklahoma was still asleep, still unaware of the heat in the cloudless morning sky. When they wake up and see the outline of the telephone poles against the long stretch of the horizon, they will think of their wonderful waiter Leo and wish he never decided to pack up and move to China. They will be sorry. Until then, I simply will look at the unwavering Oklahoma sun and know it's just the beginning of a new day or the end of an old one. When the sun is highest in the sky, I'm always busy in the kitchen, listening to Stillwater's Hottest Country Hits, or else I'm standing at the salad bar, making sure the ice isn't melting too quickly.

I work the dinner shift whenever I can because the tips are bigger and because Moira comes in almost every night with the college ballerinas. Steven calls them his sweet honeys and tells me, Go chop, Leo, every time they come in with their tote bags and wispy bits of hair. I want to say, You go chop, Steven, but instead I just do what he tells me to do because if I don't he won't cover for me when I leave early to go write my special fortune cookie messages, and since I can't think of anything to say about the United States Congress, I usually spend about an hour at the library researching good

potential aphorisms, and then I ride over to the computer center to type out the messages. I write eight special messages for Moira every week, and it really takes a lot of work, if you want to know the truth. The usual samplings of Chinese Wisdom simply won't do for Moira because she's been to China and Tibet with her ex-husband, and she even met the Dalai Lama and once she told me she saw a kangaroo in Australia, which is a lot more than I can say for myself because I've never been anywhere except for the Student Government Association Convention in Dallas, and that was way back in high school and not very exciting at all except for the bungee jumping, but I was too scared to try bungee jumping so Steven called me a pussy even though he was too scared to do it himself.

No one in my family has been to China, which is pretty stupid because we're supposed to be Chinese. Moira says, Surely your parents have some recollection of the old country, Tiger, but I tell her my mother was born in Idaho and my father was born here in Oklahoma and both sets of grandparents are Chinese, but they died before I was born. She says, Such a shame, Tiger, such a loss, and then she tells me about the time she went to Senegal in 1974 and that Senegal is nothing like China and that she taught some children in Senegal how to dance, even though they didn't have the proper footwear – she says it like that: proper footwear – and no music at all except for drums. I just smile and admire her cheekbones, because really, they're like no other cheekbones I've ever seen. Her hair is silver, and I can tell she has never tried to dye it, and she wears it in a knot on the back of her head. She says, This knot protects my brain cells, Tiger. I ask her why she needs to protect her brain cells, and she says she lost a whole lot of brain cells in the sixties, and I give that one a big laugh, like I lost a whole bunch of brain cells in the

sixties, too, even though I wasn't even around in the sixties, but there's no need to remind her of that.

I once wrote her a special fortune cookie message that said, Your wardrobe is admired by many. Saying, Your wardrobe is admired by many, was a little misleading because I really just meant me, but I couldn't very well write her a fortune cookie message that said, Your wardrobe is admired by Leo. She ate the cookie with her usual dainty bites, unfolded the message, read it aloud, and said, I know Tiger, I know.

On Saturday nights I write two special fortune cookie messages for her, just in case she's extra hungry after double rehearsal day on Sunday. She doesn't do anything in rehearsal except sit there and sometimes pace back and forth in front of the giant mirror and say, One two three four, One two three four, but sometimes she works up a sweat all the same. I love the look of her sweat. Steven tells me I will never get a date if I keep calling it sweat instead of perspiration. Steven says women don't sweat, they perspire, and he knows because his girlfriend, Amy, buys that *Cosmopolitan* Magazine and sometimes he takes a look at it while he's on the john. But I know Moira sweats. I know she sweats plenty. But honestly, the word perspire is too clinical and the word sweat sounds too much like she's a tennis pro or a bicyclist in the Tour de France. She glows. Is that all right, she glows? I think I'll write her a special fortune cookie message that says, You Glow with the Water Droplets of Wisdom. No, that doesn't work at all. It sounds like I'm getting all wrapped up in myself with the W's. I have made that mistake plenty of times before and it is no fun.

The thing is, I love her. I can't let Steven know I love her because he would say, That old bag, Leo, you need to get yourself some of the sweet honey. Steven says to play

it cool and only say I love you when you need to, but I would gladly tell Moira I love her if I didn't think she would laugh in my face and say, How pleasant, Tiger, how charming. Steven says the only way a Chinese boy can get a date around here is if he has those sophisticated European-style eyeglasses and Doc Marten shoes. I have neither. But I want to tell Moira how I feel, and the only thing I can think of is the fortune cookie messages, and those don't seem to work out very well most of the time. Moira reads them aloud to the ballerinas, and sometimes she laughs in all the right places, but most of the time she just sighs and blots the corners of her pink lips with her napkin and pays for the meal with her American Express Gold Card and then I bring mints. When I take the gold card up to the register, I sometimes cup the treasure in the palm of my hand and bring it close to my nose. Even though it's just a piece of plastic, it smells like the scent of her neck when I lean down over the table to uncover a bowl of rice. Her neck and her American Express Gold Card both smell like fresh grape juice and sliced cucumbers, and if I could smell that smell for the rest of my life, I would never need to lift weights again.

I want her to love me, too. I want my fortune cookie messages to be so dynamic and original that she might say, Well, Tiger, maybe we should go to Paris this weekend and get married. One evening, her bony fingers unfold my latest creation, and she tells the ballerinas, Always eat the cookie before reading the portentous news. The ballerinas nod in unison and move their wispy bits of hair out of their eyes. I know they're hatching secret plots to let the air out of my bicycle tires. But they look at Moira intently, because they love her, too. No one wants to read her fortune cookie message before Moira reads hers.

Discontent will be remembered as happiness, she reads from the crinkled piece of paper, and I can hear her inhale. The corners of her pink mouth turn up ever so slightly, and I know I've done my job. She folds her hands in her lap and says, A good meal, Tiger, a fine evening. Better than even the best sesame chicken, my fortune makes her day.

After Moira has paid the bill and the ballerinas prance into the restroom, I say Moira, I'm sorry to bother you, but I think some of your ballerinas might know something about my bicycle tires.

She says, What ever do you mean, Tiger?

I say, I don't mean to accuse, really I don't. It's just that my bicycle tires are full when I get here and flat when I leave. I think maybe the ballerinas don't like me.

Moira picks up her car keys and says, Don't be ridiculous, Leo, they don't even know you. She grabs her tote bag before I have a chance to say anything else and then she's out the door as fast as you please. She is angry and sad, and it's my fault.

When Moira is happy, I feel happy too. Steven says I should have more ambition. I know this only because his girlfriend Amy comes in almost every night and says so. I want to say, What do you know about me or my ambition, but I don't. Instead I say, Steven went to Murphy's with the H-rad guys, in case you wanted to know. Can I interest you in a bowl of won-ton soup? That seems to do the trick because Amy says, Bring the soup, and then calls someone on her cell phone and seems to forget about me and my ambition. I bring her the soup, and she says, Hold on, into her cell phone and then she looks up at me and says, Steven says you shouldn't wear short pants, Leo. It's unprofessional.

I want to ask Moira if she thinks it's unprofessional to wear short pants. Most of the ballerinas wear wrap-around skirts or leotards. Sometimes, Moira comes in wearing a flowing golden cape with a picture of the sun on the back. Amy says Moira is playing The Sun in a super new ballet in Tulsa. The super new ballet is called *The Milky Way*. Amy says Moira is too old to play The Sun and everyone knows it. Amy says Moira was an inspired dancer once, but her glory days are over. I myself have never had any glory days to begin with, so I don't know when my glory days will be over. I want to tell Moira her glory days are here and now and today, but she seems so grouchy lately I don't think she'll believe me. Every time I see her, she's rubbing her ankles and closing her eyes.

Moira is the only one to ever wear a flowing cape at Leo's Peking Palace. I am the only one to wear short pants. Every night I tell her, I like your cape Moira. I admire your wardrobe a great deal. I tell her I sometimes imagine myself in a long, flowing cape, riding my bicycle across Hall of Fame Avenue just after having taken my vitamin supplements. There's not a car in sight. Everyone has heard it's going to be Me Me Me, riding with thick tires and smooth knees. They gather on the curbside – children perch on their fathers' shoulders – they point at me and marvel. There's Leo, they whisper. They don't dare raise their voices because they don't want to disturb my concentration. There's Leo, and no, he's not the owner of Leo's Peking Palace, he's just a waiter and occasional prep cook. But look at that boy ride.

I don't tell her this part, but I want Moira to be among the admiring masses. I want her to wear a long flowing cape that matches mine exactly, only hers is embroidered with her initials and mine is embroidered with my initials. All of it golden.

One night Moira says, Leo, tell me for whom I should vote in the upcoming gubernatorial election.

I'm stumped. I want to say something witty and interesting and memorable, but all I can say is, Would you like some more water?

She says, No, no Tiger. We require your political insight.

I want to tell her I don't have any political insight. I want to tell her I've been trying for weeks now to write a 15-20 page paper about the United States Congress. I want to tell her these things, but I cannot. I can only say, Democrats are good. She likes this and I feel better.

Steven is trying to get me to ask the brown-haired ballerina on a date. He says she probably has sweet sauce between her legs, but that only serves to remind me the sweet 'n' sour sauce is running low on the buffet. I look at my watch and realize I haven't eaten in twelve hours, but it's OK because I remembered to take my vitamin supplements. Steven tells me to stop spending so much time lifting weights and writing fortune cookie messages and to start paying attention to my budding acne. He says it like that too – Budding Acne. I say, We should really get some low fat sweet 'n' sour sauce for the buffet, and he says, Go get yourself some Clearasil, Leo, you're driving away all the customers. I want to tell him the only reason I have pimples is because I'm always running around the restaurant trying to keep up with all the tables, so I sweat a lot and sweat isn't good for my skin.

I say, The customers like me, Steven, the customers like me plenty. He says, Only that old bag, the ballet teacher, and I would like to say she's not an old bag, she's

beautiful and graceful and she loves me and you would know these things if you had any taste at all, but I don't say that, I just say, Okay Steven, okay.

Steven asks the owners to close the restaurant on a Sunday night to celebrate my 21st birthday. He says it's about time I became a man and asks me if I have any hairs on my chest or just acne. I say, Leave me alone, Steven, but he says, That's no way to talk to your only friend who is throwing you a party to celebrate your 21st birthday. He says, You better not embarrass me in front of the hot ballerinas by drinking Hawaiian Punch instead of beer. I would like to say, How do you know the hot ballerinas don't like Hawaiian Punch? Instead, I say, Beer is fine, Steven, beer is good. I mark my calendar so that I remember to take extra vitamin supplements on the morning of my birthday party because, really, I have a feeling I'm going to need them.

Steven says to find myself a suitable date. Of course I want to invite Moira, but I know she would just laugh in my face and say, How pleasant, Tiger, how charming. And then she would bring her sophisticated gray-haired gentleman friend who is just flying in from London. To tell the truth, I don't even know if Moira has a sophisticated gray-haired gentleman friend who is flying in from London, but I don't know that she doesn't have one, either. I do know Steven would make fun of me for the rest of my life if he heard me asking Moira out on a date. And I do know that I might have a heart attack if I allowed myself to think about everyone staring at me with Moira on my arm. And I do know that it's just not proper for a 21-year-old man to bring a 54-year-old woman to a birthday party, especially his own birthday party, especially in Oklahoma. Maybe they let you get away with that kind of thing in Idaho or China or Senegal, but not here.

Instead of asking her to come to my birthday party, I tell Moira I have found the right candidate for the gubernatorial race. Moira says, Fine Leo, that's fine and pokes at the vegetables with her fork. She hasn't been talking to me much lately. I think her silence must have something to do with the fortune cookie messages – she probably doesn't find them witty anymore. She doesn't tell jokes to the ballerinas anymore, either; she mostly just sits there and rubs her ankles while they talk to one another about their favorite TV shows. Is her bad mood my fault? Does she grow less and less fond of me with each passing day? She stops asking me for details about the gubernatorial race even though I've gone to the library and researched all the candidates and categorized them onto an Excel spreadsheet. Moira just says, These vegetables are overcooked, Leo. I go back to the kitchen. I know I haven't done my job.

On the night of my birthday party, I pick out a pair of extra-long black socks from the top drawer of my dresser. I decide Steven's right about short pants being unprofessional, but it's about a hundred degrees outside and long pants make my legs sweaty and itchy. I wear the extra long, black socks with my khaki shorts – this way I won't burn up, but people still don't have to look at my scabby knees and pimply legs. I hop on my bike and ride to Leo's. The sun is going down. I'm excited because it's about to be my birthday party.

Steven has gone to a lot of trouble to make my party a nice one. In the corner by the fish tank, I see a keg of beer and a flaming trashcan. I say, Steven, are you sure it's all right to have a flaming trashcan, and he says, Chill out, Leo, it adds atmosphere. And, he's right; it does add atmosphere. The whole place looks like a candlelight dinner just

for me. The salad bar looks so dark and mysterious I forget about my pimples and take a moment to feel my biceps. They feel good, I decide. I'm strong and wise and dynamic.

The brown-haired ballerina comes up to me and says she knows Steven's girlfriend, Amy. I say, Great, I know her too. She takes a sip from her beer and says, What are you doing after graduation, and I say, Working here, and she says, Oh, that sounds like a drag. I can tell she doesn't like me. I'm going to spend the rest of my life working at Leo's Peking Palace, listening to people say, Are you the owner, big guy? And I will always say, No, because I will never be the owner, and women will always look at me and think, Just a waiter, just a waiter, and Steven will say, You should have gone for your MBA, Leo, just think of that giant inflatable cash vault they had outside the business building the other day. But I don't want to go for my MBA. I feel my biceps and think of my next fortune cookie message to Moira. I think the fortune will say something like Your Strength is Your Only Companion.

Steven and Amy bring out a big cake with a picture of Matt Damon on it. Steven says Matt Damon is Amy's favorite actor and that's why they chose that particular cake I want say Matt Damon is not *my* favorite actor, but I just pretend not to notice.

Everybody sings Happy Birthday to You, Happy Birthday to You, but when they get to the part about Happy Birthday Dear ... only Steven and Amy say Leeeeeooo, and all the ballerinas sing Tigerrrrr because they always hear Moira call me that, and everyone else just hums, because really they don't know my name at all, they're just here for the free beer.

My knees are starting to itch underneath my tall black socks. I step outside to the back parking lot so I can scratch without anyone seeing scabs or pimples. Just as I'm

about to roll down my socks, I see Moira pull up in her long silver car. When she gets out, she says, Oh Happy Birthday, dear Tiger, and she takes off her cape. She's wearing a yellow leotard underneath, and I pull my socks up as high as they will go. She says, Steven and Amy told me about the party, but I had a rehearsal, you see. Not for a ballet I'm teaching, you see, but for a ballet in which I am performing. I want to say, Oh Moira, I'm so glad you're here to celebrate my birthday, and for once I actually say what I want to say – I say, Oh Moira, I'm so glad you're here to celebrate my birthday and she says I wouldn't miss it, Tiger. She ties the cape around my neck and says, I want you to wear this on your ride home tonight, Leo, and I say, But I couldn't, and she says, But you can. And then she draws me in very close to her and says, I know I haven't been myself lately. I want to say, Why – so I say it – I say Why – and she tells me she's been feeling all wrong because she can't dance the way that she used to.

I'm sorry, I say.

She puts her hand on the side of my head and says, I'm sorry too.

She kisses me softly on the cheek and says, I have one more thing to tell you, and she draws me in even closer and wraps her golden cape around my shoulders. She says, Your bicycle tires, Leo – no one lets the air out of them. They simply deflate with time and with age. I say, I understand, Moira, and she says, Good boy, I know you do.

We go inside and share a piece of Matt Damon's ear. I drink six glasses of Hawaiian punch and Steven says, Nice cape, Leo. He drinks beer and pinches Amy's arm. Amy says, Cut it out, asshole, and Steven turns up the stereo when it gets to his favorite song. After we all jump up and down and dance, Moira says, I must retire, Tiger. I must depart. She hugs Steven and hugs Amy and then hugs me last. After she's gone,

someone breaks a tower of champagne glasses in a booth by the window. The party's still going strong, but I slip out into the back parking lot and take off my shoes and roll down my socks. I scratch my knees and hop onto my bike. Moira's cape flies behind me as I ride to the computer center with my shoes balanced on my handlebars. I breeze across the crosswalk. For my birthday, I am The Sun, my rays shining on the flattest part of the earth.

Plague Year

When the dinner party was over, Alice helped clean up the dead goat in her boss' backyard. She used a shovel. Her boss, a hefty man of 65, wore surgical gloves and a mask.

"Disease," he said. "You never know."

Alice hiked up her skirt and positioned the shovel underneath the goat's head.

She said, "Ready?"

"Ready," her boss said, but he wasn't. He reached down for the hind legs, but the goat was slippery from mud and rain. He angled for a good grip. "You don't look ready," he said, looking up at Alice. "Why aren't you ready?"

Alice didn't say anything. She knew it was better not to.

"Give me that shovel," he said. "Hold that trash bag open!"

Alice did as she was told. Her boss balanced the goat against his shoulder and heaved. The trash bag wasn't quite big enough, so he did a strange, desperate dance, folding the goat's limbs as if they were legs on a card table. He grunted when the limbs sprung open, over and over again.

"Go get another trash bag!" he barked. Alice went up the hill to the sliding glass door.

Most of the other party guests had long gone home, but Alice had lingered, dumping out ashtrays and cleaning up stray toothpicks wrapped in purple napkins. Her boss was lonely. He needed her help. The goat, though, was not her fault. She had sipped her share of wine, sure, but she liked that goat, even loved it a little. Oh, well, there would be other occasions, other dead goats. Jupiter had a serious problem with livestock these days. For the past year and a half, every full moon would bring another dinner party, along with another unexpected illness or death. Last month, a sheep died during dessert. Alice didn't believe in astrology, but her boss, everyone knew, was plagued by bad luck.

Nearing retirement, Jupiter usually spent more time on his tractor than in the green room, but he still directed one show a year – usually the Shakespeare. He liked the fake blood. In rehearsals, he kept a thermos full of scotch at his feet, but he drank from it only during tech week. Alice, a college dropout, was his assistant and occasional performer. When he couldn't find a part for her, she insisted on helping anyway, staying late to paint scenery or arriving early to put the costumes in the dryer. Sometimes she felt like she could change the course of Jupiter's tragic life. Jupiter could have been on Broadway or had his own late night variety show. His life could have mattered. Instead, he ran this two-bit professional theater in the middle of Oklahoma farm country. And while Alice thought she might move on to bigger and better theatrical prospects, Jupiter had come to rely on her. Lately she felt guilty for scheduling so many out of town

auditions. She wanted to make a name for herself, though, and, country and western musicians aside, Oklahoma was not exactly known for producing fame and fortune.

"I'm not good with women," Jupiter said to her during a break from rehearsal.

Alice, who was perched on top of an A-frame ladder focussing a lighting instrument, yelled down to him. "I know," she said. "Everyone knows."

"Come down from there," he said. "We need to get started."

Jupiter was always in a hurry. Although the actors' union required them to take a certain number of breaks, Jupiter would rehearse all night if he thought he could. Alice admired this about him.

She came down from the ladder. Each rickety step closer to the ground – and closer to Jupiter – made her feel simultaneously relieved and upset. She was glad to be on solid ground again, but she didn't want to talk with Jupiter about his flaws. She didn't want to tell him women mostly feared him, and even the ones who didn't fear him found him ridiculous. Just two weeks prior, the three witches from *Macbeth* had slashed his tires in the parking lot.

"They don't like me," he said. "I remind them of their fathers."

Alice stepped all the way off the ladder and said, "You don't remind me of my father." This wasn't exactly true. Both Jupiter and her father had the same receding hair line, the same large, swinging arms, the same need for attention.

"Your father is dead," Jupiter said.

"When he was alive, I mean," Alice said. "He was nothing like you. He was a high school guidance counselor."

"They don't respect me." Jupiter sat down in front row. He crossed his legs and held them close to his chest.

"Why do you think that is?" Alice struggled to close the ladder before it toppled over into the aisle. "How do they make you feel?"

"Now you're making fun of me."

"A little," Alice said. "You can be sort of brusque sometimes, but people should expect that from a director."

Alice often tried to cheer him up. She didn't know how she'd become his confidante, but she felt responsible for his well being. Actors – and especially actresses – were always quitting rehearsals in a huff. Jupiter yelled too much. He scared them.

"I've made a lot of enemies," he said. "I'm no longer charming."

Alice leaned the ladder against the fire exit door. "*No longer* charming?"

"I was charming once," he said. "I could charm the ladies."

"Yeah," Alice said. "I've heard the stories."

"They still tell those stories?"

"Sometimes," she said. "But more often they talk about Ryan." Ryan was Jupiter's son from a long-ago marriage. Jupiter once tried to send Alice on a romantic date with Ryan, but Alice respectfully declined. She preferred her men bookish and depressed. Besides, she didn't have time for boyfriends.

The actors began to file in from the green room, a cloud of cigarette smoke trailing behind them. Alice made a new pot of coffee at the table by the fire exit.

"Don't forget, Alice," Jupiter said. "Homecoming dinner tonight. Be early."

Great, she thought. More dead animals.

"Let's get started," Alice said. "Top of the second act."

* * *

Back at her apartment, Alice rearranged the pillows on her Craftmatic Adjustable Bed. Bought for a failed production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the expensive monstrosity lay dormant in the theater's scenery storage warehouse. Alice, taking advantage of one of her job's few perks, brought the bed home with her one night after the show closed. The bulky frame wouldn't fit through the doorway to her bedroom, though, so she had to leave it parked in the living room. She'd been sleeping there only for a week or so, and she wasn't quite used to the noise from the highway in front of her apartment complex. Just like in the commercials, she adjusted the controls so she could watch television and then re-positioned it again when she wanted to go to sleep. Sitting at the foot of the bed, she realized the perfect adjustment would allow her to lean over and sprinkle flakes of kelp into her fish tank. Maybe, she thought, she would get an extension cord for the refrigerator and pull it closer to her fortress of relaxation. Maybe she would spend days in the bed -- or weeks. Jupiter would miss her too much, though. A day off was out of the question. In a hurry, she pulled her red hair into a ponytail and put on a little lipstick. She adjusted the bed so it was flat, waved a quick goodbye to her fish tank, and took her house keys from the hook by the front door. She walked the three miles to Jupiter's farm.

Her quick pace allowed her to arrive early, just as Jupiter had told her to do. These were big occasions -- the place was always decked out with a million Chinese

lanterns, glimmering flatware, and a great punch bowl with silver etching around the edge. But this party was even bigger. Jupiter's son, Ryan was coming home to celebrate the first anniversary of his job playing a teenager on a popular daytime soap opera.

"He's making good money, you know," Jupiter said, pressing garlic. "The best."

"Really great," Alice said. "Terrific."

Alice had been working for Jupiter's third rate theatre most of her adult life. And while her official title was Director of Education, she had spent part of the last year touring Oklahoma's largest elementary schools, performing her one-woman musical extravaganza, *Shakespeare Rocks!* in cafeterias smelling of old green beans and in cavernous gymnasiums with large knotted ropes hanging from the ceilings. Unlike Ryan, she wasn't making good money.

Jupiter said, "I mean, they're talking about putting him on the cover of *Teen* Magazine."

Ryan was Alice's age – 27 – but he looked so young he could play the mayor of Munchkinland in *The Wizard of Oz*. That same year, Alice reluctantly agreed to play Aunt Em. Jupiter made a big point of emphasizing the fact that Ryan was playing the mayor, the *mayor* of Munchkinland, when a reporter from the local newspaper came for an interview. Still short enough to play Puck or Peter Pan, Ryan spent a lot of time applying moisturizer to the deep wrinkles around his mouth. The wrinkles, along with the tiny wisps of gray hair that sprang up around his temples, were the only things keeping him from getting ID'd when he bought cigarettes at the convenience store next door to the theatre's rehearsal space. The soap opera people spruced him up with dyes and creams, but away from his makeup artist, Ryan sagged.

"*Teen* Magazine, eh?" Alice said. She hung her jacket on a set of antlers by the door. "Big stuff."

"I know," Jupiter said. "Don't hang your jacket there. I don't allow jackets there. Put it in the study."

Alice took down her jacket and walked past Jupiter and his garlic through the doorway to the living room. No one else had arrived yet, but a stack of coasters sat waiting on the back of the baby grand. On the coffee table, Alice saw a greeting card with a photo on the front of two goats wearing party hats. *Don't Let 'em Get Your Goat,* the card said on the inside. *Your Success is Guaranteed.* Alice saw that Jupiter had been the only one to sign so far, but a stack of ballpoint pens awaited the masses. *You got it son,* Jupiter had scrawled. *But you'll never score the biggest buck.* Alice had known Jupiter and Ryan for what seemed like forever, but she never figured out why they dressed in fluorescent orange vests every fall, taking ham sandwiches and jugs of hot chocolate into the thin Oklahoma woods. The autumn hunting ritual was something like a family secret, but Alice wasn't officially part of their family. She didn't pretend to understand.

Jupiter pressed more garlic and Alice walked through a long hallway-gallery of framed playbills, past Jupiter's shiny gun collection, and into the study. Formerly Ryan's bedroom, the study still smelled like a teenage boy – a faint combination of aftershave and sweat. Whenever the theatre lent out her apartment to out-of-town actors, Alice stayed in this room. Since Jupiter's wife had long ago wised up and become an investment banker in New York, Jupiter and Alice assembled some sense of a household. Alice pretended she was Jupiter's daughter, and Jupiter, happily making omelets every

morning, would pretend to be Alice's dad. As they both were professional actors, the game came easily.

"Don't put your jacket on the couch," Jupiter yelled from the kitchen. "I don't allow jackets on that couch."

Alice took a plastic hanger and hung her jacket neatly in the closet. This is the way it usually was at Jupiter's house. She once had stayed there for six whole months, and if it hadn't been for Jupiter's cooking and her mysterious sense of duty, she would have gone home to her apartment and her fish tank. He could be a terrible grouch.

"I need help in the kitchen," Jupiter said. "Why aren't you in the kitchen?" Alice went to the kitchen.

"I'm here to chop." She grabbed a knife from the block. "What should I chop?" Alice didn't want to chop. She wanted to sit on the back porch with a cocktail balanced on her knee. She wanted to talk politics and rehearsal gossip with the actors from Chicago and New York. Just once, she wanted to be the guest.

Jupiter loaded his arms with plastic bags from the crisper drawer.

"Salad, salad, salad," he said. "You're here to make the salad." Alice always made the salad. Jupiter usually had something to say about the size of her cucumber slices – *too thin! too thick! scallop those edges now* so Alice saved those for last. He offered her a glass of wine.

"Thanks," she said, "but we should save some for the guests."

Jupiter pulled a large box of chardonnay from the refrigerator. "The good stuff's in the basement," he said. "For Ryan."

"Of course," Alice said. "Wouldn't want to give the little guy anything less than the best." She hated competing with Ryan for Jupiter's affection, especially since she knew she would always lose.

"That's right," Jupiter said. "Did I tell you he's going to be on the cover of *Teen* Magazine?"

Alice chopped shitake mushrooms and baby carrots and cherry tomatoes. She washed lettuce and spinach and radicchio. Her father, when he was alive, liked to put sunflower seeds in the salad. Jupiter would look after her now. She would look after him. Every week or so she'd find curious items in her mailbox at work – extra long shoelaces, boxes of kitchen matches, little measuring cups that doubled as refrigerator magnets. *In case you need them,* Jupiter would say. *Necessities for living.* A few days before the dinner party, Alice had come down with a cold and cancelled two tour dates in Tulsa. Jupiter, in another one of his strange fits of generosity, had ordered the theatre's shop foreman to bring her a case of Nyquil and a crock-pot full of chicken soup. Alice was a vegetarian, so she gave the chicken soup back to the shop foreman, who was glad to have it. The Nyquil, though, had come in handy.

Before Alice made it to the cucumbers, Jupiter was off answering the doorbell, shaking hands and slapping backs, directing jackets to the closet in the study. Alice heard a pair of New York actors chatting over the goat greeting card, making jokes about trolls and drawbridges. Alice wanted to be a New York actor, but she dreaded the cattle calls and headshots, the endless disappointments. She often thought she might be content to work for Jupiter's theatre company for the rest of her life. Maybe she'd compromise and

move to Chicago. Lighting a pair of candles on the buffet, Alice overheard the tinkling of ice cubes that meant that Jupiter was mixing drinks for the guests.

"Alice is a real jewel," Jupiter said. "She'd be ready to mix the drinks too, but I've put her to work with the salad."

"Ah, Alice," one of the lighting designers said. "A total work horse."

"Wish she'd learn how to party," said the other lighting designer. "What a shame."

She hated their small-minded sympathy. She wasn't very good at-playing drinking games or singing funny songs. Instead, she simply did her job. Even worse, she wanted some genuine respect for all her hard work. She was Jupiter's favorite employee. Everyone must think her a joke. Still, she kept up with the empty glasses and the stacks of dirty saucers. Picking up someone's cigar stub between her finger and her thumb, she remembered she didn't really want to be the catering girl for the rest of her life. And while she didn't like to imagine herself vain or showy, she didn't mind the thought of becoming a headliner, enjoying top billing in the Oklahoma premier of some big Broadway show. Jupiter might cast her in a real role someday. She kept up with the party hostess routine the best way she knew how.

Before Ryan arrived, Alice took a break to feed the goats. She grabbed a handful of peppermints from a candy dish by the back door. Jupiter followed her out.

"Alice," he said. "I should have a few words with you." Jupiter usually waited until everyone had gone home before he became weepy and sentimental. Maybe, though, he had some ideas about next season.

"Talk to me, eh?" Alice said. She stuffed the peppermints deep into her pockets.

"Yes," Jupiter said. "It's a matter of grave importance."

"Right," Alice said, and they headed down the hill toward the goats. "When does Ryan get here?"

"Never mind about that," Jupiter said. "This is about you."

Alice suspected he'd have some kind of sage advice about interest rates or tax shelters or retirement accounts. Or maybe he wanted to give her a little present. Thoughts of next season still lingered in the back of her mind.

"Goats are looking better," Alice said, remembering the stench of last month's victim. "Did you try that new line of feed?"

"You betcha," Jupiter said. "The brown one still looks like hell. We'll probably have to put him down."

Alice knew about sacrifice, but she didn't want the brown goat to die. She unwrapped one of the peppermints and several pairs of goat lips immediately descended on her hand. The biggest one sucked the pinwheel candy into his mouth, crunched for an instant, and swallowed.

"Popular treats," she said, and unwrapped another.

"About Ryan," Jupiter said.

"I thought you said this wasn't going to be about Ryan."

"Changed my mind," Jupiter said. "Let me say what I have to say."

"Fine," Alice said. "Go for it." She gave the brown goat a scratch behind the ears and pretended not to pay attention to Jupiter "Good goat," she said. "You're my favorite."

"I'm very proud of Ryan," he said. "He's done a lot for himself. When he was a kid, I thought he'd never make it out of this place. Thought I'd have to send him on the elementary school tour with that damned Shakespeare Rocks! show just to make sure he had a paycheck every month. But he went to LA and he made it. Found a good agent, and he made it."

That little punk, she thought. She wished he would die.

"Yeah," Alice said. "I know."

"I know you know. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

"I'm here," she said. "Keep talkin'." Alice kept the peppermints coming, one after another. The brown goat finally staggered to its feet.

"I know your secret, Alice" Jupiter said. "I know you're jealous of Ryan."

Some secret, Alice thought. Everyone knew she was jealous of Ryan. Ryan had nothing but his youthful good looks, and the system had rewarded him. But Alice worked hard – she'd dropped out of college for the sake of this pathetic farm theater - all for this: salad chopping and beer bottle collecting and the promise of a Craftmatic Adjustable Bed at the end of every evening.

"I'm not jealous of Ryan," she said. "I don't care about Ryan."

"Sure you do," Jupiter said. "I've seen it tonight."

"When did you see it tonight?" Alice almost yelled. The goats backed away, the brown one stumbled.

"Earlier," he said. "When I was talking about *Teen* Magazine. Don't tell me you don't want to be on the cover of *Teen* Magazine. Not even just a little bit."

"I do not want to be on the cover of *Teen* Magazine!"

"Sure you do!"

"No. No, I do not."

Jupiter looked down at the brown goat and then up at the sky. The goat whimpered and collapsed in a pile of hay. Jupiter said, "I've called the vet. Several times. Nobody makes farm calls these days."

"Look," Alice said. "It's starting to rain again." She reached out and put her hand on the goat's head.

"It's too late," Jupiter said. "He's probably going to die." He tried to pat her on the back, but she ducked away.

"I'm out of peppermints," Alice said. "We better go in." She hurried back to the house, and when she got inside, she locked the sliding glass door behind her.

"Where's Jupiter?" said one of the lighting designers. "We need him."

"Out with the goats," Alice said. "Out with the rain. Out where he belongs."

But the lighting designer wasn't paying attention. Ryan, with his smile and his shades, had just pulled up in the driveway.

"Ho Ho Ho," Ryan said, coming in the front door with an armful of plastic bags. He wore a baseball cap with a snazzy logo for his soap opera embroidered on the front.

"It's not Christmas," Alice said.

"It is tonight!" he said. "Where's my dad?"

Ryan shoved the plastic bags into Alice's arms. She deposited them on the back of the baby grand just as three of Ryan's high school friends lifted Ryan onto their shoulders.

"He'll be here," Alice said. "Any minute now."

Sure enough, someone had unlocked the sliding glass door. Jupiter rushed by the lighting designers and barreled past the buffet.

"My boy-my boy," he said. "My super-star boy!"

The high school friends let Ryan down and Jupiter buried him in a hug. One of the lighting designers started a round of applause. Alice joined in, but she didn't whistle.

"What's in the bags?" Alice asked, so Ryan dumped the contents on to the back of the baby grand.

"Ammo," Ryan announced. "For deer season."

"My boy-my boy," Jupiter said again. "Always the smart shopper."

Jupiter ceremoniously presented Ryan with the goat greeting card, and everyone laughed. Ryan put the card back in its envelope before reading all the personal messages. She knew he'd just toss the card on the floorboard of his car and never look at it again. The whole affair reminded her of the time that Ryan received a standing ovation on his birthday. They were doing A.R. Gurney's *Sylvia*. Alice played the dog. She'd never had a starring role before, but human characters always garner more respect. Maybe she would finally get out of this town, go to a drama school in Chicago or New York. Jupiter would have to learn to live without her.

The man in *Sylvia* is supposed to be in his 50's, but Jupiter of course had given Ryan a shot at the role. To make up for his youth, Ryan wore a lot of age makeup and walked with a limp. The set, supposedly a miracle of modern design, utilized a couch that slid on and off stage by virtue of a set of pulleys. The pulleys were always breaking, though, so the couch often ended up left on stage when the action was supposed to take place in Central Park.

"Great!" Ryan had said backstage by the props table. "A couch in Central Park! Who ever heard of a COUCH in Central Park?!"

"It's no big deal," Alice told him. "We'll work around it."

