

MUDLINES AND OTHER STORIES

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Bachelor of Arts

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Stillwater, Oklahoma

1985

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS  
May, 1988

Thesis  
1988  
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## PECULIAR ANIMALS: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Short fiction is still a relatively new genre, one with nebulous boundaries and wide ranges of acceptable form. We who work within the genre in America have admittedly come a long way from the formulaic, limited "tale" so beautifully rendered by Hawthorne. As artistically significant as a tale such as "Young Goodman Brown" may be, it is a very different animal than Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," for example. "A Rose for Emily," in turn, is a very different animal than Robert Coover's "The Baby-sitter." Such a comparative list could go on indefinitely.

It seems to me the historical changes within the short fiction genre deal mainly with ever more sophisticated treatments of point of view and narrative persona, as well as an increasing variety of strategies available to the author in relation to creation of both point of view and narrative persona. The modern short story allows a kaleidoscope of persona choices. Recent prize-winning stories range from the easily-understood personae in Andre Dubus' "A Father's Story" and Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing" to the tear-out-your-hair frustration of the multiplicity of viewpoints presented by the persona in Susan Sontag's "The Way We Live Now."

There is still one rule, one artistic "must" in relation to persona construction, however. It is simply this--the persona must "work." Experimentation for experimentation's sake is no assurance of success in

short fiction. Nor is conventionality for its own sake. The most important thing to remember here is that no narrative persona is an arbitrary construction. It must, rather, be justified by virtue of the individual story's demands.

Not many writers or critics talk about narrative persona, and even fewer talk about it intelligently. And this is unfortunate, for no single consideration is more crucial to the story's success or failure--not plot, not setting, not symbol, not character--than the persona from which the story emanates. All else depends upon its presence and character. One of the few critics who recognizes the importance of narrative persona is Wayne Booth, and his The Rhetoric of Fiction is the definitive work on the subject. He points out early in this book that the persona a writer constructs to tell his story is his conduit, the bridge between himself and his story. He says, "The author's judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it....we must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear" (20). The "disguise" Booth mentions and which he later refers to more specifically as a "mask" is the persona, which must be considered distinct from the author. If the author tells a story without a mask, he tells autobiographically, and autobiography is, after all, a genre distinct from fiction.

Some might say that autobiographical personae are fictionalized--masked--to a certain extent as well, but the distinction between the two genres still holds. This is mainly a function of naming. If an author purports to write fiction, his persona must be considered fictional, regardless of its similarities to the author's sensibilities. By the same

token, if an author claims to be writing autobiographically, his persona must be accepted as reflective of his own sensibilities, regardless of the extent to which he embellishes the truth, or in the extreme, out and out lies.

Not that autobiographical elements are taboo to fiction; they are not. But their presence is absolutely unimportant to the story as a whole, and is especially unimportant to the persona. In fact, the presence of a fictionalized, created voice is the single element which characterizes fiction. And character is a key term here, for, as Booth says, "Though it is most evident when a narrator tells the story of his own adventures, we react to all narrators as persons" (273). Regardless of its status--as an actual character referred to in first or third person or as a disembodied presence--each persona must be a viable entity with its own distinct traits, its own manner of expressing itself. Narrative personae don't just happen (though they may evolve); the writer creates them, and this creation is the penultimate artistic component of fiction writing. In Mudlines and Other Stories five individualized personae order the fictionalized universes of their respective works. Each does so in a particular way and for a particular reason.

In "Mortality Play," the young narrator, Emilia Ana, is a character in the story, but she observes much more often than she participates. Her relative lack of action occurs because of my reason for having her tell the story--I wished the reader to understand that Emilia is striving to comprehend her very unusual sister, Marta. Emilia is very naive; Marta very sophisticated, though in a self-aggrandizing way. In other words, Emilia, as narrator, attempts to understand be-

havior she admits ignorance of, and even during the process of seeking understanding, she sometimes misses the implications of what Marta says. In turn, Marta, who believes she understands everything, also often misses the implications of what she herself says and does.

Thus Emilia should innocently elicit comic irony, mainly when she reports actions of Marta's which she finds worthy of admiration or attention, but which are actually evidence of Marta's silliness. For example, on page seven, Marta delivers some of her characteristic wisdom to her little sister: "Carnal knowledge is a dangerous thing," she says, "especially when you don't even know the guy." Neither is cognizant of the comic irony. Emilia's naivete is not a product of stupidity, but of a chosen lack of life experience. She compensates for this by watching her sister, watching her from childhood all the way up to young adulthood. Emilia watches; Marta lives. Consequently, Emilia seldom comments on her sister's behavior; she has no personal frame of reference from which to do so.

Another young female narrator tells us the story in "Mudlines," but at this point similarities between the two end. Deborah's innocence left her at some point before the narrative action takes place in "Mudlines." Thus she shows us her cynicism and tough veneer. And unlike Emilia, her participation in the story is necessary. Again, this all relates to her purpose as narrator--she must be a significant dramatic presence in "Mudlines" because "Mudlines" is a story about the inability to really know those you love and the contradictory inability to ever truly separate yourself from them. She therefore has to interact with her parents, and has to show the reader that interaction to make such a point concrete.

Deborah makes few interpretive comments, mainly because she believes the story tells itself so clearly, so vividly, that she needn't. She is also somewhat distanced in time from the events she narrates--has had time to think about them, so to speak--so the less narrative sneering and seething, the more clearly and objectively the reader should be able to interpret what goes on in her family. She has even managed, over time, to find some humor in the painful plot incident she spends most of her time showing us:

I went over to Daddy and leaned over him, saying I would appreciate hearing about his other family, if in fact there was one in existence anywhere other than in her cluttered, booze-bungled brain. He didn't seem to hear me, so I prodded his stomach gently with my foot. No response, but a peanut shell did roll off his arm. (26)

Nor is Deborah afraid to show us her former self-righteousness. She acknowledges through that showing an awareness that upon her lies at least a portion of the blame for this troubling family scenario. After all, she is a willing participant against her mother in the struggle for possession of her father's soul, a soul that is ultimately uncapturable.

Deborah leads into Nita, the character through whose consciousness we see "The Slice of Life." We have here yet another young female focal character, but in this story I have constructed a third-person voice reflective of Nita's personality. This persona is an "it," not Nita at all. But it functions almost exclusively through her individual human limitations and perceptions, sees and reports little she doesn't see or experience. It does not always express itself as she would, but again, it does not for a reason.



I intend Nita to be a sympathetic character for whom the reader feels a great deal of pathos, but outwardly she is so rough, tough, and abrasive that had I worked solely within her realm of expression, the reader would likely say, "What a scary bitch!" and revel in her misfortune. Booth makes an important point when he says, "If an author wants intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them, then the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views will help him" (377-78). In Nita's case, those "inside views" require a mediator, a filter which will tone her down enough that the reader will let her in, will temporarily suspend his system of values and accept her own different system as viable throughout the course of the story. Thus my persona construction--a disembodied voice reflective of but not identical to Nita's (and only Nita's) consciousness.

This narrator comments quite freely, but only insofar as Nita feels the need to comment. But it also shows Nita doing bizarre things, things which she would not necessarily recognize as bizarre. An example of both these narrative qualities operating simultaneously is evident on page 32: "She should be more careful when the overpowering urge to pierce overtakes her. She quickly slaps hydrogen peroxide on the infected holes and dries them with a makeup-stained towel."

This story I designed to disturb, not offend the reader, and its persona was congruently designed primarily to allow the reader in, so that he could eventually be disturbed. If my reader were disgusted early in the story, it would be difficult for him to become disturbed; he would more likely remain disgusted throughout.

My creation of Mira in "Life, Love, Marriage, Dental Molds" was designed neither to disturb nor disgust, but to delight. A statement

of Booth's applies well to her:

...some interesting narrators perform a kind of function in their works that nothing else could perform. They are not simply appropriate to a context, though that is essential. They originally succeeded and still succeed by persuading the reader to accept them as living oracles. They are reliable guides not only to the world of the [stories] in which they appear but also to the moral truths of the world outside. (220-21)

I think of Mira as just such a narrator. She is to be seen as eminently reliable, sensible, clever, and funny. But most important to the story is her limited patience and her instinctive knowledge of just when to act.

I let Mira tell her own story because I emphatically believe she tells it best--her personality has all the right equipment. She has a flawless sense of comedic timing and a nicely biting wit. Surely any non-participating narrator (first or third person) could have had identical qualities, but Mira's triumph here is hers and hers alone; I wanted her to be able to tell the reader, "I always knew it would end like this" (63).

Besides, who better to order our perceptions of this story than Mira? Archie is a buffoon; Polly a scatterbrained, empty-headed, insecure floozy with funny teeth. It had to be Mira; she's the only sensible soul in this little world. Some might say Mira's self-imposed tooth-breaking is the single most outrageous incident in an already outrageous story, but I vehemently disagree. She knows what she wants (Archie, the buffoon), and she knows how to get it. A broken tooth

she considers a small enough sacrifice to justify saving her marriage.

Another interesting marriage exists in "Wiggly Wog," a story for which I constructed a conventionally omniscient narrator. This narrator reflects each character's consciousness at one time or another, but also has individualized traits of its own. Form should follow function, and in "Wiggly Wog"'s case, the persona's function is to illustrate the ridiculousness, selfishness, and righteousness which characterize the entire Mendelsohn clan. This family's preeminent preoccupation is with when and what they'll eat, and so I needed a persona which capitalized on the error of their ways--which pointed out Joe's ridiculous, compulsive neurotic tendencies and Barbara's (and the girls') self-serving, convenient morality. None of the characters themselves would have been able to recognize or articulate such considerations; omniscience was demanded by the story itself.

This persona I wished to have a finely-tuned ironic sensibility and a strong sense of the ridiculous. After all, much of what goes on here is utterly ridiculous. For instance, the narrator says while describing the female Mendelsohns' physiques: "I disdain physical exertion, their bodies said, I have better, more sublime ways of spending my time" (72). Obviously, none of the three would know the first thing of sublimity. If indeed this narrative statement can be taken as evidence for Barbara and her daughters' beliefs, the "sublime" for them is eating, napping, watching TV, having extramarital sex, and eating some more. Clearly the persona knows this, and as a result recognizes the ironic implications of what it says.

This persona's chief function, however, is not to sneer wittily at these people from its superior position above. I think Joe deserves

some sympathy; his utterly pathetic situation merits at least that. And one must at least grudgingly admire Barbara; she is strong and powerful, and the strong and powerful generally have a vested interest in remaining so (and have a hard time being "good people" at the same time). The omniscient persona in "Wiggly Wog" knows these things; in fact, it knows everything about this story's unique little world.

So we now see that each persona in Mudlines and Other Stories is, so to speak, a peculiar animal, as is each persona in any story a peculiar animal. I also recognize that my stories themselves and the characters which populate them could conceivably merit the same label. There are reasons for such an assumption.

First, as for the stories themselves: yes, peculiar things often happen within them, and sometimes horrifying, depressing, or desperate things happen within them. Sometimes, as in "The Slice of Life," these peculiar actions seem tragic; sometimes, as in "Life, Love, Marriage, Dental Molds," they seem funny. But admittedly, violent action occurs in each of these five stories.

The single most important influence upon my writing has been, continues to be, and will probably be in future the short fiction of Flannery O'Connor. She calls her fiction "grotesque" and categorizes it as a kind of realism. In her book of nonfiction prose, Mystery and Manners, she further describes grotesque fiction:

In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life....Yet the characters have an inner coherence....Their fictional qualities lean away from typical so-

cial patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected. (40)  
She later goes on to say, "The look of this fiction is going to be wild...is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic" (43). Clearly my fiction in this collection approaches the grotesque, in O'Connor's sense.

I have always unreservedly admired her work, but never noticed myself imitating her to any degree. But similarities do exist. I do have a fondness (some might say perverse) for the peculiar, the disturbing, the bizarre, the strange, and I also often find such things uproariously funny. O'Connor herself is said to have found her own stories terribly funny, and they clearly are packed to the limit with violent action. Although regarding degree my stories only approach the grotesquerie of O'Connor's fiction, in both our works "There are all kinds of beings, and all kinds of things happen to them" (Jarrell 152).

Elizabeth Bowen once said, "The short story as an art has come into being through a disposition to see life in a certain way" (38). This, I think, nicely states my similarity to O'Connor--we see things pretty much the same way.

Often when I've pawned my manuscripts off on my friends, they have handed them back to me after a suitable period of time, disturbed and worried looks on their faces. "Stef," they say, "your work is so dark. Nothing happy ever happens in your stories." Well, they are largely right, my friends. But I write what I see. I think most of us have a very skewed, idealized notion of happiness--one we seldom actually experience--one synonymous with utter joy. O'Connor once said:

The writer...will begin to wonder...if there could not be some ugly correlation between our unparalleled prosperity

and the stridency of these demands for a literature that shows us the joy of life. He may at least be permitted to ask if these screams for joy would be quite so piercing if joy were really more abundant in our prosperous society.

(30)

I agree. Screams for joy are unreasonable, as few screams of joy reverberate. At least I don't hear many of them. I do hear many screams, though--of frustration, rage, hysteria--and detect many more of the silent variety. If such an attitude makes my stories dark, then I plead guilty. Besides, it is extremely difficult to render brightness and joy fictionally without reverting to sentimentality, and sentimentality, rightly or wrongly, is a pejorative term in relation to artistic expression.

Peculiar things happen in my stories, and they often happen to peculiar people--my characters. Some behave peculiarly (Delbert O'Connell, Marta María Cortez-Jones, Polly Knight-Phibbs); some are in essence peculiar beings (Nita, Joe Mendelsohn). All, regardless of behavior or essence, either realize, come to realize, or acutely need to realize that they are fundamentally, irreconcilably, utterly alone in the universe.

Robyn Hitchcock, a contemporary musician, recently included a "Manifesto" in his newest album, Globe of Frogs. One excerpt from it reads: "My contention is, however--and it's a bloody obvious one--that beneath our civilized glazing, we are all deviants, all alone, and all peculiar. This flies in the face of mass marketing, but I'm sticking with it." I agree wholeheartedly; currently incredible numbers of consumers are gobbling up that fashionable, expensively-marketed, popular-

ized alienation easily discernible in many bestsellers (Bright Lights, Big City, for example) and films (anything starring brat-pack members). My fiction, though, is not of this type.