"YOU can work around it," Ryan said. "This whole thing is making ME feel a little sick."

During the blackout before the play's last Central Park scene, Ryan went out on stage and flopped down on the recalcitrant couch. Alice thought maybe she should go out there too, but she was so annoyed with Ryan's sick bed stunt that she went downstairs into the green room instead. The stage manager, Alice knew, would be angry with her for missing the last scene. But Alice also knew no one in the audience had come to see her, anyway. Ryan was a local celebrity. Even though she had the title role, her name would always come second.

When the scene began, Alice heard thunderous applause. Later she would learn Ryan had taken off his shirt during the blackout. The lights came up to reveal his oily chest. Someone told her later that he had coughed loudly and stretched his arms out like he was in a commercial for La-Z-boy recliners. The next day, someone fixed the pulleys on the couch, but any onstage chemistry they had shared was gone. The show closed in a week.

"How's the tour?" Ryan asked Alice over a plate of stuffed mushrooms.

"Not bad," she said. "I've got that *Lear* monologue down pat."

"Yeah," Ryan said. "Sometimes it's hard for me to get through my long speeches."

Alice knew from *Sylvia* and *The Wizard of Oz* that Ryan had a lot of trouble memorizing anything longer than a short paragraph. The mayor of Munchkinland was famous for his ad-libbing, but since he was Jupiter's son, no one ever said anything. She figured they must use cue cards in Soap Opera Land. She said, "A lot of lines, huh?"

"Oh no," Ryan said. "Sometimes I think I might just start crying. Right in the middle of the speech! Heavy drama, you know."

They sat down for dinner. Alice's salad came out first.

"You did a good job with those cucumbers," Jupiter said from the head of the table. "Very even."

"Thanks," Alice said. When she re-filled her wineglass, several people passed her their empty glasses. She said, "More wine, anyone?"

"The basement!" Jupiter said. "The good stuff's in the basement!"

Alice knew this was her cue to retrieve the fancy wine. She pushed her chair back and headed for the stairs.

"The cabernet!" Jupiter yelled after her. He said something else, but she was already behind the oak beams of the stairwell, down into the darkness of the bottom floor. Among the wine racks and cured meats, she heard periodic rumbles of laughter from above. Alice thought about staying in the basement for the rest of the night – no one would notice her absence. Maybe, when they finally ran out of the cheap wine, Jupiter would send down one of the lighting designers to get her. Maybe they'd just drink liquor or beer for the rest of the night, and she would just pass out among the sausages, alone until morning. She put aside her self-pity only in favor of her curiosity about the

cabernet. And since there was no corkscrew in the basement, she reluctantly headed back upstairs. A lively conversation was already in progress.

"Maybe he has hoof and mouth disease," Ryan said, and everyone at the table laughed.

"Or mad goat disease!" That was Jupiter now, giddily serving soup from a silver tureen.

Alice took her seat at the table and started pouring the cabernet.

"Alice was there!" Jupiter said. "She saw."

A chorus of good-old-Alice's rose up from the table and Alice kept pouring.

"I have an idea," said one of the lighting designers. "Maybe he stepped on a pebble! And the pebble," he paused and lowered his voice, "is caught. In his hoof."

"Rabies!" Jupiter said. "Anthrax! The Plague!"

One of the lighting designers put his napkin down and said, "Your goat is a problem, Jupiter. A real sore spot. I mean, jokes aside, it's probably a bad idea to keep an ill animal around like that. He might be contagious. He's definitely sick."

"My character's getting sick," Ryan announced. "But I'm not supposed to tell." Alice took a long sip of wine. She said, "Cancer or paralysis?"

"Not sure," Ryan said. "Something bad."

Alice looked over at the head of the table and saw Jupiter sweating behind the steam of his soup, his large red face looking larger and redder by the minute.

"What's with the disease?" Jupiter said. "You didn't tell me any of this."

"Didn't I?" Ryan kept his hands folded neatly in his lap. "Well it's been a long time coming. You know, they want to give me a chance to do some real acting."

Alice knew they were killing him off. She didn't watch the show, but Ryan had that tragic terminal illness look. His small stature combined with his high cheekbones and thin lips made him an easy target.

Jupiter pushed his own soup bowl toward the center of the table. "But you're still doing the *Teen* Magazine thing, right?"

"Sure, Dad," Ryan said. "It'll be more serious, though. You know, maybe they'll put me on a motorcycle or something."

"You're dead," Alice said, surprising herself.

"Don't say that!" Jupiter said. "This is for the sake of drama! This is for the sake of art!"

"Don't worry about it, Dad," Ryan said. "If they kill me, they kill me. I still have that Pizza Hut commercial coming up."

Alice wished she hadn't made that *You're Dead* comment. Maybe it was the wine talking. Okay, she was secretly glad for Ryan's potential failure. Maybe he'd end up back here, spending his weekends hunting with his high school buddies and sleeping late on the foldout couch in the study. A homecoming parade of shame would be just what he deserved.

Jupiter pushed back from the head of the table and pressed his palms to his forehead. "Ryan," he said. "My boy. They can't do this to you. I won't let them do this to you."

Ryan said, "It's okay."

"It is not okay!"

Ryan insisted he still had another year left in his contract. There were other shows, other opportunities. Another year would only make him look more mature.

"That's it," Jupiter said. "I've had it."

When Jupiter rose from the head of the table, no one followed him to the hallway. He opened the sliding glass door and carried his gun down the hill. Alice looked at the floor.

"Well, I'm going after him," Ryan said.

Alice wondered if this series of events would turn out like one of those stories on the late local news. Crackpots in rural areas were always having incidents with their livestock, their big guns, and their teenaged boys. They packed their dead relatives in deep freezers and hung pictures over the bullet holes in their walls. No one could save these people. She wanted to go home to her fish tank.

But when father and son came back to the dinner table, the goat was dead and Jupiter felt better. His face, at least, had returned to its normal color.

He said, "Well, I'd been meaning to take care of that." A long pause, and then Jupiter laughed, a pathetic attempt to get the party going again.

One of the lighting designers said, "Good decision, Jupiter. You did the right thing."

Soon enough, Alice found herself standing by the closet in the study, passing out jackets and scarves.

"You're a pal, Alice," said the other lighting designer. "A good egg."

She passed him his umbrella and thought of the dead goat in the backyard. At least his pain was over.

* * *

She found Jupiter sitting on a tree stump with his head in his hands.

"I could have saved him," he said. "Tomorrow."

Maybe he meant the goat. Maybe he meant Ryan. Alice considered putting her hand on Jupiter's shoulder but thought better of it. Finally, Jupiter rose from the tree stump and, together, they loaded the goat into the back of Jupiter's truck.

"Goodnight," she said when Jupiter dropped her off at her apartment. "Don't worry."

Jupiter reached into the pocket of his ski jacket and pulled out a long white envelope. "It's a gift certificate," he said. "For Super Pet Emporium."

"Thanks," she said.

"Get yourself some tropical fish."

Jupiter must not have known Alice already had an aquarium full of tropical fish. Nice idea, though, Alice decided. When Jupiter waved goodbye to her in her driveway, Alice unlocked her front door, hung her keys on a peg on the wall, plugged in her electric blanket, and settled into the Craftmatic Adjustable Bed. On an iron stand beside her television, orange fish tails wavered back and forth, back and forth in front of her drowsy eyes. Tomorrow, she thought, she might use the gift certificate to buy the fish an under-the-sea castle to swim through. Maybe, she decided, she would buy a bottom crawler to help keep the tank clean. She adjusted the bed, reached over, and turned off the fluorescent light over the aquarium. She felt the warmth of her electric blanket seep

through her legs. Alice listened to the hum of the aquarium's oxygen filter all night and well into the morning. She remembered she had an audition tomorrow as she watched the bubbles rise.

Job Switching

No one saw the shoebox full of old playbills she kept on a shelf above her kitchen sink. No one saw the way she tried to save money by using duct tape to repair the holes in last year's leather sandals. But in a few weeks, everyone in Chicago would recognize her face. Her winning smile would overshadow secretaries on their morning commute. Young men wearing expensive suits would think of her and chuckle while drinking their fancy cups of coffee. Alice would make her mark. She always knew her day would come.

Until then, she was just glad to have a job. She'd spent the last six months attending charity events with little known players from the Chicago Cubs. She was the autograph girl. Sitting behind a long banquet table, Alice did her best to look pretty while passing the players their felt tip pens. When pink-faced children came bustling up to the front of the line, they shoved their baseballs in Alice's face and said are you Miss America? No, she'd say. I am not Miss America. Please wait your turn.

The baseball players all looked at her with a cold diffidence that said are you good for a fuck? Or not?

Not, she wanted to tell them. But she didn't say much of anything, mostly because she didn't need the complications. Blue or black ink, she'd say. White paper or glossy? Could I get you some water? Three years of classical theater training and now she feared she might spend the rest of her marketable years working as a glorified waitress for gum-smacking jocks. The paycheck, at least, took care of most of her bills.

You're late this month, her landlord said when Alice ran into him at the vegetable stand on the corner. You shouldn't be buying those green beans. You should put that money toward your rent.

Alice put the green beans in her basket anyway, but immediately decided she could do without the tomatoes and carrots.

Soon, she promised. And don't worry, the green beans will keep me healthy. I'll get myself in fighting shape. Just in time to hit the pavement, you know.

Her landlord neither laughed nor smiled. Instead, he poked at an eggplant and muttered something about an eviction notice. Alice had been late with her rent a number of times before, but her landlord never did anything worse than leave nasty notes tacked to her front door. This time, she hoped, would be no different.

When her agent called her about the All Candy Expo, Alice was certainly interested. Four days in the Expo Center were four days away from the Cubbies and the sickening fruity smell of their high-end hair products. Chicago's favorite outfielders didn't look nearly so prissy on television, but Alice had dated enough actors to be able to glean the secret depths of their vanity.

They need you, her agent told her. They need your red hair.

Oh yeah, Alice said. They like my hair, huh?

I sent them a color headshot and they just burst, Al, they just about *burst*.

Alice liked the idea that her photograph was making people burst. She imagined a grim-faced casting agent sitting squarely at his desk, the top of his head exploding into a million fleshy fragments. His internal organs would rearrange themselves and his skin would turn to water all because he had seen her face, her hair, her slim shoulders and white neck. Not that beauty was the most important commodity in showbiz. Alice still believed in talent. Before her poverty necessitated the autographing job, she had starred in a long-running production of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Goodman. A local critic had called her the very essence of Chekovian longing. After Saturday night shows, theatergoers recognized her at the bar across the street and anonymously bought her martinis and heart-shaped trays of puff pastries. And during one particularly sleepy Sunday matinee, Alice finished her monologue and then looked out at the dark edges of the second row to see a woman and her adolescent daughter holding identical white handkerchiefs up to their moist eyes. Alice didn't like to brag, but she knew she was good.

I have some new audition material, Alice told her agent on the phone. How many monologues?

You don't understand, her agent said. They don't need to see you. You're already in. Four days, Alice. Four days at the All-Candy Expo. Fifty bucks an hour.

So they liked her hair. Turned out they were desperate for someone who looked a little like Lucille Ball. The Rocky Mountain Chocolate Company was putting out a new line of I Love Lucy Crispy Corn Caramel Nuggets, and they needed someone to smile and look pretty in their booth at the All Candy Expo.

Sounds like a modeling job, Alice said. I told you, no more modeling jobs. I'm an actress.

They need someone with comic timing. They need someone with flair. And besides, this isn't some kind of hollow car show bullshit. There's a script and everything.

A script?

Her agent told her she would dress up in a 50's style housedress and reenact the famous "Job Switching" episode from *I Love Lucy*. She'd perform in 10-minute intervals and then put on a sandwich board and walk around the convention floor in half-hour networking segments. She'd have a full hour for lunch and bathroom breaks when necessary. Alice didn't like thinking of herself as a commercial for fattening foods. She never thought her red hair made her look at all like Lucille Ball. And she certainly didn't want to spend four days stuffing chocolates into her mouth while pretending to work on an assembly line run amok. But fifty bucks an hour. Fifty bucks an hour. Fifty bucks an hour.

Send me the script, she said.

* * *

Can I interest you in Lucy's Famous Assorted Chocolates? Lucy's Chocolate Factory Metal Lunch Pail? I Love Lucy's Chocolate Factory Snow Globe? Alice had trouble remembering all the product names, but during her sandwich board networking sessions on the convention floor, she simply read from a secret index card she kept tucked into the pocket of her apron. The All Candy Expo looked like an exploding Jell-O

factory, everything from Necco Wafers to Toxic Waste Super-Gummy Snot filling the quivering stomachs of every candy buyer in America.

Alice ambled along the convention floor, three times passing a man dressed as one of Santa's elves. He was missing one of his fake pointy ears. His name tag – A Sugartime Hello from SPARKY – startled her with its large, block letters. On her fourth trip around Candy Cane Circle, he pointed at her ridiculously large sandwich board and laughed.

Shut up, she said, surprising herself.

Just trying to be jolly, he said. Sugartime pays for cab fare and meals. If I pass out five cases of these babies – he pointed to his sack full of peppermints – they put me up at the Hilton. And you know what else? I'm in the market for a book contract. What have you got?

Health Benefits, she lied. Sick pay. Vacation time.

Merry Christmas, he said. Give Little Ricky my best.

Alice hurried past him, sat down on low wall made of Styrofoam gumdrops, and counted the minutes before her scheduled lunch date with an old roommate. She hadn't seen him in several months, but he was in town just for the Expo. Alice had heard rumors of his leaving the business. Because of the well-known fact that the Actors' Equity Association has a 98% unemployment rate at any given time, Alice and all her actor friends reserved a special scorn for the lightweights who lacked the determination to find temp jobs during darker times. Aside from a wealthy business major who currently starred in several music videos, most of her old friends were still waiting tables in the

evenings and hitting the pavement every day looking for non-paying roles in the church basements of Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Detroit.

But before she could even think about taking a lunch break, she had to make her way back to her official station and stuff herself with chocolates. She longed for her green beans. The assembly line started with a whir and Alice began her canned speech about the crazy world of crispy corn nuggets. When no one was looking, she spit out the chocolates into a paper bag.

Back on the convention center floor, she scanned the crowd for her lunch date. Bart, her old roommate, looked exactly the same as he always did. He had a shifty look, like someone's little brother trying to get into a trendy new nightclub without an ID.

Lucy, he said. Where's the family? Now, don't tell me you've got a bun in the oven? He put his hand on her stomach. Well, here we are, Alice, he said, gesturing to the swirl of color all around them. Looks like Barbie barfed in here, doesn't it?

Good to see you, Bart, Alice lied. She resented his youthful glow. At the Goodman, he had played Mercutio to her Juliet. With the dimpled smile of a supermarket bag boy, Bart could still play Mercutio today. Alice had worked hard to stay in shape, but these days she knew she looked too old to play Juliet. Her pack-a-day habit had given her an unfortunate case of what everyone in the business understood as Smoker's Face. She imagined Bart was studying the lines around her mouth.

Got any free samples? he said.

She grabbed hold of his tiny shoulders and turned him in the direction of her booth. Over there, she said. Right by the NFL All-Stars' Big League Chew. Stop by anytime.

Lucy, he said again, this time using a poor attempt at a Cuban accent. Lucy-lucy-lucy. He turned to her and bowed. Let us dine.

In the elevator on the way down to the convention center's café, Alice studied his narrow hips. In spite of her occasional jealousy of Bart's steady parade of boyfriends, Alice had always been glad to spend time with him. She had fond memories of playing cards with him in the green room, but she couldn't help but feel bitter when she thought of the sound guy who used to whisper "fag hag" every time she walked by the booth.

Bart pressed the basement button in the elevator and said how's Marco? Marco had been Alice's last serious boyfriend. She finally broke up with him after his aversion to mildew made him refuse to buy a shower curtain for his apartment. Marco so hated the idea of soap scum that he would lie down in the bathtub to wash his hair and then scrub the whole bathroom with Comet every night after dinner. His cleaning schedule got in the way of their ever having anything to say to one another.

Marco's fine, she said. Last I heard.

Too bad, Bart said. Nice guy.

Bart, surely used to her periodic announcements of relationships gone sour, never pried. For that, at least, Alice was grateful.

In the café, they ordered salads and sat underneath an enormous brass light fixture. Alice felt bad when she imagined the lamp coming loose from the beams in the ceiling. She secretly liked the idea of the long shiny spokes crashing down onto Bart's perfectly styled head. Well, at least she had an acting job. Bart probably hadn't had a role since playing the young Abe Lincoln for the Illinois Education Association.

Are you working? she asked.

Working! Alice, I've got it made.

In between bites of cherry tomato, Bart told her of his recently becoming the National Confectioners Association's Vice President in charge of Legislative Affairs. In other words, he said with a maniacal snort, he was a lobbyist for the Tooth Fairy.

Talk about easy money, he said. I take congressional aides to lunch and shower them with jawbreakers. If I ply them with Peppermint Schnapps, they convince their bosses to vote against establishing higher nutritional standards for school lunches. All in a day's work.

They pay you for that?

Sure, he said. Loads. My cousin helped get me the position, but that's another story. We're starting a public awareness campaign before the mid-term elections. Actually, that's kind of why I wanted to see you.

Alice refused the waiter's offer of an extra helping of salad dressing. Cut to the chase, Bart, she said. I have a chocolate factory to ruin in 10 minutes.

Calm down, Lucy, he said. You don't want me to have to spank you!

Alice was tired of the *I Love Lucy* jokes. She suddenly missed her beloved Chicago Cubs and their stacks of giveaway miniature batting helmets.

Alice, she said, correcting him. Watch out or I'll start calling you Young Abe Lincoln. Do you have a gig for me or not?

Two words, he said, poking her with both index fingers. Print. Media. Wait! I changed my mind! *Three* words: Alice on a billboard.

That's four words.

You know what I mean! This is big, Alice. I was going to ask Isabelle Janko, but she's already doing all those music videos.

Bart picked up the tab with his gold card – expense account, he said – and waved his arms around as if he were a dealer in a casino. He told her the National Confectioners Association was looking for a family-oriented spokesperson for good, clean, candy-coated fun. He said he imagined her with two long braids along the lines of Pippi Longstocking or Anne of Green Gables.

We'll call you Aunt Emily, he said. You'll hold a lollipop in one hand and a wicker basket in the other.

A wicker basket?

It'll make you look wholesome.

Alice doubted something so simple as a wicker basket would make up for her Smoker's Face. But still, there was the money to consider. And even if she managed to save a few grand, her future in advertising might not last forever. What if she spent the rest of her days starring in late-night commercials hawking blenders and vacuum cleaners and cheap pieces of exercise equipment? What if she turned into one of those no-name wonders standing in a frightened crowd behind a muscled action hero? She vowed she would never be guilty of trying very hard to look amused or troubled or nauseous when the camera finally found her face. She would simply be herself. She was a natural, a serious, well-trained professional. She remembered climbing the backstage ladder up to the top of the rickety balcony in *Romeo and Juliet*. She knew Bart was somewhere back in the greenroom playing poker with Friar Lawrence and Lady Montague. Careful not to step on the edges of her dress, Alice took her place during the blackout. A piece of glow

tape marked the spot where she was supposed to stand and await her midnight lover. As soon as her eyes came level with the platform's edge, she looked frantically for her glow-in-the-dark target. What if the adhesive on the back of the tape had come loose? What if the punitive assistant stage manager who mopped the set before every performance had decided to surprise her with a cruel trick? She might step off the edge of the balcony and crash down into the garden wall, or worse, she might land on the hard wood of the stage floor, painted slate gray to look like stone.

Every night when she climbed the ladder, she felt the slipperiness beneath her fingers that meant she was afraid. But the tiny glowing "x" was always there in the center of the balcony floor, its faint yellow sparkle guiding her like runway lights on an aircraft carrier. Alice positioned her feet on either side of the "x" and she counted - one, two, three – and by the time she arrived at four she always heard the actor playing Romeo drag his heavy boots across the stage floor below her. She placed her hand on the railing and tucked her hair behind her ear. They stood there in the dark. And during the three or four seconds before the lights came up, the shifting bodies of the audience – their anxious breathing, their throats clearing, their programs rustling – all seemed so loud Alice always wondered how she'd be able to overpower them with nothing to help her but the sound of her own voice.

On the elevator on the way back up to the convention center floor, she asked Bart for some concrete information about salary, but he refused to offer anything more specific than another wave of his arms and a promise of Massive Exposure. She thought of her landlord poking at an eggplant at the vegetable stand near her apartment complex.

She could buy all the green beans she wanted, stuff herself with ears of corn, and still have enough money left over to pay next month's rent.

Let me know, he said. This could be your big break.

* * *

Back upstairs, Alice avoided the candy buyers and their shiny sample bags. If she took her hair down, she didn't look at all like Lucy, and no one save a few greedy children bothered to approach her. She found herself avoiding the chocolate factory booth for longer than the prescribed half-hour networking sessions on the convention floor. She wasn't punching a time clock, after all, and she wanted as little humiliation as possible for her fifty bucks an hour. Bart had been a real disappointment. His arrogance had always been Bart's chief annoying trait, Alice reminded herself. He was still cute and funny and good for a night on the town. But she wasn't so much interested in the club scene anymore, and she had worked hard enough on her Lucy impersonation that she knew she must have him beat in the comedy department too. She remembered something she had read about Lucille Ball on the set of *I Love Lucy*. One particularly busy taping day, Lucy tripped over a cardboard box in the hair and makeup room. Desi was irate. He searched out the negligent stagehand who had left the box lying about and griped him out by saying *you had better take care of my Lucy! If anything bad ever happens to her, we'll all wake up tomorrow morning and be in the shrimp business!* Alice wondered if anyone would ever say anything like that about her. She thought of Bart on the set of *Romeo and Juliet*. She had read that Desi Arnaz had a sign hanging in

his dressing room that said "English Broken Here." She remembered what Bart customarily kept on his dressing table: a framed photograph of Janet Jackson and a set of plastic beads from Mardi Gras. Alice once had wanted to go to New Orleans herself – Bourbon Street, breakfast at Brennan's, party 'till you puke. These days she contented herself with working up new audition material, scanning the trade papers, and occasionally performing long and moving monologues on the street for loose change. The neighborhood drunks, made curiously happy by the sound of her perfectly practiced British accent, threw dollar bills into the velvet bonnet that lay like a puddle at her feet.

Chronic poverty had become both embarrassing and inconvenient – credit cards could take her only so far. While friends had long since moved closer to the lake, she still had to order water and an inexpensive appetizer at every fancy restaurant. Her health insurance would run out at the end of the year, and unless she landed another Equity role, she would have to start looking for sleazy deals on the Internet just to buy her prescription asthma medication. She would accept Bart's offer, but she might feel a little ashamed. No matter, she secretly liked the idea of her face on a billboard. Maybe she would see herself on the sides of buses. Maybe the National Confectioner's Association would put out a whole line of Cousin Emily plastic notebooks, book covers, and erasers. Maybe she would have her own candy bar. Cousin Emily's Crunchy Delight. Then she remembered something horrible she'd seen on late night television. The guy who played Jethro Bodine on the Beverly Hillbillies, looking overweight and bitter on the terrace of some drug rehab center, stared into the camera and explained the curse of character acting. Every audition brought the same disappointed results: no one wanted to hire Jethro to play King Lear. He never had another role again.

Alice looked down at her index card and halfheartedly mumbled something about Ethel Mertz's Famous Oatmeal Cookies. No one liked oatmeal cookies. If she ever found herself in charge of a candy company, Alice vowed she would discontinue all grain products. People craved sugar. They wanted to rot.

Again, she passed the one-eared Christmas elf. This time he gave her a half-hearted wave. Maybe Sparky's fate would be her own. Would Cousin Emily have to work the children's birthday parties of Chicago's elite? Would she have to make balloon animals? No, Alice decided. She wanted the smell of mothballs in the costume shop and the water leaking onto the dressing room floor. She wanted the long rehearsals, the weeks and weeks spent performing without a day off. She thought of the time she worked for Phone-for-the-Fund at the Goodman. The development office had recruited her by promising free long distance phone calls in exchange for a few hours spent calling season ticket holders and begging them for money. Alice didn't get her free phone call, however; only those who raised at least a hundred dollars earned the meager reward. Her first phone call put her in touch with an old woman whose voice sounded like that of one of Arthur Miller's mother-types. When she talked to this woman, Alice imagined what her kitchen must look like – the faded wallpaper, the old radiator, the decorative plates wedged in between the top edge of the cabinets and the ceiling. And after they had talked for an hour and a half, Alice couldn't bring herself to ask the woman for money.

Goodbye, she said. Take Care.

Same to ya, the woman had said. Show 'em what ya got.

That last sentence always troubled Alice. Show whom? What did she have? Still, when the man from the development office looked angrily at her empty bank report,

Alice felt justified in her decision to rip her pledge sheet to pieces and throw it in his hair like confetti. She wondered if she still had the guts to do something like that.

Strolling by the Hershey Chocolate Train Station, Alice felt someone tap her on the shoulder. She knew her pursuer was either another runny-nosed kid looking for free samples or Bart.

Cousin Emily, he said. Fancy meeting up with you again. He held out a Mylar party favor bag overflowing with Pixie Stix.

No thanks, she said, waving off his sugary temptation. Expo still treating you right?

Yeah, he said. You should check out the International Section. European chocolate, you know. The real deal.

Alice took one look at his polished black shoes and tried to find a way to feel happy about taking the Cousin Emily job. She would go home and practice her audition material until she could say the lines in her sleep, but in the end she would content herself with a lollipop and a big grin. And a wicker basket. She couldn't forget the wicker basket.

Bart, she said. I'll e-mail you tomorrow. You'll give me some numbers, of course.

Right-o, he said. He patted her on the back and headed for the elevator. A chocolate lover's dream.

Alice, finally too annoyed with her sandwich board to keep the monstrosity affixed to her shoulders, took off various parts of her costume and looked for a place to sit down. The Styrofoam gumdrop wall, crowded with miscellaneous leg-swinging sugar

fairies, Ronald McDonald, and the Hamburglar, did not look promising. In a chair by the fire exit, she spotted a plastic pointed ear and knew immediately the missing elf appendage must belong to Sparky. She looked around to see if anyone was watching her, and finally put the ear in the pocket of her apron. Now she had a secret. The next time a child asked her for chocolates she might give him an ear instead. Or if Sparky dared come up to her again with his *What have you got,* she'd look him and say, *I've got your ear. And if you're not careful, I'll take your other one, too*

People are crass, she decided. Someday, when her fortune was made and her looks were gone, she would start an organic farm somewhere up in Illinois corn country. Unemployed actors would take breaks from the endless urban cattle calls and stay in the farm's bright bedrooms for low discount prices. No landlords. No chocolate. No players from the Chicago Cubs. She and her new actor-friends would listen to phonograph records and drink from pitchers of lemonade. Until then, she would provide consumers across America with a kind of temporary happiness. She would make their sweet teeth sweeter. But Alice was tired. She wanted to go home. Finally, she found a trashcan by the registration table and threw the renegade elf's ear, along with her remaining oatmeal cookie samples, into the barrel with a thud.

Looked like some good cookies, there, said a bald man in a suit and tie. I guess they were stale?

Yes, Alice said. Hard as a rock. Can I interest you in I Love Lucy's Chocolate Factory Snow Globe? Just a joke, she said. The snow globes are back at my booth.

Oh yeah? he said. Lucy, eh? I play Daddy Warbucks. Little Orphan Annie's Rock-a-Bye Ringpops?

No kidding, she said on her way to the elevator. Keep up the good work.

Recital Day

He is not the kind of guy who would end up in a place like this at five in the morning. The front door of Miss Christie's School of Music is locked and the city streets are all but empty, but he woke before the alarm went off and came directly here. He sometimes likes to imagine he has become a respectable, but tender-hearted business professional – the kind of guy who might take a long lunch hour away from his accounting firm to make an appearance at his child's middle school cafeteria. But here he is, freezing to death in his bathrobe and shower shoes, his daughter's soft-sided clarinet case slung over his shoulder. He needs to see Miss Christie. He needs to see her now.

"Miss Christie!" He knocks on the heavy metal door. She's inside here somewhere. She's always here early on recital days. If the studio's shades were open, he might be able to see her pushing a dust broom across the polished wooden floors. "Miss Christie!" he shouts again. "This is important!"

He wonders if maybe he really is a little too early. Maybe he should have showered and shaved and brushed his teeth before rushing over here. At home, his daughter sleeps in a new black lacquer bed shaped like an eighth note. Last month, he

bought her a musically-themed bedroom set as a surprise for their clarinet anniversary. He's lucky enough to have a sizable inheritance, and his wife, a corporate attorney and patron of the arts, writes him a hefty check every month to cover what she affectionately calls his "hobbies of madness and despair." She's away on business in another city, but she would probably not approve of his current embarrassing state of undress. Neither would she much like his early morning departure from their downtown apartment. Good, he thinks. I'm transgressing. I'm pushing the boundaries of acceptable human behavior.

"Just one question!" he shouts at the "Sorry We're Closed" sign. "Can't ya just answer one lousy question?" He imagines himself yelling Miss Christie's name one last time, the long "e" trailing off like a siren at the end. So what if no one's here? All the more reason to have a good time. He shouts again, his loudest most desperate moan. Still no answer. What's her problem? Does she not care about the recital? Does she not understand the importance of careful preparation?

He wonders if early morning frost hasn't permeated the ragged terry cloth of his bathrobe. He's wearing a T-shirt and pajama pants underneath, but his failure to remember socks has left him shivering and raw. He thinks of the Cream of Wheat his daughter will probably make him for breakfast. She'll pour orange juice into a plastic cup and carefully carry his cereal bowl into the living room. And sometime during his first or second warm bite, he'll hear his daughter beginning her warm-up – a series of whole notes immediately followed by a chromatic scale. He'll spend all morning listening to her slow rhythms, the repeated exercises that remind him of pebbles sinking to the bottom of a pond. And then he'll spend all afternoon wondering if he should have taken his daughter to school instead of insisting she stay home all day to practice. He'll

think of all the other fathers in the world and imagine the way they spend their days sitting in their dark offices with their legs tucked neatly underneath their stately oak desks. He should have been one of those fathers. Maybe he'll become one of those fathers someday. For now, though, he spends most of his afternoons sitting in the living room with his Walkman and a tall bottle of water. He has a higher calling.

He pulls his bathrobe close around his shoulders and starts the long walk home. Passing a bread truck making an early morning delivery, he stops under an awning to blow his nose. Behind a rack of hamburger buns he sees Miss Christie's Cadillac pull into a paid parking lot next door. Aha! So she's a little bit late this morning. So she's falling a little behind. Maybe the time has come to start looking for new instructors after all. He sinks his fists deep into his robe's oversized pockets and swings them back and forth. He is a dragonfly warming up his wings. He's going to get her this time for sure.

"Well, well, well," he says. "If it isn't Miss Christie!"

Miss Christie's broad shoulders make her look like a grandfather clock. Her raincoat is dark brown. Her lips, firmly pressed together in a straight line, remind him of grapes about to turn into raisins. She carries a leather satchel in one hand and an old-fashioned lunch pail in the other.

"Mr. Reeser!" she says brightly. "I should have known you'd be here this morning."

"I've been waiting," he says. "For a while now."

Miss Christie, who must be pretending not to notice his bathrobe and shower shoes, walks quickly to the front door of the music studio. Her key, flashing against the morning sun, unlocks the metal door with a speed and precision he's yet to witness from

anyone else on this recital day. Miss Christie is old enough to be his mother, but she'll probably maintain the music studio until well after he's dead. She is not exactly of this era – her clothing and demeanor seem like they're from the Great Depression – but she also has a forward look about her, a kind of futuristic nonchalance that hints at her intimate familiarity with horoscopes, calendars, maps of exotic locales. She seems to know things, Miss Christie does, and no matter how many times he feels the impulse to trade her in for a more expensive model, the sound of her voice always makes him change his mind. Besides, he knows his daughter would never think of taking lessons from anyone else.

They're inside the studio now and the heavy metal door sweeps a gust of crunchy leaves inside with them. Miss Christie turns on the coffeepot.

"Shall I make enough for two?" she asks. He nods with grateful acceptance and flip-flops over to the radiator on the wall. When he thinks Miss Christie isn't looking, he puts his daughter's clarinet case on the windowsill and studies some sheet music on a wooden stand. He recognizes the way the notes rise and fall on the page, but the clutter of crescendos and key signatures remind him music is a specialized language – Miss Christie's language. He'll never understand the relationship of sound to meter in the same intuitive way his daughter always has. Miss Christie herself is a low and melodious refrain: he can hear the series of half notes in his head. She sounds like a harpsichord in the flooded basement of a monastery.

"I'd like to talk to you about the recital tonight," he says. "I don't think Denise is ready."

Miss Christie polishes the outside of the coffee maker with a cloth diaper. She spends extra time on the plastic handle. "Denise is ready," Miss Christie says. "The question is, are you?"

This is not the first time Miss Christie has insulted him with her accusations of stage-fathering. Once, during Denise's duet with a visiting flautist, Miss Christie leaned over and whispered into his ear. *Your daughter's very good*, she said. *You, on the other hand, are not.* "Well, fuck you, lady," he had wanted to say back. What did she know? He used to play the guitar. He had painted with oils. He could still recognize passion. He knew how life imitated art. And just because he supports his daughter and encourages her interest in music doesn't mean he's some kind of meddling monster. He's the guy with the checkbook, that's all. The guy who paid Miss Christie's rent, in case she's forgotten.

He takes off his bathrobe. The terry cloth's faded gray and white color makes him feel like a dog – a dirty old beagle or a Great Pyrenees. He hangs his mangy fur on a silver coat rack by the studio's front door. Miss Christie's brown overcoat already hangs on the highest hook.

"I'm always ready for recital day," he says. "But her reeds. They're brand new. She can't play tonight with brand new reeds for chrissake. She'll sound like a series of squeaky door hinges – or worse, she'll sound like a beginner." He unzips his daughter's clarinet case and feels around for the new pack of reeds when Miss Christie interrupts him. She offers him an earthen mug of coffee.

"I spoke with Denise on the telephone," she says "She assures me her reeds are in fine condition. But they might not be if you continue to tamper with them without her permission. Here, warm yourself now."

"I'm not tampering!" he says. "And you can keep your early morning beverage service, thanks. I'll bet it tastes like mud." He immediately regrets having insulted Miss Christie's coffee. He could use something to make him feel more alert.

"I'll just put it right here on the windowsill," she says. "You can have it when you're ready."

So she doesn't even care about Denise's new reeds. Typical. She probably wants Denise to mess up tonight. She probably wants to make sure she herself can still lay claim to the title of world's best woodwind player. Miss Christie, he decides, does not have his daughter's best interests at heart.

He watches her put cream and sugar into her own earthen mug. She taps her spoon four times on the rim and tears open the foil corner of a granola bar package. Neatly arranging a cloth napkin onto a rolling teacart, she stops to check her hair in the reflection of a silver serving tray. She sighs. Finally, she abandons her breakfast in favor of pushing the dust broom across the studio's floor. He watches her make long, slow circles around the open room. When she's facing away from him, he takes a furtive sip from his cup.