"Mass-marketing," as Hitchcock discusses it, implies "society," and I believe most people--though they voraciously consume popularized alienation in fiction and film--find it necessary to deny their alien natures. This is why most of my characters don't handle that realization well: Nita cuts herself up; Joe falls to the floor in frothing fits. Others don't wish to realize at all: Betsy Sue closes the bedroom door in her daughter's face; Mira knocks her tooth out to insure at least the physical presence of her philandering husband.

Frank O'Connor says in The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story, "Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society....As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic...an intense awareness of human loneliness" (19). Perhaps, then, my stories and characters are not so terribly peculiar after all. In the case of Mudlines and Other Stories, though, there is more than just a "sense" that my figures are outlawed. They're often downright strange. But I devoutly hope the "intense awareness of human loneliness" part, as Mr. O'Connor describes it, comes through in this collection.

Raymond Carver says in his introduction to Best American Short Stories 1986:

But once in a while [for the writer] lightning strikes....

But it will never, never happen to those who don't work hard at it and who don't consider the act of writing as very nearly the most important thing in their lives, right up there next

to breath, and food, and shelter, and love, and God. (xx)  
I think he's right. The point is, the hard work and understanding of  
writing's importance are necessary precursors to even the possibility  
of lightning striking. I've tried to fulfill the precursors. I hope  
you all enjoy my peculiar animals.



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## MORTALITY PLAY

We are the Cortez-Joneses. Weirdness is a dominant gene in our family, and that gene shows up most in my sister Marta. We are four: me, Emilia Ana; my older sister, Marta María; my mother Elena, and my father Jonathon. Mother's a Mexican-Indian and Dad's an Anglo-Saxon--an explosive pair. We're Cortez-Joneses because Mother insists we girls keep the hyphen as a sort of gift from both parents. Marta thinks it's cool, gives us more identity, and I guess you do get used to it after a while.

Marta's been kind of funny, mainly about death, for a long time. It used to be she just watched the papers and news for stars' deaths or homicidal maniacs on the loose or really gory murder stories, but now she's even gotten weird about her own death, too, especially since she went out with Tony Antonio, Jr. And she's really gotten caught up in the AIDS crisis lately too.

It all started a long time ago. When I was four and Marta was seven, she started testing out her reading skills on the Tulsa World. She liked to read, and Mother always encouraged her to try to order books for fourth and fifth graders, even though she was only a first grader. Mrs. Brown, Marta's first grade teacher, was pretty proud of her too, especially when she raced through Mrs. Coverlet's Magicians, for fifth graders. But one morning, a Sunday, Marta got out of bed earlier than Mother and Dad, who'd had a really wild party the night before. I always woke up when Marta did; we shared a bed for the first

eleven years of our lives, because Mother thought being near each other would guarantee some magic bond of sisterdom between us.

We both tiptoed through the beercan-littered living room and counted the cigarette butts we found in the ashtrays and in places they weren't supposed to be, like empty glasses or the sink. Then after Marta's guess came out closer (68 to my 55; there were actually 63), she went out to get the paper, not to be a good kid or anything, but because she didn't have anything better to do. I couldn't read yet, so I started stacking up the dirty dishes for Mother.

"Hey, look at this," Marta said. She showed me a column in the magazine section about Jack the Ripper. She pointed her stubby, chewed-on finger at the words I couldn't read and exclaimed: "He cut off their breasts! He cut out their livers! He cut out their kidneys! He cut out their reproductive organs, whatever those are! And Em, they never caught him!"

That scared me, since I didn't know then that Jack the Ripper worked in the late 1800s, not 1969. Marta was loud enough that Mother and Dad woke up, none too happy to have their hangovers bothered by memories of Jack the Ripper. As soon as Marta saw their puffy faces emerge from their bedroom doorway, she beat them over the head with questions, especially about the mysterious reproductive organs, and more specifically, ovaries.

"Never mind what they are," Mother answered.

"O v a r i e s. That's what it says, Mother. There must be more than one of them, right?"

"Marta, it's not important that you know what ovaries are right now."

"Hey, does this have something to do with sex?" Marta's eyes scrunched up suspiciously.

"Sex, sex!" I chirped. "We're not supposed to know about that!"

"Never mind!" Mother said. She never did like to talk about sex with us. She didn't even tell us the basics until Marta's first period scared her to death when she was twelve.

"Well, how old do you think he is now?" Marta asked Mother. "Do you think he's still alive?"

Mother added in her head. She's good at that. "I suppose he could be, but he'd be a very, very old man." Marta and I screamed and squealed, jumping up and down nervously in excitement.

"He's not alive, and he's damn sure not in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Where's my sports page?" Dad asked, quickly bringing the Jack the Ripper conversation to a stop. But for Marta, the OK Magazine story planted a seed, a seed of interest in dead things.

Mother's standard advice to Marta when she wanted to know about something was "Look in the library," which Marta did. Soon she stumbled on other important deaths, for instance the gritty facts about JFK's assassination, which she ran across in old issues of Time and Life. One day after an exciting library trip, Marta came home and said to Mother, "The President's brains were all over Jackie's dress! Wow! The President's brains were all over Jackie's dress, Ma. Do you think she kept it, or sent it to the cleaners or anything, or just threw it away?"

Mother tugged Marta's long black braid. "I certainly hope, child, that she threw it away. Why do you want to think about things like that?"

"I don't know," she replied truthfully.

So for a long time our bedroom was full of headlines like "ELVIS FOUND DEAD IN HOME," "747 CRASHES--266 DEAD," and Marta's all-time favorite, "JIM MORRISON DIES OF HEART FAILURE, OR DOES HE? NO BODY FOUND." She was a big Doors fan. And from December, 1980, to April, 1981, Marta was caught up in John Lennon's death and President Reagan's assassination attempt. She first started wearing black almost all the time after Lennon's shooting, and after the Reagan shooting Marta was glued to the television from the minute she got home from school to the last time the news was on that night. She switched from channel to channel to see which network had the best shots. "Dan Rather and CBS, all the way," she announced after a thorough comparison. I saw her watch the same footage all day and all night--24 times. I counted.

After things like these happened, Marta went into serious mourning for days. Mother and Dad and I agreed with her about every violent death; every natural disaster; every bus, plane, or train crash. "Horrible, just horrible," we said. But for days Marta said, "Horrible, absolutely horrible. Utterly terrible. Why do unspeakable things like these happen? Why can't I understand these things? What did he [or she, or they] do to deserve a death like this?" Headbanger-type depressions followed for days at a time after each episode.

Marta knew death became real sometime for everybody, but she wasn't nearly as upset when somebody she really knew died. Never, Mother said, was a child so manic to go to a funeral, just to observe, not to be sad. Even when Mother's huge supply of distant cousins (so distant that sometimes nobody could even remember how far removed they were) died, Marta begged to go to the funeral, or what was more usual among Mother's Cath-

olic relatives, the wake and interment. Dad never wanted to go very bad, so Mother always let her, but warned, "You will behave like a young lady, or you'll never get to come again."

So even though Mother had a steady funeral partner, she and Dad couldn't help wondering about Marta's weirdness. They tried to discourage her from tacking up headlines and obituaries, but they were always kind of weird too. Mother read Helter Skelter twice as soon as Marta was through with it, and Dad did the same thing with Fatal Vision. They watch all the fact-based murder shows on TV, and to this day Mother can't stand to watch a Coors commercial with Mark Harmon in it because he played Ted Bundy in The Deliberate Stranger. "He's evil," she says, and "Scar-éy."

Anyway, their marriage has been pretty rocky, to say the least, and Marta's always sort of gotten into their battles. Mother's a slapper, and one time she slapped, screamed, kicked, and cussed just long enough for Dad to get really fed up and break her arm, even though he didn't mean to do it. "I could hear that sound just as clear as I can hear you, Em," Marta said, "Ker-aaaakkkk. That's just how it went." I bought some earplugs from the drugstore when I was eight, but Marta never did. Their rantings and ravings made me nervous and afraid of what being an orphan would be like, but Marta stayed awake on purpose. She says she sleeps ten hours a night today because she never got enough sleep as a child and she's making up for hundreds of lost hours. To her staying awake kept her involved in their violence (though Mother's broken arm was the worst of it); Marta's a woman who likes to be involved, not a sidelines player.

She'd tell me every gory war-zone detail once we woke up in the

morning, even if she had to pry my hands away from my ears or chase and catch me to do it. This was never a big problem, since she was always a lot bigger than me, and a little faster. "Em," she said once after an especially wild night, "I thought for sure I'd get to pick out that nice gray casket, the Dream Forever model they had at Carlotta's funeral. Mother hit him over the head with the old cast iron skillet, but I guess she lost a little in her follow-through from screaming so much."

Marta's 25 now, and even though everybody else's death fascinates her, she's become more and more worried about her own. Lately she's been going to the HMO she's a member of (she works as a computer programmer at National Cash Register) once a month or so for an HIV test, which she says tells whether the AIDS antibodies are in the immune system. I guess a positive result doesn't mean you really have the disease, just that the disease could become active because you've been exposed to the virus. And that you could give the infection to somebody else.

This seems like strange behavior to me, but Marta says, "Well, Em, I did sleep with about forty guys back when I thought sex was the closest form of human behavior there was to actually dying, and I happen to have heard on very good authority that at least three of those guys were notorious bisexuals."

Marta had to answer "yes" to one of the AIDS high-risk questions last time they had a blood drive at NCR. "I haven't ever been to Zaire," she said, "but I have been with a man who's been with another man!" She seemed almost glad there was a chance her blood wasn't safe, and said, "I just want to know when the antibodies start showing up, so my death process can go as smoothly as possible for me and my beloved family."



She's really beginning to sound like a commercial for a funeral home, probably because she's visited each one in town once and for a follow-up, and a few in the suburbs.

But she hasn't tested positive yet. She's not worried, though, because she says the disease's incubation is so long she could test positive at any time. And now that straight women are getting it, she's more convinced than ever. She's been gathering lots of articles since then, and she often says as though she's talking to a big audience, "You not only sleep with the people you sleep with, you sleep with everybody they've ever slept with as well." This, she says more quietly, just to me, means at a guess she's slept with around two or three thousand people. So Marta's sure AIDS is the way she'll go: painfully, disgracefully, repenting for her earlier sins. "Carnal knowledge is a dangerous thing," she tells me, "especially when you don't even know the guy." I've heard some strange stories about when she was wild, stuff about hot water bottles, things you have to plug in, and hanging upside down. I don't understand some of it, and I'm kind of glad I don't.

She says she dreams vivid, colorful dreams about coming down with the disease (or any fatal disease; she admits her dreams don't say which one), and that she remembers and writes them down word for word in her diary, which she calls Meditations upon Death: Or Whatever Else I Feel Like Writing About Today. She's always thought she's psychic, even though I'm the one who could make the dog do what I wanted him to just by staring at him and thinking real hard, so she's sure her dreams are prophetic.

Now every time Marta gets a cold she makes Mother, Dad, and I get together with her for a reading of her last will and testament, her fu-

neral wishes, and a revised, updated copy of her eulogy and epitaph. Because of her deviated septum, she gets lots of colds, and we get lots of family meetings. Nobody seems to really know why we go along with her. Nobody ever seems to have the guts to ask anybody else. Mother, Dad, and I just kind of look at each other funny, like we think just the fact we go along means we're all just as strange as her.

"Now Mother," she said last time, "I want to be cremated, because I can't stand the thought of worms munching my eyelashes off. And I've changed my mind; I want the hand-painted black porcelain urn with the double-reinforced lid instead of the mahogany casket."

Mother didn't want to hear about this; the little bit of good Mexican Catholic left in her doesn't go for cremation. To her cremation means no matter what good you do in life, your soul will burn in eternal hell. "So now you want to be cremated, Marta?" she asked. "Even if I took this seriously, which I don't, I'd forbid it. What's the matter with you, anyway? Haven't I brought you up right? Haven't I tried?"

While Dad lined up another half-dozen golf balls at the ten foot line of his MacGregor putting machine, he said, "Well, Elena, she's the one who'd be dead. What's wrong with cremation, anyway? It's a helluva lot easier in the long run." Dad's an atheist.

"Ugh!" Mother replied. "I don't want to discuss it. Can't we go on to the next item on the agenda and get this over with?"

"By the way, Marta, want to play a round with me next weekend at Paige Belcher?" Dad asked.

"Sure, Dad, if I'm around next weekend," Marta replied, serious. "Can we please get on with this?"

We agreed. I wanted to listen to "American Top 40," and it started

in a half-hour. So Marta read off her new epitaph and new eulogy. The new epitaph just said, "Marta María Cortez-Jones, March 19, 1962--[this space was, of course, left blank, since she hadn't died yet]. She was born to die." This took the place of her last one: "Marta María Cortez-Jones, March 19 the year of our Lord and Savior 1962--[same blank]. May her soul, if there is such a thing, attain its highest possible status. Let it be remembered she was always a goal-oriented person." "I am no longer so cynical, so hard-assed as I was last month," she explained about the change.

Marta left her will unchanged, though. She didn't have much money in the bank, but she wanted it divided up among the three of us. She wanted, she said, for us to fight over her personal stuff: her Indian jewelry from the state fair; her collection of Elvis concert programs; and her eight sets of salt and pepper shakers, each in the shape of a different animal. Her new eulogy, though, was a lot different than her earlier ones. Now, she said, she wanted only people with an invitation at her funeral, and she handed Mother a complete list, with a whole lot of names on it.

"Also, Mother, I want you to make sure you emphasize on the invitations that dark colors are mandatory. I don't want anybody at my service who doesn't have the decency to dress right."

"Marta, supposing I took this seriously, which I don't, how on earth would I have time to get these out before the service?"

"Well, naturally, Mother, since I'm going to be cremated, we can have the service any time we want."

"Not one word, Elena," Dad said. "Let's get this over with. I've got things to do this afternoon."

Mother rolled her eyes up toward heaven. "Okay, okay," she said.

"Are we finished now, Marta?" Dad asked. "Superteams comes on in a few minutes."