"Tastes good," he says. "I guess the coffee tastes pretty good."

"I knew you'd think so," she says, shaking the broom into a far corner. "Now, about the recital – "

"I have nothing more to say about the recital," he says. "I have come to accept what you say about the reeds, but I'll kindly ask that you not jinx this evening's performance with too much of your analytical talk."

She lets the broom handle fall to the floor with a thud. He counts four beats before she answers him. "That's fine, Mr. Reeser," she says. "That's just what I've come to expect from you, really. If you'd like more coffee, help yourself. In the meantime, I'll be finishing my morning meal and catching up on my correspondence. If I can help you with anything, please do let me know."

That's Miss Christie for you. Polite to the bitter end. She'd probably offer breath mints to a highjacker. So what if he's come here for the express purpose of provoking her? Once again, his plan has failed. He's always hoping Miss Christie will lose her cool. If she would just back off from the patient schoolmarm routine, he could finally get a chance to show off his musical knowledge. He understands commitment like no one else. He believes in his daughter's potential for greatness, he'd like to tell her. He knows about sacrifice. He's ready to bleed.

Miss Christie takes delicate bites form her granola bar and writes with a fountain pen. He'd like to see what she's writing, but he takes another sip from his coffee instead. Time to go home. Denise will wake up any minute now and wonder where he is. He zips up her clarinet case. Holding the precious cargo carefully between his knees, he puts on his bathrobe.

"Until this evening," he says, his hands ready to push hard against the metal safety bar on the studio's front door.

"Indeed," says Miss Christie, without looking up. "Oh, and Mr. Reeser?"

"Yes?"

"There's a pair of socks in the receptacle at your feet."

He looks down and – sure enough – the "Lost and Found" crate contains, among other miscellaneous artifacts of careless music students, an old pair of Girl Scout socks. He sits on the edge of the windowsill and puts them on.

"Thank you, Miss Christie," he says. "Thank you, and good morning."

He hears the studio's door fall closed behind him, and he's back on the city street again, only this time he's not alone. Men in business suits stare at him. Women with baby strollers steer clear of the potential fright lurking in the bristles of his unshaven face. A boy on a skateboard frowns. Avoiding a sympathetic look from a bus driver stopped at an intersection, he keeps his hands tight in the pockets of his bathrobe and starts the long walk home.

* * *

Denise doesn't worry when she wakes up to find her father missing from their downtown apartment. She simply goes about her morning routine, feeds the fish in the saltwater aquarium and quickly dresses in her tidy school uniform. She spends some time wondering where her clarinet has gone and finally realizes her father must have taken it with him to Miss Christie's. She turns on the radio and packs her lunch, a sandwich and a piece of fruit.

"You're back," she says. She jumps off a tall stool in the kitchen. "Nice socks."

"You're up already," he says, looking red from the cold. "And what's with the penguin suit anyway, you're at home today, remember?"

"I have a test today," she says. "Discrete Math. But shhh, it's a secret."

"Funny," he says. "Brilliant." He scratches his head and says, "Why didn't you tell me you already talked to Miss Christie about your new reeds?"

She has long since given up on making music-related purchases without throwing her father into a panic. She knows she probably should have told him about the new reeds in the first place; he checks her clarinet case every Monday before she leaves for school. He's the guy with the checkbook, he always says; he can inspect the goods as necessary.

She unpacks the lunch she just packed, puts her sandwich in the refrigerator, and stirs some Cream of Wheat into a pot on the stove.

"I thought I might be able to make it to the bus stop before your return from the recital day ritual," she says. "You didn't have your usual long philosophical talk with Miss Christie, I guess."

"She made me mad," her father says. "She accused me of tampering with your reeds."

"But you were, though – tampering, I mean?"

"I do not tamper," he says. "I simply give my stamp of approval, that's all."

Denise knows her father's stamp of approval is one that always comes with a price. She doesn't want to stay home today to practice her clarinet. She's good – she knows that much – but she's not so good that scouts from the London Symphony Orchestra might show up at tonight's recital to try to lure her away from the seventh grade. She has grown accustomed to staying home from school on recital day, but she only goes along with the whole charade to keep her father from throwing a tantrum. She wants to keep him happy.

"Go to the living room," she tells him. "Cream of Wheat in exactly six minutes."

"That's my girl," he says. "My sweet little girl."

"And take a shower," she says, following him out the swinging doors, through the hallway, and into the maze of magazines and books stacked high in every corner of the living room. "I think it's been awhile since you've bathed."

But her father has fallen face first into the pillows of the leather sofa, the belt from his bathrobe like a string on a sinking kite. She'll probably have to wake him when his breakfast is ready.

She's ready for her mother to come home from her business trip. Exhausted and hungry, she's been her father's sole caretaker for the last five days. She shouldn't say "caretaker," though. Not very nice. Makes her father sound like a mental patient or an idiot savant. He's actually more like someone who always imagines himself on a game show about the artistic process. *Arty Party* or *Van-go-go-goh!* He's the guy at the game show's celebratory end, the one who wins the super pyramid jackpot and drags his family up to the stage to get soaked in confetti. She imagines him shaking the hand of the game show host. He's doing a quiet but very noticeable dance, the keys to his brand new car jiggling in a helicopter's circle around his head.

After a couple of drinks, he'll admit the family money has spoiled him. He always talks about Ruth Lilly and her $100 million dollar donation to *Poetry* magazine. He'd like to make that kind of statement someday, he says. He'd like to show the world where its priorities should be.

"But Dad," she says when she carries his breakfast tray into the living room. "The world doesn't want your kind of money. I've been thinking about that."

He bolts awake on the couch. "I'm not asleep!" he says. "Did you think I was asleep?"

"I thought you needed something to eat," she says. "So have at it."

He grabs the breakfast tray and immediately takes a swig of orange juice. "Tastes like a wildflower," he says. "Tastes like the fresh part of Lake Michigan. Tastes like the evening summer breeze."

"It tastes like oranges," she says. "I'm serious."

He gulps the rest as if he were a child learning how to swim. Is she supposed to think this is how Mr. Hip Dad behaves? She's not impressed.

Her father always wanted a son. In the corner of the ink blotter on his desk, he keeps a photograph of her male cousin – a six-year-old dynamo with a baseball glove. She doesn't play any sports, so the clarinet has become her private Olympic trial. And since she's not interested in cheerleading or boyfriends, she's convinced she'll grow up to be a spinster like Miss Christie. As soon as she started getting serious about the clarinet, she boldly declared she'd never want any children.

"Come on Denise," her father says when he places her clarinet case in her lap. "What if your mom and I had said the same thing before you were born?"

"I wouldn't know the difference," she says. "I have things to do, Dad. What's so difficult about that for you to understand? I have my music, my chemistry, my French. I don't want anyone to get in my way."

"Absolutely," he says. "You've got your head on straight, kid. Ready to practice?"

She was. Next to the photograph of her athletic young cousin, her father kept a Xerox copy of the sight-reading scorecard from her last audition. She hadn't missed a single point. But she never failed to notice the lack of her photograph, especially since her family saw the dynamo male cousin only every year at Christmas and on the occasional Thanksgiving. Her father loved the sound of her clarinet, but somehow couldn't stand the way she looked. She was ugly.

"You're not ugly," her father says toward evening on recital day. She sits at his feet while he French braids her hair. "No one thinks you're ugly."

"No one thinks I'm pretty either," she says. "An important distinction."

"Everyone thinks you're pretty."

"No they don't. You think I'm pretty decent looking, but only because half my genes come from you. Everyone else takes one look at me and says, *Oh you know that Denise. She's very smart. Very talented. Oh did I mention she's smart? Very talented, too.* They don't mention my looks at all."

"Good Christ," he says. She can feel him jabbing a bobby pin into her scalp. He's not much of a hair stylist, but he insists on helping her get ready for every recital. She endures the French braiding process as a way to keep him from trying to pick out her clothing.

"Kids today," he says. "We never worried about things like that when I was fourteen."

"Yeah but you wanted to right?"

"Hell no," he says. "When I was fourteen, I was terrified of all human company. I played chess with a kid from my basketball team, and there was another guy on my block who taught me how to play acoustic guitar. I didn't know any girls."

"You just don't remember," she says. "It was too long ago."

Her father is old. He is older than her mother, older than her friends' fathers, older than most of her teachers. Only Miss Christie seems more knowledgeable. She's spent much of her childhood feeling embarrassed about his lack of a real job, but recently her junior high companions all seem impressed with his messy hair and relaxed attitude. She's ready to go to the recital.

"Gorgeous," he says when she comes out of her bedroom. She wears a long black skirt and a sweater with pearl buttons. "The musician enters stage right."

She feels like she might as well be wearing a Halloween costume. Recital clothes always make her look like an oil slick. She's glad so many serious concertgoers often close their eyes. Better to hear the music, they say, but Denise could guess their true motives. She wasn't the only one, either. Most string players her age had serious problems with acne.

"Don't forget your metronome," her father says, stuffing sheet music into her clarinet case. "You'll need some established rhythm for your warm-up."

She assures him Miss Christie will have a metronome or two, and, besides, she's been warming up all day.

"Oh god I've ruined you," he says. "How're your chops? Tell the truth."

"My chops are fine," she says. "Stay calm."

Her father looks like an 80's pop singer in his loose jacket and piano keyboard tie. At least he finally managed to take a shower. Miss Christie surely will notice the overwhelming scent of his cologne.

"I'm a rock," he says. "Nerves of steel."

* * *

Miss Christie is not the kind of woman who would host a recital without refreshments. In fact she's brought three punch bowls – two cut crystal glass and one pewter. She lights the candelabra and spreads rose petals on the tablecloth. Earlier she polished the floors and set up ten rows of wooden folding chairs. In each chair she placed a velvet cushion and on each cushion she placed a program; she did the calligraphy herself. Her younger students would be doing solos this evening, and the woodwind quartet would perform a brand new selection. The world premier's local composer already was seated in the front row. Miss Christie has been through a thousand recitals by now, but still feels her pulse quicken during the warm-up session.

"Denise," Miss Christie says to her most talented student. "I trust you've been preparing all day."

Denise nods and begins another scale. Miss Christie, pleased to see Mr. Reeser has finally mastered the French braid, touches the top of Denise's head. She's terribly fond of her but worries about her health. Poor Denise always looks a like a wilted summer weed. She's terribly serious, much like Miss Christie herself was at that age. As a result, Miss Christie's other pupils are afraid of Denise's dark eyes and quiet

determination. They mostly avoid her. Her father, sadly, has made her a little more popular.

"Hey Denise," another student says. He's a cellist, long-legged and aggressive. "Your dad bring his friends?"

Past recitals brought some of Mr. Reeser's local cronies, aging alcoholic musicians with names like Boogie Bob and The Finger. Denise's colleagues were impressed by these fellows and their *yeah man* talk of the old days. One of them had written a forgettable song for the Rolling Stones.

"Not tonight," Denise says without looking up from her warm-up.

The cellist, clearly annoyed by getting the brush-off, shuffles over to the opposite corner of the studio. Miss Christie taps him on the shoulder and tells him to be seated. She sees him whisper something in the ear of another boy, a trombone player with holes in the knees of his pants. She knows they're speaking of poor Denise, making adolescent jokes about her flat chest and stringy hair. Their teasing is not uncommon. For their cruelty, Miss Christie hates these boys, hates the way they underestimate Denise's superior intellect. One day, Miss Christie knows, Denise will bravely meet their gaze. Instead of ignoring them in favor of her clarinet, she will look up from her music stand and beat them at their own game of cheap insults. On that day, her loneliness will begin.

"Good evening, everyone," Miss Christie says. Conversations stop in mid-sentence. Her presence is a commanding one, she knows. "Please take your seats. Our recital will begin shortly."

Mr. Reeser raises an encouraging fist at Denise. When Miss Christie heads for her place in the audience, she hears Denise take a deep breath as she walks by the stage.

Poor girl, she looks so nervous, so sweaty. The lights dim and Miss Christie's first student, a four-year-old son of two local doctors, takes his seat at the piano. He plays "The Merry Farmer," a familiar selection played at almost every recital. Miss Christie finally starts to relax. In all honesty, her anxiety troubles her. Why should she get so nervous? She's in charge of these wayward young musicians. If only they would take their music as seriously as they seem to take themselves. The four-year-old fumbles through to the end, forgetting the crescendo in the final measure. Miss Christie looks down at her program, one last check for misspellings. The audience applauds for the merry farmer, his merry barnyard and merry plow. The four-year-old bows dramatically at the edge of the stage. Miss Christie's applause is clipped and thunderous. She stares hard at the young virtuoso. When she manages to grab his attention, he immediately retreats to his folding chair upstage. She's glad for his obedience.

The younger children finish their solos, the string players muddle through their ensemble piece, and the woodwind quartet takes the stage. Denise orchestrates the movement of folding chairs and music stands. Two large boys push the piano out of the way.

The local composer, creasing the edges of his bow tie, squirms in the seat next to Miss Christie's. He whispers something under his breath.

"Beg pardon," Miss Christie whispers back.

"Nothing," he says. "Never mind."

He crosses his legs and bounces his ankle up and down. Miss Christie has seen wind-up toys behaving better than this. She leans forward, places a steady hand on his shoe, and tells him to relax.

"Intermission," he says. "We should take a break."

Miss Christie again looks down at her program. She didn't schedule an intermission, but the young composer seems forlorn. His piece, she's afraid, isn't exactly his best work. She should know. When he was a child, he took his music lessons from her. *Every good boy does fine,* she probably told him a thousand times. She used to think young people could memorize with ease. In addition, they believed everything she told them. Not so anymore. These days the children took lessons only to enhance their scholarship applications to prestigious high schools and universities. Sometimes they wanted to be in a rock band. The young composer's parents, those many years ago, had taken note of his interest in hymns. Every Sunday, he would memorize that morning's selection and spend all afternoon singing at the top of his lungs. His parents said they wanted to encourage his curiosity, but Miss Christie thought it more likely they just wanted to get him out of the house. Intelligent children always suffer in that way. She looks over at the young composer's pleading face and rises from her chair.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she says. "Please take a moment to stretch your legs. Our world premier will begin in just five minutes."

Audience members begin their polite chatter. Their programs crinkle and fall to the floor. A line forms at the ladies' restroom. The young composer's body, so stiff before, immediately goes limp. "Thank you," he says. Miss Christie can't help but notice the shallow quality of his breathing. Perhaps he needs his asthma inhaler.

"Take a deep breath" she says. "You're setting a bad example for our young musicians."

She looks up at Denise, who seems relieved for the extra time. She's helping the oboist adjust her music stand. The young composer steps up onto the stage. Worried, Miss Christie follows him.

"Just one little change," he says, pulling a pencil from his breast pocket. "These two half notes at the second ending? Should be a whole note. Definitely a whole note." Miss Christie nods her approval, and the musicians make note of the change. They're used to this composer's fiddling, but their professionalism in this situation is a pleasant surprise. Only Denise looks taken aback. Miss Christie quickly sees the reason why.

"What's the big idea?" Mr. Reeser says, stepping onto the stage. "There's no intermission on the program. This recital's gone awry Miss Christie, and you know it."

"Dad," Denise says, pointedly.

"Ah, Mr. Reeser," the young composer says, reaching out to shake his hand. "Good to see you looking so well. Mrs. Reeser's out of town I presume? Denise's playing is just marvelous these days, simply superb. I was just sitting there thinking to myself, oh my, that Denise Reeser! Why spoil her magnificence with a couple of crappy half notes at the end? Denise Reeser deserves a nice fat whole note, the size of a ballpark frank!"

Denise's face is red. Miss Christie wants this charade to come to an end.

"Gentlemen," she says. "The program will continue as scheduled. Please compose yourselves and be seated. Do I make myself clear?"

"Something's not right here, Miss Christie," Mr. Reeser says. He steps off the stage and wipes his palms on the front of his pants. "I'm going to sit down now. But I'll be watching – no, scratch that, I'll be *listening* – for signs of trouble."

"Take care-uh yaself!" The young composer shouts after him.

Silent and angry, Miss Christie stares. The young composer takes his seat and buries his head in his program. She should make a practice of shaming him more often. Finally, the lights dim. When Miss Christie rises from her chair, the audience bursts into applause.

"Thank you," she says. "Good evening."

She doesn't need to say anything more. Everyone settles into position and the young composer nods at Denise. The piece begins slowly and Miss Christie closes her eyes. Poor Denise. Her musical ability will only cause her trouble. Maybe she will do Denise a favor someday and tell her to get out while she still can. Denise wouldn't listen, of course. Miss Christie, who spent her entire childhood traveling with her father's low-class swing band, wishes someone would have taken the time to teach her something useful – something like electronics repair or dog grooming. Instead, she learned to play the piano before she learned to walk. When she was nine, her father made her play the bugle at a Veteran's Day ceremony in someone else's town in a faraway state. Her gums had been bleeding all day from the recent loss of a tooth. She told her father she was in too much pain to perform, but he insisted. She was supposed to play *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Standing at the center of the gymnasium, she realized her toes were in the exact spot where basketball players jumped into the air at the beginning of every game. Everyone cheered for basketball players; maybe they would cheer for her too. The town's mayor nodded at her to begin. Her mouth ached. She put the bugle to her lips and blew, but nothing came out. She was embarrassed, but not as embarrassed as her father was. Like bandits in an old-style Western, they skipped town under cover of night.

Before she has a chance to plan Denise's future, the quartet arrives at the second ending. Denise takes a breath and blows into her clarinet.

Thank you, Denise, Miss Christie says over punch and cookies at recital's end. A lovely performance, as always.

Mr. Reeser says, You're Welcome, Miss Christie.

Denise tucks her hair behind her ear, stares at her shiny shoes.

Miss Christie takes Denise's hand. She wants to tell Mr. Reeser to zip his lips. But before she says anything at all, she counts to four in her head, a whole note, or two halves.

Tragedy and the Common Woman

It's the day after Thanksgiving, and Willy Loman is back. We call him Willy Loman because he played Willy Loman in my husband's college production of *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman paints his fingernails black and plays *Taps* on our upright piano. He fancies himself a performance artist, but his attempts at serious dramatic showmanship always make us laugh. If you ask him, Willy Loman will tell you he just wants to entertain. But his joker's impulse, his overwhelming desire to make the royal couple fall out of their thrones, his carefully studied card tricks – all seem pathetic when everyone's sober. Willy Loman has become a fixture in our household. I wonder if he'll ever leave.

Things were a little better around our house before Willy Loman. My husband, who used to design sets for big touring productions out of New York, makes his living these days by teaching theater history at Oklahoma State University. When we first moved to this college town, he would decorate the attic, his carefully chosen set dressings like Jimmy Stewart's honeymoon house in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

He's my own little Donna Reed, I used to say to the other faculty wives. They would laugh, but they'd look down at their egg salad sandwiches, ashamed. If only they

could spend entire weekends at a time in the otherworldly comfort of the attic. Back then, I was the lucky one, the one with the "last good man."

Help me spread out the rug, my husband would say. We'd drag the weighty bundle out from the brass trunk he stole from some ancient production of *The Pirates of Penzance* and kick it open with a thump onto the dusty floor of the attic. After the candles and the dinner and the bottles of cheap champagne, I'd sprawl out in the middle of the Oriental rug, stretching my limbs out from my center, flying.

When you fall asleep, he said, putting another record on the phonograph. When you fall asleep, I'll roll you up in the rug and pack you away in the trunk. I'll only get you out again the next time we do *Pirates of Penzance*. Or *Death of a Salesman*.

Why *Death of a Salesman?*

Because you're the only one who could possibly keep Willy Loman from killing himself.

Sure, I'd say, laughing, sleeping.

Over the years, though, the attic became crowded with costumes from the theater and old furniture from the lower levels of our house. We never went up there. My husband, formerly so spontaneous, became very worried about matters such as life insurance and tax write-offs. Worse than that, he started to hate me.

You remind me of New York, he said one day in the laundry room.

We met on the set of an off-Broadway musical review, but our life in the city was so long ago I sometimes forget all about our Brooklyn apartment, the taxicab rides and take-out dinners. He always remembers.

I was a failure in New York, he said, matching socks from the dryer. You remind me of hard times. For you, I will always be a tragic case of lost opportunity.

I added bleach to the washing machine and told him he was talking nonsense. You weren't a failure, I said. And besides, we live here now. You're very popular. Your students think you're some kind of genius.

This is Oklahoma, he said. You don't understand.

* * *

Willy Loman was here yesterday for Thanksgiving, but he's back again today. Something to do with a light fixture in the kitchen. The chandelier's a heavy old thing, modeled after the great ships of Ancient Greece. When Willy Loman sees the giant iron comedy and tragedy masks hanging from either side, he says, This thing's a charmer. What a trip to charm school. He pulls his hair back into a ponytail and tightens it at the nape of his neck.

Willy Loman has been working on his Ph.D. in theatre history for six years now. My husband is starting to get worried about the prospect of his graduation. If Willy Loman surprises us all and finishes his dissertation, there will be no more cleaning out of the gutters, no more painting of the molding around the kitchen cabinets, no more transportation of heavy cardboard boxes in the back of my husband's truck.

What's happened to you, my husband said to me while I was getting dressed. You used to look like a dancer.

I laced up my tennis shoes. I used to *be* a dancer, I told him.

I know, he said. That's the problem. What are you now?

I didn't say anything in reply, but the answer was simple. I was nothing. I'm nothing now.

* * *

Willy Loman is always asking for my autograph. He has this joke with himself wherein he seeks out painfully ordinary people and pretends to make a big deal of their smallest success.

Carol, he says. You coulda been like Isadora Duncan. You're more like Duncan Hines, but that's OK. I still want your autograph. He pulls a red vinyl, Wal-Mart autograph book out of his back pocket and makes a big show of his generosity. He balances a cheap ballpoint pen on the tips of his fingers.

No, I always say. Put it away, Willy Loman, you have work to do.

My husband says Willy Loman is no good, but he only says so when Willy Loman isn't present. In the middle of the night, just when I think he's falling asleep, my husband will turn to me and say, He shouldn't even be in the program. He never names any names, but I know. Willy Loman has become a symbol of my husband's downfall. Had my husband made a name for himself as a New York set designer, Willy Loman would not exist.

Willy Loman knows he's no star. My husband says he has a heightened sense of irony. One time Willy Loman came over to shampoo the rugs wearing a three piece suit. My husband was out of town.

Howd'ya like my threads, he said. I bought this getup for my encounter with the job market.

Come on, Willy Loman, I said. You know you don't have any job interviews.

He just snapped his fingers and said, I know I don't have any interviews. Why would I have any interviews, right? That's why I'm wearing this suit to shampoo your rugs.

Over the years, I've learned I'm supposed to feel sorry for all of my husband's students, and Willy Loman is no exception. Like so many young scholars of theater history, Willy Loman feels trapped in Oklahoma. How would he ever get discovered? Casting agents, he reminded me, don't make regular stops in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. He shook the can of Carpet Bomber with a great deal of energy, sprayed bubbling foam on the living room carpet, and told me about his troubles.

People are stupid, here, he said, scrubbing. They don't even go to plays. Oklahoma is filled with mindless, trashy cowboys who'd rather watch television. Speaking of television, don't you think I should star in my own infomerical? Willy Loman's Rug-Cleaning Extravaganza! I'd be a hit, don't you think?

You'd be grand, Willy Loman, I said. Can I get you some rubber gloves?

He told me he didn't believe in gloves. Dirt, he said, made him feel more connected to the harsh reality of everyday existence. He asked me how I felt about dirt, and I didn't know what to say. Like housewives throughout eternity, I could fight dirt with the best of 'em. He was probably hoping my answer would be more romantic and/or pornographic, but I didn't – and don't – play those games.

Well, your carpet looks good, he said when he was finished. Thanks to me.

Thanks, Willy Loman, I said. We really appreciate your help.

Thanks for the memories, he said. Lights fade.

It's the day after Thanksgiving, and my husband is getting ready for Willy Loman's arrival. He's arranging the tools out in alphabetical order – hammer, pliers, pry bar, screwdriver – flat head first, then Phillips.

It starts with a C, I say, pulling the leftovers from the refrigerator.

What, he says. He pulls a tape measure from his back pocket.

It starts with a C, I say again. Looking over at my husband, I see he's puzzled which tool could possibly start with a C? I see his lips move, but he doesn't say anything.

Crowbar, I say. Do you want a sandwich?

He places the crowbar beside the hammer and the edge of the table, then puts the ratchet set in between the pliers and the screwdriver. He positions tools lengthwise and diagonally. Finally, he gives up and chucks everything back into the toolbox.

We won't need that shit anyway, he says. If you're making sandwiches, go ahead and make one for Willy Loman.

Willy Loman pulls up on his ten-speed bicycle. The sky looks like rain, so he asks if he can bring his bicycle inside. Sure, I say, at the same time my husband says, No way.

Look at all the mud on those tires, my husband says. Look at all the rust on the spokes. Willy Loman puts his head down and says, Excuse me for living.

My husband says, What? And Willy Loman just says the same thing but louder, exaggerating every word.

That's what I thought you said, my husband says, and slaps Willy Loman hard on the back. Put the damn bike in the garage.

Willy Loman goes straight for the refrigerator. This is standard procedure, so I stay out of his way. He eats a handful of olives and then moves the mayonnaise jar from the top shelf to the bottom. I think he might be looking for the turkey, so I say, The bird's on the counter. I already made you a sandwich.

All right, Willy Loman says. You're the best.

I hand Willy Loman a plate, and my husband wants to know where his sandwich is. Haven't made your sandwich yet, I say, and I can tell he doesn't like my priorities.

Willy Loman says, You can have my sandwich, sir, and my husband says, Nonsense. Carol will make us another one.

Sure, I think. Carol will make us another one. Carol will make the whole Thanksgiving dinner. Carol will wake up at four in the morning and put the turkey in the oven. Carol will make sure all the casseroles are arranged on the table according to color, only to be told later they would have been better arranged by the order in which you're supposed to eat them. And how is Carol supposed to know the order in which you're supposed to eat them?

Well, Carol is informed. You would have known what order to eat them in had they been properly arranged on the table.

They go into the garage, and I make another sandwich, cutting off the crusts, just the way my husband likes.

On Thanksgiving, when Willy Loman was perched on one of the rolling kitchen chairs with his arms in the air, my husband said, Watch it, buddy, that's my wife under there. Precious goods, stolen cargo.

I don't like to be called goods, don't like to be called cargo, but at least he was looking out for me. Other women don't have husbands who look out for them. Other women don't have husbands who, along with their aging graduate students, replace the shelf paper in the kitchen cabinets every year on Memorial Day, rake leaves on Thanksgiving, secure great iron light fixtures whenever the occasion calls for it.

We ate Thanksgiving dinner in the kitchen, beaming in our best clothes under the great, Greek, iron light fixture. Willy Loman put on a tie.

I hope you're not going to use the Corelle, my husband said, arranging the crackers in a circle around the edge of a cheese tray. The Corelle is our casual dinnerware – the cheap Wal-Mart plates that don't break when you drop them on the floor.

I said, What's wrong with the Corelle?

It's Thanksgiving.

We used the Corelle last Thanksgiving.

And I didn't like it.

I liked it just fine, said Willy Loman, snatching a cube of Vermont cheddar. Presentation doesn't matter. It's what's on the plates that counts. Isn't that right, Carol? Why don't you do a little dance for us, Carol? Carol dances with Corelle!

Presentation, my husband says, is everything.

We did not, of course, use the Corelle. We used the good china, stolen from some long-ago production of *A Doll's House*.

Sometime during the mashed potatoes, the great, iron light fixture crashed down on to the table. The stuffing flew.

For chrissake, my husband said. My cheese tray. My beautiful cheese tray.

Willy Loman asked me if I was all right.

Fine, I said. So much for dinner.

Come on Carol, Willy Loman said. Do a tap dance for us. I'll play a little light fixture dirge on the piano.

I felt a migraine coming on. Give it up, Willy Loman.

That's right, my husband said. Give it up. And give me a hand lifting this damn thing down to the floor.

* * *

It's the day after Thanksgiving, and Willy Loman is back again. They've decided to secure the light fixture to the beams in the attic, ensuring it will never again crash on to the table during a meal, thus ruining someone's artistic efforts with the cheese tray. I'm working on the Christmas cards when Willy Loman comes sneaking up behind me.

Where is he? I ask, looking up from some insipid greeting to an ex-roommate.

The attic, Willy Loman says.

Willy Loman is thinking now is his chance. He's thinking he's going to start some torrid affair with the professor's wife, the aging beauty, the ex-dancer, the woman whose needs could not possibly be satisfied by a washed-up old professor who insists on using the Industrial Shop-vac on the interior of his truck every time he's in the campus scene shop.

Forget it, Willy Loman, I say. You can just forget it.

Forget what?

You're not getting my autograph, I say, licking a stamp. Now go and see if he needs some help up there.

That would make a good story, wouldn't it? Willy Loman and I have sex amidst the Christmas cards while my husband sweats over the alphabetical arrangement of a crowbar in the attic. Or what if I went up to the attic myself and clubbed them both to a bloody mess with that very same crowbar? Then, I roll them up into the great Oriental rug and stuff them into the *Pirates of Penzance* trunk? I only get them out again when the police come, and even then I laugh, say they must have killed one another. Their rehearsal for *Lord of the Flies* got a little out of control.

But I don't do those things. I finish the Christmas cards. I wrap up another sandwich for Willy Loman to take back to his apartment. I hold my husband's hand as Willy Loman speeds off on his ten-speed bicycle. I only offer a slight sigh when my husband asks me if my hands are clean.

Well, I'm sorry, he says. I don't want to catch a cold.

Or typhoid, I say. Or yellow fever.

Any of those, he says. Can I have another sandwich?

Sure, I say, and guess what, I make him one. I fantasize about refusing, but I never do. I'll probably make him another one tomorrow. He'll complain when I forget to cut off the crusts. Next year at this time, I'll make more sandwiches, cut off more crusts. I'll work all day in the kitchen. The three of us will enjoy Thanksgiving, a day of many blessings. Sitting at the dining room table, I'll be grateful for every crumb.

Honk, Honk, Dead

Chivalry

Nate said he didn't know how to pour cement, but he read the directions on the package and went from there.

"It's called concrete, anyway," Eleanor told him. Eleanor was busy putting the parrots back in their cages, but she talked to him over her shoulder.

"It's not called concrete," Nate said. He wiped his hands on one of Eleanor's dishtowels, a cloud of dust erupting over the sink. "It says right here on the package it's called cement."

"The package is wrong."

"You're wrong."

"Wrong! Wrong!" said the biggest parrot.

"Shut up," said Eleanor and Nate.

"Play ball!" the biggest parrot said. "Fight! Fight!"

"Anyway," Eleanor said. She closed and the latched the cage door. "Thanks for pouring."

But Nate hadn't poured anything yet. For all Eleanor knew, he might never manage to actually help her. Every week he brought the package from the garage, read the directions, and said, "Well, you really need that block." He'd go home, grade papers, and play with his Johnny West action figures. Eleanor had seen him set them up in long anachronistic lines – cowboys fighting English knights, Roman soldiers aiming their spears at Robert E. Lee. He liked to watch them kill each other.

Eleanor remembered when the hot water wouldn't turn off in her kitchen. She called Nate, but he didn't pick up. She knew he had caller ID. She also knew he was home – *Storm Chasers* was on television – so she gave him hell on his machine.

"Hello, Nate!" she said, the gush of water flooding from the kitchen sink in the background. "I could really use your help right now."

The parrots yelled from their cages.

"Are you there," she said. "Pick up."

He didn't.

"Listen, I'm in trouble here. I imagine you're otherwise engaged? The next time you go out of town on one of your ski vacations, don't expect me to come over there and take care of Pecos and Company. I hope Pecos flies into the ceiling fan. I hope his blood splatters all over your ceiling. I hope his feathers get caught in your air ducts. I hope you cry."

"Don't cry out loud," one of her parrots sang.

Eleanor hung up and ran a search on "plumbing" on the Internet. She found a pair of pliers in the garage and problem solved. Nate so often made himself available for

household repair projects, but Eleanor hated feeling like she always owed him something in return. Thanks to the Web, she thought, she might never need his help again.

Fellows

Nate was fresh out of graduate school. He walked with a confidence that reminded Eleanor of the high school seniors she saw every year – the ones with the record-breaking SAT scores. The university held a convention for them in May, something called the Scholars' Working Weekend. Walking around campus, the young students took up as much space as they possibly could, their arms outstretched like wings and their noses loudly sniffing the spring air. Nate was like that. When the two of them walked from the admissions office to his car or from the history building to the coffee shop, he practiced his lecture notes aloud, timing the rhythms of his proclamations to the crunch of the gravel underneath their feet. *The famine,* he'd say. *The destruction. Many. People. Died.* Eleanor had read up on her ancient history. She knew when Nate was exaggerating. But she didn't say anything; she just walked beside him or behind him, grateful for the company.

Tornado

One of Eleanor's parrots was biting her again. Every time she stuck her hand in to refill his water cup, he grabbed her thumb in his beak, clamped down hard, and made the timid sound of a parrot smooch. Eleanor wasn't sure if he was showing affection or aggression, but she was tired of bleeding.

"Look here, Custer," she said, dropping the water cup into its plastic holder. "Maybe I'd like to have a little birdie stew for dinner."

Custer rang his bell.

Eleanor would not have birdy stew for dinner that night. She'd probably have a microwave meal again, something with noodles and cheese. She'd lived alone for 21 years now. Over dinner, she read about a fraternity boy who attended the university where she worked as an admissions counselor. The fraternity boy died of alcohol poisoning after drinking 21 shots on his twenty-first birthday. Eleanor looked at the boy's photograph, his slicked hair and cocky smile still very much alive on the front page of the local paper. Twenty-one years ago, when that boy was born in a hospital in the middle of a wheat field somewhere, Eleanor packed up and moved out of her ex-husband's house for the last time. She'd had a number of boyfriends since then, but she'd grown tired of the predictable routine of anger and neglect. These days, she thought, she'd settle for casual human company, the kind you could get in a coffee shop or an art museum. Nate had seemed an appropriate choice.

Custer squawked from his perch in the living room while Eleanor ran cold water over her thumb. She thought about calling Nate to see if he wanted to go to the Third Annual Super-Pro Bird Extravaganza in Oklahoma City, but Nate wasn't having much to do with Eleanor these days, not since the aviary mess in her backyard. Whenever she saw him on campus, he looked away. The one time they met in the Student Union, he looked at the wall behind her and talked of attending ancient history conferences and proctoring comprehensive exams. *Sorry,* he said. *Lots to do.* Disappointed, she told herself she was

better off without him. Eleanor wrapped a Band-Aid around her thumb and stared at something on the Internet – the weather or the news.

Fate

They first met at the bird store in Tulsa. Eleanor was looking at the canaries when Nate popped in over her shoulder and said, "The females don't sing, you know."

Eleanor was annoyed. She hated strange men in bird stores. They were always washed-up old hippies or lonely librarian-types. Nate looked like an unfortunate combination of both.