"Yes, are you finished now, honey? I need to get dinner started."

"Casey Kasem comes on in a minute, Marta; are you done?"

"God forbid I keep you from fat football players jumping over walls or a hot stove or Janet Jackson. I guess I know what priorities are," she said.

A while later we all ate a huge dinner of spicy enchiladas and eggs, except I didn't have any eggs because I'm allergic to them. Then Marta went home after passing out hugs, kisses, and "I love you very very much"es to all three of us.

But before she left I asked her why we have to talk about her funeral stuff so often. "I always miss the first few on 'American Top 40.' I do have a life, you know, and this is kind of a weird way to spend a Sunday afternoon with your family." It was hard for me to say that, because this is pretty important stuff to Marta.

"Y'know, sis, it's not something I think about. I guess I figure if I'm always prepared for the worst, anything less than the worst will seem a helluva lot better. I can always be happy this way. Understand?"

"No," I said. But I just work at a day care center; I'm not smart and philosophical like Marta.

"Forget it, Em."

"Okay, I will. I just think it's weird."

"It is, but I like being weird."

"Oh." I don't understand this kind of thing, but it must work for her. She is one of the happiest people I know, and she gets hysterical

about things like Kibbles and Bits commercials or award winners' speeches. Who wins or what movie they were in or what kind of puppy it is never matters; she cries tears of happiness anyway. Mother hates to have the TV on when she's around during one of their parties.

It seems like Marta has been happiest and weirdest about death since she broke up with Tony Antonio, Jr., this guy she went out with and lived with for a while. This has been over for about three years now, and it only lasted about a year and a half to start with. We were both going to the same commuter college then. I was just taking basics because I didn't have anything better to do, but Marta was working on her MBA. She came home to study sometimes, and I heard a bunch of stuff about her and Tony.

According to Marta, Tony Antonio, Jr., his tray full of potatoes, bread, jello, barbecued chicken, and fruit, spotted her in a crowded university cafeteria and immediately decided to destroy her. "And was I ever ready to be destroyed, Em, was I ever ready," she told me. In Marta's opinion, this guy was as close to perfect as any guy could be. And she herself was pretty attractive then; she wasn't so heavy as she is now. She had straight, thick blue-black hair and brown eyes that seemed to say things to you without making a sound. They never had much chance, though, since Marta isn't quiet all that often. She had long, pretty legs then too, and she always wore black, all black. "I am striking, Emilia," she used to say to me when I'd catch her staring in a mirror. "Striking," she repeated. I guess Tony thought so too, at least for a while.

He was a power lifter and twenty-two year old sophomore phys. ed. major who did male strip shows in his spare time. They called him The

Whopper in school circles, because that's the name he was known by when he stripped. After he hooked up with Marta, she began to blow off her studying and started following him to shows and meets.

She first figured things weren't rosy when she surprised him by showing up backstage at a lifting contest. "God, Em," she told me, "I went backstage at the Mr. Tulsa County meet to congratulate him for winning third place, and he had his hand right inside the front of Mrs. Oklahoma's bikini bottom. And this was the night after we had sex five times and I wrote his political science paper for him." Marta would rather go to the strip shows than the lift competitions because, as she said, "They give those guys some kind of weird pill that makes it impossible for them to get hard for a few hours. He was always real nice to me when he didn't have a hard-on, and strip shows were the only times he didn't have one."

One night at about three she called me, hysterical. "I'm gonna kill myself, Em, I swear I'm gonna!" she screamed, blubbering into the phone. "I'm gonna drive my car off the Lake Keystone Bridge; I've always kind of wanted to anyway."

I asked her what was wrong, and she told me Tony blacked her eye. Of course I asked why, and she said because she was trying to force him to pledge his undying love to her, something he just couldn't do.

"I just asked him, Em, to tell me he loved me; was that such a big thing? I only wanted a little reassurance, that's all. It went on and on, me pressuring him, him running around the apartment and hiding from me outside in the parking lot. Finally I pinned him on the corner of the top bunk, and do you know what he said to me?" I didn't have a clue. "Well," she said, "I told him he was lousy in bed anyway, which

is not true, and that probably he couldn't get it up anyway, which is also not true. Then he said to me, looking me right in the eye, 'Oh yeah, bitch? You shoulda seen me last night.'"

Marta hadn't been with Tony the night before, so this didn't go over very well. She said she knew he was screwing around, but didn't want to find out about it from him or anybody else. At that point she said she screamed, pummelled, begged forgiveness for screaming and pummelling, and right in the middle of this, she said, "He gave me a solid right, square in the left eye, and a little toward the nose." Tony left the apartment on foot just after that.

"And Em, I called him a few minutes ago," she continued, "and told him I was gonna kill myself, and he said, 'Good riddance, you stupid lousy slut.'"

I felt like I should go over there to make sure she didn't hurt herself, even though I had a child psychology test the next morning. But first she made me wake up Mother and Dad so she could tell them she was going to kill herself, and she also wanted one of our cousin's numbers so she could call her. When I got to her dumpy apartment, she babbled all sorts of stuff about Tony between wails, but she finally fell asleep around dawn while I held a new ice bag over her swollen eye. I didn't think at the time it would bruise much, and I was right.

Tony called her a couple of weeks after this scene, and she was pretty grateful. He moved in with her a little while later, and during those eight months, two weeks, and a few days I never went back. Marta came home pretty often, always without Tony, but I didn't like him, so I didn't have much to say to her, since he was all she wanted to talk about. I stayed in my room most of the time. The Tony Antonio, Jr.

phase screeched to a stop one day when he took all his stuff and most of Marta's while she was at a computer fair on campus.

He died pretty violently not long after that, having been shot twice in the lower abdomen ("Not low enough," Marta said) by somebody's jealous husband. When Marta heard about it, she rushed to the hospital, even though she hadn't seen him since he cleared out her place. "Jesus, Em, he told me I was the only woman he ever really respected. He said he'd always had a special place in his heart for me, and that his memories of our time together were happy ones."

Marta never learns. She went back to the hospital unannounced the next day and heard Tony saying just about the same thing to another woman, "a fat tub," Marta said. She was overjoyed to see his obituary three days later. She blew it up to 5" x 7" and framed it. It still sits front and center on her mantel.

"Keeps me sane," she says.



## MUDLINES

My father lies on his stomach, his arms and legs flung in all directions, on the wheat-colored, thick plush carpet. He's between the bar and the dining room table. Partially under the table, actually. Surrounding him are fat clumps of Oklahoma red dirt, wet red dirt--wet red dirt on his black boots, in clumps on the carpet which trace a path from the front door, wet red dirt staggered around the house to where his bulk now rests gracelessly on the floor. There's even a big mud handprint on the eggshell white wall by the bar.

Every year we have one O'Connell holiday disaster, and this time it's New Year's Eve, 1986, a night when every reasonably attractive twenty-four year old should be out somewhere drinking heavily at the very least. Not me, though. No, here I sit in the Better Homes and Gardens-deco living room of our house, keeping an eye on my father.

It is July, 1981, and my mother and father both stare at me from the foot of my hospital bed. To my immediate left, a young police officer also stares at me. "Miss O'Connell, are you conscious?" he asks.

"I guess so," I answer groggily.

"Will you please sign this? I'm only giving you a speeding ticket." He places great emphasis on only.

"Sure," I say, certain for the first time that I've royally fucked up somehow. The nice policeman thanks me, and exits unobtrusively.

She tells me I have a broken nose, a black eye, a mild concussion,

a spattering of vomit on my shirt, a demolished vehicle currently wrapped around a city light pole, and big problems. He tells me he thinks he should slip the nice cop a hundred since it's so obvious I was driving drunk. I tell him not to.

He carries me out to the family sedan, where my sister Eileen waits, and she starts crying when she sees me. "What's wrong?" I ask.

"We thought you'd be dead when we saw the car. And you look like the phantom of the opera, only scarier," she replies, a fact I verify upon glancing into her compact's mirror. I cry then, too.

I stay with Eileen and my parents for two weeks, healing. Then I return to my Oklahoma City apartment. A few days later, he brings me a 1977 Monte Carlo, green, to replace my totaled 1976 brown Nova. "Daddy, you didn't have to do this," I say.

"Well, goddammit, you've got to have a car, don't you? You've got to get back and forth from school and work, don't you?"

I agree. It is my third car, I'm nineteen years old, and I've never made a car payment in my life.

The morning of New Year's Eve, 1986, they both came into my room, where I was jamming to Exene Cervenka and John Doe of X, to tell me they'd be home from the Dead End bar in a couple of hours, allegedly after Daddy picked up the money Hattie owed him for winning a ten-liner off the Texas-Air Force game. He won fifty bucks on the ten-liner and spent \$123.50 on booze. She said he drank twenty-some whiskey and sodas in three and a half hours. She must have had a twelve-pack of Bud Light or so herself, because she was shake, rattle, and rollin' pretty good when I got to the End at 4:00 after she'd called me to come get them.

My alcoholic mother called me to come to deliver her and my equally alcoholic father from the clutches of a New Year's DUI, and the minute I got to the dive they tried to shove a beer down my throat. That was probably the first beer I'd refused in years--I don't get offers that often--but I would've rather died than drink a beer then. I wanted to die pretty badly anyway, after listening to her introduce me to every old worthless drunk in the place at least three times. And they all gaped at me when they found out I'm still not married.

"She's a real knockout, Betsy Sue," they all said with crooked, leering smiles and bloodshot eyes. They said typical sorts of things: "Well, honey, why haven't you got you a husband yet? You're pretty as all get-out," that sort of thing.

"I'm waiting for one just like my daddy," I said, looking wide-eyed at the near catatonic man precariously hanging on the barstool by some miraculous defiance of Newton's law. That confused and shut them up, but the tragic thing is there's some truth in it.

"Yeah," Daddy slurred, "that Deborah O'Connell, she's tough. She takes care of her old man when she's down from school, don't you, Deborah O'Connell?"

"Sure, Daddy, sure." My eyes filled with water, and I tried to blink back the tears, because Daddy gets mean when I cry. He hates any signs of weakness, and when I cry he gets after me, which never fails to make me cry even more.

"This is Deborah O'Connell," Daddy said to no one in particular for the eighty thousandth time. Then he tried to buy the house a round for the eighty thousandth time, and as he groped for a twenty he'd laid on the counter for just such a situation he knocked over a tray of high-

ball glasses, and they crashed and splintered as dramatically as they do in AA ads.

"Let's go," I said.

"Wait till your daddy's ready, Deb." She smiled, rocking slightly on her heels as she stood by my barstool. I looked around while trying to blink back the water in my eyes. It looked like there were four or five sober people in the place, and every one of them was looking at my parents, but mostly at my daddy, with pity and disgust on their doughy faces. My daddy, the hero, the forty-nine year old star company softball player and bowler, pitied? The water came back quickly, unwanted.

"Johnny, are you about ready to go?" my mother asked. Daddy's name is really Delbert, but she never calls him that. She had one husband named Robert many years ago and has one now named Delbert, but she always wanted one named Jimmy or Johnny, so that's what she calls him. He calls her either Chief Inspector Betsy Sue--because she always knows where he is, even though many times she really doesn't want to know--or Cute-ums, Sweetums, and the like. It's kind of confusing to introduce them to people, so mostly I keep my friends, such as they are, away.

"Go? Deb, don't you want to stay and have a drink with your old man?" His big strong arms around me, his dead-smelling breath slapped my face.

"No, Daddy, I want to go home. I don't like to drive after dark."

"Ooohhh, Deb doesn't wanna drive after dark. Are you afraid of the dark? You're twenty-three goddamn years old, aren't you?"

"No, I'm twenty-four goddamn years old, and I still don't like to drive after dark."

"Quit provoking him," my mother interrupted through her closed,

white, ground-down teeth.

Daddy said we couldn't leave until I'd introduced myself to a man I'd already been introduced to, said, "It doesn't do a bit of goddamn good 'less you introduce yourself. Don't you understand a single goddamn thing?" So I introduced myself to this man named Bud (one of the sober ones), who looked like he wanted to cry. I knew I did.

It's a wonder he didn't get arrested for public drunk during the 200 foot walk to my car. We had to hold all 205 pounds up, and he was resisting all help. It was a long walk. The drive home turned out to be pretty quiet, except when she bitched me out for letting some guy get in front of me from the on ramp. "You don't have to slow down; he's on the access road," she said. "You have the right of way."

"So I'm polite," I said. "What's the big deal anyway?" Rescuers get bad raps these days.

The twenty mile drive from Tulsa to suburbia finished up with Daddy yelling at me to slow down and look out for the cops when I was doing 25 in a 30 just blocks from the house. Then neither of them could focus long enough to find their house keys, so she looked through her initialed leather key ring and his generic silver key ring for about fifteen minutes. No luck.

I was outside, propping Daddy up against the cold stone and screaming, "You mean you're both so fucked up you can't find your own house keys?" She agreed with me, saying, "Yes," under her breath, and went around the house to the garage door to try to break in. Somehow Daddy broke loose from me and staggered around the yard, taking out a couple of new shrubs and falling both face down and face up in the mud four or five times.

By now she'd managed to jimmy the garage door open and make her way through the kitchen and dining room and into the foyer. The heavy wooden front door slowly swung open, and her brown, watery eyes got bulgy, the way they do when she's really drunk, really pissed, or any combination of the two. It's a look that anyone who really knows us is familiar with, that look her eyes get.

She was confused. She'd left him and me ten minutes earlier, and now I looked about the same, but Daddy had what looked like mud all over him--on his boots, his knees, his ass, his elbows, his hands, and even a little dab in the deep cleft of his chin. After she bitched me out for letting him get away, as though either of us had ever been able to hold him in the first place, she let us in. But she told Daddy slowly that he'd have to stay in the foyer until she could get the mud off him, while I sat in one of her newly-reupholstered chairs and lit a cigarette.

He couldn't stand up by himself when she'd gone for the washcloth, and he wouldn't let me prop him up, so he went as far as his bad balance would take him, then ended up between the stocked bar and the solid pecan kitchen table (actually under it, a little), like I said before. I went over and asked him if he was okay, and he mumbled some jumbled nonsense in response. Looking down at him, I didn't know how to feel, so instead of feeling anything I moved his head to the left a little so he wouldn't inhale or ingest his vomit.