She said, "Thanks for the tip."

Nate leaned in closer. "And even the males don't sing in the summertime."

"Funny," she said, "It's July."

"That is *not* funny," he said. "It would be funny if it were, say, September. Now September is a funny month!"

Eleanor stuck her head inside the cage and whistled at one of the canaries. She said, "Don't be shy, little guy. Put on a show."

"He won't sing. His feathers are falling off. He's feeling bad."

"Funny," she said.

"What's funny?"

"Middle of July and *you* could practically star in your own musical."

Nate didn't say anything. He paid for his parrot pellets and waved goodbye.

"La la la," he said. "Do re mi."

Tornado

The Band-Aid didn't help. Eleanor sucked her thumb and remembered why the company of birds always seemed like a double-edged sword. Custer would never learn.

Judy screamed, "Guess What!" from her cage in the kitchen and Eleanor yelled back, her usual, "What?" But Judy didn't have an answer. She just kept up a steady chorus, "Guess what – guess what – guess what!" until Eleanor had to shut off Judy's light and throw the cover over her cage. Judy fell silent, asleep, and Eleanor thought about going to the store for some antiseptic, but didn't feel up to the drive. Nate had exhausted her these last couple of months. They always did everything together – bird shows, bird stores, bird symposia. Eleanor felt certain Nate was still attending these events without her. She could have gone alone, but she didn't want to risk running into him. Custer ripped the newspaper on the bottom of his cage, and the two cockatiels whistled at one another, a game of melody and chance. They knew that if they whistled long enough, Eleanor would bring them new seed.

First Date

They met again at the presidential picnic for incoming freshmen. Wedged in between a tall boy in a baseball cap and another tall boy in a baseball cap, Eleanor spooned some wilted salad greens onto her paper plate, but she didn't feel much like eating. She'd had a long series of interviews that day – immersion encounters they called them designed to get the freshmen ready for the perils of their first year. *What are you*

afraid of, she'd asked them all. Mostly they just shrugged. She nodded, a sympathetic finger under her chin. Maybe they weren't afraid of anything. Maybe they were afraid of everything. Either way, Eleanor was sure they would strut around campus, no fear in their eyes, their backpacks slung low. And while 18-year-old after 18-year-old let their shoelaces drag the carpet in the back corner of her office, Eleanor pretended to listen to their sighs and grunts. In her head she designed an imaginary line of T-shirts for young adults. *Stay away from me.* The T-shirts would read. *I might kill you.*

Nate stood in the shade of one of the president's poplar trees, one corduroy leg in front of the other like in a catalog for camping equipment or fishing rods. He chewed with his mouth open and talked to a woman Eleanor recognized as the head of the History Department. Eleanor used to take care of the history head's cats when she went out of town, but they'd stopped talking since one of the cats — a 16 year-old Siamese with bladder problems — died on Eleanor's watch. But Nate was laughing and History Head was smiling, so Eleanor thought she might try to be friendly. She threw her wilted greens into a cardboard box underneath the food table, grabbed a taco wrapped in aluminum foil, and headed over.

"The bird guy, right?" Eleanor said, being careful not to interrupt.

History Head nodded at Eleanor. "We have a new cat," she said.

Eleanor nodded back. She offered up some bit of trivia about new cats and old cats and whether or not the old cats can adjust to the new cats.

"Fascinating," History Head said. "You know Nate, then?"

Eleanor shook her head "no," and Nate nodded his head yes, but History Head didn't notice, she just kept going with her Nate-this-is-Eleanor--Eleanor-this-is-Nate.

Nate shook Eleanor's hand and said, "Did you buy the canary?"

Eleanor told him she already had too many birds, and Nate said he already had too many birds, and History Head said she already had too many cats. They all ate tacos.

Going Dutch

Shopping at Home Depot, Eleanor was sure she'd finally get her outdoor aviary. Her backyard already had a nice sized gazebo, but the ground was so uneven she'd have to put the cages on a dangerous slope. Nate looked through a bucket of angle irons and made his promise.

"Yeah, I'll pour the cement," he said. "No problem."

Eleanor believed him. He already had fixed her garbage disposal, put together Judy's new cage, and trimmed the hedges around her front porch. She put a crescent wrench in her shopping cart and said, "I really appreciate this, you know."

"I know," Nate said. "But it's no big deal. What else am I going to do?" They loaded bags of cement into the cart. Eleanor made sure to draw Nate's attention to the flashing gold of her credit card when she paid the cashier. Sure, he was helping her out, but she hoped he would take note of her independence. And while she liked having him around, she didn't want him getting too comfortable.

Courtship

Nate called Eleanor on the telephone one Saturday morning and invited her to the Theta Pond Jamboree.

"A bunch of us are going," he said. "History nerds."

Eleanor, all too familiar with the history department crowd, declined.

"Yeah," Nate said. "I hate 'em too. We'll dodge 'em as soon as we get there."

Since the presidential picnic, Nate and Eleanor had started spending a lot of time together. Nate came to her office on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and picked her up for lunch. They bought season tickets to the theatre together. Eleanor e-mailed Nate about twice a week, sending him links to pet care catalogs and tornado fact-finding bulletin boards. Nate e-mailed her back, sending the same musical greeting card over and over again – three Roman soldiers dancing in a chorus line, their toenails painted gold. *Relax-Relax!* They chanted. *We are Caesar's maniacs!*

"I'll go," Eleanor said, "But we should drive to Tulsa when the festival's over."

"Agreed," Nate said, so they went.

The ducks at Theta Pond rustled around in a jumble of feathers, clearly frightened by all the people and their shiny Mylar nametags that, said, "Welcome to Cowboy Jamboree! My name is _____." Eleanor didn't wear a tag, but Nate wore one that said, "Welcome to Cowboy Jamboree! My name is Alexander the Great."

"Charming," she said.

"Isn't it, though?" Nate thrust his chest forward. His bravado, Eleanor decided, was less than impressive. "Why don't I make you one?"

"What would it say?"

"Why, 'Welcome to Cowboy Jamboree' of course! Then we'd give you a name. Maybe Helen of Troy."

"I'll pass," Eleanor said, but Nate wasn't listening -- he gazed longingly at the face-painting table where most of the history department was crowded around a tall

trashcan full of popcorn. History Head wore a headdress made of rhinestones and feathers. Eleanor spied a line of ducks headed across the street.

"Amazing," she said, "How do they know to use the crosswalk?"

"They don't," Nate said. He managed to abandon hopes of the history crowd in time to hand her a balloon in the shape of a crescent moon. "But they can recognize a car when they come across one. The shiny metal, the roar of the motor. They know when to stay away."

"Staying away would mean avoiding the street altogether."

"Where's the fun in that?" Nate said. "Where's the danger?"

Eleanor didn't know ducks particularly cared about fun or danger. They cared about water and fish and other ducks. Maybe they cared about staying *out* of danger.

She said, "Well, at least the cars always stop for them."

"Crash," Nate said. "Honk, honk, dead."

Eleanor didn't know if Nate meant the car would honk or that the ducks would honk. Maybe the first honk was the car and the second honk was the duck. Maybe it was the other way around.

"Let's go check out the bird store," Eleanor said. They walked by a long series of silver benches, away from the line of ducks in the crosswalk. Eleanor looked behind her. As far as she could tell, all the ducks managed to safely cross the street. She let go of the crescent moon balloon and muddled her way down a hill – Nate ten steps in front of her, the parking garage in plain sight ahead. Why was he always walking in front of her? One day, she thought, he'd fall face first into a mud puddle and she'd have to help him up. He would learn about embarrassment and fear.

Trouble

After Nate returned from the Ancient History conference in New York, he was Mr. Hot and Cold. Even though they saw each other all the time in the Student Union, he'd go for days without talking to Eleanor at all. She could see him looking past her, turning the other way when she came in the double doors. After weeks of silence, he sent her a million e-mails out of the blue. *Where have you been?* He'd write. *Are you duckin' me?* When Eleanor hit reply, she managed her usual pleasantries – jokes about forgetting to clip Nate's wings or trim Nate's claws. *Bye Bye, Birdie,* she wrote. *Fly away home.* Months would go by before she heard from him again, and when he did write, it was the same routine all over again. *Where have you been? Are you duckin' me?*

No. She finally wrote back. *I am not ducking you.* She wouldn't hear back from Nate for a while. Finally, she heard nothing at all. There goes another one, she thought. Maybe she wasn't fit for human company. Maybe Nate was just the wrong kind of human.

Tornado

Eleanor checked the weather for the third time that evening. Her thumb still hurt from before, but at least the throbbing had stopped. The Weather Channel always reminded her of Nate, so she took to getting her forecasts from the friendly man in the

computer instead. His name was Flip or Skip, and he always had good news. If a cold front blew in, he'd just say, "Button up!" Tonight he said, "Watch out for sizzles!" A severe thunderstorm watch was in effect. Eleanor checked the window, and sure enough, low clouds hung around her front porch and the wind chimes rattled in high gear. *It's coming,* Nate would say. *The Plague.* But Nate wasn't there, and he never would be again. Eleanor knew Nate had probably taken his new girlfriend and/or some graduate students to the Super-Pro Bird Extravaganza in Oklahoma City. She imagined his car blowing off the highway, a funnel cloud sweeping him into a vortex of metal and glass. Nate often told her how much the drive from Oklahoma City scared him in bad weather. Again, she thought about calling his house, but didn't. She refilled the seed cups for the cockatiels, who sang merrily at the treat.

Commitment

"This cage is a hunk of junk," Nate said, a screwdriver tucked behind his ear. Eleanor had just bought Judy a shiny new cage, but they were having a hard time getting the old one to come apart.

Eleanor pulled on one of the bars, but it wouldn't come loose.

"I got it," Nate said. "I can get it."

A metal screw popped off and flew into the wall.

Nate said, "I knew I could get it."

Later, over tea and cookies, Eleanor asked him about the Ancient Rome conference in New York.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm leaving tomorrow. Not sure when I'll be back, you know. Thought I'd check out some other stuff while I'm there."

Eleanor, as always, volunteered to take care of Pecos and the rest of his parrots while he was gone.

"Oh yeah," he said. "I meant to tell you about that. I found someone else to take care of the birds." Undergraduates, he said. All of them, he said, were very knowledgeable about the important historical events that shape our world. No problem, they'd take turns feeding.

Eleanor took the teacups to the kitchen. "You're really sweet to help me out so much," she said. "With the cage and all."

Nate followed behind her and let his hand graze her elbow when he put his saucer in the sink. He said, "I'm not so sweet."

She was a little surprised to hear him make such an admission, but she knew – for once – that he was telling the truth.

"I'm tired," she said. "Probably better call it a night."

"I'll be back tomorrow with a better pair of pliers," he said on his way out the door. "Goodnight."

Tornado

Eleanor finally broke down and turned on The Weather Channel. She had to wait 15 minutes for the local forecast, but trouble was definitely coming. The guy on

television talked about air pressure. He told her to put on a football helmet to protect her head from flying debris. Eleanor didn't have a football helmet, so she found a spaghetti sauce pan in the cabinet underneath the sink. She took all the travel cages down from a high shelf in the garage and started to pack everyone up when the doorbell rang. She saw Nate's old blue van in the driveway. *Terror.* She knew he would say. *Destruction. The Wrath of Nature.* Nate appeared at the door, but he didn't say any of those things.

"Judy!" he said, breathless. "Custer! Pack 'em in the van!"

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"Can't I be worried about you?"

"No," she said, and shut the door.

Back in front of the weather forecast, she felt confident she'd done the right thing. He clearly wanted something from her. Friendship? Dependence? Admiration? Whatever it was, Eleanor knew better than to indulge him. She still missed him sometimes, but she was too proud to let him try to help her. She'd rather be alone.

Favors

Another weekend arrived. Arranging all his tools in Eleanor's backyard, Nate leaned shovels against her back fence and hosed out the wheelbarrow. Eleanor offered to help him, but he insisted on doing everything himself.

"Stay out of the kitchen!" he said.

"But you're not *in* the kitchen," Eleanor said. "You're in the backyard."

"That's exactly what I mean," Nate closed the sliding door behind him. "I am the chef," he said, pointing to the yard behind him. "And this is my greatest meal."

For several weekends running he measured and measured again, drew up blue prints, sifted pebbles from the backyard dirt. Eleanor brought him periodic sandwiches and felt both pleased and annoyed he never seemed to leave her side. By the fourth weekend, he had laid out stakes and connected them with string. "You'll have an outdoor aviary," he told her in the living room, "by sundown tonight."

When he finally poured the cement, the birds had already fallen asleep and Eleanor was thinking about going to bed herself. Nate invited four of his graduate students to stand around the perimeter with flashlights. Having Nate around all the time was taxing enough, but the grad students tracked mud on her carpet, stuck their fingers in the birdcages, and played loud music on her stereo. She wanted her house back.

"Looks good," Eleanor came outside in her robe and house slippers.

"Don't look." Nate ordered the flashlights extinguished. "You'll see my masterpiece in the morning."

Eleanor slept late, but when she awoke, she put Judy in her travel cage and took her out to the backyard.

"It's good," Judy said, but she was easy to please.

"Come on kid," Eleanor said, "enjoy your future playground."

The concrete block was a little sloppy, but it effectively leveled the backyard's uneven slope. In the corner closest to the house, Nate had inscribed several names with a stick. *Nate. Judy. Custer. Helen of Troy.*

"You forgot the cockatiels," Eleanor told him later on the phone.

"I couldn't remember their names," he said. "Besides, that would have taken up too much space." How many times had she told him the cockatiels' names? She

suddenly felt like one of those freak-out television wives, the kind who cried when her husband forgot their wedding anniversary. She wouldn't allow him to see her annoyance.

"Thanks," she said. "You're the best."

Vocation

Eleanor worked hard to recruit the best students, but the brightest young scholars didn't usually want to go to her university. She spent her weekends combing through the School News sections of every newspaper in the state, hoping to find willing prospects.

"Don't you get bored with all that teenybopper crap?" Nate asked her during one of the many aviary weekends.

"I like looking for surprises," Eleanor said. "This place could use a few more good students."

"You got that right," Nate said. "If you find any cute ones, let me know."

Eleanor cut out paragraphs about National Merit Scholars and Masonic Lodge Students of Today. She put them in a scrapbook and scribbled notes on the side. *Maybe.* The notes said. *Too Boy Scout-y? Send promotional brochure now.* When she wasn't looking, Nate took ink pens and scribbled mustaches and devils' horns on all the grainy photographs. He scribbled in his own marginalia: *Ugly and Dumb,* he wrote. *Redneck Jerk. Knows nothing about Ancient History.*

Tornado

Nate rang the doorbell again. The rain made Eleanor feel sorry for him, so she opened the door.

"Come in," she finally said. "I'll make you some spaghetti."

"This is not a joke," he said. "There's a tornado WARNING."

Eleanor explained she had just been putting all the birds in the inside bathroom. "I'm prepared," she said. "I've been through this a million times before."

But Nate wasn't budging from the doorway. "We should go," he said. "The Student Union basement is much safer."

"Where are your birds?"

"Already in the van."

"I'm not going with you," Eleanor said, and though she wanted to cave in and offer him a cup of tea for the road, she didn't. Nate's company, once comforting and even mildly entertaining, ultimately felt too much like a perpetual tornado warning. Maybe this time he'd be gone for good.

Payback

The day after Eleanor put the finishing touches on her outdoor aviary, she found a yellow envelope in her mailbox. *Ms. Eleanor Ash,* the envelope said. *Admissions Officer* She took the stamp-less envelope inside and put it on top of a pile of bird catalogs. She forgot all about the mysterious missive until dinner, when she tore open the envelope in between bites of frozen burrito.

Past Due – the notice said – *Bill for Construction Services.* She looked down to the middle of the page where Nate had carefully itemized the aviary's total expenses.

Labor – it said – *36 hours total. $180 due.*

Foundation Materials: $0.00 due.

The tornado didn't come. The guy on television announced the warning's expiration, so Eleanor took all the birds out of the bathroom and returned them to their cages. She covered them and shut off their lights. In the dark, she reached out for the idea of Nate's hand or Nate's shoulder. A foolish gesture, she thought. She turned on her computer. Watching the screen light up, she thought of the way the birds would awaken her in the morning, their bright calls and sweet chirps made only for her.

My Darling Dear

I don't believe in all that ice cream and ponies crap anymore. I can't. The New Hampshire town where I grew up has been taken over by summer people; the flashy professionals who used to winterize their cabins on the outskirts of town have finally grown tired of New York and Boston and even Nashua. The wealthy vultures remain in this small town until the yellow leaves pile up in the parking lots. Unwilling corporate soldiers smile through their fitness-hungry morning walks in the middle of unbearable January. I don't recognize many faces, but I really ought to remember more figures from my childhood – the grocer perhaps, a favorite schoolteacher, the town's one and only traffic cop. They say the owner of the old Toadstool Bookshop lives somewhere on the border between town and country. In the car, I think of myself taking flight on a soft gust of air and hovering over the town cemetery, the headstones crumbling, the moss grown thick on the tree stumps in the valley below.

I'm traveling with my daughter, Lauren, who is fourteen and resentful. She's just become a vegetarian, which is strange, because I always thought she was more concerned with rock bands and clothing labels than she was with the state of our natural habitat. Just last year she was begging me for hundred-dollar cheerleading shoes and going off to

horror movies with a pack of kids from the country club. A couple of months ago she came home from school, called to cancel her subscription to *Seventeen* magazine, and programmed the VCR to tape some kind of PBS special about Karl Marx. I like her more now that she thinks she's a lefty, but she still doesn't like me. Together, Lauren and I are returning to this quiet place so we can have what my books on child development would call "quality interface opportunities" before the divorce is final and Lauren moves to Colorado with her dad. I had thought about doing the whole custody battle routine, but Lauren's dad has a lot more money than I do. He can send her to private school and take her on skiing trips and give her all kinds of opportunities to hang with the natural-living crowd in Boulder. There is no natural-living crowd in Oklahoma. There's only the Bible crowd and the cattle-roping crowd and the very small crowd of those opposed to the Bible and cattle roping.

I've come to think of Lauren's father as just that – Lauren's father. I no longer think of him as my husband. Even the term "ex-husband" sounds like something you might see on a nighttime soap opera or on a commercial for the Psychic Hotline. Over time, he and I have become friendly strangers in a house with three bedrooms. When Lauren and I started off for our final mother-daughter vacation, he emerged from the very office-like headquarters of his bedroom long enough to shake my hand, check his cell phone for missed calls, and carry Lauren's duffel bag to the trunk. He and I haven't had a real conversation for years.

We're on the highway just outside of Peterborough and Lauren says, "So this is it?"

I'm shielding my eyes from the sun's spotty glare. I suddenly covet her sunglasses and then notice for the first time they're too big for her head. She looks like an insect.

"Yeah, this is it," I say. "I don't know why I waited so long to come back."

"Do they have a record store?"

"Not sure. Probably not."

Lauren slumps in the passenger seat and tosses a freckled arm out the window. Our air conditioner broke about 200 miles ago, but the weather here is cool – much cooler than Oklahoma. We turn onto the main road, and I remember the feel of this place, the utter calm. I read on the Internet about the town's board of governors voting to keep McDonald's from opening a restaurant within the city limits. The lack of golden arches gives this place an otherworldly feel – like stepping into a snow globe where you're suddenly alongside a bunch of tiny, rosy-cheeked figurines all clothed in stylish windbreakers. I wonder if I'll run into any of my old friends. Maybe I'll buy a local paper and scan the obituaries. We drive past the Episcopal Church, its red shutters and green lawn bright like modeling clay. The trees are bigger than I remember. The sidewalks are buckled from the constant winter freezing and thawing, but the storefronts look more or less the same – signs lettered in careful calligraphy, polished brass railings, the occasional wooden bench.

"What time is it?" Lauren says. "We haven't eaten anything since Dunkin Doughnuts."

I look down at my watch. The second hand is stagnant, still like the dead August air in Oklahoma so many miles behind us. "I don't know," I tell her. "I keep forgetting my watch is broken."

She sighs. Although she hasn't said so, I sense Lauren blames me for the broken air conditioning, the broken wristwatch, the broken toilet in last night's motel. She doesn't want to be here. I made her come along.

She says, "Well let's stop, anyway. I could use some more granola bars."

"We're almost there," I tell her. "Let's get settled in first, okay?" I try to give her the lightest pat, but she immediately pulls away, her knees a flattened wedge against the passenger door.

"Okay," is all she says in reply, and we're back to another long stretch of silence before we pull into the shaded path leading to the boardinghouse where we'll be staying for the next four days. When I hear the driveway's gravel popping underneath our tires, I feel glad to be on solid ground again, the highway's steady thump still trembling through my every muscle. Maybe a table in the lobby will greet us with a basket full of mints and a wrought iron postcard rack. Perhaps an old piano teacher will give lessons in the sunroom and Lauren will want to sign up. I feel my lungs closing around the mountain air, and the tightness in my chest feels like possibility when we pull up next to a long bed of tulips and overgrown ivy.

"This place looks like a dump," Lauren says, and when I look up at the house I see she has a point. The porch opens up in gaping holes and shingles fall from the roof like matchbooks floating in the wind. Someone clearly has tried to cheer the place up, though, as evidenced by the flowerbeds and the hummingbird feeders and the big terra

cotta pots overflowing with an odd mixture of pebbles and seashells. The mailbox – freshly painted a very bright green – looks out of place against the faded white of the house itself.

"I thought you said we were staying at a boardinghouse," Lauren says, collecting her CDs from the dashboard.

"I did say that," I say. "I mean, there's a Holiday Inn in Keene, but I thought it'd be so much more fun to stay in someone's actual home." Around Lauren, I'm always trying to sound more cheerful than I actually feel. Sometimes I start to hate the mother I fear I've become. I am not the sunny brownie-baking type, nor am I the kind of parent who drags her children on vacations for the educational experience of "cultural enrichment," but thanks to the all-encompassing grouchiness of Lauren's adolescence, I've become a strange combination of both.

Looking again at the bright green mailbox, I decide I'm willing to have a sense of humor about this place. Maybe the kindly old piano teacher still lurks somewhere inside.

"Maybe they're Irish!" I say good-naturedly, but Lauren's blank expression means she doesn't understand or – more likely – doesn't appreciate my attempt to put her at ease. "Look over there," I say, pointing behind a rusty fence. "Looks like they have a dog."

Lauren stands on tiptoes to see behind the fence, but I'm immediately sorry I brought the beagle's wagging tail to her attention. When the divorce is final, our German shepherd will stay in Oklahoma with me. Lauren begged her father to sweep the dog away from my evil clutches, but the Boulder condo has a strict policy against anything with fur. Ever since the rainy Saturday when we sat Lauren down at the dining room

table and made our big announcement, Lauren has been having long, serious talks with the German shepherd every night after dinner. Together they lie on the floor in front of the big screen TV and Lauren whispers into the dog's twitching ear. *I'll be back,* I've heard her say. *Don't worry now, don't worry.*

"I think he likes you," I say when a shiny black nose appears over the top edge of the fence. "Looks like he wants to play."

"Get down!" Lauren says. "No!" This is the way with my daughter. Anything that pleases me suddenly becomes worthy of her intense hatred. My books on child development say all 14-year-old girls can't stand their mothers. The theories differ, but the gist is always the same: approaching adulthood confuses the girl, and just as she sees herself becoming a woman, she suddenly longs for her childhood again and her mother becomes persona non grata. These same books suggest mother-daughter field trips – spontaneous outings to the mall and makeover sessions at expensive salons. I hate the mall, and I haven't worn makeup since the 80's, so I tried some of the books' other suggestions. Following the advice of the experts, I initiated positive encounter moments, short attempts at conversation that usually ended with Lauren flouncing off to her bedroom. I could hear her crying behind the heavy oak door. I'd imagine her sitting there with red streaks running down her face and picture the way she must look up at the lacy canopy above her bed and feel unsure as to whether she should hate it for the way it makes her feel like a baby or love it for its history of steady protection. She probably feels the same way when she looks at me. I've given up on those child development books. The family values people would have me imprisoned for saying this, but part of me will be glad when Lauren moves to Boulder with her father. For one thing, I'll finally

be able to finish my course work at the university. I think of my around the lake, my German shepherd trotting beside me withou weekends, I'll sit in a dimly lit corner of the college library, a pil lovingly by my ink-stained hands. I'll cook big dinners and eat f days and days in a row, no one there to complain of the soup's cl repetition of the flowered place mats, the life gone stale.

The beagle behind the fence is barking now, but I recogn in this wagging, panting, blur. Lauren is getting her duffel bag fi

"Can you believe it?" I say. "We finally made it."

"I've gotta pee," she says. "It's about damn time."

I collect the trash from the floorboard of the front seat – c contain spring water, foil gum wrappers, the plastic sippy-lid fro pile everything into the paper bag from Dunkin Doughnuts and g the backseat. Lauren and her belongings are on the front porch f I can tell by the way she shifts her weight from one foot to the ot peek inside the house, but she doesn't dare let me catch her look curious or alive.

"Go ahead and ring the bell," I tell her, thinking I might g charming, old-fashioned manners of New England. "I think you string."

Indeed, a long silver cable hangs just to the left of Laurer the string toward her chest, nothing happens.

"Cheap," she mutters, and I manage to climb the stairs just as the front door suddenly opens.

An elfin man in a cardigan sweater appears in the doorway. I know this man. He's a lot shorter than I remember, and his nose and ears seem bigger, but the sunken cheeks and wiry limbs are just the same as they always were. His name is Anthony, and he owns the Toadstool Bookshop in downtown Peterborough. I spent so many of my afternoons thumbing through novels in the bookshop's adjoining café that my friends at school started calling me Little Miss Tea Time.

"Welcome," he says, and I'm amused because of what I said earlier about the green mailbox and the possibility of Irish residents. Anthony is English; when I was 18 and restless, he made a regular practice of calling the Irish vulgar brutes. *You'd be a hit in a Dublin pub,* he told me after one of my anti-New Hampshire diatribes.

I'm sick of this fucking town, I'd say, brushing biscuit crumbs from the table. *And I'll say fuck all day long if I want to. Top O' the morning to ya, buddy.*

I felt about Anthony what so many young women feel about older men who aren't their fathers: admiration, affection, and something like fear. He was fond of me in the way teachers are fond of their finest students, but I was always painfully aware of what my youthful ambition must have represented to someone like him. He told me he felt trapped by mortgage payments and Neighborhood Association meetings. For him, my otherwise hollow plans to take the world by storm must have sounded like the promising glow of eternal youth. I never became his mistress – the guilt would have driven him crazy. Instead I became something much worse: I was a reminder of all his regrets.

Just as Lauren picks up her duffel bag and starts to go inside, Anthony shuffles out onto the porch and pulls hard on the bell. Again, nothing happens.

"Oh bugger," he says through clenched teeth while pulling down even harder. "Rust and mud have ruined my bell."

On his third and final yank, the bell rings, a low, sonorous moan. "A-ha!" he says. "Only a matter of muscle power, then." He turns to Lauren and awkwardly studies her sunglasses. "Well, come in then, " he says. "The bell works, at least."

He doesn't recognize me. All those afternoons spent talking about his life on the London stage, and he doesn't even know me. I wrote him long letters from college. I sent him funny newspaper clippings and recipes for scones. I asked after his children. For a while, I thought I might come back to New Hampshire just to spend more time in his company.

"Anthony?" I say. "Anthony Sheader?"

"Yes?" he says and turns to face me. He seems to have trouble seeing me through the dirty lenses of his glasses. He kneads one of his earlobes between his finger and his thumb – a nervous habit I remember from our afternoons spent reading aloud from the plays of Bernard Shaw. Finally, an anxious, high-pitched laugh escapes his lips and he hops onto one foot in a kind of hapless, old man's jig.

"A-ha!" he says. "It's you! It's really you!" He hugs me and I feel his tiny frame fall heavily against my shoulders. His sweater smells like mothballs. The weather outside is much too warm for the way he's dressed, but I can feel the air conditioning leaking out from the house in Arctic waves. "Oh my dearest Jill," he says, "my dearest darling."

His fondness for sweet nothings like "dearest" and "darling" has always puzzled me. He used to say those words all the time. I think he knew all along I was falling for his tortured but tender English scholar routine. And worse, I think he liked to see my fascination with him playing itself out in punishing ways. Whenever I found myself attracted to a nice, normal New Hampshire high school debate team captain, Anthony would take me into a corner of the bookshop and hold me close to him, saying *darling* and *sweetest. Please don't cry.* I remember the kind of crying I did when I was 18 and wonder if my self-indulgent sobbing was anything like the weeping I know Lauren does behind closed doors. I cried not because I had lost someone or something, but because I knew I was going to experience loss someday and the sum total of that pain would be greater than anything the world had ever seen before. I was wrong, of course, but at least I knew enough to fear the future.

Anthony pulls back and looks me over. He's not the kind of man to stoically turn away and make you wonder at his mysterious, brooding ways. An expert chef and classically trained dancer, Anthony always glowed with a kind of boyish charisma. Everyone wanted his attention. Back in the day, his wife and children always seemed terribly lonely.

"Oh my Jill," he says. "My darling dear."

"Hello, Anthony."

"What brings you back to Peterborough?"

"My daughter, " I say, nodding at Lauren. She looks at Anthony as if he's some kind of boring middle school science teacher. She takes off her sunglasses and puts them

in the side pocket of her duffel bag. I make the introductions, and Anthony looks as if he'd like to embrace Lauren, but she keeps him at arm's length.

"Where's the bathroom?" she says. "I mean, could you please point me in the direction of the facilities?"

Anthony directs her down a bright hallway – the kind of hallway I might imagine leading to my imaginary piano teacher's imaginary sunroom – and Lauren takes her duffel bag with her. Anthony puts my backpack in one of several grand bedroom suites, and I follow him to the kitchen where he fixes me a cup of tea. We talk quickly and excitedly about all the years gone by.

"Susannah just had another boy!" he announces, and I see the happy faces of his grandchildren staring at me from the refrigerator. They look much like his own children when I knew them so many years ago. In one snapshot, a girl in a green swimsuit holds a plastic shovel and plants a kiss in the center of Anthony's bald head. I don't want to ask him about his wife. When I was 18, I actively avoided her gaze whenever I ran into the whole family at the Toadstool or at the gourmet grocery store or in the lobby of the summer stock theater where Anthony played Claudius and Friar Lawrence and King Lear. But I knew she must have hated me the same way she probably hated all of Anthony's young friends.

Before I'm forced to make pleasant chatter about his wife's wonderful taste in decorating, Anthony says, "Carolyn lives in Michigan now. Her husband's a Lutheran minister." I should have known they'd be divorced.

"And this place?" I ask him. "Since when are you in the business of bed and breakfast?"

He arranges pastries on a heavy, pewter platter and tells me the Toadstool Bookshop – along with the adjoining café, – went under last year.

"Three words," he says. "Amazon dot com."

"That's awful."

"I know," he says. "It was hard to see the old place go. I couldn't stand to sell off the inventory, so most of the books are still downstairs in the basement."

I'm suddenly very sorry to imagine the Toadstool's empty shelves and lonely wooden dictionary stands. All the places that saw me grow up are too old to see me finally get myself together. In the world of the Toadstool, I'll always be 18 and angry. I would have liked to let the old place see how I turned out.

Lauren emerges from the bathroom. Her hair sticks up from an errant wave of static electricity. I try smoothing it down for her, but she pulls away and walks over to look out the kitchen window. Outside, the beagle chases his tail.

"Nice vegetable garden," she says. "I hope you don't use pesticides."

"Lauren," I say, a little embarrassed at what might be considered bad manners.

"Oh no," Anthony says. "Everything's organic, don't worry."

I watch Lauren turn away from the glare of the kitchen window. The look she gives him now isn't the same look she gave him when she first met him out on the porch. I'm an expert at recognizing the cynical scrutiny children use against adults – my child development books call it "The Stare." The way she looks at him now – the way her eyes seem to survey him for signs of softness – is more like the way she looks at our German shepherd at home, right before she whispers, *Don't worry now, don't worry* into his

nervous, twitching ear. Her nose crinkles at its top edge. She looks as if she might like to touch him, but she puts her hand in her pocket instead.

"Yeah, organic's better," she says, and turns back to face the window. The three of us watch the beagle as he chases a honeybee around and around the same thin excuse for a tree. I take a sip from my tea and Anthony offers Lauren a pastry from his carefully arranged platter.

"No thanks," she says. "I don't eat refined sugar."

"Right," he says.

I remember our trip to Dunkin Doughnuts this morning – that she complained of my decision to stop there but ended up finishing my half-eaten éclair.

"Well, dinner's at eight, then," Anthony says as he covers the pastry platter with a piece of plastic wrap. "I'll be using some of the vegetables from the garden."

I look down at my watch and remember it's not working.

"I'd like to go into town," I say. "Maybe see about getting my watch repaired."

"Yes, yes, of course," Anthony says. "Don't let me keep you."

I ask Lauren if she'd like to come along, but she begs off, insisting she's tired of being in the car. When I tell her we'll only be in the car for a little while, she doesn't even seem to hear me.

"I'll play with the dog," she says. "Or I'll look at a book."

"Suit yourself," I say, secretly glad to have the front seat to myself for a change. I comb my hair in the bathroom of the master suite and get my wallet from the side pocket of my backpack. When I walk out the front door, I look over the fence and see the two of

them in the backyard. Lauren scratches the beagle's ears and Anthony picks cherry tomatoes from an overgrown, bird-eaten plant.

Back on the main highway, I marvel at how curvy the roads are in comparison to the monotony of the Oklahoma I've come to think of as home. When people ask that terrible question, *Where are you from?* I no longer give the same bland answer I gave for so many years. *The East*, I'd say, with a dismissive wave of my hand. Now, whenever anyone asks me that question, I say, *You know – Tulsa.* The Oklahomans nod their approval in their casual, accepting way. They start talking about Jenks or Fairfax or Broken Arrow, and I pretend to listen. People aren't concerned with trivial matters like lineage there. They associate people with agricultural icons – as in, that boy's a Franklin; his family has hogs. Here in New Hampshire, history takes longer to repeat itself.

Heading toward downtown, I imagine Lauren sitting on a leather sofa in her father's Boulder condo. Men from her father's company are milling around the living room talking about the Broncos game and sipping from longneck beers. One of them sits down next to her and says, *My my, you sure have grown up,* and she looks up from the latest copy of *The Nation* and tells him about the progress of the war in the Middle East. He pats her on the knee and gets up for another beer. I wonder what she's doing right now. I think of her crouching next to Anthony's beagle and starting to cry. He goes down to his basement and brings her a copy of some lousy biography of Karl Marx. She takes the book and holds it close to her chest and says "thank you." He tells her he's read two other books by the same author, and he's confident she'll find this one a good read. She thanks him again and starts to look at the back cover. He pops a cherry tomato into his mouth and offers her one from the plastic bowl he's been carrying around the garden.