She returned with a cream-colored, "Hers"-applied washcloth. Ugly mad eyes was all there was to her now, as she spotted the mud running a drunken path from the foyer to Daddy's resting site. Mud, mud, mud--it was all mud, including the muddy look in her eyes. I could tell she was getting maniacal, especially when she headed straight for the

utility room. It was just too much mud for her to handle.

I tried to stop it, but it was too late.

"Son of a bitch. Prick. Bastard." She turned the green family-sized trashcan upside down and with some fancy wrist action poured it all over his half-unconscious person. Cigarette butts, last swallows of beer, dirty white Kleenexes, the last dab of Wolf Brand Chili without Beans, some peanut shells, and a bunch of other garbage landed on Daddy and the surrounding area. She smiled slowly, meanly, like a child, and stared at him, still holding the trashcan.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked. "You're no better, don't you see you're no better? Why don't you hop down and wallow in it with him?"

Just a puddly glare in return. "Did you hear me, dammit?" I continued. "You're no better! Are you ever going to understand, you're no damn better?" Daddy still didn't know what hit him; I think he was sort of unconscious still.

"At least I don't stagger around and fall down. At least I clean up my own shit. I have to clean up his shit too, the prick."

I told her that was her own fault for putting up with him for twenty-six years, and that she did too stagger, was as a matter of fact staggering right then. Bending over carefully, she picked up a Virginia Slims butt with a piece of lasagna or something on it. I chain-smoked and wished for a Quaalude.

It is December, 1983, and as Eileen and I return home from school for Christmas vacation, they both meet us at the door, their faces grave. She's still in her caftan with sailboats on it, and it's 3:30 in the

afternoon. Eileen says hello, kisses them both, and retreats to her room.

"What's happened?" I ask.

"Your old man got a DUI three days ago," he says, chuckling unconvincingly.

She looks like hell, says she doesn't want to talk about it and doesn't want to hear anybody else talking about it either. She's afraid he'll lose his job, and she can't handle thinking about that. So I wait until she goes to bed at 7:45 before I bring it up with Daddy. He tells me they both took turns driving home that night, but neither of them could handle it, so they pulled into Long John Silver's to get something in their stomachs.

After they'd finished eating, he got behind the wheel and pulled onto the highway, but a cop followed him out of the parking lot and pulled him over. Somebody must have seen them weaving and called the police, he thinks. He refused to take the breathalyzer, not realizing that meant an automatic conviction. So he got cuffed, shackled, and hauled off to jail, and he figured she did too, for public drunk. All night long he heard a woman screaming bloody murder a few cells down, and every once in a while he'd say, "Inspector, is that you?" but the woman just kept on screaming, oblivious.

It turns out it wasn't the inspector, but she overhears me tell him he's automatically convicted and that he'll lose his license, at least for a while. She comes into the living room looking pretty tensed up, and shrieks, "I thought I asked you not to talk about this!"

"We need to talk about it; we're a family," I say.

"We don't need to talk about it!" she screams.



Daddy tells her to settle down, so she sits. He repeats what I've told him, and says he imagines when he tells his boss the company will expect him to go through alcohol rehabilitation. She stands up and says, "I've heard enough of this," then collapses on the floor. Daddy holds her hand, and I suggest calling an ambulance, since she says she can't breathe and her heart's beating out of her chest.

"Do you want to go to the hospital, Betsy?" he asks.

"No, I'll be all right," she gasps back. Daddy buries his head in her chest and starts sobbing.

"God, I love you, Betsy Sue, and it seems like all I ever do is raise hell and cause trouble for everybody." This is true: adultery, fights, alcoholism, gambling.

"It's okay, Johnny," she says, "I love you too."

"I love you too, Deb," he cries into my shoulder.

"Me too, Daddy." He carries her back to the bedroom and lies down beside her while I enter Eileen's room to brief her on what just happened.

The phone rang, and my mother stepped over Daddy and reached around the bar to pick it up. It's your sister, she mouthed to me. I made like I wanted to talk to her, to tell her, but she said loudly, drunkenly, "Oh, never mind, Poop, Deb just wants to tell you about the family crisis...No, it's no big deal; we'll see you later."

"Eileen, I want to talk to you," I screamed into the receiver of the phone in her old room, which I call the Dakin Hall of Fame. There's no phone in my room. She hung up.

Eileen, the normal one. The younger, by three years. The one who'd

be married on May 17 to a dull, balding clinical psychiatrist in his first year of practice. Eileen, the twenty-one year old who vowed to keep her 114 stuffed animals for as long as she lived, as well as every single one of her vividly-clear childhood memories, but only the few good ones.

I ran back into the kitchen, feeling anger, hatred, and the need for revenge.

"You're not gonna spoil that kid's holiday; nobody is," she said.

"Funny thing, you didn't give a flying fuck about spoiling my holiday."

"Your holiday would've been spoiled if nothing had happened today at all. You can come up with some excuse to spoil every day. You don't need me or your dad to do it for you."

I decided not to touch that one. She moved to the refrigerator and came back with a beer in her red Louisiana Downs coolie, and part of me died, never to be reincarnated or recycled.

The trash lay there, as trash will, in a touching tableau, next to and on top of my daddy. He seemed settled in, so I decided not to disturb him.

She sipped her beer contemplatively, intently, purposefully. I lit another cigarette and asked her if she was serious, if she actually realized what she had done--the implications inherent in the opening of that beer. Yes, she said, she realized very clearly what she had done and what had been done unto her all her life, but that wasn't the point.

Some people can hide things from themselves for as long as they live, yet go on living somehow. She and Eileen could, but he and I couldn't; instead we screamed to the depths of the heavens every truth

we knew, and we both knew a lot of them. Since he couldn't scream now, it was my duty as an O'Connell to scream loudly enough for both of us.

It went on for a long time. I told her what she was made of, recited her every motivation to her, while she went to the refrigerator periodically, then returned to gape at me, bloody-eyed, blank. Thus inspired (at least she was attentive), I forged ahead.

My method was one of compassion and passion, empathy and sympathy. I understand about alcoholism, I said, but understanding was not and would not ever be enough. The time had come for action. Her, his, my action. I would do all I could, because I loved them. Did she realize how horrible life was for Eileen and me growing up in an alcoholic environment? Look at the effect it had on her, and to a degree, on me.

"There's nothing wrong with that kid," she replied, putting the Bud Light down and looking directly at me.

Nothing wrong with her? I could understand that response, since she and Eileen were so much alike. Both of you, I said, cannot and will not see into yourselves at all.

"He feels guilty because of his family," she said from nowhere.

"What?"

"He got so drunk today because of the guilt he feels about his family," she reiterated clearly, as if talking to a child. I said I knew his family was strange, deranged in fact, but that I thought he did a good job of pretending he wasn't really a part of it.

"No, no. His other family. The one he's been supporting all these years." She said this very deliberately, as though imploring that I understand.

"Just hold on. Are you crazy? What the hell other family?"

"The one he's been supporting all these years."

"I think you better start talking to me about this other family. Who are they? Where are they?" I didn't believe a word of it.

She just shook her head slowly, eyes huge, and didn't say another word. I went over to Daddy and leaned over him, saying I would appreciate hearing about his other family, if in fact there was one in existence anywhere other than in her cluttered, booze-bungled brain. He didn't seem to hear me, so I prodded his stomach gently with my foot. No response, but a peanut shell did roll off his arm. She had, by this time, become immersed in some unhappy memory of Daddy's adulterous days. I could tell, because she's done this many times before, and when she does her eyes cloud up and she stares back in time, when the scenery was different, not so expensive, and everyone was younger, more alive, and louder. So loud I could never sleep.

"Hey," I said, "I don't want to hear any more about this other family stuff until he wakes up and can defend himself."

"He can defend himself just fine passed out. The truth is the truth."

I tried to bring the conversation back around to her problems. Her blood pressure is really high, so she should go to the doctor to take care of it, because sometimes when she's excited she can't breathe and her heart pounds. She doesn't eat right, just drinks beer, and she never gets any exercise other than watching him play golf, bowl, or run the bases. She also smokes too much. I told her all this.

"I'm going to live a good, long, happy life," she replied, as if in church, eyes round and eyebrows raised. I could tell she meant it.

"How the hell do you figure? We might as well start looking for

cemetery plots right now."

"Oh, no!" she cried, truly shocked. "I'm going to live a good, long, happy life."

Just trying to help, I tried to impress upon her that alcoholism, smoking, poor diet, lack of exercise, and denial do not add up to a good, long, happy life. She merely stood up unsteadily, took one last swallow, and staggered back to the kitchen to throw the beer can away. Standing at the foot of the bar between it and Daddy, she said, "Deb....," waveringly, unsteadily. I turned to look at her. She didn't finish. Turning around, she entered the master bedroom and shut the door.

I tried to clean up the mudlines, but failed..

## THE SLICE OF LIFE

Nita sits, staring blankly. One of her hands rests on her black cat's back, the other on her sofa. Her long index finger is stuck in a cigarette burn in the sofa like she's plugged into it.

She's been sitting this way a couple of hours, maybe more. All has been still, except for the few times she's moved her eyes from object to object. Now she's focusing on the Kelvinator refrigerator logo, the raised silver letters transforming into a floating brigade of individual snowflakes. Clytemnestra, her cat, suddenly jumps off the sofa, diverting her attention and causing the snowflakes to melt away.

Pulling her finger out of the hole in the sofa, Nita stands up, tugs at the bottom of her red bikini panties, and pulls down the undershirt rolled up above her hips. She rubs her eyes, slaps both cheeks hard, glances at the clock, which reads 9:57 p.m. God, she's late. Seriously late. She hurries to the fake antique telephone and dials a number. After a few moments she says, "John? I did it again...I don't know, I just got lost, I guess...Anyway, I'm gonna be late...I'll call you when I'm ready, but it'll be a while...Yeah, I'm okay...Okay, bye."

John will have to wait, but he won't mind. He's the only friend she has right now. She's not really big on friends. John says he's never met anybody like Nita, nobody even remotely like her. His friends say they haven't either, and are glad of it. They've told her this. Nita guesses they tried to talk John out of having anything to do with

her, knows they think she's crazy or scary or evil or something else abnormal, but John's too nice to say anything like that to her. When she asks why he never talks about spending time with the guys anymore, he just says he'd rather spend time with her. She's glad he does.

Her heart's pounding. She wipes sweat from her brow and upper lip, then with her middle right finger lightly applies pressure to the throbbing vein in her wrist. One hundred thirty-five beats per minute. Time for a little deep breathing. She plops down yoga-style on the floor, breathing in, one-two-three, out, one-two-three. After about five minutes she takes her pulse again. Eighty-seven beats per minute. A sigh of relief. Much better. Now she can start getting ready.

Chewing on the inside of her mouth, she looks through her closet. The red blouse will have to do. Now to iron the damn thing, which will probably take forever. A glass of wine will help get her through that. She takes a fluted wine glass out of a cabinet and thumps it, loving the ping sound lead crystal makes. She thumps the glass again, and it makes the same sound. Amazing. Even though she doesn't want to, she puts the glass down and fills it with Riunite white. She could sit and thump lead crystal for hours.

Back in the combination living room/bedroom of her efficiency apartment, Nita turns on her stereo. She doesn't have a TV, but the stereo is a Pioneer and it is loaded. She nearly bankrupted herself buying it, but she would bankrupt herself again and again for the kind of sound it delivers. She snaps a Cure tape into the cassette and turns the volume up, way up. Absolutely fabulous sound. "And the night sang out like cockatoos..." sings Robert Smith. The music fills Nita; she dances around--arms extended over her head, knees bending, hips undu-

lating--singing loudly while ironing the blouse. Clytemnestra rubs against her bare calves when she holds still long enough.

The upstairs neighbor bangs on the ceiling in protest. Nita's face twists up. She hates that girl. Up goes the volume another several dozen decibels. Nita also bangs on the ceiling herself with a broom handle. The upstairs neighbor doesn't hesitate to bang her bed against the wall and howl unmercifully when she's screwing her boyfriend, which is often. A little good music won't hurt her. No reason to worry about the upstairs neighbor anyway; that girl's all talk.

Having finished her ironing, Nita goes into the bathroom and flips on the light, grimacing at the brightness of the four 100-watt bulbs. She hates her naked face and avoids directly facing the mirror. She cleanses it with Sea Breeze, rubs in a palmful of Oil of Olay, and gently touches the faint lines around her eyes and mouth. They're getting deeper right before her very eyes. That high-dollar cellular recovery cream obviously isn't working, but she won't throw it away just yet.

She presses the eyelash curler down as firmly as possible, careful not to catch any tender skin inside. After curling her lashes twice, she gets out her mascara and puts on three coats, separating each lash with a straight pin after every coat. What would happen if she stuck herself in the eye real hard? Blood? Do eyes even bleed? Intense, blinding pain? Just blindness? An interesting question. Accidentally blinking while the mascara was wet makes several black dots show up under her eyes, so she dips a cotton-tipped swab in baby oil and wipes them off carefully. It's a bad deal to get cotton stuck in your eyelashes.

Nita goes back into the front room and turns the cassette over.



This time Robert Smith sings, "Your tongue is like poison, so swollen it fills my mouth." Nita takes a large, cosmetic-stained makeup bag out of her huge black purse and returns to the bathroom. First she arranges large dots of white foundation over her face, forehead, and neck, placing them in geometric patterns like triangles, squares, and rectangles; it makes putting on makeup a little more fun. With a sponge she blends the makeup in. Bits of sponge fall into her hair, and she picks them out carefully, thanking God she spotted them before someone else did.

She gets out a cover stick and applies it liberally to the large grayish circles under her eyes. They're always there, those circles, because she has a hard time sleeping, although she usually stays in bed about ten hours a night.

Taking a makeup brush out of a drawer, she scatters loose powder over her face and pressed powder on her eyelids. Next a line of bronze cream blusher goes under her cheekbones in a straight line which she rubs in with another sponge. One time she went alone to a bar with her makeup on serious punk-style, all applied in straight lines, with black under her cheekbones and on her lips. Everybody stared at her and called her names, one guy even spit on her, and even though she liked the way it looked, she never did it again. But she wanted to.