She declines at first, but when he insists she's missing out on something delicious, she carefully places a ripe one on the center of her tongue. She bites down and allows the juice and seeds to squirt into her mouth. The beagle jumps up and demands some attention, so the two of them get down on their haunches and place their hands all over the dog's body. Anthony asks her about Oklahoma, and she can't help it, she starts to cry again. He takes her into his arms and says, *Don't cry my sweetest, please now darling, don't cry.* She grabs his cardigan sweater in two large handfuls and pulls away only when her nose starts running.

The child development books never tell you exactly what happens when your daughter becomes a woman. I remember reading a chapter called "Grateful Beauty: The Mother who Loves Too Much." The chapter told me I would go through a phase that paralleled my daughter's entry into adulthood. I would baby her, the book said. I would buy her frilly dresses and shiny black patent shoes. I would try to make her presentable for the adult world, but simultaneously and selfishly retain her girlhood for myself. I never did those things. Instead, I played out scenarios in which she was suddenly vulnerable, suddenly alive, suddenly the object of another's gaze.

A long time ago, I loved Anthony. Five minutes alone in his presence and Lauren undoubtedly will love him, too. When we leave to go back to Oklahoma, I will be responsible for taking her away from a friend in a faraway place. Joining our German shepherd, Anthony will become another stone statue in the growing museum of her mother's cruelty. Realizing I've made a potential mistake by leaving the two of them alone together, I pull into the shopping center where I was going to get my watch fixed. I go into the discount store and instead of asking for the jeweler, I head for the pet section

and get two boxes of Milkbones. I pay for them in a hurry and let the curvy roads guide me back to Anthony's Bed 'n' Breakfast.

In the movies, Paul Newman or Robert Redford would play Anthony. Maybe Hollywood would make him more masculine – a firefighter or a ranch hand instead of an opera-loving former bookstore owner. At this point in the story, he and I would go over the sordid details of our respective divorces, fall in love over a game of checkers, and lovingly watch from the sofa as Lauren crowned Anthony's beagle with a homemade paper hat. The three of us would go on a hayride or attend a noisy carnival in the center of town. Maybe Anthony and I would get married and maybe we wouldn't, but in any case, we'd all come out wiser about the importance of intimacy in human relationships.

My child development books, too, would tell me to work on finding personal fulfillment so as to ensure an active and lively parental presence in my daughter's life. Another male influence could help her learn discipline and self-awareness. If I respect myself, her respect soon will follow. They all lie. At this point, I just want my daughter to myself. After this trip, I won't see her again until Christmas. By that time, she'll be altogether grown.

"We're leaving," I announce, as soon as I walk into the kitchen. Lauren is setting the table and Anthony is chopping carrots on a cutting board. "Get your stuff."

"My stuff?" Lauren says. "What are you talking about?"

I slam one of the Milkbone boxes down on the counter and say, "Here, Anthony. These are for your beagle. Thanks very much for having us."

"What's going on?" Lauren says in a clatter of forks and knives. "What happened to you out there?"

Anthony stands there looking confused – a long paring knife in one hand and a green topped carrot in the other. "Is something wrong?" he says.

"Nothing at all," I tell him. "Just a change of plans, that's all. We had a great time here, Anthony, really we did. I just think we'll be more comfortable at the Holiday Inn."

"At least stay for dinner," he says. "The salad's almost ready."

Lauren doesn't say anything, but she gives me one of those manipulative teenager stares – the exact same look she gave me back in Oklahoma when our twenty-something next-door-neighbor asked Lauren to join her and a bunch of her friends for a weekend music festival in Dallas. *Will there be drugs there?* I heard myself say. I never knew I could be so controlling; this is what Nancy Reagan has done for America. *No drugs,* they both lied, and I finally gave in.

As always, Lauren's look wins the day, and I finally agree to delay our departure until morning.

"Wonderful," Anthony says. He puts a violin concerto on the CD player and resumes his carrot chopping.

"Be seated," he says. "Relax."

At the dinner table, Anthony regales us with tales of past guests at the Bed 'n' Breakfast. He's enjoyed meeting all kinds of new people, he tells us – elderly sisters on a tour of family cemeteries, a longshoreman and his two cats. Just last week he entertained a midwestern college professor and his wife.

"They were in town looking for antiques," he tells us. "Big money."

"People shouldn't do that," Lauren says.

"Lauren," I say.

"No, no, let her talk," Anthony says. "People shouldn't do what, dear?"

"People shouldn't buy used furniture like that. It's disrespectful. I mean, if someone asked me to buy an old chair, I'd refuse. Someone's mother, someone's daughter, someone's sister sat in that chair. That chair belonged to someone. And those phony shopper-types act like they don't even remember."

Anthony tells her the midwestern college professor and his wife were very interested in both antiques as well as the history of their ownership. "They were collectors," he says. "Connoisseurs."

"Oh," Lauren says, chastened. For the rest of the evening, she silently picks at her dinner plate while Anthony and I make small talk about the local goings on. When bedtime arrives, she sneaks off to her room without even saying goodnight.

"Your daughter," Anthony says, his hand on the doorknob to his bedroom, "She's so much like you."

* * *

The next morning, Lauren stomps into the master suite and gives my backpack a swift punch.

"Are you angry?" I ask, remembering the first step in initiating a quality interface opportunity.

"Let's just go," she says.

I grab my stuff and stop in the kitchen to thank Anthony one last time. "Maybe we'll see you around town," I say. "We'll be in the area for four days."

"Yes, of course," Anthony says. He scrubs a frying pan in the sink. "And Jill?"

"Yes?"

"It was good to see you again."

"Yeah," I say. "You too."

I think of the long days Anthony will spend alone in this old farmhouse. He will make up the beds and trudge up and down the stairs with fluffy stacks of towels. When it rains, he will browse the basement bookshelves for something to fill up his afternoon. I could have stayed here. Lauren and I could have stayed here together. I pull the cord and ring Anthony's rusty old bell on my way down the front steps. The hollow clang of clapper against metal is the only sound piercing the early morning silence.

Back in the car, Lauren puts on her Walkman and stares out the passenger window. The other box of Milkbones from the discount store sits on the seat between us. I had imagined letting Lauren feed them to our German shepherd one by one as a way to say goodbye. But when we finally get back to Oklahoma, she probably won't touch them. They'll sit on a shelf in the pantry until Lauren finally grows up in Boulder and the dog finally dies. So much for my generosity. When we pull into the parking lot of the Holiday Inn, I tap her on the shoulder. She hums along with her music.

"What?" she says, probably not meaning to shout.

"We're here," I tell her. She heaves her duffel bag onto her shoulder and takes off her headphones.

"Why don't we get some breakfast or something?" she says.

"Soon," I tell her. She collects her belongings, and I remind her not to forget her pillow. I'm thinking about the last time she'll sleep at our house in Oklahoma. She'll have all new furniture in her father's Boulder condo. When she leaves, I won't let anyone – not even our German shepherd disturb the contents of her bedroom.

"Look," she says. "They have a pool."

Through the chain-link fence of the Holiday Inn, I see about three inches of green water floating at the bottom of a pathetic concrete canyon. A child-sized inner tube deflates and wanders in the wind.

"Doesn't look good," she says, and she's right. So much about this trip hasn't looked good. I remember when she was a small child and her father and I took her on vacations to St. Louis, Chicago, the San Diego Zoo. Every roadside convenience store was an attraction worthy of deep reverence. Young children are easy to please. Give them broccoli for dinner or keep them up an hour past bedtime and they're just as easily upset. As they grow older, they're just as easily pleased, just as easily rattled; they just master the fine art of making themselves appear otherwise.

At the Holiday Inn, ivy grows up past the lobby's narrow windows.

"Those Milkbones," Lauren says, as we make our way to the front desk. "I read about the ingredients on the back of the box. No dog should be eating that stuff."

"Oh yeah," I say. "What's in them?"

"Rat guts," she says. "Or worse."

I'm sure they make all-natural dog biscuits these days, but I'm equally sure they're twice as expensive as the regular kind. I tell Lauren we'll have to find a way to dispose of the offending doggie treats.

Checking in at the front desk, I imagine the birthday gifts I'll send to Lauren in Boulder. No doubt some of them will become prized possessions while others languish in the back corners of a closet I will never see. I don't always know how to give her what she needs.

I nod back toward the Milkbones in the car.

"We'll just throw them away or something," I say.

"Yeah," she says. "On our way home."

The Musical

Sam liked to read *National Geographic*. In his office at the university, he had a wall calendar with glossy photos of zebras celebrating every major holiday. On a bottom shelf, Sam kept a book called *World of Discovery*, a heap of brittle pages left over from his silent childhood. He liked to read about the many animals his allergies would never allow him to own. The feathers of birds, for example, undoubtedly would tickle the delicate membranes inside his nose. The pencil drawing of the English sheepdog convinced him early on that dogs, as a general rule, were much too hairy. And while Sam had long since discovered hand-held vacuum cleaners and prescription allergy medication, he still didn't like the smell of wet leaves and dead squirrels and flea powder contained in economy-sized buckets. He could never tolerate an animal in his own home, but he still enjoyed the majestic look of the standard poodle in the backyard adjacent to his own.

"Here's to you, old boy." Sam raised an empty beer bottle in the direction of the poodle's dark eyes. "You and I are some mighty warriors."

The dog panted, its stumpy tail steady as a windshield wiper. Sam

pretended to drink from the empty beer bottle, but stopped when he saw a cigarette butt floating in someone else's saliva at the bottom.

The party was over and Sam was glad. He had made a fool of himself. He imagined a pencil drawing of himself in *A World of Discovery* – his head clutched in his hands, a long line of guests disappearing into the background.

"What's his name," he said. "What's this goddamned dog's name?"

His wife, several feet above him on the deck, stacked plastic chairs into a leaning tower. "Hush," she said. "It's late."

"Well, he's gotta have a name," he said, this time in a whisper. "Every dog has gotta have a name."

"I don't know his name," his wife said. "He's a new dog. They haven't had him very long. Let's get this stuff cleaned up, okay?"

"His name is Ajax," Sam declared. "Ajax Thompson-Smith."

"The Thompson-Smiths don't live there anymore." His wife started a new stack of plastic chairs. "They moved to Idabell, remember? You want to do those tablecloths?"

Sam thought "Idabell" would be another good name for a dog. Idabell the English Sheepdog. Idabell's muddy paw prints on the hardwood floor. The sour smell of Idabell. He said, "What are they doing in Idabell?"

"I don't know," his wife said. "Something to do with hog farming."

"Well, I don't care," Sam said. "This dog is called Ajax. Ajax Thompson-Smith."

The scent of citronella mixed with the charcoal dust from the fire in his barbecue

grill. Sam looked up at the Christmas lights weaving in and out of the latticework above the deck. These twinkling pebbles were a decorative accent most people would have left behind after getting their college diplomas, but the flash of the reds and greens reminded Sam of a busy traffic circle, an aircraft carrier, a midnight parade. The yard beyond Sam's patio, pockmarked with piles of mud and gravel, shone underneath the light of two tiki torches, one of them mounted on the fence like a hunting trophy and the other one stabbed into the soft ground by the garden.

When winter came, Sam retrieved a tarp from his basement and pulled at the corners until he could stretch them far enough to secure the contraption to stakes mounted near each of the four corners. Still, the occasional Oklahoma snow crept underneath the edges and rotted the pine boards until they cracked at the edges and split down the middle. One of the cracks had grown into a full-scale crevasse, a kind of fault line dividing Sam's backyard in two. In the spring, Sam planted great pots of ivy, the thin stems growing fast under the unrelenting sunshine and Sam's patient, weekly packets of Miracle-Gro. Sam positioned each stalk of ivy so together they effectively covered the fault line in the deck, but on nights like this when he hosted backyard dinner parties under the stars, his gaze wandered back after his second glass of wine. He knew something was down there.

Sam and his wife hosted these merry occasions on Friday nights in the summertime. He didn't usually teach graduate courses during the June session, but thinking of potential party guests – he made sure to give A's to all the students in his Romanticism course the previous spring. The students liked his jolly ways, Sam was confident. They appreciated that his was the only class where they could spread their

long legs out in front of them without suffering the effects of the bitterness that usually radiated from the professor at the end of the seminar table. Sam was not bitter. Even though he had been stuck in Oklahoma for 22 years now, he was still fresh-faced and hip, still in touch with the New York City of his youth. The young students admired him. They liked his mustache. They liked the fountain pens he carried in his breast pocket. They liked his clean, fresh breath, Sam was sure.

Sam's wife, active on the Oklahoma State Arts Council, knew a number of actors, painters, writers, and any number of Sooner State cultural movers and shakers. Sam liked these people as much as they liked him. He liked to study the rotting fingernails of the sculptors. He liked the fastidious pecking and poking of the ballet dancers standing before the barbecue buffet. But most of all, Sam liked to watch the musicians playing imaginary pianos in the air, tugging at their ear lobes, alert to the buzzing sounds of bug zappers and neighborhood garage doors opening and closing. He liked their clothing – it was the kind of clothing he would wear only to mow the lawn, but these people never seemed to mind wearing faded T-shirts and baggy shorts with frayed edges and long strings hanging down to the top edges of their socks. In his very own backyard, Sam could hear about rhetoric and metaphor and song. He could provide hot dogs for the hungry, and sweet, homemade mustard for those who might otherwise have to settle for French's. Lucky enough to have the money to make these occasions go off without a hitch, Sam didn't mind spending whatever was necessary to keep the artists happy. He even converted his garage into an apartment so artists who had fallen on hard times could crash for free.

Sam wanted to tell the dog next door he could have been an artist himself. He could have been the one with his own book of poetry, a textured mural on his ceiling, scraps of staff paper littering the floor of his downtown loft. But Sam was afraid. To make up for his failure of will, he supported every artist in town.

Not all the artists, however, wanted his support. They started out attending the backyard dinner parties every Friday. A few weeks would go by, and they'd start coming on Wednesdays for quiet evenings in Sam's library. After a month or two, they'd start spending stray nights in the garage apartment, falling down drunk like collapsing stacks of firewood, hugging the sofa cushions and wetting the pillowcases with their restless, drooling sleep. After about six months and several thousand dollars from Sam's checking account, the artist in question usually disappeared.

"It's your fault," Sam's wife Kathryn said. "They leave because of you." Sam carefully folded a lavender tablecloth while his wife collected the candles from each table on the deck.

"My fault!" Sam said. "How can it be my fault!"

"You give them too much attention," she said. "They're very delicate. They need consistency. When you fawn all over them, they feel wounded when you start ignoring them three weeks later."

"I do not ignore them."

Sam's wife held a candle in her fist and wagged it back and forth at Sam. "You do ignore them," she said. "I've seen you in action. Just tonight Marty Paul was screaming like a lunatic, and you practically put your hand over his mouth." Marty Paul had been a student in Sam's Romanticism seminar.

Sam said, "I'm tired of Marty Paul."

"See what I mean?"

He did. Sam admitted getting a little carried away with his own generosity on occasion, but Marty Paul was a special case. Sam had never fawned all over Marty Paul, only put up with belligerence and cleaned up his vomit a couple of times. Marty Paul was the reason for the outdoor setting of the Friday night parties, though Marty Paul's propensity to startle the neighbors sometimes caused Sam to consider moving the crowd into the living room.

"I've never been nice to Marty Paul," Sam said, stacking the lavender table clothes into a cardboard box.

"You drove him to the airport."

"He was going to pick up his girlfriend."

"And look how that turned out," Kathryn said, and again, she was right. Marty Paul's girlfriend was a talented young trumpet player. Her presence at the backyard dinner parties eventually failed to make Sam feel any better about his life. She made him feel worse.

Kathryn finished collecting all the candles and started for the French doors leading inside to the living room.

"Enough for me," she said. "Let's save the beer bottles for morning."

"I'll get them," Sam said. He popped open a trash bag and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Standing outside the living room's picture window, he watched her get a glass of water from the kitchen, close the blinds in the hallway, and glide into the master bedroom. He went around the edge of the house and waited until the reading lamp on her

side of the bed went dark. When he was sure she was asleep, he went to the tool shed and rummaged through the drawers in his workbench until he found a flashlight, a crowbar, and a trowel.

* * *

In the plastic chairs section of the baggage claim area, Marty Paul rose to meet his trumpet-playing girlfriend. Sam, who sat with his knees close to his chest in a chair next to Marty Paul, had been curious about this girlfriend ever since Marty started making long, rambling speeches in her honor. *O, the fair, Melinda,* Marty Paul said, standing on top of an over-turned bucket in Sam's backyard, *Your absence is like an elephant leaving footprints in the refrigerator of my heart.* Sam didn't know what Marty Paul meant by this, but assumed he was making some kind of private joke. When Sam finally saw this mysterious, trumpet-playing Melinda, he couldn't stop staring at her cheeks. He imagined their full roundness provided a secret compartment for treasure pouches, gold coins, or very tiny, important documents. Documents for rodents. Rodent birth certificates and keys to rodent safety deposit boxes. Sam liked to imagine he could shrink himself down to the size of a rodent and put on a rodent-sized hard hat with a light mounted on its top. He thought of himself looking like the drawing of a muskrat from the *World of Discovery* series. In his new incarnation as a microscopic muskrat, Sam could sneak into this trumpet-playing Melinda's bedroom while she slept. When she inhaled, he would switch on the light on top of his hard hat and sneak into her mouth, being careful not to step on her tongue. He would survey the hollowness of her cheeks, touching them ever so lightly with his paws. And when she exhaled, he would float out

of her mouth like a stray zephyr, on his way to her pillow, on to the floor, into the air conditioning ducts, and back out into the world.

"This is Sam," Marty Paul said. "He's the one I told you about."

Except for the marked difference in their cheeks, Marty Paul and his girlfriend could have been twins. Tall, lanky, and similarly clad in the artists' signature faded T-shirt and cut-off shorts, both Marty and Melinda were crowned by spongy clumps of black hair, their tangled masses gathered in loose ponytails at the bases of their necks. Marty's T-shirt bore the marks of his latest mixed-media project while Melinda's advertised a local Mexican restaurant.

"Nice to finally meet you," Sam said, rising from his orange plastic chair.

"Likewise," Melinda said. She didn't look him in the eye. She looked instead at a digital clock hanging on the wall behind him. Sam made a gesture toward picking up Melinda's suitcase.

Marty Paul said, "I can get it."

"I insist," Sam said. "We'll pay a skycap to carry it to the car." Sam flashed a twenty in the face of an old man wearing an official-looking airline uniform.

"Help us?" he said to the skycap. The old man bent over to pick up Melinda's suitcase and waved off the twenty. Sam was surprised to see him heave the suitcase high onto his shoulder – the suitcase like a portable radio, the skycap its focused listener. He even bobbed his head in time to an imaginary beat. Sam let the skycap walk in front of him while Marty Paul led the party to Sam's car across the street in the short-term parking lot. Sam looked at the skycap's thin legs and wondered if he himself would ever look so sad, so fragile, so much like a lace tablecloth or a piece of tracing paper. Maybe

he looked like that already. Maybe teaching in the English Department was something like this skycap's trek across the airport grounds. The students paid Sam big money to carry their luggage from the airplane of undergraduate bliss to the parking lot of middle age. And when the students faltered, when they got stuck on the escalator or stalled in the long line to the metal detector, they blamed him. Claiming in desperate cries they simply didn't have enough help carrying the weight of their tired old duffel bags, they found Sam responsible for their every failure. Well he was tired of helping. He wanted his potential back.

On the long drive from the airport, Sam made a point not to look at Melinda. Even when traffic demanded that he check his rearview mirror, he did so with the speed and precision of a squirrel in search of a nut. He didn't want Marty Paul to cook up any ideas. He turned on the car's radio.

"Good tune," he said to Marty Paul. "These guys are bad."

"I've never heard this song," said Marty Paul. "But I don't like it, either."

Shit, Sam thought. Here he was trying to stay up – or was it down? – with the lingo, and he couldn't even manage to sound like he knew what he was talking about. Maybe he could still recover.

Sam said, "Oh yeah, I hate these guys. They're really *bad*. Wooo-eee, they're stinkin' up the car. The tune itself, though, well, it's sorta catchy."

"The tempo's all wrong," Melinda said from the backseat. "I mean, the lyrics really demand something more – I don't know – allegro."

Sam liked the sound of her voice. And tempo! He liked the tempo of her speech the slow rhythms of an Oklahoma childhood. He knew from experience that too much

relaxed ease caused many people here to neglect themselves and their surroundings – the careless fender benders, the useless cashiers in grocery stores, the fallen fences that stayed that way for decades. But Melinda was different. She seemed to accept her broken state for what it was – an accident of geography and birth.

"Here we are," Sam said when he pulled into Marty Paul's driveway. "Front door service."

Marty Paul said, "Why don't we take Melinda home first?"

"I don't know," Sam said. "We're already here." He took the liberty of pressing the button that released Marty Paul's seatbelt. The shoulder strap flew with a snap.

"Take care," Sam said. "I'll see you in class tomorrow."

"Yeah," Marty said, unfolding his legs. "If I decide to come." He stuck his head into the backseat and blew Melinda a kiss. "Call me when you get home," he said. "We'll make plans for tomorrow."

Sam could have given Melinda a chance to get into the front seat, but he sped away, swerving in front of a teenager driving a tractor. He finally felt free to look at her through the rearview mirror.

"So you like music?"

"Yeah," she said. "You could say that."

"Feel like making a little extra money?"

Through the rearview mirror, he saw her rub her hands together. Was this a sign of craftiness – evidence of greed – or was she simply reacting to the frigid whir of the car's air conditioner?

"Extra money?" she asked.

"You know it," Sam said. "I'm writing a musical."

She didn't seem terribly interested. Maybe her coolness was all part of an elaborate scheme to steal his ideas. But perhaps she was simply a careful planner, a considerate young deer. She kept rubbing her hands together in that same slow, deliberate way. By the time they reached her apartment complex, he had talked her into doing some basic arranging and maybe a little collaborative work at the piano.

"You'll pay me by the hour, then," she said.

"Name your price," he said. "You and I are a team." He said the word "team" as if he were the overbearing referee pictured on the label of high energy sports drinks. He liked the sound of his new voice. He was full of conviction. He was like the president starting a new war. He could inspire the unclean masses to rise above the red soil from which they came. When Melinda slammed the car door and placed her open palm on the passenger window, he thought she was sending him a secret message: Oklahoma code for camaraderie. This one's a keeper, Sam thought. His secret was safe with this particular sample of artistic youth. Together, they would alter the landscape of musical theater. Here I am, he thought. A man of action.

* * *

Sam took his tools back around to the deck and moved the heavy pots of ivy into the corner by the barbecue grill. In the yard next door, the black standard poodle, Ajax Thompson-Smith watched him through the fence.

"Git!" Sam hissed. "Go on now!" But Ajax Thompson-Smith did not move. His tongue drooped so low it flapped urgently against the tall weeds growing in the neighbors' flowerbed. His dark eyes watched Sam's feet as they knocked across the deck. Wedging the flashlight under his arm, Sam took the crowbar and forced it into the deck's largest crevasse. The wood splintered and Sam cringed, hoping the sharpness of the sound wouldn't wake Kathryn. He positioned the trowel in the hole left from his crowbar handiwork and shone the flashlight at the wet ground below.

* * *

Marty Paul thought he knew a lot about art. When he brought his trumpet-playing Melinda to one of Sam and Kathryn's backyard dinner parties, he spent most of the evening building a sculpture from dirt clods, sticks, and scraps from the compost pile. Sam didn't like the way Marty's sculpture added the smell of rotten vegetables and the attention of the next-door-neighbors' poodle to an otherwise very pleasant evening.

"I love your sculpture," Sam said, managing to sound earnest. "I mean, I really think it has some tremendous potential."

Marty packed mud around the base of a broccoli stalk. He held the top of the sculpture steady with his chin. "Don't bother me," he said. "I'll talk to you when I'm done."

"Just let me know," Sam said. "Because I really do like it."

Marty nodded, and Sam went to the bar area for another drink. Kathryn and Melinda, holding identical martini glasses, looked like grand marble statues, their elbows jutting into the mosquito-thick air. They didn't seem to notice Sam's arrival at the bar.

"I'm on the Arts Council," Kathryn said. "Maybe I can find out about getting you on with the Prairie Festival."

"I've played many a Prairie Festival in my time," Melinda said. "I'd like to try for something a little bigger. I need to work on my sight reading, but I should be ready for symphony auditions in the fall."

Kathryn said, "Do you have a practice room on campus?"

"They charge a hefty rental fee unless you're enrolled in the music program. I get in a hour or two at Marty's studio whenever I can."

Sam felt his body stiffen at the mention of Marty's studio. He had paid the rental bill for Marty's downtown office space for the last six months. Marty, as it turned out, didn't even go there very often. The light wasn't right, Marty told Sam. The darkness combined with the industrial smell made it a bad place for the artistic process.

"Nonsense," Kathryn said. "You need your own practice room. I'm friendly with the wind ensemble guy, he'll have something for you I'm sure."

"That's really nice of you, Mrs. Turner," Melinda said.

"Kathryn."

"Kathryn," Melinda said. "I do appreciate your help."

"We like to help young artists!" Sam said a little too loudly. He hated it when Kathryn looked embarrassed in his presence. He slid an arm around her shoulders, but his tenderness didn't seem to keep her from averting her eyes, shuffling her feet, exuding

her general wish for him to either wise up or die. He said, "Don't we like to help young artists, Kathryn?"

"Anything we can do," she said.

Sam winked at sweet Melinda and her sweet trumpet player's cheeks. He liked the secret the two of them shared. Without a break in the conversation, Sam took each empty martini glass from the gentle hands of each woman. While they spoke of the arts council and the chamber group and the jazz ensemble, Sam went behind the bar and mixed new drinks. He watched his wife's mouth open and close, open, close. Her jaw seemed mechanical, like a bulldozer's arm. He wasn't in love with her anymore, but their marriage, he had to admit, made a good business arrangement. When he was in graduate school, Sam spent a lot of time outside the education building, hoping to help future school teachers carrying thick books to their hatchback cars. Kathryn, who taught elementary school arts and crafts before the budget cuts came, had been the perfect choice. Anyone who loved children, Sam thought, surely would be able to put up with him. Sam's hypothesis had mostly proven correct, and since Sam and Kathryn never decided to have children of their own, Sam's preferences for both daily activities and lifetime goals usually won the day. Sam never considered cheating on Kathryn – not in the usual way. Too dangerous.

Sam gave the two women their replenished drinks and told them he had some work to do at the barbecue grill.

"Smoked salmon," he said. "Very delicate."

The women excused him and Sam walked three steps toward the grill. He saw Marty Paul making progress on his sculpture in the back corner of the yard. At the last

moment before reaching the grill, Sam stepped off the deck and crept around the far edge of the house, into the front yard, and then back over near the bar area where Kathryn stood talking to Melinda.

Folding himself into the makeshift wooden shed that housed his riding lawn mower, he could hear every word of their conversation. He caught the tail end of one of Kathryn's breezy sentences.

" ... but it's not always easy to maintain artistic integrity and your 401K at the same time," she said. Sam could hear her fingernails tapping hard on her martini glass.

"Isn't that the truth," Melinda said. "Marty Paul and I are both struggling, but I guess you've heard about that."

"Yes," Kathryn said. Sam recognized the troublesome sound of her voice going down into its lower register. "I have heard," she said. "Student loans, car payments, even the textbooks they make you buy can really empty out the old bank account."

"Among other things," said Melinda, and Sam was really curious now. He shifted his weight to his other foot and bumped against the weed-eater in the corner of the shed. The women didn't seem to notice.

"Other things?" Kathryn said.

"Yeah," said Melinda. "Marty Paul spends a lot of money on Ebay. You know, rare comic books, napkin dispensers from the 50's. It's for his art, though, so I try not to say too much about it."

"Oh," Kathryn said. "I see."

Oh, so Melinda's craftiness was all starting to make sense now. Sam felt a sudden urge to start up the riding lawn mower and run over everyone in sight. Instead, he

waited until the women moved on to other side of the deck. Slowly, he emerged from his dusty hideout. He wanted to find Marty Paul.

* * *

Sam and Melinda spent their Wednesday mornings in Sam's garage apartment. Kathryn was away at her hospital board meetings, but before she left Sam would casually stretch and yawn, murmuring that he wasn't up to much, just a few papers he needed to grade before Romanticism class at 12:30. Sam instructed Melinda to tell Marty Paul – who was always asleep on Wednesday mornings anyway – that she needed those few hours free to work on some research at the library.

"Well, I guess that about wraps it up for today," Sam said, closing the cover on the baby grand.

"Good work, Sam," said Melinda. She said that every week. Sam wasn't sure whether or not she was sincere, but the slow escape of air from between her lips made his own lips vibrate in time to the rhythm still in his head from the morning's work.

"You really mean it?" Sam asked her. He didn't want to appear insecure, but he needed to know if he was fooling himself.

"Sure, Sam. That Patroclus solo is really coming along."

"Thanks," he said. "I mean, you're right. It is coming along! That key change really makes the difference."

Sam looked at his watch and realized he was about to be late for his seminar. He hurried his pencils and his favorite pink erasers into his briefcase and urged Melinda out the door.

"I'll take you home," he said. "Or to the library. Or to Marty's studio. Wherever you need to go."

"Home is fine," she said. She cinched the straps on her backpack until she looked like a second-grader stopped in a crosswalk. "Oh, and Sam?"

"Yes?"

"We're still on the same payment schedule, right?"

Sam scanned the bookshelf for his copy of Keats. "Yeah, right. Same as before. Every two weeks."

"And you paid me last week?"

"Yeah, sure, but if you need more I can write you a check. There, write it yourself." He tossed his checkbook onto the flowered print of the couch. "Write it in the car."

Sam drove in his characteristic fashion, making loose turns and speeding past the fields of wheat on the way to the university. After holding steady enough to write out the check, Melinda stared out the window. He wondered if she admired him, if she found him hilarious or merely deluded. Did he really have talent? Could he successfully mount this production?

"You haven't told anyone, have you?" he asked her at a stoplight. "I mean, about the project?"

"No," she said, but he could tell by the turn of her head she was probably lying. That's all right, he decided. Everyone would know soon enough. As soon as he sent the libretto to an agent he knew in New York, the whole world would know. He could even quit his job. He imagined himself giving expensive presents to the secretaries and swooping down the hall to pack the contents of his office into sophisticated leather pouches. Taking down the zebra calendar hanging on a thin nail on the inside of the door, Sam would throw his head back and think about all the students over the years who had gone on to Rhode Island and Texas and Maine. None of them had gone on to Broadway.

"Well, thanks again," he said near the door of Melinda's courtyard apartment. "See you next week."

She said a quick goodbye, but was headed for the iron gates in the distance before he could really tell what she was thinking. Maybe she had been telling the truth when she had pulled her hair behind her ears and stared blankly out the window. Melinda was a friend – a true believer in the power of music. She wouldn't dare share their secret with Marty Paul. But what if she tried to take all the credit? When the show made its debut, maybe she would insist on listing her name first, later making the rounds on the talk show circuit, showcasing her impossible musical knowledge on CNN's Showbiz Today. Maybe she wouldn't even mention his name at all. He'd be stuck in the Oklahoma State University English Department, teaching "Ode on a Grecian Urn" year after year after year while she spent her summers in Provincetown and her winters on the slopes. He decided to take a stand.

He rolled down his window. "Melinda!" he called out into the escalating noon hour traffic. "I forgot to tell you something!"

Her head turned from the lock on the iron gates and she came trotting back toward the car. Her ponytail swung in a long line behind her.

"What's up, Sam?"

"About the project," he said. "I think we've done enough for a while. Let's go ahead and call it off." Yes, he thought. Kicking her to the curb was definitely the right decision. He couldn't trust her any longer.

Melinda leaned down, her hands slapped on her knees as if she were talking to a child. She said, "Are you sure?"

"Definitely," he said. "But it's certainly been a pleasure."

"Likewise," she said. "You've done some good work, Sam."

"*We* did some good work. But I think the time has come for us to get serious about our chosen callings. You need to get ready for symphony auditions. I need to draft my sabbatical application for next semester. We've had our fun. Let's move on."

"Okay, Sam," she said. "It sounds like you have this all figured out." She let her cheeks get full and round when she turned back to the iron gates of her apartment. Sam watched her. Over her shoulder, she said, "You'll be late for class." Just like Kathryn, she was. Concerned for his wellbeing.

Touched, he saluted her and said, "Don't worry, I'm on my way."

* * *

"Almost done with that sculpture, Marty Paul?" In the back corner of the yard, Sam found Marty using the sharp edge of a stick to carve a paisley pattern in the mud around the base of his compost creation.

Marty kept working and said, "I told you to leave me alone, man."

"Whoa, there, sorry buddy," Sam said. "Just checking up on you, that's all."

"Yeah, well, cut it out."

"Whatever you want, there, big guy. You're the one with the vision." God, he felt dumb. He shouldn't be saying words like "vision." Only dumb people said the word *vision*. What was the better word? Inspiration? Foresight? Wisdom?

"Where's Melinda?" Marty Paul asked.

Sam stuffed his hands deep in the pockets of his khaki shorts. "Over there," he said, swinging his shoulders toward the barbecue buffet. "Talking to Kathryn."

"She needs more money," Marty said.

"Don't we all," said Sam.

Marty put down his carving stick and sat down on a nearby lawn chair. Sam sat on a tree stump facing him.

Marty said, "No, I mean she really needs it this time. That's why I brought her here."

Sam didn't like begging. He liked to be the one with the idea. He said, "I thought she was your girlfriend."

"She is my girlfriend."

Sam wanted to say, Well then why don't *you* find her some money, Mr. Ebay, but he didn't say this. Instead he said, "What exactly is the problem, Marty?"

"She's about to declare bankruptcy. If somebody could just pay off her one credit card, she wouldn't have to."

"And you want that somebody to be me?"

"Yes."

Sam knew this was a bad idea. He hated Marty Paul. He wanted to give him a good pop in the jaw. "I'll think about it," he said. "Come on, let's go get another drink. Then maybe we can show everyone your sculpture."

* * *

Before Sam even broke a sweat, he found himself peering down into the hole in the deck, slowly digging and finally building beside him a pile of earth the size of a small child. He didn't realize he had buried the metal box this deep. Finally he felt the trowel hit something hard. Hoping this wasn't just another dirt clod, Sam raised the tool high above his head in a dramatic pose. He imagined himself in silhouette. I am here, he thought. *I am here.* He stabbed at the ground. Like a farmer harvesting the last hope for winter's supply, Sam dug around the metal box until he could reach his hand in beside the sunken remains of his secret project. He was breathing more quickly now, sniffing in time to Ajax Thompson-Smith's panting next door. He was glad to be digging, but the soft ground underneath the deck had been a lousy hiding place in the first place. What was he, some kind of pirate or something? A dog with his damned bone? A freakish

handyman/serial killer with all his relatives' limbs scattered throughout his suburban backyard? Sam began to feel ridiculous. Worse than that, he felt ashamed. He had exploited the talents of a young musician, all for some silly idea about his own artistic potential. He was a fool. A loser with muddy hands.

* * *

"Attention, attention, everyone!" Sam clapped his hands like a high school principal. "Marty and I have something to show you!"