"Damn," she says, frowning and pawing through her bag. She shoves it aside, stalking into the other room to tear through her purse--tossing out a brush, a switchblade, and pieces of broken cigarettes. Cigs are expensive, and it seems like she breaks more than she smokes. A battered but whole one emerges from the bottom of the purse, and Nita lights up, shoving the rest of the stuff back into the purse, broken cigarettes and all.

She gets another glass of wine and returns to the bathroom, humming the melody to "Torture," watching herself blow smoke rings in the mirror. She lines her eyes in dark gray with the pencil, smudging the liner in her light gray eyes' outside corners. Next comes the shadow, a frosty gray-blue color.

A voice in her head says, It's time, it's time, and she hums louder, trying to drown it out while putting purple shadow in the creases of her eyes and extending the shadow up to the outside corners of her brows, making her already up-tilted eyes look even more catlike. Taking another brush from the drawer, Nita puts on wine-colored blusher from her cheekbones up to her temples. While turning the faucet on over the cigarette, she surveys the finished product in the mirror. Now she can study her face and feel nearly comfortable.

She's done as well as she could with what she has to work with. Her shoulder length auburn hair looks bright and shiny, but as bushy and unmanageable as usual. Her eyes look as inhuman as ever, a fact which makes her very happy. Her unblemished skin--vampire-white, translucent, luminous--also looks good, but her ears look terrible. Two of the eight pierced holes are fiery red and peeling. She should be more careful when the overpowering urge to pierce overtakes her. She quickly slaps hydrogen peroxide on the infected holes and dries them with a makeup-stained towel.

After turning down the stereo, Nita goes to the phone, dials a number, and clears her throat. "Hi," she says. "I just have to get dressed, so I'll be ready in about 15 minutes...Yeah, okay...Hey, grab me a pack of cigs on your way, huh?...Thanks."

Back up goes the stereo volume. John's such a good guy. She should

be nicer to him, she really should. She'll really try. He's always doing nice little things for her--picking up cigs, running her to the store, taking her back and forth from the gym, where they met. He'd struck up a conversation that first time they'd talked--about her extraordinary muscular strength, considering she was a 125 pound female. He couldn't believe how seriously she took her weightlifting and told her anyone serious about weightlifting was automatically a friend of his. She thought he was genuinely nice, and couldn't believe she actually thought that. They spent so much time together working out that they naturally got to know each other better. The wonder of it was that as John got to know Nita better and better he also realized she was stranger and stranger, more and more different from the other women he knew, but this just seemed to make him want to be her friend more.

Nita suspects John's just like a little kid, likes anything out of the ordinary and interesting, which she definitely is. His Deer Creek, Oklahoma, upbringing hadn't exactly piqued his curiosity much, and she is just an avenue by which to expand his safe, boring, small-town existence. She also suspects he feels a little sorry for her. She hopes not, but suspects nonetheless. She's not exactly sure why he feels sorry for her; it's something in his manner, in the way he looks at her, his big brown eyes soft and compassionate--sorry-looking, in fact.

She can't afford to worry about that now, and so picks through her jewelry box until she finds all the pieces she needs. Besides the diamond stud she always wears just under the curve at the top of her right ear, she puts in seven black earrings--hoops, round balls, and dangly drops. She also places five rings on her fingers. People probably

think she looks like a walking pawn shop, and a second-rate one at that. Who cares?

She dresses as quickly as possible in a black leather miniskirt, sheer black undershirt, and the big red blouse. An antique rhinestone brooch is pinned to the blouse and an Eat Shit and Die button affixed upside-down to a black leather belt. A pair of red lacy anklets go on over black textured pantyhose. Ankle-high black boots with silver buckles complete the outfit. But still, something's missing. Oh god, no lipstick! She thanks the deity for letting her remember and puts on a glossy red shade, then brushes her hair and coats it with Aquanet. She sprays Opium perfume in her hair and on every pulse point not covered by clothing.

Nita takes her empty wine glass into the kitchen and puts it in the overflowing kitchen sink. Those dishes will have to be washed soon. "Hey, Clytemnestra!" she yells, "you better eat your cat food, dummy, 'cause it's gonna lay there in your dish till you do." Clytemnestra, unmoved, glances at her and yawns. Nita knows, though, that if the food's all dried up when she gets home, it'll make her sick to look at it and she'll put some fresh Tender Vittles in the bowl. Dried up cat food makes her want to vomit.

Hating to wait more than anything, she begins pacing up and down the short distance of her living room floor. That voice still says, It's time, it's time, but now it's louder, pounding. She slaps her hands over her ears, wishing John would hurry. Finally, after what seems like hours, pounding on her front door. She takes her hands from her ears and turns the music down. "John, is that you?"

"Goddammit, Nita, of course it's me. Who else would it be? Open

the damn door!"

Nita winces as she opens the door, muttering, "Sorry," and letting in John, a big blond bearish-looking man with very round eyes.

"I've been pounding on this door for five solid minutes," he says, his ruddy face redder than usual, "are you deaf?"

"I just didn't hear you! I said I was sorry, so let's go, okay?" she says, twisting her diamond stud.

He looks at her intently. "Are you okay?"

"Sure. Let's just go, huh?"

"Okay," he replies, apparently content to let go of his concern.

"Don't forget your purse."

Nita gives Clytemnestra a kiss and a hug, saying, "Clytie, Mommy'll be home later on. Be a good kitty and don't piss on the carpet, okay?" The cat stares stonily and green-eyed in return.

"John," Nita says, "I've gotta teach that damn cat some manners. She never waves goodbye." Both laugh, and John's face opens up as he leads her out the door. She should be grateful to him for taking her places, since she doesn't have a car of her own, but she wishes he had something a little snazzier than this very uncool 1976 Nova with its peeling bright yellow paint and two missing hubcaps. John's proud of it, though, and always says it has "one of the best goddamn engines in town." Big deal--ugly car, great engine. Not much of a tradeoff.

She asks John where they're going.

"Oh," he replies, "I thought The Grand Slam sounded fun; what do you think?" he asks eagerly. He seems to genuinely want to please her.

"Sure," she replies. There's usually a swarm of great-looking men at The Slam, and John follows his instructions well, though she can tell

he doesn't like having to. If she seems interested in anybody, he's supposed to butt out, but if she's being hasselled, John's supposed to step in and take care of the problem, hopefully quietly. He should kick butt only as a last resort.

"My cigs, please," she says. He hands them over. "Thanks," she replies. She doesn't offer to pay for them, never offers to pay for any of the little things John picks up for her. He thinks she doesn't have any money, even though her parents send her some, mainly to keep her away from home. But it doesn't do any good to feel guilty about deceiving John about her economic situation. He likes buying things for her and would be offended and hurt if she asked him not to.

The two sit out the rest of the short ride silently, John concentrating on the road, Nita trying to find something worthy of attention in the familiar ugly scenery. It doesn't take long to get to The Grand Slam, one of Stillwater's newest and supposedly hottest bars. It's nice because it's still too new to attract a crowd of scroungy, has-been regulars, and it's considered the place to be in Stillwater right now.

John circles the small parking lot closest to the bar; every space is full. He goes around the lot four times, and every time around Nita's hands grip the armrests more tightly. "How many times are you gonna drive around the parking lot, John?" He turns to look at her. "Are you gonna drive around all night hoping somebody'll pull out? It's already 11:30; everybody who's here is gonna stay a while. Park by the curb up there, for Christ's sake." She points to a nearby street. He looks hurt, but she can't worry about it; they need to get going.

"I saw a No Parking Any Time sign up there, Nita. I don't want to get a ticket."

"You won't get a ticket, dummy, just hurry up." He probably will get a ticket, but she can't let that be her problem. She's gotta get into this bar. It's taken forever to get out tonight.

John pulls in and backs up three times, trying to get really really close to the curb.

"John, you had Drivers' Ed. years ago! Let's go!"

"Okay, okay," he says, setting the emergency brake and locking all four car doors. "Are you having your period or something?"

"No, I'm not 'having my period or something.' I just want to get in; it's late. I don't know why you bother locking this bananamobile up so tight anyway. Nobody'd want it." She grabs his arm and drags him toward the bar. "Get your money out so we can get right through."

At the door they stand in line behind three other people. Nita smiles, hearing her favorite sounds--funk music and crowds of people yelling and screaming. They make it up to the front of the line, and the man at the door takes John's money--five dollars for their combined cover charge. She can see smoke clouds forming and reforming from the door. It's time to march straight to the bathroom to make sure she still looks all right. She always does this. If she decides she looks bad, she makes John take her home immediately, because leaving is far better than having other people, especially total strangers, cut her down behind her back.

She runs through the makeup routine again, touching up everything methodically. It isn't fair what time does to a girl's makeup. The minute it's on she can feel it fading imperceptibly away. She still looks pretty good, so she leaves the bathroom, wondering why the other girls in there were giving her dirty looks. Must have been that hair-

spray she accidentally shot in one girl's face. It was the girl's own fault; she'd been hogging the mirror, not giving Nita enough room. Anyway, it was just a little hairspray, not enough to put her eye out or anything.

She makes her way through to John. He has that dubious look on his face, wondering whether he should get out his keys or buy them a couple of drinks. One of life's biggest puzzles is why John puts up with her at all. Maybe he really likes her, really cares about her. Definitely hard to figure. "Well?" he asks.

"We stay," she says, moving toward the lighted wet bar. John follows, grinning and taking out his billfold.

Nita lights a cigarette and approaches her favorite bartender, a middle-aged, cockeyed Indian, and orders a gin and tonic for herself and a Budweiser for John. She snaps her fingers at John for some drink money. A tall blond guy with an earring laughs at this. "Who's the boss?" he whispers, winking at her.

Nita turns, eyeing him carefully. A blond. Wow. Nice. Tight black leather pants hug his ass--and everything else--nicely. She smiles and says, "Yeah, it does look pretty bad, huh? He loves it, though." A tall one too, she notices. Must be about 6'3" tall, since she's 5'9", has three-inch heels on, and still has to look up at him.

"Yeah, I bet he does, baby," he replies, "I bet he loves it a lot." He walks off into the crowd. The cute ones are always so dangerous, such soul destroyers. She bites her lip. Chasing men is a drag, but there's something irresistible about men who make women chase them. She might accidentally on purpose have to run into him a little bit later on and play with him, humble him some.



She hands John his beer, shooting him a look that tells him not to ask any questions. He doesn't. He instead leads her to her favorite spot out in the center of the bar. Standing up is best since she can see everything better that way and can in turn be seen easily. She looks around. Everybody looks like they're having a great time, like they couldn't possibly be having more fun. She tries to look like she's having fun too, by smiling and moving to the beat of the music. She avoids seeming too interested in the music, though, in hopes John won't ask her to dance right away. He's a horrible dance partner--most big men are--lacking in everything but enthusiasm. She sucks hard on her straw, hitting air after a moment, and crunches ice loudly between her big, strong, white teeth. "I need another drink," she says.

"God, you sucked that one down fast." He gets out his wallet.

"Save it, John." She smiles, grabs the wallet, and pulls a five out.

"No thanks, Nita, I don't need a beer yet," he says, smiling back at her, "but thank you for asking." He understands her as much as she'll let him; they're just playing.

Grinning, Nita moves away, walking straight through the middle of the crowd instead of taking a path cleared of people. She enjoys the nameless, faceless grinding of strange bodies against her own. Up at the bar, she catches her favorite bartender's good eye and orders another gin and tonic, lighting another cig while waiting for it. As she looks at her reflection in the glass paneling behind the bar, she glimpses the tall blond with the cute ass approaching and looks away quickly, acting surprised when he taps her on the shoulder.

"Hi there, Madame X," he says.

Her stomach drops.

"So do you have a name, or do you want me to call you that?" he asks, smiling down at her. It's a smile that looks predatory.

"What's it to you, Jack?" Where was John when she needed him?

"Maybe a lot, maybe nothing. I haven't decided yet." He still smiles that same smile. "And I'm not Jack, I'm Cal."

"Charmed," she smirks, twisting her diamond stud.

"If you're so charmed, how about a dance?"

She shrugs, says, "Sure." He takes her sweaty hand and leads her through the crowd expertly, like he's done it a million times before with about a million other girls. He stops in the middle of the front of the dance floor, her favorite spot--maximum exposure. She turns to face the crowd and begins to dance--hands clasped behind her head, elbows up, hips slowly circling to the beat. She's used to making fools of her partners, since hardly any measure up to her own natural abilities, but this guy is one of the few who can, maybe even outdo her.

She looks around the crowded dance floor at the other couples, thinking they look stupid, happy. Some are probably even in love, whatever that is, if anything. More are probably on the make. Even more are probably composed of one who's on the make and one in love, or one who wishes or is kidding herself she soon will be. It's all pretty scary.

John watches her with a pained expression, and when he catches her looking at him, he raises his eyebrows. She sticks her tongue out at him and smiles at Cal, who's staring at her so hard she can feel the line of his glare cutting through her face and coming out the back of her head. He's a member of the on the make club. She looks back, but

John isn't there anymore.

The dance floor's hot, and her upper lip and forehead begin to sweat. People are still coming to dance in the middle of the song, pushing her closer and closer to this Cal guy, on the make. More sweat. Frankie Goes to Hollywood sing, "Relax, don't do it...When you want to come--COME, aahh...." A high-pitched ring goes through her ears, and she fears she'll lose her balance. Saying, "Excuse me," she staggers off the floor and stumbles down the hall to the bathroom. Everybody probably thinks she's drunk. She's not. That'd be easier.

In the bathroom Nita leans heavily against a wall, sliding down along it into a sitting position. She hates to get her skirt dirty, but sitting down for a minute might quiet the ringing. Her heart pounds. In, one-two-three, out, one-two-three. Every girl in the bathroom looks at her, but no one, no one asks if she's all right; they just look. Who cares? It isn't likely she'll ask anybody, much less a bunch of stuck-up nobody girls, for help. But she hopes she's not coming down with something. She hates to be sick; she always looks so terrible when she's sick.

The ringing has stopped, and her heart pounds dully but more slowly. She stands, waiting for the two girls in front of her to get away from the mirror. They back away quickly, and Nita looks at herself. She jumps a little, almost not recognizing her reflection.