The crowd assembled was used to Sam's proclamations, so they all kept their feet firmly stationed on the ground below them. Only their heads turned in his direction.

"Our friend Marty Paul has been working on this sculpture all evening," Sam said. He tried to sound like the man he had seen on the Bravo channel earlier that week.

"And now, he's going to tell us all about his artistic process."

"Well," Marty said. "I imagined I was like an elephant, an escapee from the zoo." About half the members of the crowd showed their boredom and utter familiarity with this line of speech by stopping only briefly before going back to their conversations. The other half, occasional friends of Marty's, indulged him. "Like an elephant, I ravaged the contents of this backyard until I could assemble a certain structure, a memento, a souvenir of our mutual destruction."

Sam looked down at Marty's creation and saw that this grand souvenir was mostly potato peelings and mud. Two broccoli stalks rose from either end like masts on a sinking ship.

"Well done," Sam said. "Very, very well done."

"Shut up," Marty said.

"I mean, I like what you've done with found materials."

"Shut the fuck up," said Marty Paul.

"Of course if you want to make sure it doesn't attract flies ..."

Marty stepped between Sam and the sculpture and said, "Get away from my work, man. Go to hell."

Everyone at the party knew this was their cue to leave. Beer bottles piled into the trashcan, Pyrex dishes returned to their owners, car keys jingled from the backyard all the way around to the front curb. Marty Paul didn't seem to notice.

"You heard me," he continued. "That's my work. And I don't want you anywhere even close to it. I don't want you anywhere even close to me. I don't want to see your fucking ugly mustache and your stupid pen collection in your front pocket. I don't want to smell your fucking raggedy-ass winter fresh breath." Marty's volume was rising now. Next door, Ajax Thompson-Smith barked.

"And I'll tell you another thing," Marty said. "I don't care about your money. Buy yourself a fucking yacht. Open up a soup kitchen. Hire some kind of struggling seamstress to make you a golden robe. Wear it to your next party! Yeah, wave! Wave to the crowd now, Sam, wave!"

Melinda came over and started to put her hands on Marty Paul's shoulders.

"You!" Marty said. You're nothing but a sell-out! Think old Sam's some kind of genius, eh? Think the two of you are going to make it big on Broadway? Rodgers and Hammerstein! Lerner and his buddy Lowe! The two of you – together – making it big with the musical version of the *Iliad*!"

So Melinda had told him. Sam saw Melinda turn away, her hair disappearing into the darkness of the bushes. He looked at Kathryn cleaning up the barbecue utensils, and he could tell she hated him, had always hated him, was ashamed to be near him in public places. He felt sorry she would probably spend the rest of her life apologizing for his strange, erratic behavior.

Sam looked at Marty Paul's solid jaw and said, "How the hell did you know about that?"

Marty Paul disassembled his sculpture and flung parts of it at the barking poodle. A broccoli stalk bounced off the fence and landed at Sam's feet.

"Everyone knows about it."

Everyone knew about it? So everyone knew about it. So what? Everyone knew he had paid Melinda to help him work on his masterpiece, the musical version of the *Iliad*. He should have suspected it when the secretaries started drawing little eighth notes on his Xerox copies. All the smirks, all the sideways glances, all the humming during department meetings, all of it made sense now. They were making fun of him.

* * *

The metal box opened with a creak and Sam pulled out a thick envelope containing the score. Stuck between the pages was a manila folder with his favorite liner notes and lyrics.

Hector! Don't dissect her!

Just be glad now,

They've been had now.

But that beauty!

It's your duty!

Come alooooooooong, now!

He was proud of that one. Under his breath, he hummed the tune he and Melinda had worked out together. They had been good partners – her sense of rhythm combined with his sense of classical style. He didn't blame her for telling Marty Paul about the project; he had been tempted to tell Kathryn several times himself. He knew nothing would become of his score – he would probably just take it to his office and put it on the bottom shelf next to his old copy of *World of Discovery* – but he couldn't help resenting everyone who had ever forced him into settling for this second-rate existence, this nightmare of Oklahoma cattle trailers, this outpost of resignation and weeds. He could have done something. He could have shown those lousy students they were no better than the animal hides they used for their jackets and shoes. The continued heat of the nighttime air bore down upon him, and Sam repaired the hole in the deck with speed and efficiency. Next door, Ajax Thompson-Smith slept in the dirt.

* * *

Marty and Melinda were the last ones to leave. After Marty Paul finally calmed himself down, Kathryn called them a cab. The two couples sat in lawn chairs in the front yard, waiting for the one and only taxi driver willing to work weekends in their sleepy university town. They waited a long time.

"No big deal, man," Marty Paul finally said. "The graduate students make fun of everyone."

"I was a graduate student too, once," Sam said. "I know how it goes."

Marty said, "I'll probably be a graduate student for the rest of my life."

Sam said, "That's what everyone thinks."

"Keep on rotting away," Melinda said. "Just keep on. I'm taking my trumpet on the road."

Kathryn stood up and cupped her hands around her eyes. "I think I see headlights," she said. "Here, don't forget your sculpture." She picked up what was left of Marty Paul's creation and balanced it on Melinda's outstretched arms.

"Ahhh, chuck it," Marty Paul said. "It'll stink up the house."

"We'll keep it," Sam said and Kathryn immediately scowled. Sam said, "Don't worry, I know what to do with it."

The taxicab finally pulled out of the driveway with Marty Paul and Melinda pressed against opposite sides of the backseat.

Kathryn folded up one of the lawn chairs and said, "I could have played the trumpet."

"I know," Sam said. "You would have been a soloist, maybe. In a famous jazz quartet."

"Or in a band," Kathryn said.

"I like the sound of that," Sam said, folding up the rest of the lawn chairs. "A famous marching band." And as he walked toward the house, he imagined himself in a parade of percussion players. He wanted to establish a suitable rhythm for performers past and present. For Kathryn, he would play the bass drum.

* * *

Sam took the compost sculpture around the side of the house and into the backyard. He sat down in the flowerbed and imagined himself a mighty zookeeper, a fearless friend to animals. For many years of his life he never would have considered sitting down in a flowerbed. Too risky. But the prick of tiny pebbles underneath him felt good. Even the cool mud seeping through the seat of his shorts relaxed him. No longer did he worry about the perils of laundry detergent and muddy footprints on the hardwood floors. He scooped up a handful of potato peelings and pushed them through the fence.

"Ajax!" he called.

"Ajaaaaaaaax ---- You're the one!

Remember the battle's not done!

I'll be here with your victory meal, Oh!

Watch out for your good buddy's heeeel-o!"

For about fifteen minutes, Sam fed the remains of Marty Paul's sculpture to the dog next door. When Ajax seemed to enjoy the broccoli stalks in particular, Sam reached through the fence to ruffle his ears. This dog likes me, he thought. He thinks I'm a lot of fun.

"Ajax," he whispered. "Stay strong."

SWOT

Strengths

I can open windows that have been painted shut. I can carry two boxes of Xerox paper at the same time. I can hurl tape dispensers at the pop machine with deadly precision. Also, I am loyal. Okay, so I'm not really loyal, but more important than that is my ability to pretend I am loyal. I work for the president of the university. To show my loyalty, I proudly wear the school colors – orange and black – just like everyone else does. Every Friday on game day, the entire campus looks like a Halloween discount sale.

I keep exactly seven perfectly sharpened pencils lined up on the edge of the president's desk. I buy magazine subscriptions from his granddaughter. I bake brownies. As a result, the president likes me. He thinks I am loyal.

"Patty," he says, from his padded chair at the head of the conference table, "bring us some champagne."

First of all, my name is not Patty. Second of all, state law prohibits the consumption of alcohol on university property. I've come to accept he will always call me Patty, and I was instrumental in getting the governor to sign our private party liquor license, but I'm not happy. That's another one of my strengths, however: I am fearless in

the face of illegal activity. I gladly will forge the president's signature, and I hardly blink at the late night cash withdrawal, the thousand-dollar fountain pen, the sports car parked in the driveway of a promising young athlete.

"Snap it up, Patty," he says. "This calls for a toast."

An oil tycoon has just made a rather sizable donation to the university. The president, along with his executive leadership team, is ready to celebrate.

"One moment, Mr. President," I say. Many years ago, when I was still a receptionist, I learned one never says, "just a minute," or "hold on a sec" in the presence of the president. "One moment" is always a better choice. "One moment" is clean, professional, direct.

The president fiddles with one of his big gold rings and says, "Thatsa girl Patty," like I am a horse. I've grown accustomed to this kind of brusque behavior. Another one of my strengths: I am patient. When a representative from the Office of University Assessment comes in during my lunch hour to tell me about conducting a SWOT analysis of the president's office, I listen with close attention and nod at periodic intervals. When strategic planning meetings scheduled to end at 5:00 last well into the evening, I remain utterly calm. I am like a camel kneeling in the desert. I am fierce and lean.

The woman from the Office of University Assessment is a fancier version of me. She wears pearls that look real. SWOT analysis, she tells me, is the new trend in business. In spite of what certain old-fashioned faculty members will tell you, a university is, first and foremost, a business. I learned that a long time ago. And how does SWOT analysis, work? I ask the fancy woman, my finger judiciously tucked underneath my chin. She tells me SWOT analysis eventually will centralize power in the

president's office. SWOT analysis will help the university take a good long look at itself in the mirror of fiscal responsibility. SWOT analysis will lead us to our Hedgehog Principle. Sounds fascinating, I say. Tell me more. Hedgehogs, she says are very focussed, very goal-oriented. Like the mighty hedgehog, this university can successfully burrow through the depleted soil of tuition hikes, budget cuts, painful financial need. SWOT analysis is the measuring stick, the foundation for our future, the management tool of the new millenium. She believes in SWOT analysis. So do I, I tell her. I am committed to success.

In the kitchenette, I pour champagne into flutes. I hear laughter in the conference room. The president has just told a joke. The last time the president told me a joke, he made suction noises with his lips. He was imitating an electric razor. I forget the joke's details, but I remember having to manufacture a laugh. Humor is not one of the president's strengths.

"We've finally arrived," the president says, as I carry in the champagne. "Nobody can say *this* university is an orphanage for uncoordinated children." His team of executive vice-presidents again erupts into the familiar clucking chuckle of old men. I assume he is making a comment on the sometimes questionable nature of charitable donations. Later today, the president will pose with the oil tycoon in front of the library. Photographers will click and flash and whir. I will park the university van on the library lawn, quickly add blusher to the president's cheeks, and situate an enormous cardboard check in his meaty, outstretched arms. No one ever thinks about who makes those enormous cardboard checks. Someone has to make the signature look real. This brings me to another one of my strengths: I am creative. I care about growth. The people at the

print shop say I am very good at measuring things with a ruler. They are correct. I can make birthday banners without using stencils. I can send e-mails with color photos in the body of the message. I am a master of the glue stick.

"Thanks for the bubbly," the president says. He takes a gulp and swishes it around in his mouth. "You should have some, Patty. How 'bout a swig?"

I remind him I'll be driving the university van to the photo shoot later this afternoon.

"Just a sip, Patty," he says. "Come on."

I'm afraid of scandal, but he knows as much already. My sense of caution is another one of my strengths. He hired me because I know how to make him look good. He wants to wear a suit and tie everywhere he goes, but I have convinced him an orange golf shirt makes him look more like a man of the people. I sometimes forget he once was an actual professor, a scientist in the field. Former graduate students poke their heads in his office, and I imagine his old life, his old clothes, his tattered briefcase and dusty running shoes. His research in the department of soil science never was anything particularly glamorous or important, but he still uses his past as an excuse to complain of the pollen generated by the flowers outside the conference room window.

"Parasites," he says, pointing to a tall row of hollyhocks.

"Mr. President," I say. "Phone call on line two." I have put away the champagne, and the executive leadership team has dispersed for the day. The woman from the Office of University Assessment wants to speak with the president.

He is preoccupied with the flowers. "They just take-take-take," he says. "The soil needs those nutrients to survive."

"Mr. President," I say again. "Line two."

"Tell 'em I'll call 'em back," he says, and I can tell he's had a little too much champagne. The campus newspaper would have a field day with this one. We have one full hour before the photo shoot. Surely he'll be back to his serious diplomatic self by then.

"And send someone over to dig up those hollyhocks," he says. "I can't stand the sight of 'em."

This is not the first time he has asked for a landscaping overhaul. My ability to distract him into believing his wishes eventually will be granted is another one of my strengths.

"I'll take a message," I tell him, and I leave him cursing at the monkey grass lining the narrow pathway to the student union. I go back to my desk and tell the woman from the Office of University Assessment the president is meeting with a student. See what I mean? A man of the people. At the end of every semester, I send 20 or 30 cases of ice cream to every residence hall. I tell the man at the ice cream store to attach a card that says *Good Luck on finals! Your Friend, the Prez.* A little dessert can work wonders. My husband was an investment banker, so I gave lots of dinner parties. I could have lived on the alimony after the divorce, but I wanted to do something more interesting than organize the geranium sale for our church. I quit going to church and became a receptionist. I moved up very quickly; I am ambitious; I never remarried; I am devoted to my job.

"I'll have the president call you in the morning," I tell the Office of University Assessment. "First thing."

She seems satisfied, and I open up the president's schedule on my computer. Have I mentioned I am terribly organized? I *am*. Other administrative assistants call me the Trapper Keeper. Last year, I gave a seminar on time management. The president made a brief appearance, but I orchestrated his grand entrance and even grander exit to perpetuate the lie that he desperately needed to rush off to another important event. The key to time management is to convince everyone you are in high demand. I have successfully convinced the entire university that the president is one hot commodity. I have done such a good job, the president himself imagines he is overloaded, stretched to the max, in need of a spa vacation. The truth is no one dares make an appointment with him in the first place because they know I'll insist he's too busy. Every week, I tell the chair of the faculty council maybe, just maybe, I can squeeze in some time right after the football game on Saturday night.

"Hey Patty," the president strolls into my part of the office. He's calmed down significantly since looking at the campus flora and fauna. "How's the foundation on this building?"

Perhaps he's worried about earthquakes or sonic booms. Sometimes I still have trouble reading him. Maybe he just wants to make sure his office is located in the most stable building on campus. "I can call the Physical Plant," I say. "I'm sure they keep records on that sort of thing."

"Don't bother," he says. "I've just been thinking about the soil, you know. I'm sure they had to use a lot of steel reinforcement when they dug out the basement."

The president's mood is coming into focus. I remember now, he gets sentimental right before finals week. Last year, he took an afternoon off and actually went inside the

library to check out some books. I insisted he shouldn't waste his time on the kind of task we easily could assign to a work-study student, but he just murmured something about musty corners, the pages stuck together, the memory of ink stained hands. *I couldn't find the card catalog,* he said. *And they didn't have any pencils.* Telling him about the seven perfectly sharpened pencils lined up on the edge of his desk seemed to make him feel considerably better.

Weaknesses

I am jealous. When I accompany the president to the New Student Week Cowboy Jamboree, I am jealous of the young women with their young husbands and young children. I am equally jealous of the women who attend alone. The young mothers and wives stand with the confidence of possibility. At home, they have houses full of furniture and designer pets and pyramid paperweights with three slots available for photos of their most recent vacation. If they ever have arguments with their husbands, they think of the quarrels as temporary, necessary means to an end. The young women who attend alone, however, don't need the distraction of family life. They are scholars. Their homes are filled with towers of textbooks, used file folders, encyclopedias inherited from their spinster aunts. They, too, stand with the confidence of possibility. I live by myself. I have a degree in accounting. I am caretaker to the most powerful man in town. He doesn't even buy me presents.

"How about a little music, Patty," the president says. He's eating a chef's salad in the conference room. We're about to be late for the photo shoot.

"We should go," I tell him. "The press will be waiting."

"Let 'em wait," he says. "I need to feel myself in the presence of song. The radio, Patty. Turn it on."

I put on his favorite station – the world's hottest country hits. A male voice sings a song called "The Truth about Men." I've heard this one before. *We ain't wrong. We ain't sorry. And we're prolly gonna do it again.* The president bobs his head in time with the singer's twang and scoops the last of the salad's croutons into his mouth.

"You've soiled yourself," I say, noticing salad dressing and bacon bits displaced from the napkin he has stuffed into his collar. "Let me get you a new tie."

"Did you say, *soiled* myself, Patty?"

"Why, yes, sir," I say. "I think you just need a quick change of clothes."

He points to the splotch of white on the bottom edge of his tie. "This is salad dressing, Patty. Bleu cheese. This is not soil. Soil is in the ground. Soil has nutrients. Soil serves a higher purpose. If anything, this dab of salad dressing here is dirt, do you hear me? Dirt. Displaced soil. No longer serving a purpose. Don't make that mistake again."

"Of course sir, I only meant..."

"I don't care what you meant. Now get me a new tie."

I go to the closet off the kitchenette and reach for the string that turns on the light. I pull hard, but nothing happens. Another one of my weaknesses: I'm afraid of the dark. Sunlight streams in from the window in the kitchenette, so standing before the darkened closet doesn't particularly scare me, but I always feel a little disconcerted by this cavern of old suit jackets, cardboard boxes, umbrellas and gloves. The president's ties hang high on plastic hooks on the back wall of the closet. I have to part the hangers to reach my

desired goal. What if I push half the suit jackets to one side, the other half to the other side, step into the closet, and feel immediately overwhelmed by the smell of mothballs and the rustle of dry cleaning bags? I could get trapped in here. I could die surrounded by the outer shells and accessories of rich old men.

I select a nice pinstriped tie. On the floor, I see an orange and black duffel bag, a gift from the alumni foundation. I take the tie and the duffel bag and close the closet door without bothering to adjust the suit jackets from their parted position. Half the suit jackets are bunched to one side, the other half bunched to the other. I know I've left myself with something to think about while I'm standing around at the photo shoot. While the photographers' assistants add blue food coloring to the brown water running from the fountain in front of the library, I will think very hard about the many wrinkles developing in the president's suit jackets. A weakness: I occasionally make deliberate mistakes. I want to keep myself from getting too bored. If I come in first thing in the morning and drop a box of paperclips all over the conference room floor, I'll have a small project to keep myself busy later that afternoon. Sometimes I add a little drama to the scenario. I might, for example, wait until the executive leadership team is about to arrive before bothering to clean up the paperclips. When I drop the last paperclip into the box, I breathe a sigh of relief just seconds before the president walks in with a line of his cronies following close behind. And if the president takes a personal day, I make even bigger messes – Hershey's chocolate syrup all over the kitchenette's counters, the contents of the paper shredder's dumping tray spread across the president's desk like the remains of a ticker tape parade. When I clean up, I feel myself becoming a powerhouse of housekeeping ability

"This one's very attractive," I say, presenting the president with his new tie. "It's grateful, but not desperate, charming, but not obsequious."

"Good choice," the president says. He's bunched the salad dressing stained tie into a ball. The crumpled mess is like a centerpiece in the center of the conference room table. "You'll send this one to campus laundry, of course."

"Absolutely," I say. I put the old the tie in the bottom drawer of my desk. Another project for another day. I guess I'm lucky I don't have to do all the president's laundry. I'm sure his wife folds and presses most of his clothing. I'll bet she has several drying racks. She doesn't participate in the usual first lady exercises in altruism, however. Her only pet project involves a little envelope stuffing with the American Heart Association, and she very rarely hosts events in their home. Wives can get away with that kind of behavior these days. Not so when I was married.

I drive the presidential minivan to the library lawn. The president sits in the back. Better to stretch his legs, he says. The enormous cardboard check and the orange and black duffel bag ride in the front seat with me. Another weakness, I'm afraid: I am a terrible driver. My lack of lifetime experience behind the wheel causes me to wait far too long at intersections. I let everyone else go before me. Even when no other cars appear in my line of vision, I sit there with my foot glued to the brake. We're late for the photo session, though, so I hurry along. Outside, dust blows in the street. Even though our windows are rolled up and the air conditioner is on, I feel something stinging my eyes. Displaced soil, I almost say aloud. Organic matter meets its final destination.

"Your mouthwash dispenser," I say, pulling onto the library lawn. "You've remembered to spritz?"

"Always," he says, but he lies. I'm afraid poor dental hygiene is one of the president's weaknesses. At last year's Christmas party, he dressed up like Santa Claus (my idea) and stirred up the wrong kind of holiday cheer when some of the Regents' grandchildren complained of his sour smelling breath.

Just as I thought; the press has already arrived. The oil tycoon sits in a lawn chair by the fountain. He dips his fingers into the brown water and anoints the mushy creases of his forehead with occasional drips and drabs. A cowboy hat rests in his lap. I am relieved when I see no one looks particularly annoyed at our late arrival. They seem glad for the extra loafing time.

"Bill, Bob, Jim," the president says, shaking hands. "Nice to see you all."

I stand in the background, my duffel bag slung over my shoulder. I work very hard to keep the enormous cardboard check from blowing away and worry about how the president's hair will look in the photographs. I didn't think to bring his styling products, though I did remember to toss a hairbrush and some makeup into the duffel bag before we left the office.

The oil tycoon rises from his chair and puts on his cowboy hat. He slaps the backs of several men I don't recognize. The president, lurking behind them, has the flushed look of the newly wealthy. He has this same look when he plays blackjack on the Internet. My ex-husband was also something of a high roller, though I'm grateful his adventures took place well before the advent of cyber-gambling. He went to Vegas every six months, but I always stayed home.

The oil tycoon's donation hasn't been earmarked for any particular purpose, but the president is sure to spend most of the money on athletics. When the football team

wins, everyone seems happy. Even as I force myself to buy orange and black socks and orange and black headbands and orange and black doggie sweaters, I can't get too excited about the possibility of beating the rival state school. Sporting events bore me, and around here, that kind of attitude is a definite weakness. I hide my indifference behind glossy university calendars and my collection of football shaped magnets. *Crush 'em!* I say on Fridays. I usually manage to sound sincere.

Opportunities

A reporter from the local newspaper sticks his tape recorder in my face. I recognize him as a recent graduate. In addition to writing for the university paper, he founded the campus chapter of Amnesty International. He has the fake rural liberal look I've come to associate with tie-dyed T-shirts and braided leather bracelets.

"And the president intends to allocate this money – how?" he asks.

"You'll have to ask the president," I say, but the president is busy chatting up a blonde woman by the library steps. In spite of his efforts to divert her attention, the woman sticks close to the oil tycoon. Like me with my duffel bag, she grips tightly to several executive briefcases. She is probably my equivalent. Maybe she has worked for the oil tycoon for as many years as I have worked for the president. The president touches her noticeably pregnant stomach, his gold rings flashing in the sun. She looks offended, removes his hand, and quickly turns to talk to someone else.

"Just gimme a quote," the reporter says. "Anything."

"The president," I tell him, "is simply grateful for the opportunity to bring this university from good to great."

Vague terms like "good" and "great" always satisfy the local press, and this time is no exception. The reporter turns away without even saying thank you. His colleagues busy themselves setting up tripods and looking around for students to pose in the background. Two young men with backpacks and baseball caps sit on a bench and pretend to look over their class notes.

"Find some kids who look, you know, diverse," the reporter says, and I start to think we're going to be here all day. Someone finally locates some international students, and the president and the oil tycoon take their places in front of the library's front door.

"Toss me that light meter, will ya?" a tattooed photographer yells in my general direction.

I look behind me, but no one is there. I put my hand on my heart and mouth the word *me* and the photographer nods yes. I think of myself hurling tape dispensers at the pop machine in the presidential suite. No one ever sees these occasional outbursts, but the thunking sound of office supplies hitting the "o" in "Coke" is very satisfying nonetheless. I went to college on a softball scholarship and, to this day, I am skilled in the art of the fast ball. I pick up the light meter and make a quick, underhanded throw. I hit my target with ease and the photographer nods in gratitude. I feel useful and important.

The Office of University Assessment defines "opportunities" as factors outside the department that could positively impact it. The president and I rarely venture outside our department, but when we do, we are certainly open to the possibility of positive impact. We could stand to have an outside interior designer come in to shake up our ground plan, however. I'd like to replace the wood paneling in the conference room.

Probably doesn't sound too exciting or necessary, but I spend a lot of time there and the dark oak gets depressing. I'm tired of taking notes at meetings. I've recently had the opportunity to buy a high tech intercom and recording device. I installed the speakers myself. The president says the whole set-up is all too reminiscent of Watergate. But this is digital, I tell him. This is wireless. He tells me to do whatever I want with the intercom, but to leave the recording system alone. I've thought about secretly recording everything, anyway, but I'm sure he'd hear the squeak of the cabinet door every time I readied the system for transcription. The intercom, though, provides me with a good deal of entertainment. I can sit at my desk, speak into a microphone, and know my voice is booming through the president's office, the kitchenette, and the conference room. I mostly use the system to announce important visitors or to remind the president of an upcoming appointment across campus, but sometimes I play with the microphone when no one else is there. At 6:00 in the summertime, when all the local students are dozing in their cheap university apartments and most of the rest of the young scholars are back in their hometowns working on tractors or rounding up cattle, I have the building to myself. The entire campus is hot and empty.

"Hello, everyone," I say into the microphone. "I have an important announcement to make. The president has retired. And I don't mean he's retired for the evening, I mean he has retired for good. No more bad jokes. No more country music. The flowers are free to grow in peace."

The photo shoot is over, and the oil tycoon and his pregnant assistant have left for the airport. I toss the enormous check into a dumpster and carry the duffel bag back to the minivan. Since the president wants to make his annual solitary pilgrimage to the

library before walking back to the office, I take my time driving back through campus. I wait a full four minutes at every stop sign. Finally pulling into the presidential parking lot, I see through the windows the still dimmed fluorescent lights of our suite. I think of the president's bulky body taking up space in the reference section, his elbows jabbed into some poor librarian's ribs.

The president's absence leaves me with an important opportunity. I hit the power locks on the minivan and take the duffel bag to the flowerbed outside the conference room window. Orange and black pansies grow in neat rows. Someone worked hard to plant these flowers; I'd hate to see them uprooted. I decide right then I will not call the physical plant and inquire about the building's foundation. I will not call the landscaping department and order them to make the flowerbed more soil friendly. I will not bother to return the president's library books when they turn up overdue. I kneel down by the monkey grass and gather several heavy dirt clods. I squeeze them between my fingers, but find it impossible to break them into smaller pieces. Making certain no one sees what I'm up to, I tuck four or five especially rocky clumps into my duffel bag, for later.

The president returns from the library with a stack of books. "They tell me everything's online these days," he says. "But I wanted to browse these old beauties anyway."

"Don't let me disturb you," I say. "Will you need a bookmark?"

He says he can make do with a post-it note, so I leave him alone at the conference room table. After I hang his suit jacket in the closet, I quietly deposit the orange and black duffel bag on the loveseat in his office. I'm grateful for the president's rare moments of serious study. He gets so involved in his crop residues and his no-till grain

yields that I can get in a few rounds of computer solitaire. Animated hearts and spades light up my computer screen. I love to beat the computer. A walrus dances across the screen and plays a bugle when I win two in a row.

"Hey Patty," the president calls from the conference room. "Did you know alfalfa and red clover actually *increase* carbon counts? All these years and I never knew."

The computer shuffles the cards and I start a new round. Perhaps the president's findings mean the monkey grass can stay. I hope he forgets about the flowers. Several face cards are showing, and I'm off to another good start.

"Does the physical plant use proper fertilizer?" he asks. "I sure hope they don't use a chisel plow."

I don't answer him, but he doesn't notice. I draw the ace of clubs and think back to my husband's days in Vegas. He'd always come home with new clothes, new shoes, and one time, a new car. We fought about his extravagant spending habits, and I always lost. That's what happens when you're not making any of the money yourself.

"I'm off," says the president. He stands behind my desk chair and hums along with the solitaire music. "Until tomorrow, Patty."

I bid him good evening and play a few more rounds before heading home for the day myself. Driving through town, I notice the people at the entertainment super store are planning ahead for the students' impending departure. Their billboard says *Don't forget to turn in your movies*. I'm at a four-way stop. I wait on the edge of the intersection for a very long time. I almost decide to put the car in park, but I'm so lost in thoughts of tomorrow's possibilities that I forget about the car, forget about the absence of traffic, forget I'm even driving. In the morning, I'll do what I always do. I'll come

into the office and turn on all the lights. I'll warm up the Xerox machine and start some coffee brewing. I'll check the voice mail for messages. No doubt the fancy woman from Office of University Assessment will have called again looking for the president. The head of residential life will have left a long and meandering message about the many hours students are devoting to studying for their finals. I'll feel guilty for having forgotten to send the annual presidential ice cream. A message from the library: the president's research materials are ready for download. And finally, I'll listen to a message from the president himself. I've decided to take a personal day, he'll say. Good weather for a round of golf. But no problem, Patty, you can take care of things, you're a real dynamo. And remember that sick day you took last year? I know what it's like to run the place without any help, Patty. I'm sure you're up to the task.

I'll listen to all the messages again just to make sure I didn't miss anything. I'll heat up a muffin in the microwave and turn on my computer. I'll look at the president's e-mail. His inbox will be flooded with demanding faculty form letters, online petitions, fruitless requests for appointments. I'll reach into my orange and black duffel bag and pull out one of my dirt clods. I'll turn on the intercom system and speak into the microphone.

You're wrong, Mr. President, I'll say, hurling my first pitch. The dirt clod will smash to pieces and leave a big round scab right in the middle of the conference room door. You don't know what it's like to be alone.

Threats

The morning comes just like any other, but the president does not take a personal day. I should be so lucky. He does, however, announce his retirement.

"Help me spread the good word, Patty," he says, dropping his briefcase at my feet. "Looks like my golden years are officially approaching."

I've been waiting for this day for years, but I can't bring myself to feel excited. All my plans for celebration seem a little pathetic now that he's actually jumping ship. He tells me he'll stay on until the end of next semester. At least I'll have plenty of time to make plans for redecorating the office.

Just as I sit down to write the press release, he drops his car keys onto my desk and jiggles like a loose limbed clown. Never before have I seen the president dance.

"The trunk, Patty," he says. "I need your help unloading."

"Mr. President," I say. "Are you feeling itchy?"

"No, I'm not feeling itchy! I'm feeling alive. You should try it sometime, Patty."

I resent the implication I somehow appear dead. My makeup aims for a springtime look. I suddenly worry the next six months before his ultimate departure will be full of distress. The president will become an embarrassment.

I think of the last six months before my husband left me for good. On the day of our initial separation, I went into the university bookstore looking for do-it yourself guides for what I thought would turn out to be my newfound financial freedom. When I said the word "divorce," the bookstore clerk looked at me as if I were some kind of urine sample. I knew I'd never be marketable again.

"SWOT analysis," I remind the president as we're walking out to the parking lot. "The final report is due at 5:00 today."

"You'll come up with something, Patty," he says. "You always do."

He unlocks the trunk of his Lincoln Town Car and I see I'm in for more than I bargained for. The president has been to the lumberyard.

"I'm finally going to get that grant," he says. "Research, Patty. You'll have to list that as one of my strengths."

He explains his plan to build two large filtration troughs in the southwest corner of his office. Construction projects make men feel more important. Right before the divorce, my husband built a sandbox for the children we never had. We lived next door to an elementary school, so he claimed his brilliant backyard addition would increase the resale value on our house. I think my husband must have hated me.

"Well Patty," the president says, shaking a box of nails. "I hope you brought your muscles to work today."

I don't want to help him. The lumber will give me splinters. The chainsaw will soil my dress. I hope he doesn't expect me to help with the actual building. Power tools can be dangerous, and the president isn't exactly young anymore. Heavy lifting, I'd like to remind him, is not in my job description.

"Let's get to it, Patty," he says. "Are you ready for some action?"

"No," I say, surprising myself. "I need to write that press release. And someone has to finish the SWOT."

He tosses the box of nails back into the trunk and shakes his head from side to side. He looks like a bumblebee. He says, "No?"

"You heard me," I say, and I start back for the office without him. I'm both proud and deeply ashamed of this, my first official act of defiance. Maybe he'll run after me

and say *please-oh-please, Patty, I'll do anything to get back in your favor.* Murderous rage is the more likely response, however. He could turn into a steam engine and run me over with the force of a thousand boxcars. I could get fired. I could die.

I hear the sound of his trunk slamming shut, and I start walking faster. I want to be busily typing at my computer by the time he heaves the 2X4's onto the loveseat in his office. I sit down at my desk, think very hard to come up with words that convey just the right combination of nostalgia and optimism, and finish the entire press release before I hear anything at all.

I'm fixing a paper jam in the printer when two guys from the physical plant come in with the lumber. Their shirts are untucked and tape measures hang from their hips. A third man – a cafeteria worker with a faint blond mustache – carries the chainsaw, a gold-plated hammer, and an industrial-sized toolbox. Both physical plant guys stand at least a foot taller than the cafeteria worker. They all move their legs in a way I suspect is designed to take up as much space as possible. Without saying a word, the physical plant guys drop the lumber right in front of my desk and lope out the door into the hallway. The cafeteria worker frowns at their departure and then looks at me with a little too much familiarity. I go back to my press release and try to pretend he's not there. Finally, he asks me where he should dump the tools. When I show him to the president's office, he claps his hands and says *nice digs.*

"There's my young friend, Mr. French Fry," the president says, suddenly appearing in the doorway. He squeezes the cafeteria worker's shoulder. "How'd you like to start working in the purchasing department?"

"Been there," the cafeteria worker says. "No smoke breaks."

The president laughs his best insurance salesman's laugh and tells me to give the cafeteria worker a booklet of Presidential Bonus Bucks. I, of course, am the brainchild behind Presidential Bonus Bucks. With Presidential Bonus Bucks, the cafeteria worker will get 10% off his next shampoo and style at the Campus Clip 'n' Curl. He will bowl two games and get one free. At the movies, he will receive a child-sized popcorn with purchase of two jumbo-sized soft drinks. I grab two booklets from my desk drawer and toss them at his head. The old-me would have gone to the supply closet and found him a complimentary university hand towel. But this time I don't care if he gets his hand towel or not. I don't care if the corners of the bonus booklets graze his forehead and make him bleed. This is my office now. The cafeteria worker still seems genuinely pleased as he hands me the gold-plated hammer, calls me ma'am, and heads out the door.

"Good men," the president says. "Good, strong men."

"Yes," I say. "Nice of them to give you a hand."

The president starts to say something else, but decides instead to sort hardware on his desk. Maybe getting down to business is his way of letting me off the hook for refusing to help with the filtration troughs. A handful of carriage bolts clutched in his hand, he starts to count out loud. When he gets to twenty, I interrupt him.

"Would you like to proof the press release?"

"Twenty-one," he says. "No, I wouldn't. Twenty-two..."

"Don't you want to know how you're announcing your own retirement?"

He throws the carriage bolts down with a heavy clunk, and the tips of his ears turn red.

"Listen, Patty," he says. "I don't know what's gotten into you lately, but I'm trying to count here. I'll look at the press release later."