Sweat has cut lines into her makeup and blush; chipped-off pieces of mascara cluster in little bits around her eyes. Nita stares hopelessly at herself, not knowing where to begin. Why not just stay in here all night, then sneak out later when everyone else is gone? She'd probably get locked in or something. John would never leave her, any-

way. She picks a Kleenex out of her purse and starts rubbing her face, trying to get the lines to blend together again, although it won't be the same as before, nowhere close. And that voice. It's back, saying, It's on one heartbeat, time on the next. She decides not to fight it anymore.

She's very, very tired. Almost but not quite tired enough to stop worrying about how she looks. She can't even do anything about her mascara since she's stupidly left it at home, but she fixes the rest of it as well as she can, considering how terrible she looks underneath. She always looks terrible underneath. The flakes of stray mascara she scrapes lightly off with the tip of her long fingernail. Despite the cover-up, circles and wrinkles are all she can see now. She turns away from the mirror and leaves the bathroom, praying John is somewhere nearby.

What luck! He stands alone near the ladies' room door, sipping on a beer. Is he telepathic? Was he watching when she stumbled off the floor? It doesn't matter; he understands. Their eyes meet. "You okay?" he asks, his big hand covering her shoulder bone.

The touch helps, a little. "I don't know, maybe. Can we go home now?"

"Sure. Wanna talk about it?"

She knows he'd listen for hours if she had hours' worth of stuff to say. She doesn't. "No thanks. Let's just go." She takes his hand as they walk outside, into the darkness, a real darkness unlike that inside the bar. Nita sees a couple leaning against a parked car. They kiss deeply, his hand--which kneads her breast--inside her opened blouse. Nita looks away. What's it all about?

She herself rarely has sex, but now and again something, a voice

maybe, tells her to go to a bar alone, pick up a total stranger, and sleep with him. These guys never find out her real name, and she never wants to know theirs, doesn't even ask. If they insist on having a name to call her, she makes one up, usually something absurd and horrible like Gertrude or Nell. And if she ever sees these guys again or they're stupid enough to come back to her place, she denies ever having laid eyes on them, refuses to acknowledge their very limited significance in her life. During the sexual encounters, Nita consciously avoids speaking to them unless she has to. Usually all she wants to do after the sex is beat them up or bang her head against a wall, hard, and even that's no relief unless it's hard, real hard. She rarely does either.

John unlocks the car door for her after plucking the parking ticket from under his windshield wiper. It's Nita's fault, and she mumbles she'll pay for it. John tells her not to worry, it's okay.

They're now inside the car, and John squeezes her hand and pats it. She leans her head back, closes her eyes, and holds onto the armrests tightly. They drive home in silence. When they get to her place, she says, "John, come up for a minute, please." They hold hands as they walk to the door.

Once inside, Nita pulls out the sofa and lies down. "John," she says, and he comes, lies down, and wraps himself around her. This happens pretty often. She'll put on a tee-shirt and get ready for bed, and John will stay until she falls asleep. He always leaves after that, locking the door carefully behind him, because she can't stand the thought of him seeing her in the morning.

Now John mumbles something against Nita's hair, but she puts her

finger on his lips, wanting to hear nothing but steady, even breathing. It's precious. They lie together for several minutes, until she rolls over and says, "I think I'd like to be alone now."

"Are you sure? I'll stay if you want me to." He will, too, as long as she needs him.

"No, you go on home. I think I'll take a hot shower. Might help me relax."

"Okay. I'll come by about two tomorrow to go to the gym."

"Thanks, John," she says, hugging him. She kisses him lightly on the mouth, then watches him go out the door, down the stairs. She locks up and leans back against the door.

After making sure the curtains are drawn, she takes off her clothes, throws them into a pile in the corner, and stares fixedly at her naked body in a full-length mirror. It's a beautiful body, well-muscled due to the long hours of sweaty workouts she puts herself through at the gym, but it looks deformed, distorted.

She knows what she has to do, what the voice has been telling her to do all day and all night. It's told her before. Lightly she traces the long line of a scabbed-over, deep scratch on her belly as her eyes fill with tears.

Still touching the scratch, she walks into the bathroom and takes a blood-stained razor blade from the medicine cabinet. Clutching it firmly, she steps into the shower and turns on the water as hard and hot as it will go, letting it beat down on her. Ah, the steam! As the minutes go by and the steam fills the room, Nita's skin reddens, especially the skin around the scab.

Wincing, she tears the softened scab off the scratch. Dark red

blood oozes out, and she lets the water wash it away. Gritting her teeth and holding the blade between her right index finger and thumb, she slowly and skillfully reopens the wound with the razor, following its original path. Practice makes perfect. Blood drips over her pelvis and down her legs, and along with it, a little bit of the pain, just a little bit. Not enough to make any real difference.

She watches it go, sitting down in the tub as the beating water courses down her face and chest.

## LIFE, LOVE, MARRIAGE, DENTAL MOLDS

Polly's husband George, a really nice man, really nice, has been coming in to Archie's office for regular cleanings and the occasional amalgam for a couple of years before we first see her. A really nice man, George, always says, "How are you today, Mrs. Highfeldt?" very respectfully when he passes my spot at the secretary's office on his way to Archie's. When he passes back by on his way out, after giving me his insurance forms, he says, "Nice seeing you, Mrs. Highfeldt," or sometimes, "Have a nice evening." He's a very unassuming type of young man, thirtyish, not flashy, an engineer of some kind at the Conoco plant here in Ponca City, I believe.

I assume during those two years George mentioned his wife to my husband during those safe, polite conversations that always occur between a dentist and his patient. But Archie has never said anything about her to me.

I see Knight-Phibbs in the 12:30 slot of the appointment book that first day she comes in, but the hyphen throws me and I don't connect her to George Phibbs. She blows in at 12:50 or so, and of course such tardiness is bound to throw us completely off schedule for the rest of the afternoon--you can't rush good dental work. Very flashy, Polly. A full six feet of her, very blond hair, the kind that's not really blond, lots of makeup carefully applied with a heavy hand. And a manner about her, the kind of manner that demands attention and makes you wonder why she has to demand it.



So she blows in, as I said, late, and with rose-colored lipstick on! Completely inappropriate for the dentist's. Archie's rubber gloves will be pinky-red, and so will his forearms, I think. The woman immediately plops herself down in the chair closest to my open office window and begins deliberately pulling at her hair while looking in a compact mirror, I suppose to make it conform properly to its unkempt style.

"Mrs. Knight-Phibbs, I suppose?" I ask.

She looks up at me, fingers poised mid-pull. "Yes?"

"You had a 12:30 appointment, I think?"

"Yes," she says again, "At least I think it was 12:30."

"That's right. Twelve-thirty," I repeat.

"Oh my, am I late?"

At this moment Archie comes around the corner and says, "Goodness, Polly, not even late enough to mention. I should thank you; you gave me a few extra minutes to enjoy my lunch." My husband invariably breaks for lunch at 11:30; he finished his bologna sandwich and apple at precisely 11:43.

"Archie," I say, "you do have that double root canal at 1:30."

"Yes, yes, Mira, I know. Polly and I are just going to take some molds and have a little consultation, and if Mr. Whitehead has to wait a few minutes to get his root canal, then he'll just have to wait a few minutes, won't he?" He beams Polly's direction. She beams right back at him. Archie has quite a way with his patients. "Come right this way, Polly," my husband directs, placing his hand lightly on the small of her back while his other hand points to the inner office. "Polly is George Phibbs' wife, Mira," he explains as he rounds the corner.

This is news to me, especially since she doesn't look his type. Archie and Heidi, his hygienist, work on Mrs. Knight-Phibbs for some time. I can hear what goes on in the inner office from my desk, and the last twenty minutes of the appointment sound like conversation, mainly. In between I can hear Archie saying nice things to her repeatedly: "My goodness, you're a beautiful girl!", "Your hair is certainly attractive," "Polly, you have absolutely classic bones in your face; if we can just get these teeth aligned, you'll be perfect!", and finally, "I truly don't believe I've ever seen such a beautiful pair of legs on a living human being before, I really don't." I enter the office just then to have Archie look at an insurance claim, and he turns to me and asks, "Mira, doesn't Polly have beautiful legs?"

I glance at Polly's legs, which are stretched out in front of her as she lies horizontally in the patient's chair, a top mold setting in her mouth, Archie's thumbs applying pressure to it from underneath. Since Polly's khaki green miniskirt leaves a good deal of her legs exposed, I feel I have ample evidence for an opinion. "Yes," I reply, "Polly certainly does have beautiful legs. Such long ones too. And Archie is quite the leg man."

"You really do have pretty legs, Mrs. Knight-Phibbs," Heidi utters enviously.

I can feel Polly's eyes appraising my legs in comparison, finding her own quite superior. A good little observer, that Polly.

"I will admit," Archie says, "without reservation or shame, that as Mira says, I am quite the leg man, so my opinion is of the expert variety." He beams at Polly again, and she looks pleased about the compliment, as pleased as a woman can look with a dental mold in her mouth.

At 1:42 Polly Knight-Phibbs emerges from the office, again beaming, Archie's hand again lightly touching the small of her back. "Well, Polly," he says brightly, "I'll see you again just as soon as those duplicate molds come back in from Kansas City."

"Oh yes, Dr. Highfeldt. I'm just so excited!" For the first time I notice something a little funny about her smile.

"I enjoyed our conversation very much, Polly. We must talk about writing again sometime," Archie says sincerely.

"Oh yes," she breathes. She has a very breathy voice. "And we must talk about dentistry again soon, too."

"Certainly, my dear, we will. Bye now."

Mr. Whitehead glares back and forth from one to the other, obviously and understandably impatient to get his canal underway. "I think Dr. Highfeldt is ready to see you now, Mr. Whitehead," I prompt.

"Ah yes, Mr. Whitehead," my husband answers, "right this way, please."

"She doesn't look at all his type," I say as we get in the car to leave for the day.

Archie clips his shoulder strap into its holster. "Who's that?"

"Polly Knight-Phibbs."

"Doesn't look George's type? No, I suppose you're right. She's a poet, you know. They never look like anybody's type, except other poets'."

"No," I say, "I didn't know. What kind of a poet?"

"What do you mean, 'what kind of a poet'? What kinds are there?"

"I mean is she a serious poet, is poetry her vocation?"

"Yes, she's a serious poet; she's working on her Ph.D. at Tulsa University."

"Well, that's interesting," I say, wondering why Archie is defending her. "What's wrong with her teeth?"

"Oh," my husband says, "that's very complicated." He explains that Polly Knight-Phibbs accidentally knocked out her right incisor at twelve years of age. Apparently her imbecile of a dentist at that time simply moved the next canine over to block the gap. Over the years, all the teeth on the right side of her mouth naturally shifted to the left to compensate for the extra space left by the incisor the imbecilicist removed. And as a result of that, all the teeth on Polly's left side are being shoved to the left as well. I realize this must be the reason her smile looks odd, off-whack--it leans, or at least her upper teeth do. Archie says her lowers are textbook perfect. To top the whole thing off, Polly has recently been experiencing headaches, severe headaches, she tells Archie. It is Archie's opinion these headaches are caused by, of course, the general leftward shift of her entire upper mouth's bone structure.

"What can you do?" I ask.

"Polly has a few options," my husband explains. "Easiest would be to have an oral surgeon move the jawbone back a bit so the shift would at least stop giving her headaches. But that will only be feasible on a temporary basis; the teeth could conceivably continue to shift leftward and in turn inevitably grind on the moved bone, not to mention that poor Polly can't walk around with all her uppers leaning even more. It's already a considerable aesthetic problem for her as it is."

"What else could you do?"

"Well, we could go ahead with the oral surgery on the jawbone, then put her in braces to line all the teeth back up. In the meantime, the space where she lost the incisor will gradually reappear, but in the back of her mouth. As soon as the teeth are all straightened up again, I'll extract the misplaced canine and insert a bridge with a new incisor and canine on it. The canine will eventually fall out anyway; there's no nerve there. That should take care of the whole problem."

"Sounds like a lot of work, a long time, and lots of money," I put in.

"Oh, it will be, it will be, that's certain. But she says she's ready for it, that George told her his insurance would pay for 80% of it if we say it's a medically-necessary procedure. We can do that for everything but the bridge, but that will only come to \$850 anyway. Polly says George can handle that with no trouble. But the poor woman can't be expected to walk around with a canine in her incisor's spot and no incisor at all. For God's sake, there's a bicuspid in that third spot now. It's an outrage!"

I just think her smile looks a little out of kilter, but to a dentist of any integrity whatsoever, such situations are completely unacceptable and should be remedied--just as long as the patient can afford it. For a patient whose income won't allow fixing a smile which is just a little out of kilter, Archie always says something like, "But who would want to tamper with that charming smile? My goodness, Mrs. Doe, it's what gives your whole face such character!" And whoever the patient, she either leaves the office full of hope for the future restructuring of her smile or full of happiness that she is such an

individual, an individual whose face bespeaks such character that even her dentist won't hear of altering it. Either way, Archie gets lots of repeat customers. As I've said, he has a way with his patients.

I don't see Polly Knight-Phibbs again until Archie tells me her molds are back from Kansas City and that I should call her and set up a consult ASAP. I do so. Polly is unable to come in during the next three days, she says, as she is committed to finishing her newest rondel, which she tells me is entitled "Lubricating Without Waiting." I very deliberately do not ask her what it is about, though she clearly wishes I would. We set up an appointment for the next Thursday at 3:00.

My husband brings that woman's dental molds to bed for the first time the same night he gets them back from Kansas City. "What are you doing, Archie?" I ask, never having seen him bring molds to bed before. He has been known to scrutinize them over Frosted Flakes or while pretending to watch Nova, but never has dental work invaded the sanctity of our bedroom.

"Fascinating molds, aren't they, Mira?" he asks, pointing out just how obvious the leaning is when the teeth are taken out of the context of Polly's attractive though flashy face.

"It's a good thing she's a nice-looking woman, or those teeth would really stand out," I say. They are strange looking molds.

"The crowding is so severe here," he says, tapping the back teeth on Polly's left side, "that she must indeed be experiencing terrible pain."

"You see pain every day, Archie. It's your business to both alle-

viate and inflict pain. Don't worry so much about it."

"But this is unnecessary pain, Mira, and for that reason it's got to be fixed. Not to mention this is dentist-inflicted pain, a disgrace to the profession, and therefore must be repaired by a better dentist, namely me, so Polly can be made to understand that dentists are agents of good, not bad."

"She probably never considered this leaning a big problem. She probably never really noticed they were leaning."

"My God, Mira, the poor woman has a canine where her incisor should be and a premolar where her canine should be! Think of her suffering, and her a poet too. She's so sensitive, especially to beauty; all artists are. But she's still young, and I'm just glad George had the good sense to bring her to me before this became an even more serious problem for her self-esteem."

I flip off Johnny Carson in the middle of a President Reagan impersonation and roll away from Archie.

"She's written poems about her teeth, Mira. Think of that. I've got to help her."

I doubt that "Lubricating Without Waiting" is a dentally-inspired piece. While pretending to sleep, I hear Archie tap various spots on the molds, and I finally fall asleep to the grainy sounds of fingers on plaster and of plaster teeth being forced to bite down.

She throws open the door with a flourish at 3:28 that Thursday afternoon. Archie is in the lobby looking at the newest issue of People.

"I think I'm a little early!" Polly exhales as she wriggles out of her London Fog, adjusts her bola, and pulls at her hair. I look back

at her, left eyebrow raised. "I'm not early?" she asks. I lower my eyebrow and smile slightly. "Oh my, I thought my appointment was for 3:30!"

"Three o'clock, I believe," I reply, "but I'll check my appointment book again to make sure." I glance at it. "Yes, Mrs. Knight-Phibbs, 3:00 it was."

"Now Mira," Archie says, placing the magazine back carefully so that it conforms to the fan-shaped configuration of the group, "we all make mistakes, don't we? We'll just have to explain Polly's mistake to the rest of our customers this afternoon, and I'm sure they'll understand."

No, I think, I'll have to explain it to them; you'll be back there chit-chatting about Polly's dental options and magnificent physical presence.

"Oh, thank you, Archibald," she says, "I'm just such a scatterbrain."

Archibald? He doesn't correct her. I roll my eyes dramatically, but neither looks my way.

Heidi pokes her head around the corner of my office while Archie and Polly are still in consultation. "Mrs. Knight-Phibbs says she's written a poem about him!"

"About who?" I ask, determined to at least appear disinterested.

"About Dr. Highfeldt, of course!" she hisses, "about your husband," she emphasizes. "It's called 'Ode on a Dentist: Apostle of Symmetry.'"

I roll my eyes again. This Archie doesn't need. Or me. But I take some satisfaction from the knowledge that "Ode on a Dentist:



Apostle of Symmetry" is not likely to be widely anthologized.

"This dental problem has scarred her deeply, Mira," my husband says to me over lamb chops and rice florentine. "She's a very lonely woman."

"But a poem about you, Archie? Really. Or should I call you Archibald?"

"Don't be catty, Mira. Have a little compassion. Your teeth are flawless; you didn't even need braces as a child, honey."

"Excuse me for saying so, dear, but you're hardly the stuff genuine poetic inspiration's made of." Archie's one of those men approaching fifty who try to camouflage their bald spots by parting their hair slightly above their ears and folding the rest over the tops of their heads. He's also got a spare tire and jowls.

"Some see the inside, Mira. True inspiration is a thing of the soul, Mira." I can see I've hurt his feelings.

"I love the way you look, Archie, and I love you. But I find it difficult to believe anyone could be inspired by her dentist, especially if that someone happens to be a flashy blond with four foot long legs."

"You really must get over this leg fixation, Mira. If you think it's all so ridiculous, then why do you think she's become so attached to me?"

"All your patients are attached to you, Archie, and that's my point. This is just an attachment, one that will fade as soon as the bridge goes in."

"Polly tells me our auras are more similar than any she's ever seen."

"You have your fun, Archie," I say. "I just hope you don't get your feelings hurt." Really, auras?

Polly's surgery comes and goes, and after her sutures heal, Archie puts on her braces. Office procedure continues as usual, with us placating all patients with appointments after Polly's since she continues to be habitually late. Bracework is delicate and time-consuming, so Polly isn't able to say much to Archie during that process, although I hear him talking to her incessantly: "Do you need to swallow, Polly?", "Raise your left hand if you experience the slightest discomfort," "You'll look so youthful with your braces on, Polly, that all the freshmen males at TU will be chasing you, if they're not already," "My goodness, dear, but your legs are things of beauty. I shouldn't charge you; seeing your legs is payment enough!"

Archie tightens Polly's braces every six weeks after he puts them on. After the fourth or fifth tightening, Heidi pokes her head around my corner and says, "Mira, does Dr. Highfeldt not like Mrs. Knight-Phibbs anymore? He seemed really fond of her for a while, but now he hardly talks to her during tightenings."

"As far as I know, he thinks she's charming, Heidi. Maybe he's just concentrating. Maybe he's preoccupied."

"Well, he's your husband, Mira, and I thought you'd know." Heidi loves to insinuate I'm not a good wife to Archie. She's idolized him for two years, ever since she came to our practice straight out of dental school. He's her first dentist, and such crushes often occur and are quite understandable.

Meanwhile, Archie continues to bring the molds to bed regularly.

He has memorized every single tooth's feature and angle of irregularity, and now he seems to study them merely out of habit. Running his fingers lightly over the plaster surfaces has become a form of relaxation, a thing he does absently, while appearing to abstractly consider things utterly removed from dentistry. He often doesn't even look at the molds as he fondles them, but gazes off into the distance, his eyes far away.

"You may never see as unusual a set of molds again, Archie," I say one night.

"What's that? Oh, no, I suppose not," he replies. "No, Polly's molds will look like any others after the braces come off." He sighs dramatically.

"And when will that be?"

"Just a year, Mira. Not long now." Another heavy sigh.

I know for the first time they're sleeping together when I find the poem folded neatly in Archie's smock pocket. He must mean for me to find it, probably hopes I'll save him from Polly Knight-Phibbs, she of the leaning teeth. They don't lean so much now; you can tell the difference.

The poem is entitled "Mission Impossible: Otherwise Known as Futile Fornication." It's typewritten, with a handwritten inscription: For Archibald Highfeldt, DDS. Allow me to cite it, in its entirety:

Other people's dentist husbands are the best  
 obsessions  
 possible. They get inside you, for a very  
 very short time, then  
 absolutely retreat,  
 taking a little of you with them,  
 just enough you know it's gone,  
 but never leaving anything--

except being inside you--  
in their wake.

Other people's dentist husbands make the best  
lovers imaginable. They make you scream  
out loud for a very  
very short time, then leave you  
screaming inside from the memory  
of really screaming.  
Who the hell else makes you scream?  
Makes you come in a federal disaster area flood  
of forbidden guilt  
that feels like being reborn  
into the death that comes when they go?  
Not your own husband, that's for sure.

Her dentist husband's interest in me makes me want  
to die. Hope that fucker slips away again.  
Soon.

I must admit to being a bit taken aback at these bad erotic images  
of Archie as some sort of forbidden love god, holder of the key to the  
feminine sexual responses of a flashy bottle blond. I have been his wife  
for 27 years, and he's always suited me just fine, more than just fine,  
but I can't imagine his having such a torturing effect on a ditzy woman  
in her mid-twenties.

But I refuse to panic, refuse even to respond to the poem in  
Archie's presence. My husband is having an affair of the torrid sort  
with an attractive though flashy woman young enough to be his daughter.  
A very long-legged woman young enough to be his daughter. I know my  
husband, Archibald Highfeldt, DDS, and I know the course this foolishness  
will take. I'm buying an exercise bike. I may even stop flossing.

Archie studies me carefully for hours after the laundry has come  
out of the dryer, is sorted and folded. I replace "Mission Impossible,"  
folded as precisely as before, in his now-clean smock pocket. He must  
assume I've seen it, but doesn't say a word. He waits for me to say

something, do something. But I utter not a word of protest, throw not one fit, declare not a syllable of righteous indignation or humiliation, pack not one suitcase. There's no need; I know what I know.

Archie must have told Polly I've seen the poem, because she verges on hysteria every time she comes to get her braces tightened after the poem in the smock pocket incident. She carefully avoids catching my eye, and is at least a couple of minutes early for each appointment. That fact alone is suspicious, poem or no. Despite Polly's efforts to thwart me, I press the issue by bombarding her with questions about George, her work, her studies, and free verse. She answers me as tersely as possible and pulls at her hair a great deal. Archie stays completely out of the waiting area and says only the most banal things to Polly while tightening the braces: "Oh, these little beauties are really shaping up, Polly," and "Won't be long now, Polly," and "Raise your left hand if you feel even an inkling of discomfort, Polly."

At home I pedal my Schwinn Air-Dyne thirty minutes a night while Archie's gone and assiduously avoid Johnson and Johnson cinnamon floss. While pedaling furiously I visualize long, sleek calves wrapped around my husband's neck; occasionally a pedicured toe with a rose-colored nail accidentally disrupts his folded-over hair, and his bald spot is thus prominently displayed. But neither party in my vision seems to care.

George has come in for two cleanings during Polly's tenure as a braces wearer. He must be completely ignorant about their affair, because he continues to say, "How are you, Mrs. Highfeldt?" and "Have a

nice evening." He says them very sincerely. I hear him telling Archie, "You've made quite an impression on Polly, Dr. Highfeldt. She thinks you're the greatest thing ever. I'm really grateful to you for helping her. She's got so much more self-esteem now."

"Er, well, uh, yes, certainly, George. My pléasure." Archie clears his throat and sounds just miserable.

I ride on, as do Archie and Polly in my visions.

The day rapidly approaches when Polly Knight-Phibbs' braces are to come off and the bridge is to go in. Archie behaves strangely when home, but thankfully isn't home much. When he is, he carries Polly's molds with him wherever he goes, even into the bathroom one morning, instead of his usual National Geographic. I know they're spending illicit time together mulling over the significance of the big day and making love violently, Polly's unbelievable legs wrapped around Archie's neck. She has probably written reams of poems in his honor by now, but thankfully I haven't seen any more of them. I think up likely titles for them while pumping away on my Air-Dyne, titles like "99 Ways to Make Love Without Once Resorting to the Missionary Position," "Mission Possible: Purposeful Fornication," and "On Contemplating Archibald's Drill."

The big day arrives. Polly emerges from the inner office victorious, smiling broadly for all of us to see concrete examples of the wonders for which dental science is responsible. "You're the artist, Archibald, the true artist," she breathes, too ecstatic to be careful, "in every sense of the word." Archie looks sheepish. Heidi rushes

Polly's new molds back to Archie's private office to harden.

Archie drops me off at the house at 5:30, then leaves me, presumably due to a pressing engagement of the carnal kind with Polly as the guest of honor. The time has come for action.

I go to the garage and remove Archie's small hammer from his tool box. I've already bought a box of peanut brittle as a ruse. I enter the master bathroom, hammer in hand, and rest my left elbow on the counter for support. I open my mouth wide, then whack the hammer into my right incisor and canine. It hurts a great deal, but I can see no tooth damage. I whack myself in the same two teeth again, and a terrific pain travels up the nerves and settles just below my eye. Still, no tooth damage, although by now I've probably so damaged the nerves that I'll soon need root canal work. On strike number three I connect; a portion of my right canine flies off into the sink. Now I must wait.

Archie comes in the front door at 10:30, just as Johnny starts his monologue. He bursts into our bedroom clutching two small boxes--Polly's before and after dental molds--in his hand. "Good evening, Mira," he says.

"I broke a tooth on some peanut brittle," I say.

He runs over to the bed hastily, laying Polly's molds on the dresser. "What?" he says, "Let me see."

I open wide. Archie pokes at it and asks me if I'm in pain. I say I am. "Well, darling," he says, "we'll have to file that down and get you in a temporary first thing in the morning. We'll go in early."

He mixes me a hot salt water concoction to gargle with and joins

me in bed. "My poor little darling," he murmurs as we make love for the first time in weeks.

Afterwards he says, "Oh, darling, I've been such a fool!" his head in my lap.

"Yes, Archie, you have."

"Can you possibly forgive me, Mira?"

"I can." I feel air traveling through the broken edge of my tooth as I speak.

The next night--after I've had my broken tooth filed, molded, and temporarily crowned--Archie has that woman's dental molds in bed again, both sets, before and after. My new molds rest on the dresser. Archie gently runs his fingers over the plaster surfaces of Polly's molds. He goes to the closet and puts on heavy work boots, then dramatically walks into the master bath, turns on the light, places both sets of molds on the linoleum, and crunches them to bits as though he's crushing grapes for wine. He looks into my eyes as he does this, and I look into his. Soon all that remains upon the floor is a pile of pebbly rubble.

He comes back into the bedroom. "I have a surprise for you, darling," he says, kneeling by our bed. He goes over to the dresser and opens up the box which holds my dental molds. Reaching into it, Archie pulls out a squiggly something and carries it over to our bed. Spread out in the palm of his hand, the synthetic rubber premolding solution spells out a crimson Mira in Archie's flowing cursive script.



"Oh," I say, as Archie puts his hand on my flannel-covered thigh.

"My goodness, darling, but you're firming up," my husband says to me.

I always knew it would end like this.

## WIGGLY WOG

Joe Mendelsohn was having a bad morning. No hot water at 8:30, a bad paper cut from USA Today at 8:55, and Louis Farrakhan the only guest on Donahue. To top it all off, either Bysshe or Byron (his wife's two Himalaya cats) crapped in his airplane plant, which had previously been flourishing.

Since his department head, in collusion with his wife, urged him to take a year's sabbatical, he'd had many bad mornings, this only one among them. A social psychologist prone to extreme nervous stress, Joe felt out of his element just hanging around the house. But thank God there was always something to cook. He felt a singular kind of joy when he whipped up something scrumptious for his wife and daughters, and today the featured culinary delight was--wiggly wog.