"Look at it now," I say, no longer afraid of his reaction. I'll make bold threats with reckless abandon. Holding his gold-plated hammer gives me a great deal of confidence. He's retiring, after all; what can he do? The same thing happened with my divorce. Packing my husband's last suitcase gave me license to give him a piece of my mind. I folded all his shirts, tucked them in next to his trousers, and told him he had ugly hands. No lie, his hands were monstrous. He looked like he was always wearing boxing gloves.

The president picks up a carriage bolt from the growing pile on the desk and pokes the dull end into my hip.

"What did you say?" he says.

"Look at the press release now," I answer. "Count the hardware later. And don't jab me with that thing."

He throws the carriage bolt across the room and watches as it lands on the love seat by the window. He marches into my part of the office.

"Show me the goddamned press release," he yells after me, and I've won. I have defeated the president in a battle of wills. I am not his assistant. He is *my* assistant. Never again will I bother to wear orange and black on Fridays. I will take down my football calendar and replace it with something from the Audubon Society. I will play computer solitaire all day long.

"Just a little paper jam," I say, pulling the press release from the printer. "Can I get you something to drink?"

So I'm slipping up already. No big deal. I'll get him this one cup of coffee, but that's all. No creamer, no orange juice, no fancy silver tray.

"Forget the coffee," the president says. "And I'll be in my office. Do not disturb, Patty, important work in progress."

He holds the press release as if it were a pie fresh from the oven. He's not accustomed to touching actual pieces of paper. The rapid shift in office technology is the best explanation for his current library book phase, but I still think he needs to start pulling his weight around here. He'll read my press release if I have to strap him to his chair. He goes into his office and shuts the door. I would like to get on the intercom system and say, *Attention-Attention. This time I'm not kidding. The president's retirement is finally here. I'm in charge now, people.* Everyone would gather on the library lawn, and photographers would snap my picture. Students of all races would place enormous cardboard checks into my outstretched arms. When evening came, I would order the cafeteria workers to bring ice cream. Tall men from the physical plant would dab our faces with embroidered cloth napkins.

I spend most of the day working on SWOT analysis. Strengths and Weaknesses come fairly easily, but I struggle with the Opportunities section. Under Threats, I list the president's impending retirement. I handily imply no one will be able to fill his soil-stained shoes. I'm doing the final proof when I hear the chainsaw starting in the president's office. I turn on the intercom.

"Can I give you a hand in there, Mr. President?" I say into the microphone.

I hear nothing but uneven revving and presidential grunting, so I get up from my desk and knock on the door.

"Mr. President?" I say.

Still no answer, but I hear the chainsaw stop.

I open the door and see him unlocking the conference room window.

"I'm sick of these hollyhocks," he says. "Time for them to go."

I say, "What about your filtration troughs?"

"Later, Patty," he says. "Someone has to think about the soil, here."

But wait a second. I'm in charge now, and I happen to like hollyhocks. Who in the world cares about soil? Okay then. If he's going to make such bold threats, I'm going to take action. I might even use the gold-plated hammer. He can't just take the flowers from the ground. He has no business ending their lives.

"Stop," I say. "Close the window."

"Look Patty, I already went over your precious press release. Now I'm just going to move my hand outside the window here and pull..."

"Stop," I say, even louder. I take the hammer and my orange and black duffel bag from the loveseat and stare at the president until he droops. Carefully placing one of my dirt clods on the middle of his desk, I point to it as if I'm a batter ready to hit one out of the ballpark. I'll show him. With all the force I can muster, I swing the hammer down onto the dirt clod and smash it into a thousand bits of dust. The desk rattles.

"All right," he says. "You win."

"Thank you," I say. "And now, I believe it's time to go home."

The president looks at his watch. "You're right, Patty," he says. "Let's knock off for the day."

Formulating a plan to come in early tomorrow to clean up the mess on the president's desk, I collect my purse from my desk drawer and retrieve my Tupperware container from the drying rack in the kitchenette. The president packs up his toolbox and shuts off the lights.

As we're walking out to the parking lot, the president puts his hand on my shoulder and says, "You'll call the Physical Plant tomorrow, then?"

"Of course," I say, and we both know I'm lying. My little game with the president, I think, is much like the game husbands play with their wives. Longtime lovers tell one another all kinds of tales of honor and devotion, but in actual practice they're a lot more interested in personal victory.

"Goodnight," I tell the president as he gets into his Lincoln Town Car. Sitting in the driver's seat of my practical sedan, I watch him pull out of the parking lot. He looks so tired. But maybe I'm just projecting – I could stand a nap myself. I should have demanded more annual leave in my SWOT Analysis Report. I'll make some corrections tomorrow if my schedule allows some tinkering time. I start my car and head toward home. When I stop at the first stop sign, I witness the speeding traffic and wonder about the potential for accidents – so many pickups, cars, and motorcycles careening toward trees and telephone poles. So many motorists on so many pointless journeys, almost too late to save themselves from collision.

Come to the Tall Grass Prairie

Start with buffalo. A great, teeming stampede of flying fur, roaring across the plains like a million mountains moving. You'll want to restrict yourself to certain other members of the animal kingdom – horses, coyotes, bobcats, snakes. A mangy dog here and there is fine. Keep it simple, though, nothing exotic. Same goes for the people – you're better off with farmer types and the occasional oil tycoon. Wheat, wind, prairie grass, you know the drill.

Try to distinguish yourself from people writing about Kansas. They have that whole *Wizard of Oz* problem to contend with, so you're actually a lot better off than they are. Also, many people think Kansas is even more boring than Oklahoma, so don't be afraid to use that to your advantage. Kansas wins the Wholesome Award, though; more people get murdered in Oklahoma. Country music lyrics are always a fine addition, as is the judicious mention of beef jerky, ranch style beans, and marshmallows roasting on a stick.

When your husband comes in from his day on the lake, ask him if he caught anything and then get back to work. You have a deadline to meet! Your husband carefully takes off his plastic work boots and spreads newspapers on the kitchen table.

Tell him you need the kitchen table! You use the kitchen table to do your writing and Ernie, your boss, wants to see an entire new promotional packet by next week.

Oklahoma: Where the Wind Comes Sweeping Down the Plain.

Not very original – obviously – and besides, you know better than to remind the customers of Ernie's competition. Discoveryland, the dinner theatre that plays Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* every single night of the summer, once tried to woo you away from Ernie's family-owned Tall Grass Prairie Preserve. Discoveryland was starting a new ad campaign, and their managing director thought you'd be just the person to get the ball rolling. You stuck with Ernie. You're nothing if not loyal.

You know, zipadedoodah, Ernie says one day in the break room. Get us some tourists from out of state.

As far as you can tell, there are no tourists from out of state. You look down at your green salad and saltines. You don't say anything. You don't want to hurt Ernie's feelings.

Oklahoma: Where the Tall Grass Just Keeps on Getting Taller.

This is true. The tall grass does keep getting taller. You know because John Derrick, Ernie's nephew and office assistant, constantly complains of having to sharpen the lawn mower blades.

This place is *called* the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve, Ernie says to John Derrick. You see John Derrick replace the can of chewing tobacco in the back pocket of his oversized jeans. Ernie pokes him in the shoulder and says, The grass is supposed to be tall, in case you've forgotten, punk-ass.

I know that, John Derrick says, this time digging around in his front pockets for loose change. You can tell by the way his hips swing he's been watching too much MTV. He drops another quarter into the Coke machine, and Ernie slams his clipboard down on the table.

Don't you sass me, John Derrick, Ernie says. You want a job I'll give you a job. You want a vacation and you better start hitchikin' to Disneyland.

None of this helps you. You spend all your lunch hours trying to think of better slogans for better business. Ernie is counting on you. Ernie believes in your master's degree in Public Relations. Last year, when you finished your course work at the University of Oklahoma, you learned clichés mean loads of tourism dollars. Ernie has had what they call "some college," but he inherited the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve when his father died. He wants you to help turn the place into something that actually turns a profit.

Your husband, Ernie's childhood best friend, finished his master's degree the year before you finished yours. His was in Classics. During your last year, your husband went off to start a Ph.D. at Brown. He hated the people in Providence; they reminded him too much of all those school librarians who punished him for forgetting to push his chair underneath the table. He dropped out and moved back to Oklahoma, back with you.

Right now your husband is cleaning fish on the kitchen table. He smells bad. This kitchen table – your desk – will probably smell bad for weeks.

Good catch? you ask him

Fine, he says. You speculate that this will be his last word until after dinner, when he will dutifully clear the table, load the dishes in the dishwasher, and say, Goodnight, then.

You have grown accustomed to this quiet place, this life of dry leaves and loud insects and flat, ashen clouds. You never thought you'd stay in Oklahoma. Your husband never thought he'd leave.

Everyone Always Comes Back to Oklahoma.

Only Fools Leave Oklahoma.

The Panhandle Holds Your Heart in its Hand.

Lousy, all of them lousy. You've finally burned enough incense to rid the house of its fish smell, and you're sitting at the kitchen table, brainstorming. In the living room, your husband watches the rodeo finals and reads Euripides. He doesn't say so, but you're convinced his obsession with Greek Drama has made him imagine himself a tragic hero, the last bloody warrior in a dying city-state. The two of you will never have children. He says he's afraid you'll leave them in a hot car all day long in the middle of July or maybe drown them in the bathtub one night after dinner. Or if they escape that fate, they'll go off to college in the East and then return for the winter holiday with new ideas about the necessity of violence, dethroning the father, plucking his eyes out, cutting off his hands. Your husband always uses a condom on the rare occasions when you have sex. You know you're not supposed to be happy about his grouchy insistence on birth control, but you're damned relieved. While your friends make long distance phone calls to tell you about their biological clocks, you can't help but feel glad you'll never have another Oklahoman in your house.

Oklahoma: Where the Buffalo Roam.

You'll have to look it up, but you're pretty sure some other state uses this as their license plate slogan. This will never do. You're sitting at the kitchen table again, and now your husband sits in the window seat writing furiously in a notebook. He hasn't spoken to you since he started the dishwasher three hours ago. He probably has had one of his big inspirations. This happens from time to time – he starts a letter-writing campaign to change the local recycling laws or he suddenly becomes very interested in becoming a contestant on an important new game show. Your theory is he's just bored, but you're willing to consider the possibility he's also a little bit crazy.

You've done some research on buffalo. The Prairie Preserve's gift shop has everything from buffalo coloring books to buffalo 32 oz. Big Gulp tumbler traffic mugs. In a corner by the rattlesnake display, you find a book called *Bison: Proud Beasts of The Sooner State*. You retrieve the book from your briefcase and drop it with a deliberate thunk onto the kitchen table. Your husband doesn't look up. You open the book and realize it's mostly a showcase for some second-rate local photographer. Your favorite is a photograph of Ernie – in what looks like his teenaged Christian fundamentalist phase leaning against the mock log cabin near the front gates of the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve. He has the overly-styled male hair of the 1980's. His bangs are stiff with hairspray. He bares his teeth at a station wagon approaching from the gates; perhaps he's trying to look like a buffalo? You wonder if your husband has ever seen this photograph. You think about calling him over to the kitchen table to take a look at his old buddy mugging for the camera, but you don't want to feel hurt when he replies with his inevitable grunt. And why should you feel hurt? You're not attached to this photograph – or to Ernie himself

for that matter -- any more than you're attached to this stupid ad campaign for the Prairie Preserve, but you're tired of trying to make conversation with a brick wall. You're amazed at how your husband can always seem to make you feel bad about something that didn't even mean that much to you in the first place. We're out of Cheerios, you'll say one morning at the breakfast table

Yeah, he'll say back And then he'll look down at his book or go back to putting his pennies, nickels, and dimes into hundreds of precarious piles, or sometimes he'll simply walk out of the room without saying anything at all. Suddenly you're very worried about the Cheerios, very worried you'll run out of them tomorrow and no one will even care. You feel an odd kinship with the Cheerios, like the Cheerios are on your team and the piles of pennies languishing in the window seat are on your husband's team. Someone will be the eventual winner, and it probably won't be you. No matter what you do to combat the silence, you know the hollow space that fills the house will always be the same

Oklahoma: Where Hollow Space Surrounds You.

You like this one. You write the slogan in large, block letters at the top of your legal pad. You draw stars on either side. You imagine how your idea would look painted on the side of covered wagon. This could be the glittering symbol of hope that draws the Hollywood stars to this long, empty stretch of tornado alley. Tired of the growing crowds in places like New Mexico and Montana, they'll sell their sprawling ranches and move to Oklahoma. They'll start film festivals and open art museums and demand trendy shops that sell satchels and beads and good, quality coffee. You think of yourself behind the cash register at the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve. In the corner by the rattlesnake

display, Ernie and John Derrick are showing off their genuine, life-worn boots. Children in designer ski jackets reach up to touch the edges John Derrick's cowboy hat. The line at your cash register goes all the way out the door. You spot Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell somewhere in the back; they're both wearing dark sunglasses and baseball caps, but you've seen them come in before, so you recognize the way they adjust their shopping bags and unbutton the top buttons of their stiff casual shirts. Maybe they'll buy a ziplock baggie full of genuine Oklahoma red soil. Oklahoma: Where the Hollow Space Surrounds You. This one's going to fly.

You go back to reading *Bison: Proud Beasts of The Sooner State*. On the television in the living room, you hear the rodeo finals ending. Your husband changes the channel to one of those Behind The Scenes of Epic Films shows. Someone is interviewing a famous director. You can hear the famous director saying, The world needs more comedy, the world needs more pathos, the world needs more of what the cinema can show them. You read in your bison book about something called brucellosis, a disease affecting bison in Texas, Missouri, and at Yellowstone National Park. The book says bison in Oklahoma are not infected with brucellosis.

The Tall Grass Prairie Preserve: A Brucellosis Free Zone.

Come Into the Tall Grass: No Brucellosis Here.

Brucellosis Busters: Cowpokes on Parade.

Brucellosis, you read in your book, doesn't adversely affect buffalo, who carry the disease, but it can quickly spread to the cattle population and cause pregnant cows to spontaneously abort. This is one of those instances in which you find yourself wishing for someone to talk to. You'd like to tell someone about brucellosis, not because you

really care about buffalo disease, but because you'd like to share the experience of learning. You carry the book into the living room where your husband, half an ear cocked to the Hollywood director's special, is still writing furiously in his notebook.

We could do it, he says. We could make antiquity come alive in Oklahoma.

You're surprised to hear him say anything at all, so you try to act enthusiastic.

We could, you say. I mean, somebody ought to say *something* to make *someone* come alive in Oklahoma.

He looks up at you and scowls, the very serious look of someone who wishes you dead.

You think I'm kidding, he says. I'm not kidding. The world needs more comedy, the world needs more pathos, the world needs more of what Greek drama can show them.

You've been watching too much television, you say. You move his pile of *Car And Driver* magazines to the floor so you can sit next to him in the window seat. Sleeping arrangements aside, this is the closest you've been to him in months. You're both a little startled.

I'm going to do it, he says. This time I'm really going to do it.

Do what?

I'm going to put Oklahoma on the map. The First Annual Greek Drama Festival of Oklahoma. Do you hear me?

With both arms out in front of him, he makes invisible headlines in the air.

The First *Annual* Greek Drama Festival of *Oklahoma,* he says. There's wonder in his voice, and as much as you know you're supposed to say ooh aah, that's great, honey,

wow, I mean you're really going to show 'em this time, you're annoyed he didn't want to hear about your slogan for the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve.

He thinks he's a genius. You know better.

I'm going to bed, you say. Could you pick up some Cheerios in the morning?

He's angry. You secretly hope he'll yell at you; at least you'll know where you stand. But he doesn't yell. He scowls. He scribbles in his notebook and says, Goodnight, then.

Goodnight, then, you say. And you're off to bed.

The next day, you tell Ernie about your slogan.

I like it, he says, his feet up on his desk. Tell John Derrick to order up some T-shirts.

Ernie doesn't authorize expenditures unless he's really sold on an idea. You take his enthusiasm as a good sign.

You find John Derrick in the machine shop and tell him about your slogan. You ask him to make a T-shirt order just as soon as possible.

Write it down, and I'll get to it as soon as I can, he says. Better yet, send me an e-mail, and I'll reply when I have time.

You're constantly amazed that this man, this *boy*, has the nerve to give you orders. He makes minimum wage. He's barely out of high school. He spends his breaks playing things like Death Match 2000 on his pocket-sized video game super freak-out-supremo. And he thinks he can tell you what to do.

You'll need to order all the adult sizes and most of the children's sizes, you tell him.

What about maternity sizes, he says, putting a staple gun into the work apron he wears around his waist.

What do you mean?

Nothing, he says. I just thought you'd want to consider all segments of the population, that's all.

Fine, you say. I'll send you an e-mail.

* * *

Your husband is rehearsing for his upcoming production of Aristophanes' *The Frogs*. He's borrowed props and costumes from the warehouse at Discoveryland, and he's putting together a festival of sorts that will take place in the fountain plaza right outside the gift shop at the Prairie Preserve. You're taking a break from stocking a new shipment of buffalo tube socks inside the gift shop. You step out to see your husband raising a megaphone to his lips. He plays Pluto, the king of the underworld. Ernie and John Derrick are in the chorus.

I don't want to be no goddamned frog, Ernie says.

Hey, John Derrick says, didn't this Greek guy also write a play called *The Fags*? You'd be perfect in that one, Ernie. A real crowd-pleaser.

Watch out, Ernie says. That's all I'm gonna say.

Places everyone, places, your husband says into his megaphone. Ernie, John Derrick, and other members of the chorus splash through the roaring current in the fountain and crouch on either side of a plastic fern.

And action, your husband says, even though this isn't a movie.

Brek-eh-kuh-kex, Ko-axe. Ko-axe. The members of the chorus chant in unison. Welcome to the Fountain and the Lake. Let us wake --

Cut! Your husband screams. You've never seen him so animated. He throws the megaphone to the ground and tells them they're all worthless. You don't sound like frogs! You sound like dogs. You sound like hogs. You sound like shit! Now get it together. Off Ernie's lead, now!

Again, they start with their Brek-eh-kuh-kex, Ko-axe. Ko-axe. Their murmurs don't sound much better to you than they did the last time, but your husband lets them keep going.

Oklahoma: Where Amphibious Life Surrounds You.

You'd like to see some real frogs. You'd like to see your husband bring them home from the lake one day. He would dump them from a metal bucket, and they would land with a wet smack onto the kitchen table. You'd take the fish from the freezer and place them on the counter. You'd take a knife and cut them all to pieces. You'd sacrifice them to the gods. You'd get pregnant. You'd have the baby and feed it with frog legs and fish scales. You'd nourish it with your own saliva. You'd teach it how to kill.

Winter Carnival

That week brought out the mailmen in their moon boots and the children with their sloppy homemade bird feeders. Shopkeepers didn't know how to handle the snowdrifts accumulating in parking lots. People stayed home, turned on their radios, and pretended to live in another, easier era. At night, they didn't need streetlights. They could see far past the supermarket and into the windows of the town's only orthodontist. The traffic lights went dead, but the city didn't bother to make repairs. Residents left their cars in their snug garages and took to the streets with their wet dogs and their dangerously swerving bicycles. No one knew when school would start again.

Sara sat in front of the space heater with a pot of coffee and a pile of overdue books from the university library. She wasn't the type to accumulate late fines at the circulation desk, but waiting for the furnace repairman had left her housebound for days. She'd thought about taking a stab at the furnace herself – she was an expert at replacing the filter – but remembering her doctor's orders to stay active but not *too* active kept her huddled in a blanket by the phone.

Eight months earlier she had broken a hip. She thought herself too young for broken bones without the excuse of danger or adventure. Still, her embarrassing fall on

the bathroom floor brought her grown children rushing home from their jobs and their families. They hovered over her like she was some kind of nursing home case. She was finally glad when the doctor deemed her healthy and her daughter and son shared a rental car to the airport. They'd be back in a year or two, more quarrelsome and probably wealthier. They'd bring the grandchildren. Sara would watch them from her back window and wonder how they managed to steal all the pecans from the squirrels under the eaves. When she was a girl, she sat on tree stumps and made careful inventory lists of the contents of her Connecticut backyard. Her grandchildren, though, were conquerors. They didn't have slingshots or BB guns, but only because they thought themselves too sophisticated for such low-tech fare. Sara would hug and kiss them and give them greeting cards with checks tucked inside, but ultimately she would be more than ready for their departure. Camped out on the floor of her living room, she would listen to the radio and wait for winter.

Freezing weather didn't always touch this warm town, but when and if the snow ever came, classes were cancelled, the days were shorter, and Sara seemed to have more energy. She stayed off campus and worked in her solitary cave of antique lamps. More and more concerned with the state of her sketchbook, she only grew restless when she finished developing another roll of film. She sent thoughtful e-mails to her colleagues. She did crossword puzzles with terrific speed. She slept. And when a day or two had gone by and the sun still refused to melt the growing piles of snow, she ventured outside on foot, took more photographs, and eventually added to her pile of leather bound albums. Someday, maybe next winter, the best photos in those albums would become a collection. The following year, provided she didn't break any more bones, the collection

of photos along with her supplementary sketches would become her third book. And while she knew all her books were destined to remain forever closed on the coffee tables of slick urban illiterates, she remained determined never to retire.

The snow was just starting to fall when Sara's friend, Jeanne, appeared on the front porch. She carried a watering can in one hand and a bag of crushed ice in the other.

"Looks like Winter Carnival's going to come early this year," Jeanne said when Sara answered the door. "Come on, we have work to do."

The beginning of Winter Carnival, like leap year and Lent, abided by specific but confusing calendar rules. Winter Carnival could arrive any time between Halloween and Christmas Eve or any time between January 3rd and the end of February. In the case of a Thanksgiving snowstorm, university rules demanded the cancellation of the Melting Parade. Some years there was no Winter Carnival at all.

"I don't think so," Sara said, looking up at the sky. "Flurries. That's all."

They went inside, and Sara turned up the radio. Jeanne put the watering can in the kitchen sink and the bag of crushed ice in the freezer. They sat on the sofa with their cups of coffee while the DJ at the campus radio station predicted an announcement from the university president later that afternoon. Winter Carnival, like Groundhog Day, required a certain series of ritualistic guesswork. The president - or more likely the president's beleaguered secretary – made the very important decision as to when Winter Carnival would officially begin and end.

"I'm serious," Jeanne said. "Let's hit the sidewalks."

Like Sara, Jeanne would not retire. She wore pink lipstick and told everyone she'd like to drink champagne on her deathbed. Jeanne said she was glad for the snow,

but doubted the wisdom of the university administration. Teaching two sections of Intro to Theater always left her ready for a short break from the egos of young actors, and that break, she said, should begin sooner rather than later.

At the slightest hint of cold weather, Jeanne gathered the materials necessary to manufacture small but noticeable slick spots on the slab of concrete outside the window of the presidential office suite. Sara sometimes worried an innocent bystander would slip and fall, but Jeanne assured her she was only adding atmosphere. Besides, Jeanne said, no one actually walked on that part of the sidewalk, anyway. She was creating a picture, a pointed postcard for the president. Also like Sara, Jeanne seemed to thrive during the surprising white blur of Winter Carnival.

Sara hated to admit she was the more cautious of the two. Embarrassed, she told Jeanne they should wait for the announcement from the president's office. Maybe the people in charge would allow Carnival to begin without their additional labor.

"Those assholes?" Jeanne said. "Forget it. The president, in case you haven't heard, spends his time playing croquet in the hallways of the classroom building. I swear, it's like something out of Alice in Wonderland."

Sara agreed, and Jeanne took their coffee cups to the kitchen counter. Sara would wash them later, or maybe she wouldn't. She considered letting the puddles of old coffee sit at the bottom of each cup for days until she finally forgot about them altogether. Instead of finding a place for them in the crowded corners of the dishwasher, she would toss the dirty cups in the trash and never think about them again. If the snow came, Sara would willfully ignore all household chores in favor of her real work. Helping Jeanne manufacture the slick spots started to seem more important.

Sara bundled up and slung her camera bag across her chest. The flurries quickened.

"Let's walk," Sara said, though her doctor would not approve. She hoped the furnace man wouldn't call while she was away. Already the cold house had given her a runny nose.

Sara carried the watering can, and Jeanne hoisted the bag of ice high onto her own shoulder. Sara didn't bother locking the front door, but she stopped in the garage to tuck a flashlight into the pocket of her parka. Jeanne retrieved an umbrella from the trunk of her Toyota, and they trudged into the gray distance.

"Just think," Jeanne said when they stopped at a crosswalk. "Maybe this year there'll be lawsuits." Jeanne actively wanted to punish people in positions of authority. The university administration had a yearly habit of putting the entire grounds keeping crew on "seasonal layoff," leaving the sidewalks unsalted and unsanded – accidents waiting to happen.

The sign changed to "Walk," and they hurried across the street.

Sara said, "I'm hoping for a short Melting Parade, at least."

In her younger, more foolish days – when her husband was alive and the children were still at home – Sara embraced the Melting Parade and all its sad attempts at glory. The last day of Winter Carnival always came unexpectedly just as Sara hurried to finish making snowflake confetti, filling balloons with helium, sewing uniforms for the university marching band. She gave up all of those projects long ago. When her husband died and Sara became more serious about her photography, the 4-H women and the

Carnival Guild Board of Elders all gave her disdainful looks whenever they spotted her in the hardware store. Sometimes she felt lonely.

They were almost to the edge of campus when a passing jogger said, "Well wouldn't you know. Here they are – KoKo and KiKi."

Sara immediately recognized the red-faced heap of terry cloth and spandex as Jeanne's ex-husband, Daniel Usher. Usher taught modern American poetry in the English Department. KoKo and KiKi were just two of the many familiar selections from his catalog of not-very-funny nicknames.

"Off to start an international incident, are we?" he said, finally catching his breath.

Usher was not alone in his belief that Sara and Jeanne were troublemakers. Sara knew she was something of a rule-breaker these days. The town's residents would prefer that she shuffle around and make friendly jokes about gardening and her grandson's little league career. She was supposed to spend all day silently working in the shadow of her male colleagues in the Art Department and then stop into the faculty's favorite tavern only long enough to sip some ice water and offer the shy admission she'd rather be home knitting potholders. And if she ever managed to transcend the scents that were supposed to emanate from grandma's kitchen of virtue, she had to be wacky and fun loving, bingo-playing, bluehaired, gossipy and ridiculous. Sara was none of these things, and neither was Jeanne. People like Usher never failed to mention their departures.

But Jeanne had been on fairly decent terms with Usher since the long ago divorce. Usher had been less annoying and slightly more lucid during the ten or so years of their marriage, so Jeanne seemed to comfort herself with the knowledge he was worse off

without her. Sara liked them both, but preferred Jeanne's quick wit to Usher's incoherent rambling.

"Just hoping for an early Winter Carnival this year," Sara said.

Jeanne said, "You should wear gloves, Usher. Your fingers look like something out of a TV dinner."

"Well, you're both too late," Usher said. "As usual."

Usher put his hands in his pockets and told Sara and Jeanne about the president's announcement. Just five minutes ago, he said, Winter Carnival officially began. Usher, along with several of his colleagues from the College of Arts and Sciences, planned to march in this year's Melting Parade. Would Sara and Jeanne like to join them?

"No thanks," Sara said. "Last year they put us behind the horses."

"Agreed," Jeanne said, dropping her bag of ice onto the pavement. "I swear that parade is like something out of an Ionesco play." Snow stuck to the grass in front of a nearby swimming pool supply store. The street looked like a sheet of waxed paper.

Sara dumped the water from the watering can and thumped its hollow side against her hip. "Let's celebrate," she said. "No classes for at least 24 hours."

She was glad to see Usher sprint off toward the Student Union. Jeanne's open umbrella shared between them, Sara and Jeanne blended in with the 5:00 traffic, their flashlight mingling with the headlights heading home. They stopped in front of a fire hydrant so Jeanne could tie her shoe.

"That's the third time in two years," Sara said about the recurrent plumbing problems in Jeanne's Depression-era house. "Maybe it's time to sell."

"Usher loved that house," Jeanne said. "I'm afraid he'd buy it right from under me and let the downstairs fall to pieces."

Sara knew all about Usher's old sewing room in Jeanne's house. The musty third-floor tower had little in the way of modern conveniences, but Usher had contented himself with his manual typewriter and a pile of wood for the room's ancient fireplace. After years of sequestering himself upstairs for hours on end, he insisted he was more productive there than anywhere else. Jeanne and Sara were pretty sure he didn't do actual work up there, however. Like so many heads of household, Usher just wanted to escape his family. But he was attached to that room, no doubt. When the divorce was final, Usher spent a full year living in his cramped attic sanctuary before Jeanne finally kicked him out. These days he lived in the attic of one of his colleagues.

"You're right," Sara said. "The professor's house belongs to you now. Let the pipes freeze."

By now they were nearing Sara's house, their flashlight's beam resting on the passenger door of Jeanne's Toyota. They'd be in touch in the morning to discuss the weather's progress.

"Sleep well," Jeanne said. "I swear that cold of yours is like something out of a Kleenex commercial. Take care of yourself."

At this point they might hug, Sara thought. Neither one much cared for hugs, though, so Sara gave Jeanne a tentative pat on the shoulder.

She stepped on to the porch and watched Jeanne pull out of the driveway. Today, like so many other days, she worried about Jeanne all alone in that dilapidated, flooded house. About once a month, Jeanne would lock herself in her formal dining room for

several days, and when she finally emerged, she refused to discuss her activities. Sara knew she just graded audition tapes, worked on her own monologues, and polished small sections of dialogue. Jeanne was an accomplished playwright. Sara was proud of her friend's lifetime of artistic achievement. Winter Carnival, she hoped, would allow Jeanne to get some rest, get some work done. Perhaps the short break would do the same for her. The snow came faster now, and Sara watched the back and forth of Jeanne's windshield wipers disappear around the corner.

* * *

In her basement darkroom, Sara blew her nose into a handkerchief and finished developing another photograph. The evening's work completed her collection of tree branch prints. Since the furnace man undoubtedly would use Winter Carnival as an excuse to stay away, she had all the space heaters turned up to fire hazard levels. Pockets of cold still leaked in from the cracks underneath the doors and windows. Just a little more moisture in the air would allow snow to fall from the basement's thick beams.

She thought of herself going back out to the playground where, two days before, Jeanne had climbed an old sugar maple and sawed off just the right branch. Sara set up her tripod while Jeanne held the scrap of wood against a background of dirty water trickling from a drainage pipe on the next block. An entire roll of film on just that one branch. Now she had all the photos developed, but she wanted the actual branch back in her possession. She wanted to put it on her mantel piece or hang it from the ceiling like

she did with the holiday greens. She wanted to change the pattern of everyday events and make herself into a moving tree stump, her branches somehow still intact.

The draft from the back door made the kitchen table too cold for any kind of official dinner, so Sara sat in front of the space heater with a plate of toast. She looked at the icicles forming outside and remembered when her husband was still alive and Jeanne and Usher were still married. Even then, their houses were always falling into disrepair. The snow fell in great heaps one year, and her husband insisted on doing the neighborly favor of alleviating the cold packed pressure on the sagging roof of the Usher estate. Sara and Jeanne worked all afternoon in the kitchen preparing enormous vats of hot chocolate for the Melting Parade, and Usher, of course, didn't even emerge from his third-floor sewing room when Sara's husband slipped and fell into a snow bank by the side of the house. A trip to the Emergency Room didn't stop him from climbing back up there later that day. When evening came, Usher joined him. They must have fancied themselves proud men on the roof, lamenting their middle-aged failures. Sara wondered what they were doing, but Jeanne talked her out of her worry. *Let 'em freeze,* she said, and Sara laughed. Married women so often seek other married women. They didn't want secret recipe ingredients or borrowed power tools or hideouts for their extra house keys. Sara just wanted to talk to someone. She wanted to remember what it felt like to be something more than the lesser part of a whole.

Now without husbands, Sara and Jeanne sometimes had to rely on neighborhood teenagers when their gutters needed cleaning. They still mowed their own lawns, however. They clipped hedges in the spring and shoveled snow during Winter Carnival.

Relieved of the duties of the faculty wife, Sara could finally concentrate on her book of trees. She taught her photography classes. She talked and walked with Jeanne. Donning layer upon layer of cardigan sweater and sweat pants, Sara continued to endure the long shiver into nightfall. The space heaters produced passing bursts of tropical breeze, but she knew she'd never get warm enough to fall asleep.

"I guess your furnace guy had other engagements," Jeanne said when Sara called in the middle of the night. "Come on over. The sewing room's all yours."

"I'll never fall asleep," Sara said. "My eyes are closed, but only because it seems warmer that way."

"I swear it's like Noah's Ark over here," Jeanne said. Sara could hear a TV movie in the background – car chases, gunshots, an ambulance. "Bring that squeegee thing of yours, would ya?"

They discussed the plague of plumbing problems in Jeanne's kitchen. After they hung up, Sara packed an overnight bag and retrieved her Supermop from the garage. Loading everything into the trunk, she said goodbye to her icebox prison. The first night of Winter Carnival and she would spend it in Usher's third floor study. Jeanne would bring her an afghan and a set of pillows. She would sleep by a dying fire.

* * *

The next morning, Sara dumped the ashes from the fireplace into a shopping bag from the local grocer. She never thought she'd see the day when brown paper sacks seemed like relics from the past. No one even bothered to ask the customer's preference

anymore. Many of her colleagues bragged about taking their own environmentally friendly canvas bags to the grocery store, but Sara knew they were lying. They used plastic just like everyone else did. This particular brown paper bag was at least a decade old by now. Jeanne must have tucked it into a cabinet somewhere and then brought it up here for long term storage.

Neither Cinderella nor Santa Claus, Sara felt as if she belonged to this fireplace, belonged to this small room. Sunlight streaked the walls. The circle-shaped window was no bigger than a hand mirror, but she felt as if she could see trees growing, roots emerging from the hard wood floor. She dressed, sat on the hearth, and filled half a notebook with idle drawings. Curious, she glanced at the headlines on a bundle of old newspapers: "Dairy Show Today" and "God's Alarm Clock Has No Snooze Button." *That's the thing,* Jeanne would say. *Nothing happens here.*

Around noon, Jeanne knocked on the door with sandwiches and soup. They munched on cold cuts and Sara drew a thumbnail portrait of Jeanne's face. She pencilled in shadows underneath the eyes. She knew Jeanne might leave her alone someday. Or maybe she would go first, and Jeanne would be left thinking about the hole in the ground where strange men would drop the box containing Sara's broken body. She remembered when her own hair was longer, a different color. She thought of records on a turntable, long forgotten living room furniture, jigsaw puzzles in the basement's old playroom. Thirty years ago, Jeanne would push a stroller around the block and stop in for a cigarette. They'd take long drives through the wheat fields on the outskirts of town. No one cared about seatbelts. She remembered the metal gas can on a shelf in her garage, Usher's wide ties, her husband's incomplete set of golf clubs from the Salvation Army.

She wanted to pack them all into this third floor room and wrap them in stiff, brown paper, never to be opened again.

Sara put down her sketchpad and pointed her camera at Jeanne.

"Smile," she said.

"Why?"

"Because someday your new play will get produced in New York. Someday I'll have a gallery opening, and you'll be able to say you knew me way back when."

"Don't talk like that," Jeanne said. "And enough with the photo ops."

Sara let the camera fall into her lap. "Don't talk like what?" she said.

"I can't think about *someday*," Jeanne said. "I don't have time for *someday*. I don't know what's going to happen to my play, you don't know what's going to happen to your photographs. Christ, you sound like one of our students. I mean, look at us. We might as well just blow away and die."

Sara knew Jeanne was probably right. So what if they managed to meet all their family obligations? Their children were grown and their husbands no longer required their services, but Winter Carnival's arrival held both promise and dread. Making plans for the long-term future started to seem like buying a broken down exercise bike at a garage sale. All your possessions became reminders you were stuck in one place – you could pedal forward, but you couldn't go anywhere. Sara still liked to think of herself as a bundle of potential, still capable of artistic achievement. But she couldn't deny the way her hands sometimes shook when she focussed her camera lens. She wanted more time. She knew Jeanne wanted the same.

"We're not going to die," Sara said. "Not yet."

"Speak for yourself," Jeanne said, and Sara feared this was going to turn into one of those maudlin cancer moments wherein women embrace and murmur platitudes about test results and healing white light.

"You don't have something you need to tell me, do you?" Sara said.

"Nothing like that," Jeanne said. "I'm just sick of this flooded house, sick of this rotten town. Can't even get out of the driveway what with all the goddamned snow."

"Let's shovel," Sara said. "Come on, it'll do us both some good."

Jeanne agreed they would spend the afternoon on home improvement. The kitchen, for starters, required some serious flood control. Sara would get the Supermop from the trunk of her car, and together they would push the excess water out the laundry room door and into the frozen front yard. Jeanne's plumber, they joked, was probably out skiing somewhere with Sara's furnace guy.

A borrowed snow blower made quick work of the driveway. In the garage, they listened to the weather forecast and were disappointed to hear the temperature would be well above freezing by mid-afternoon.

"You know what that means," Jeanne said when they waded through the kitchen.

The climate here was too warm for ice-skating, snow sculptures, or university sponsored hockey games. Her entire adult life spent here and Sara still wasn't used to the odd stretches of warm weather. Winter, she always thought, should provide opportunities for recreation. This year's carnival break was hardly a break at all.

"Take off your shoes," Jeanne said, squeezing a wet towel into the laundry room sink. "You'll ruin them."

Sara looked down at her sneakers and saw water seeping through her socks. Once again, Jeanne was right. She held herself steady on the edge of the countertop and balanced on one foot. Reaching down to untie her laces, she felt her weight collapse beneath her. She slipped. And as she splashed down to the floor, she imagined herself in a hospital bed, her arm in a cast, her ankle black and blue.

* * *

Most of the snow melted by the end of the next day. Sara sat on her couch and listened to the president's address on campus radio. *Another Winter Carnival come and gone,* he said. *Another spring semester on the way. Another rush of melting ice from the mountaintops. Though water floods our streets, it will not dampen our spirits.*

Please, she thought. Definitely time to turn off the radio.

She used a magnifying glass to look at a contact sheet of her latest photos. All the trees looked dead. *It's winter,* Jeanne would say. *They're supposed to look dead.* Sara was starting to suspect this latest project – the tree book – was little more than a lost cause. No longer did she have an interest in appealing to an audience of pretend-environmentalists. The recycled paper she insisted on for both her previous books made all her photographs look grainy and dull. Screw the earth. She wanted fame.

The Melting Parade would begin in just under an hour and Sara reluctantly decided to attend. She'd borrowed a wheelchair from her doctor's office, but only because Jeanne had insisted. She was adjusting the height of her crutches when the phone rang. Finally, the furnace man. She told him she'd leave the side door open. A

call waiting beep from her son, and then another one from her daughter. They were concerned. Was she taking her vitamins? Had she seen the commercial for Osteo-pro? The grandchildren sang a song in the background – something about racecars and industrial dump trucks. She assured everyone she was fine; she was just going out to the Melting Parade, in fact. Something in their voices changed when they heard about the events of Winter Carnival. Her son wanted to know if the university still sponsored the snowshoe race on the library lawn. Her daughter asked about the fortune-telling booth and the antique-car display. She was always surprised to hear them speak so fondly of their childhood. Wasn't that what everyone always said about this town? It was a good place to raise a family.

She filled the bird feeders in the front yard, took a few halfhearted photos of the oak tree across the street, and waited for Jeanne to pick her up. Together, they loaded the wheelchair into the back of Jeanne's Toyota. Jeanne looked rested, relaxed. She wore red lipstick instead of her usual pink.

They discussed the possibilities for parking close to the parade route.

"I'd rather remain inconspicuous," Sara said. "If that's possible."

"Face it," Jeanne said. "You're the star of the show."

Everyone on campus had heard about her fall. In today's mail, she had received no fewer than a dozen get-well cards. The senders, Sara thought, didn't really want her to get well. They wanted her to look and act like a fully functional adult, but they didn't especially prize her wellbeing. At least they were polite.

Jeanne and Sara circled around campus and finally decided they would leave the Toyota in the university parking garage. Tired, Sara agreed to use the wheelchair, but kept the crutches propped up in her lap.

"Hey girls," said a voice from inside a nearby concession stand. "Wait up."

The concession stand's back door swung open. Wearing a cap and gown and full academic regalia, Usher emerged with a corndog on a stick.

"How's the ankle, Sara?" he said. "A little too big for our britches, are we?"

"My britches," Sara said. "Are just the right size."

She told him all about the dramatic fall in his old kitchen, the trip to the orthopedic specialist, the X-rays, the plaster cast. He seemed impressed.

"Too bad you didn't decorate the wheelchair," he said. "Would have made a fine parade entry."

He went on to detail his morning activities – a whole grain breakfast, a shoeshine, a trip to the dry cleaners to retrieve his cap and gown. "I just needed a place to change," he said, nodding at the concession stand.

"Lovely," Jeanne said, eyeing his corndog on a stick. "You're a class act."

"I know!" he said. "No one bothers to look presentable anymore. Except for you two, of course. Looking fine, looking sharp."

Usher posed by a bucket of carnations, and Sara took his picture. His crow's feet were deeper than she remembered. He still believed in so many accessories of academic yesteryear – the briefcase, the beanie, the pair of penny loafers. The world had moved on without him. As she focussed her camera lens, Sara realized this was absolutely the wrong angle. Usher towered above her wheelchair, his hands gesturing toward the bucket

of carnations with a giant's menace. Usher, she realized, should not be photographed from below.

"Hold on a second," she said. "Let me get this right."

Jeanne said, "Can we go?"

Sara fumbled with her crutches and hoisted herself up. "In a minute," she said, looking back through the camera. Usher looked smaller now, less monstrous. He tilted his chin toward the sky.

"All finished," Sara said. "That one's for the ages."

Usher removed his cap, bowed, and told Sara to send him a copy of the photograph. She promised she would. Finally, he spotted some of his colleagues from the English Department and rushed off to catch up with them.

"Pathetic," Jeanne said. "He looked like something out of a public service announcement."

Sara resituated herself in the wheelchair, and Jeanne pushed her into the line of people heading toward the parade route. Before they reached their spot on the curb, Sara snapped photos of the snowshoe race, the fortune-telling booth, and the antique-car display. She would send copies to her daughter and to her son. They'd see. Nothing had changed around here, not since they were children.

The parade's master of ceremonies – a weatherman from a television station in the city – carried a golden wand with a daffodil on the end. When he blew his whistle, Sara heard snare drums in the distance. A man dressed as a squirrel bowed and gave her a balloon. He kept the rest of the balloons to himself. Must be the wheelchair, Sara said to Jeanne, and they laughed. She held the string for a moment before letting go.

Lumbering toward the student union, members of the volunteer fire department carried axes and a hose. The marching band played a medley of showtunes. Workers from a local Chinese restaurant swung their orange capes at dancers from the campus ballet company. Usher and his gang of lost scholars waved at Sara and Jeanne when their procession passed by. They waved back. The university president, a croquet mallet in his hand, stood atop a magnificent rose-colored float. Though she had seen it all before, Sara watched with great attention. In the street, great chunks of ice detached themselves from the drainage grates and slowly turned to water.

Grammar Town

Shannon grew up next to Adverb Lake. *Anxiously and slowly*, she joked in her teenage years. She grew up anxiously and slowly by the shores of Adverb Lake, but she never imagined she would spend the rest of her life there. Shannon wasn't even born when the workmen used dynamite to dig out this island of split-level homes somewhere between Tulsa and Stillwater, Oklahoma. Her grandfather financed the Grammar Town housing development, the manmade pond near the entrance from the highway, the suspended wooden bridge spanning green-gray water and natural animal habitat complete with all-weather lily pads.

Her father liked to extol the virtues of the family neighborhood of middle class dreams. Levittown meets Native America, he said. Brook Farm meets Academic Freedom meets Easy Monthly Payments. Professors at Oklahoma State University could live there without feeling punished by the harshness of their surroundings. They could feel smart there. They could feel worthwhile. They could feel as if they were in the company of like-minded artists and intellectuals with good taste in foreign food, though they'd never point to their falafel or curry or baklava and dare to utter the word "foreign."

Forget the plains, they told Shannon all through her childhood. Think of Europe. Think of New York, Santa Fe, Chicago if you must. But whatever you do, remember you are better than this red soil. You are larger than the tin roofs and cracked dishes and broken families that litter this desolate place. You can transcend the long horizon of the hot August shade and rise up to meet the challenge of the East. Or failing that, you can grow up to tackle the real Midwest, the land of Sherwood Anderson and Willa Cather. Shannon's father told her the mythic South could also hold some promise. Think of decayed plantations and families full of scandal, he said. Think of tradition. There is no tradition here.

"There is nothing here," her Uncle Usher said, lacing up his ancient athletic shoes. The two of them sat on the front porch of her parents' house in Grammar Town. The sun had been up for only an hour or so, but the roof on the Victorian across the street looked like it was going to melt off into the driveway. "This place is a dump," he said.

Uncle Usher was old-fashioned. He longed for a world where you could still smoke in movie houses. He spoke often of workers' rights. He believed in going to the market every morning to shop for the evening meal. This morning, he was doing robotic stretching exercises, getting ready for his ten mile run into town for a faculty breakfast on the branch campus of Oklahoma State University.

"I've heard your babble a million times before," Shannon told Usher, who wasn't really her uncle. A colleague of her parents, he was just the latest in a long series of pretend-relatives who lived in the attic room above her father's office. She and her parents called him "uncle" as a kind of cruel joke – no one would ever mistake him for the candy-giving, joke-telling type. He was too bitter, and his face was too full of moles.

"I do not babble," Usher said. "I'm what they call a cultural critic. Remember that."

"I'll remember," she said. His flushed face rose to meet hers, and he cleared the mucus from his throat. He bent down again and tied his athletic shoes in double knots. Shannon remembered when Usher had tried to teach her to tie her own shoes so many years ago. She always thought of him when she saw the children of various faculty members tripping over their long shoelaces as they toodled along the pristine sidewalks of Grammar Town. Their parents, no doubt, were sorry Velcro had gone out of style. The children tumbled off their tricycles and cut gashes into their knees. Their contorted faces might stretch into placid grins if they knew Uncle Usher's secret to shoe-tying success. *You see these strings*, he told Shannon before kindergarten one morning. *Pull them until you feel like your feet are about to fall off.* For months, she would pull and pull, finally breaking off one of her shoelaces and running inside to get help from her mother. *Don't listen to Uncle Usher,* her mother said. *He's crazy.*

"Don't forget the Brussels sprouts," she shouted at Usher's sweat-stained back as he sprinted down the driveway.

He waved his hand at her and muttered something unintelligible. She felt sure he would remember. She knew he kept a computer-generated schedule of daily events folded neatly in the zipper pouch he wore around his waist. He would stop at the organic farmers' market on his way home from the faculty breakfast and turn up his nose at the faculty wives and their faculty children in strollers and their faculty dogs on leashes. Usher had long stopped speaking to anyone in any kind of pleasant way. She and her

parents were the only ones who could force him to maintain even the most perfunctory level of polite behavior. To everyone else, he was nothing but the Grammar Town crank. Soon, her parents would drive their Volvo to the same faculty breakfast. Shannon had intended to be gone before they woke up, but she already heard her father washing out the coffeepot in the kitchen.

"Big day?" he asked her when she retrieved her brownbag lunch from the refrigerator.

"Trimming azalea bushes on Participial Glen Grove Drive," she told him. "Other than that, I'll just be pulling weeds, I guess. Why?"

He edged around her to get a package of coffee from the freezer and said, "Thought you might show up at the faculty breakfast, that's all."

"I already told you," she said. "I'm not going." She grabbed a can of soda from the door of the fridge and stuffed it into her lunch bag.

"No pressure," he said. "But if you change your mind ..."

She wouldn't change her mind. For years, her father and Usher had been trying to talk her into accepting a part-time teaching position at the university. Insisting the entire family could have lunch together every day at the Student Union, her father told her over and over again that her youthful attitude would be just what the English Department needed. When he asked her to send in a letter of application, she always said "No." She was afraid. A university job meant commitment, permanence, surrender. Her parents' colleagues had their publication records and their tastes for expensive cheese, but Shannon had only an unfortunate Okie accent and a master's degree from Kansas State. Because she had spent her life on the plains, she always imagined everyone in her

parents' department spent their time studying her big round head and picturing the tumbleweeds blowing through the empty recesses of her brain.

"Sam and Kathryn Turner are going to be there," her father said. "I know they'd like to see you."

Sam Turner, the department's Romantics professor, liked to talk with Shannon about compost piles and appropriate care for rose bushes, and his wife Kathryn had been Shannon's favorite teacher at Grammar Town Elementary School. But Shannon still felt embarrassed to be in their presence, as if they expected more from her than a half-hearted attempt at earning a living in her pathetic home town. Sam and Kathryn didn't have children of their own, so Shannon always thought her potential failure made the future look all the more bleak for people like them.

"Give them my best regards," she said to her father.

"Will do," he said. "They'll be glad to hear you've been so successful in the, uh, yard mowing business."

"Landscaping," she said

"Right," he said. "Professional landscaping. Maybe someday you'll get a promotion and learn how to be one of those people who scoops dead animals out of swimming pools."

She knew what came next – his speech on self-reliance. She didn't want to listen. Instead, she wanted to pull loose branches from trees, spray paint the underside of a wheelbarrow, dig her hands into peat moss. More than that, she wanted finally to be able to afford to move out of her parents' house in Grammar Town. Where would she go? Usher never failed to remind her she was getting too old to rely on father's generosity.

Friends her age were already buying their own condominiums in places like Florida and Massachusetts.

She thought of running away with a traveling salesman or going off into the wilderness to kill her first deer. What else was the daughter of intellectuals supposed to do about her own intellectual doubts? Shannon spent her teenage years driving around dusty back roads with pot-smoking boys, all of them convinced they knew better than the simple-minded sunbathers of Adverb Lake. When her companions drank cheap beer and outran the cops and took baseball bats to the lettered mailboxes of Grammar Town, they seemed altogether positive their lives would be better than the lives of their fathers. Shannon knew how boys came of age – they beat their dads at basketball and went off to war. Or, as in the case of the male offspring of Grammar Town professors, they went off to NYU or Berkeley and came home on holiday breaks to impart the wisdom of the wider world. And the girls? Sometimes they tried to imitate their male counterparts, but mostly they looked for boyfriends who might intimidate their fathers and then married young. They joined book clubs and took up teaching piano.

Shannon was determined her own entry into the world of adult behavior would differ from the usual Grammar Town narrative. Maybe she would hit her father over the head with some kind of gardening tool. Her mother would scream in mock horror and then run away with Uncle Usher. She could see her father falling headfirst into a young tomato plant and his blood mingling with the June bugs scrambling in the dirt. She would use the clothesline in the backyard to hang his body from a rusty drainpipe. They didn't have a clothesline in their backyard, of course – clotheslines were illegal in Grammar Town – but maybe she could remove the shoelaces from her shoes, tie them

together, and then wrap the long string tightly around his neck. *You see these strings,* she'd say to herself. *Pull them until you feel like your father's head is about to fall off.*

"I'm late," she finally said. "I'll see you at dinner." She tucked her lunch bag under her arm and left her father noisily stirring cream into his coffee. At the front door, she heard his spoon clatter into the bottom of the sink. He slurped his coffee with a loud, slow rattle of his lips.

"Dinner!" he shouted after her. "We'll be waiting for you."

* * *

The heat made the azalea bushes on Participial Glen Grove Drive look like drooping rags. Shannon slammed the door on her truck, ran the industrial hose to the nearest spigot, and hooked up the sprinkler. Grammar Town was just ritzy enough that someone should have thought to install an automatic irrigation system, but Shannon imagined a younger version of her parents getting some kind of sick enjoyment from hiring illegal immigrants to water their lawns. Now she was in charge of all the public spaces in Grammar Town. Even though she liked working outside, she couldn't escape the feeling she had become a second-class citizen. Maybe everyone thought she wasn't smart enough to become a professor. Again, she imagined the younger version of her parents. Like the faded photograph of her father in his Bermuda shorts and her mother in her cap and gown, Shannon's memory of her childhood looked like something from a bad cartoon – her father's mouth full of too many teeth, her mother's strange look of admiration as she watched him cut bite-sized pieces from her graduation cake. Always

ready to hop into an imaginary getaway car, her parents also seemed afraid. What were they afraid of? Growing old. Dying of thirst in Grammar Town. Discovering the awful truth that all their reading and writing didn't even impress their next-door-neighbors. In any case, Shannon didn't want to repeat their mistakes. Some people lived to work and some people worked to live. In her new incarnation as professional groundskeeper and landscape artist, she would count herself squarely in the latter camp. She'd have nothing to fear but the occasional mosquito.

She rubbed sunscreen on her nose and started hacking away at the bushes. She felt satisfied with her work. She thought of a friend of hers – a poet – who spent her summers working at the organic farmers' market at the edge of Grammar Town. Today, her poet friend, standing in the midst of great piles of eggplants and rows of strawberry flats, would have to deal with Usher and his need for Brussels sprouts. Maybe Shannon could think of this landscaping gig in the same way her poet friend seemed to think of the vegetable stand: summer employment only. When minivans full of her academic acquaintances pulled up beside her, Shannon would put down her hedge clippers and do her best nonchalant shrug, saying something like, *Oh, no big deal, just earning a little extra money, that's all. Some people work at vegetable stands, some people trim bushes. Young people, you see, can do blue collar work with confidence.* The minivan drivers would answer her with generous nods of their heads and then brag about their own children and their far away adventures at other universities in other towns. *But you don't need all that silly drama,* they'd say to her. *You will live here for many years.* But what would happen to her when the dry Oklahoma air finally sapped all the available moisture from her skin? Would she find herself hunched over a rotting tree stump somewhere,

only to watch parts of her body shrivel up and blow away? Her father might be right. This was not suitable employment, not for the long term, anyway.

She walked through the sprinkler's steady stream of water and felt a little better. She cupped her hands, had a nice long drink, and watched the cars slowly go by. She saw most of the English Department on their way to the faculty breakfast. She saw mothers taking their children and their inflatable ducks and dragons to Adverb Lake. She saw the flower shop delivery van making its rounds to every fashionable house on the block. And running toward her in a mad rush of sweat and saliva, she saw Usher, his hands gripping a dented brown shoebox.

"Glad I found you," he said. "This is urgent."

Shannon asked him if he wasn't missing the faculty breakfast.

"Are you kidding," he said. "I'm holding on to what could be my ticket to full professorship here and you're talking about stale bagels and warmed-over coffee?"

"All right, already," she said. "What's in the box?"

He said the contents of the box would bring Grammar Town into the national spotlight. "I can feel the camera on my face," he said. "They'll shove their microphones at me like they're lepers begging for calamine lotion. And just when they're expecting me to offer up some kind of canned bullshit about love of God and country, I'll give it to 'em, right between the eyes: *Supple and turbulent, a ring of men shall chant in orgy on a summer morn!* Ha! Fascist pigs!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Voila!" he said, ripping the lid from the box with a magician's flourish. Shannon peeked inside and saw a small piece of PVC pipe loosely wrapped in a shredded piece of plastic sheeting.

"What is it?" she said.

"Can't you tell?"

She couldn't tell. She considered lying and saying, yes, she thought his discovery very grand indeed, but she knew doing so would only catch up with her later on.

"I give up," she said. "I guess I need your guidance."

"It's a piece of the space shuttle!" he said, the pitch in his voice rising dramatically. "A genuine piece of the goddamned space shuttle, right here in Grammar Town. Who would have thought!"

Shannon reached into the box to pick up the two-inch treasure.

"Don't touch!" he said. "Toxic agents, you know."

Shannon asked him how he had managed to put the piece of pipe inside the shoebox without touching it himself. He reminded her he always kept a pair of rubber gloves in the emergency supply pouch he wore around his waist.

"Didn't the space shuttle crash over Texas?"

"The space shuttle is very large," he told her. "It contains multitudes."

"Didn't NASA already collect all the pieces they logically expected to find?"

"Listen to you!" he said. "*Logically expected to find.* You sound like you think reason itself has transcendent and universal qualities! Haven't you learned anything about the world? If I say I have a piece of the space shuttle, you had better believe I'm on to something big. Give me a ride home?"

Shannon turned off the spigot and coiled the hose. She wiped the wet leaves from her hedge clippers and started to sharpen them, but stopped when Usher, bouncing up and down in the passenger seat of the truck, honked the horn impatiently.

"Time's a wastin'," he yelled out the window. "We have work to do."

* * *

At dinner, Shannon's mother put Usher's shoebox in the middle of the table. They all sat down, and Usher said he was glad he didn't have time to go the organic farmers' market. Shannon's father frowned when Usher said Brussels sprouts were the food of the landed gentry. Usher was from a working-class family in New Jersey, he reminded them. He would never dream of eating such a vegetable. Shannon's father started to tell Usher what he had missed at the faculty breakfast, but Usher said he was glad he had missed that parade of fools. The last time he went to one of those things he had accidentally made another faculty member cry.

"How did you make her cry?" Shannon asked him over a basket of croissants.

"I made gagging noises when she started talking about her son's Christian rock band," he said. "She was mad. She said, 'Oh, but my son and his friends are so sweet and kind,' and then she just burst into tears."

"Usher," her mother said, "You shouldn't tease people like that."

Shannon's father nodded vigorously in agreement. Conversations like this one made Shannon even more desperate to find a place of her own. She felt as if she had already spent her entire childhood listening to the tales of this or that tenure review, this or that unfortunate neurosis, this or that departmental feud. Graduate students had thrown

up on her bedroom floor. When she was eight, her father spent six months at a university in another state. All of a sudden, the dinner table was quiet, and her mother took to watching a lot of television. The departmental grapevine had withered and died, and though Shannon didn't know how to interpret the silence, she still felt the absence of her life's usual cast of characters. When her father returned that summer, Shannon decided she'd grow up to embody the best qualities of all academic personalities. Maybe she would save her parents from their despair.

"I'll treat people just as they deserve to be treated," Usher proclaimed. "Just call me Commander Space Shuttle, Captain of the Humanities."

"Phone call for you, captain," Shannon's father said, bringing the cordless to the dinner table. "I think it's the president."

Shannon listened to Usher prattling on about his discovery. She figured he must be talking to another one of their colleagues, probably someone else who thought Shannon a simple country bumpkin. She would never forget about the wine and cheese reception at which the guest of honor had told Shannon she would be much better off if she would only declare herself a maverick thinker and abandon her parochial notions of truth. He took one look at the thick hands of the bartender refilling a platter of beef jerky and snorted, *People from Grammar Town are losers*. She knew most of her parents' colleagues included her in that lot. Town Grammarians, they called the locals. The term was something akin to "townie," but the implication was redneck through and through.

Usher hung up the phone and returned to the dinner table.

"That's it!" he said. "I'm doing the summer colloquium series on Tuesday. Top billing at the Student Union. They *think* I'll be talking about mentoring or strategic

planning or some shit like that, but just when their heads are falling into their laps in boredom, I'll hit 'em with the big guns. First, the space shuttle. Next, my work on 'Sunday Morning.' The academic world will never be the same."

"I'll bet," Shannon's father said.

"Shannon!" Usher pounded his fist onto the table. "Your father will introduce me."

Her father said, "I will?'

"Richard," her mother said, "I think you could stand to do Usher this one favor."

"Of course he can," Usher said. "And Shannon will attend. Front row, center. Just to get a feel for the place, you know."

"I already have a feel for the place," Shannon said.

"This is for the sake of your future," Usher said. "This is for the sake of art! Don't you have a nice skirt you can wear?"

Usher was always looking for ways to improve upon Shannon's wardrobe. *A woman should try to look like Katherine Hepburn*, he always said. Shannon watched her parents studying her for a reaction to Usher's phony plea for the future of Western Civilization. Why did everyone think she belonged in a university setting? She didn't want to attend Usher's lecture. Her whole life was already an extended Grammar Town fiasco. When she was four, her father taught her how to diagram sentences with sidewalk chalk on the driveway. While her mother taught summer classes on campus, Shannon worked diligently for hours in the shade of the house. Her father, thumbing through a dictionary from a lawn chair on the porch, periodically raised his fist in encouragement. *The kid's a whiz*, she heard him say to the neighbors when they came over to watch

Shannon's speedy command of the prepositional phrase. But when the neighbors went home for the evening, Shannon could see sadness in the way her father looked at her – a strange combination of pride and uncertainty. Her father had this same look whenever envelopes arriving in the mail contained Shannon's semester grades, or SAT scores, or scholarship announcements. While Usher gave his speech on the lamentable state of women's fashion, Shannon's father looked at her with this same mournful, questioning gaze.

"I told you all," she said, not exactly nicely. "I don't belong on that campus."

"This is not the English building we're talking about here, kid," Usher said. "This is the Student Union." He carefully pronounced every syllable of "Student Union," as if doing so would convince her of the merits of this wonderful opportunity to sit among some of her worst enemies and listen to the town eccentric talk about a hunk of plastic that probably had fallen off someone's car.

Her mother loaded dishes into the dishwasher. She said, "Do whatever you want, Shannon." She felt grateful for her mother's sympathy, but knew this ease in parental judgment was not altogether for Shannon's benefit. If her father believed in achievement at all costs, her mother believed in revenge. Like so many academic unions, the marriage of Shannon's parents was marked by the successes of her father and the sacrifices of her mother. Only when Shannon was old enough to start kindergarten did her mother even begin to think about getting advanced degrees of her own, and even then she had to earn them from the department where Shannon's father was already an assistant professor. When they rebuilt Grammar Town after the tornadoes of '92, Shannon's mother urged the city commission to draw up plans for a new branch campus library near the duck

pond by the highway. Usher and Shannon's father both dismissed the idea as foolish and unaffordable, but Shannon's mother pressed on and eventually won. Ever since then, Shannon's mother would do and say anything she wanted. Shannon's father seemed to miss the early years of unquestioning female devotion, but both parents finally settled into a life largely spent in front of the screens of their separate computers – her father in his office, her mother in the utility room off the kitchen. They seemed secure, if not altogether happy. Sometimes, Shannon caught her mother crying in odd corners of the house. Slumped in the driver's seat of their Volvo, she would drop Kleenexes one by one onto the oily floor of their garage. *I'd never be able to find another job,* her mother would say, clutching Shannon's hand. They might have divorced years ago were it not for the tenure system.

"Don't listen to your mother," Usher snapped.

"Don't listen to Usher," her mother said.

"Listen to *me*," her father said.

"What do you people want?" Shannon said, rising from her chair. "Do you want me to go to some rinky-dink research symposium and impress all your friends with my dignity and poise? Or maybe you'd rather I join them in their academic misery? I know, you want me to open up a ladies' boutique in the center of Grammar Town."

Usher said, "You know I've always thought a revitalized downtown would be nice. Whatever happened to soda fountains? Whatever happened to hat makers? Whatever happened to the greengrocer, the butcher, the milkman, the local hardware store?"

"You're not listening to me," Shannon said. She grabbed Usher's shoebox from the center of the table. "You see this box," she said.

"Don't touch," he said.

"I'll touch it if I want to," Shannon said. "Call me Commander Space Shuttle, Captain of the Humanities. Welcome students, colleagues, friends." She slammed Usher's shoebox back down onto the table. He immediately checked the contents for damage. "I'd like a round of applause for Dr. Daniel Usher," she said. "Dr. Usher is an associate professor of English specializing in modern American poetry. Thirty years ago, he published exactly one article in exactly one third-rate journal edited by his former girlfriend. This morning, he will speak to us about a piece of trash he found on the side of the road." She started clapping.

"Shannon," her mother said.

"That was inappropriate," said her father.

"And I've published a lot more than one article," Usher said.

Shannon stopped clapping and sat down in her chair. She felt relieved, but also a little sorry she had hurt Usher's feelings. By the time she collected herself and felt ready to make a public apology, Usher was already wiping crumbs from the table with a sponge and talking to no one in particular about women's fashion. That's the problem with these people, Shannon thought. They don't even know when to feel slighted. Their emotional lives are so wrapped up in the political climate of the university that deliberate jabs at their intellect only register as excuses to change the subject. Maybe that was how people managed to cope. When the professor at the wine and cheese reception had pronounced Town Grammarians losers, maybe Shannon should have replied by saying something

about the length of skirts that season. Probably not a good idea. Usher was crazy. Her parents were crazy. Landscape artists, she thought, are not crazy. They just pull weeds and go home. They dig their bare hands into the earth. They have control of real material, real growth, blossoms and decay.

"Usher," she said. "Do you think people from Grammar Town are losers?"

"Yeah," he said. "Everybody does. Why?"

"Even though you yourself are from Grammar Town and Mom and Dad are from Grammar Town and *I'm* from Grammar Town?"

"First of all," he said. "I'm from a working class family in New Jersey. And you know what else? We're stuck here. The world won't have us. If we couldn't complain about Grammar Town, we'd have nothing left but our research and our students. And since most of our students are from places even lowlier than this dump of a town, it makes us feel good to long for fine wine and decent conversation. Face it kid, you will live here for many years. Let's go look in your closet. Do you have any Mary Janes?"

"You still think I'm going to attend the summer colloquium?"

"Of course you are," he said.

Usher always seemed so confident that Shannon would do his bidding. When she was 14, he convinced her to stand outside the English building and pass out sample packages of glow-in-the-dark breath mints. *These people smell like sewage*, he told her. He talked her into the scheme by saying her assistance would improve the lives of her parents and bring good will to an otherwise acrimonious debate at an upcoming meeting of the graduate faculty. Shannon had already spent too much time embroiled in the ups and downs of Usher and company. If she attended his lecture, she might find herself just

one step closer to a life of wasting away in Grammar Town. She would become another victim of a system that conspires against people who want to think for a living. On the other hand, she knew nobody cared about Usher anymore. They dismissed him as they dismiss all professors nearing retirement. His research didn't matter, his lectures didn't matter, his life didn't matter Shannon felt sorry for him. She felt sorry for herself.

"You know," she said. "I'll have to get back to work after the colloquium's over."

Shannon's mother and father put plastic wrap over the leftovers. Her mother, leaning against the refrigerator, closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. Her father muttered one last complaint about the lack of Brussels sprouts. Together, Shannon and Usher walked upstairs to her closet, where her summer wardrobe awaited them.

* * *

The Subject-Verb-Agreement Room of the Student Union was packed, a big turnout for a summer colloquium Most of the English department had heard Usher would be making a big splash, so they filled the first two rows with their throat clearing and nose blowing and talk of the latest summer art films now available on DVD.

"Where's Usher?" Shannon's mother whispered into her ear.

He was late. Earlier, Shannon had seen him trying on sunglasses in the campus convenience store.

Shannon said, "Surely he's coming."

The door swung open. Usher, wearing sporty shades with orange-tinted lenses and clutching his shoebox under his arm, rushed in and dropped a set of note cards onto the podium. His hair looked as if it hadn't been combed in months. Shannon thought of herself getting her hedge clippers from the truck and giving him a little trim. After she finished with him, she'd cut the gratuitous beads and bows from another faculty member's dress. She'd hack the toothpick from her father's mouth and cut the long straps from her mother's backpack. She thought of a former student of her father who stopped to talk to her one day while she was pulling weeds in Grammar Town. He told her about his plan for majoring in Waste Disposal Systems. He wanted to study something practical, he said. Something that would really help people. Before talking to that student, Shannon didn't know majoring in Waste Disposal Systems was even a real possibility. Later, she learned about all kinds of unusual majors – Situational Management Styles, Law Enforcement Technology, Meat Inspection. These were the kinds of people who would insist on the superiority of garden tools over grammar. They were the kinds of people who might try to trim Usher's hair with a set of hedge clippers. *What is all this junk*, they would say sourly, pointing to difficult passages in their grammar textbooks. *When are we ever going to use this?* Unfortunately, these people were right. They wouldn't and shouldn't use their textbooks. They were much better off sparing everyone the pain that came with thinking about words.

"I'm ready," Usher said. He organized his note cards into neat piles.

Shannon's father adjusted the microphone. Her mother took a seat next to Shannon in the front row.

Shannon studied her program. She looked up to see Usher shoving his shoebox in her face.

"Take it," he said. "I don't want it anymore."

"Usher," she said. "Your discovery."

"Simpletons," he said, nodding his head in the direction of the English Department faculty. Shannon looked around. They were all there. Her father waved from behind the podium. Sam Turner furtively glanced down at the packets of seeds peeking out from the breast pocket of his shirt. His wife, Kathryn, stared at the floor in boredom and embarrassment. Shannon looked behind the Turners and saw the man who had pronounced Town Grammarians complete and total losers. He whispered something in the ear of the woman who had cried on behalf of her son's Christian rock band.

"They'd never understand," Usher said. I've decided to stick with 'Sunday Morning.' You'll hold on to the box for safe keeping?"

"You bet," she said.

Usher took off his sunglasses and put them into the pouch he wore around his waist.

"Good morning," Shannon's father said into the microphone. Welcome to the Summer Colloquium Series at the Student Union." Everyone was quiet. "Dr. Daniel, Usher, associate professor of American literature, comes from a working-class family in New Jersey." Everyone laughed. Usher gave Shannon a subtle thumbs up. When her father finished detailing Usher's accomplishments and explaining the history of his work on Stevens, Usher took his place at the podium.

"Thank you, Richard," he said. "An honor to have you introduce me. Many of you know Richard's daughter, Shannon." He was talking about her. Why was he talking about her? Usher looked out at the crowd and then read slowly and deliberately from the first note card in his pile. "This summer, some of you may have spotted Shannon trimming hedges on the streets of Grammar Town. She doesn't always enjoy her work, but I say a good gardening job in Grammar Town sure beats the hell out of selling insurance in Hartford." Again, everyone laughed. Good, she thought, his opening joke was a minor hit. Usher read from "Sunday Morning." And as he started to explain the nature of his research, Shannon sat very still. In her hand, she held Grammar Town's promise, a piece of the space shuttle. She would live here for many years. Trimming hedges by the university, she would witness every blastoff, orbit, and crash.

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