At 10:32 that morning, right after Wheel of Fortune, Joe went to Snyder's IGA to pick up the supplies: lime Jello, dairy whipping cream, flaked coconut, cream cheese, pecans, and canned crushed pineapple. By 11:19 he was elbow-deep in the dessert-in-progress and his Pyrex jello bowl: whipping the cream with his Waring blender, shelling pecans, and draining the pineapple in expectation that dinner would be at about 6:30. After he mixed all the ingredients together and topped the heavenly jello with generous spoonfuls of whipping cream, he picked up the phone to call his wife at the OU English Department, where she was an associate professor specializing in 19th century British Romantic poetry.

His wife Barbara answered the office phone coolly, professionally,

as was her custom. Joe explained his inspired choice of wiggly wog for dessert, and urged her to call Eva, their eldest daughter, so she too could ready herself for an evening in paradise. Joe himself volunteered to tell Bethann, their baby, the good news when she came home for lunch.

"Yummyummyummy," Barb enunciated upon hearing the news of the wiggly wog. The Mendelsohns were serious about their food, and wiggly wog was a rare treat, as Joe rarely had time to fix it before his sabbatical. He was the only member of the Mendelsohn clan who even made a pretense of cooking anyway, and although he really loved to putter around in the kitchen, he was usually too preoccupied and nervous to do so. He had time now, and he thought he'd concentrated pretty well so far, at least with the wiggly wog. And if Joe was lackadaisical about cooking, his wife and his girls were positively disinterested regarding culinary matters. They were more than happy to eat McDLTs or Arby Qs every night, or to subsist on Little Debbies and Bama Pecan Pies alone, whichever was handy. The female Mendelsohns would eat anything, so long as they didn't have to wait for it.

Barbara assured Joe she would call Eva, and after hanging up the phone grudgingly admitted to being glad in a way that Joe's neurotic behavior had forced him to spend more time at home; the family certainly ate better when he wasn't well.

And it wasn't that he was unwell, she told herself; he was just overstrained. The latest trends in violent crime, sexually transmitted disease, and the plight of the homeless, for example, had affected him deeply, coupled with what he perceived to be the furtherance of the country's "malignant carcinoma," as he called it--the increasingly

amoral, disinterested, yuppies-to-be qualities his students (and all young people, he supposed) possessed. He just needed a little rest, Barb thought, and if that just so happened to include mouth-watering caloric delights for her and her daughters, well, all the better.

Barbara made no pretense of still being in love with her occasionally dotty husband. She wasn't sure she ever had been in love with him, in fact. He was simply a nice high-strung man who had always respected her rights as an individual. She told him many years earlier that an open marriage unfettered by bourgeois ideas about jealousy and commitment would benefit both of them. It just so happened that a little before that conversation she had been granted a very bright, handsome research assistant, one who shared her passion for Romantic poetry, or at least said he did. Subsequent hand-picked research assistants followed in the original's wake.

Barbara Mendelsohn, who had a passion for John Irving too, considered herself rather a Helen Garp sort of associate professor, although she never intended to get caught performing fellatio upon one of her students or killing one of her children accidentally in the process, as Helen had. No, not everything about Barb was Helenish, but she too prided herself upon discretion in the conduct of her affairs, which were infrequent, generally nontroublesome, and only with research assistants, never present students.

Of course Joe knew about the affairs. Of course he knew. She and Joe didn't discuss her dalliances openly, but she never lied about her whereabouts on the occasional night she spent in Motel 6s or seedy student hovels, and Joe never asked. He loved her, she knew, and the wife who was partially his in spirit was wholly his on paper. The in-

stitution and the comfort it offered was what was important to Joe anyway; at least that's what his tolerance of her implied.

Barbara justified her affairs by blaming them on a sense of need. Over the years Joe had become less and less interested in sex as he became more and more neurotic, and Barbara had never been terribly sexually attracted to Joe in the first place: his penis was too small, his sexual enthusiasm mild, his appreciation for sexual variety nil.

By now Joe was content to never have sex at all. Barbara, believing strongly in her powers of carnal attraction, considered this disinterest overwhelming evidence that Joe was getting worse. What had begun as a quirky dislike for socializing with fellow faculty even on required occasions had slowly but surely accelerated into a mild persecution complex and a near case of agoraphobia--Joe never wanted to leave the comforts of home unless it was absolutely necessary. Grocery shopping, taking in or picking up dry cleaning--these things didn't bother him because they were family chores, but going to the movies, to barbecues, to hear guest speakers, to watch football games, at times even going to the university to teach--these did bother him. In the latter situations, he felt surrounded, stifled, he told her, and often experienced shortness of breath, arrhythmia, and on one memorable occasion, a slight foaming at the mouth which alarmed him for days and even caused Barbara some concern.

Behavioral scientists are notorious for refusing to take their own behavioral problems to another behavioral scientist for treatment. Barb thought it ridiculous that Joe wouldn't elicit some help from his colleagues or the therapists they recommended. Joe just said no, he'd take care of it himself, thank you. Sociologist, heal thyself, was his

motto, and for him taking care of and healing himself meant hurtling himself headlong into a frenzy of domestic caretaking.

Never had the Mendelsohn home been so clean, so spotless in fact. Each Monday and Thursday at precisely 10:00 a.m., after Donahue, Joe vacuumed the entire house, stopping every twenty minutes to turn on Lite 107 FM and play exactly three rounds of solitaire, after which time he continued vacuuming, repeating the process until the house was "hoovered," as he called it. He dusted every shelf, table, and inch of paneling on Wednesdays and Sundays while playing albums by Huey Lewis, Al Jarreau, or Lionel Richie. On Saturdays he cleaned both bathrooms, filling the 1775 square foot house with the lingering aromas of Lemon Scent Comet and Pine Sol. The girls were expected to keep their own rooms in order, which they did haphazardly and disinterestedly. The kitchen Joe cleaned as necessary, being sure to scrub out the sinks at least every other day.

Barbara watched Joe flit through this routine of happy homemaking skeptically and tolerantly, admitting to herself that it seemed to be doing him some good, the routine sustaining him and making him stronger. He really did seem to be doing better since his sabbatical had begun a month or so ago, after what she termed the Last Chance Incident.

Barb had quite a bit of sympathy for her spacey husband and others not so strong as herself, but she had her limits. During the first day of the summer session at the university, Joe had been going over roll sheets to see if he recognized any names. He sat in the cushiony, wheeled chair in his office before his first class started, shuffling absently through the two roll sheets which assigned the 67 students to his two sections: an introductory, sophomore level class in social

psych. and a senior level class simply called Contemporary Issues.

"Do they look like good groups?" she'd asked from the less comfortable, not so cushiony guest chair, noting his nervousness--the way he dragged his fingers through his bland blond hair at the temples, his rising ruddiness foregrounding the surrounding ashy pale. She wondered about the gender breakdown in each class; Joe became terribly agitated if any class was overwhelmingly male or disproportionately female.

"Looks like I have Betty DeBartolo in 2543 again," he replied, "a young lady I gave an F to last fall."

"So?" Barb asked impatiently. Doling out Fs concerned her not at all.

"Well, things could get sticky."

"How do you mean?"

"You know, she may harbor some resentment toward me and try to sabotage the class or something," he said, giving her a look fraught with frustration at her ignorance of socio-educational tenets.

"I sincerely doubt it, Joe," his wife replied. "What sort of student was she before?"

"Pretty quiet, I guess." His brows lowered from their usual raised position. "Too quiet, as a matter of fact."

"Oh boy," Barb said, rolling her eyes.

"Like maybe she was plotting something, that kind of quiet."

"Boy oh boy oh boy." Barb wondered if this was going to be a little scene or a big one. "I really doubt, Joe, that she was plotting anything, don't you?"

"Maybe she's the one who used to call all the time and hang up!" Joe said, certain he was on to something.

"Joe, everybody gets those kind of calls every once in a while. Besides, our number's unlisted." Joe didn't look reassured. "I'm sure Ms. DeWhatzit will be pretty humble and try to work her way into your good graces so you won't flunk her again."

"I don't know. I just don't think I could face her, honey. I think maybe I'll try to switch a section with Jack."

Barb's patience was quickly thinning. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. Wacky she could put up with, but utter spinelessness was intolerable. "Who's the authority figure here? You or her?" Joe didn't answer; he instead wrung his hands and looked imploringly at her. "Well?" He still didn't answer. "Look at it this way then. She'll find out you're the professor and drop the class out of fear you'll flunk her again." Barb knew she was reaching with this scenario.

"Just to be on the safe side, would you come sit in today, honey?"

"Hell no, Joe!" Barb said, her patience leaving her in one great mass upon hearing this request. "Are you serious? You can't be serious. You better by God not be serious!"

"Please, honey. For moral support. I can't do it without you!" By this time Joe had that look on his face, the one that said he was inches from doing something drastic and desperate. Barbara had seen it often enough to know. He scurried over to her and grabbed her shoulders, hard. "You've got to, you've just got to, I can't do it myself. You promised you'd help me out, Barb, and I want you to be there. I can't do it by myself!" He panted slightly now, his fingers leaving smudgy-looking marks which stayed for three days in her ample flesh, his brown bespectacled eyes flecked with urgent green. That green was always a bad sign.



"You're hurting me, Joe," she said as calmly as she could. After she pried his fingers off and left him sobbing, unable to take his class, she gathered up her briefcase and black patent leather purse to leave his office in search of Dr. Cox, the Sociology Department head. Joe crashed through the door after her and entered the hallway, which was full of expectant first-day students waiting for their classes to start.

"No, Barb, no, don't leave me!" he whined very loudly. "You've got to sit in for me; you said you'd help!" He made a sliding lunge for her ankles, but missed. Barb, breaking into a trot, glanced back and saw Joe hurrying to his feet, trying to regain his balance on the freshly-waxed linoleum. She ran around the corner to the main office, not missing the scattered students' comments regarding the oddity of this situation. Quite clearly one male voice enunciated, "Hey, that's Doc Mendelsohn! Well I'll be fucked ass backward!"

"You wish, Marvin," said another male voice.

"Scarey," a female voice intoned slowly.

Joe staggered after Barb into the main office, still panting. At that point she led him into Dr. Cox's office, where he promptly collapsed on the floor. Barb suggested to Dr. Cox that Joe clearly couldn't take his classes that day, and perhaps, she said, a year-long sabbatical with pay would give him time to get some help. He agreed, appreciating Joe's teaching abilities under normal circumstances and wishing profoundly to avoid another public display of abnormality in the building which housed his department. He hoped never again to witness this particular brand of collective behavior--students jammed into the outer office door, looks of predatory blood lust for human humiliation imprinted on their faces, Joe's twitching feet clearly visible from their

vantage point. The fact that Joe had fallen apart right in front of him in his own office--collapsed on the carpeted floor, his entire body seeming to tick--helped hasten his acquiescence to Barb's proposal as well.

Nothing more than minor panic attacks had happened since, although Joe steadfastly refused to see anyone for help. He said just being with his girls was better therapy than any he could pay for. By "his girls" he of course referred to his wife, but also to his two grown daughters, Eva and Bethann.

The elder of the two, Eva, was just home from graduate school at OSU for the summer. She currently wiled away the summer days riveting Levis patches on the backs of jeans in a local garment factory. Always following in her mother's footsteps, Eva was about to begin her second year in a master's program in English, and as usual was doing a mediocre job of it. Mediocrity didn't bother Eva as long as her mother, whom she adored, was pleased, and Barbara was quite pleased Eva was working on an advanced degree in her own field.

Bethann, at twenty (two years younger than her sister) was just beginning the third trimester of her first pregnancy. The child she carried was of indeterminate fatherhood, but Bethann was a free-spirited girl, so this fact didn't bother her at all.

Both girls took after their mother: tall, big-boned, dark haired, dark eyed, intimidating-looking girls with healthy written all over them. None of the three ever participated willingly in any exercise, and were thus somewhat chunky and graceless, but self-assuredly so. I disdain physical exertion, their bodies said, I have better, more sublime ways of spending my time.

Unfortunately, Eva also had a cow-eyed look about her, evidence of her mindless and total devotion to mimicking her mother in all things. Bethann, however, was made of tougher, more genuine stuff. Her husbandless, loverless seven month-long pregnancy was a source of pride, not shame, to the Mendelsohns, Barbara in particular. She delighted in the fact that the Mendelsohn clan would soon have another, hopefully female soul to bring up without direct interference from any meddling, conventionally socialized male. Joe was certainly not going to be a problem.

The coming baby had drawn the family together, but the Mendelsohns were united in another area as well--their abiding, consuming fondness for food, the higher in fat and/or sugar content the better. Thus the excitement resultant from Joe's idea to make wiggly wog that Friday night. An unspoken food law ruled every sit-down meal the Mendelsohns consumed together: all four parties involved were allowed equal portions of every ultra-desirable dish. Wiggly wog was one such dish.

Joe knew this, and knew it well. When Bethann arrived home from Hertz, where she worked as a rental rep., at 12:30, the wiggly wog had been jelling in the refrigerator for only twenty minutes, but she peeked at it anyway en route to a typical lunch of a peanut butter, strawberry jelly, and butter sandwich and a few handfuls of Fritos.

"Hey, is that wiggly wog I see in there?" she asked, raising her meaty index finger, about to swipe it through the creamy topping.

"Yes, honey, but keep your fingers off it. Be fair," her father said.

"Okay, okay," she replied, content for the moment to munch on her sandwich as a poor substitute. She watched Days of Our Lives during her lunch and watched her father pretend to watch it too. "Things okay?"

she asked, peering at him suspiciously over her sandwich.

"Sure, everything's okay, honey. I mean, with wiggly wog for dessert, how could anything be wrong, right?"

"I guess," she answered, still thinking he looked a little shaky.

"So how are you feeling today?"

"I've had a couple of real healthy kicks today, and I've been real hungry, but other than that it's been pretty much regular." Joe didn't seem to be listening to her, but she decided not to worry about it since she was preoccupied with the four hours she had left on her tedious shift. "Gotta go, Dad," she said after swallowing the last of the Fritos, patting her father's knee absently as she went to the front door. "Man," she said, "I can't wait to get home and get after that wiggly wog! It'll give me some inspiration for the rest of the day."

"Yeah," her father said.

Joe watched the soap opera for a while, bored and nervy. Something in the back of his mind which wouldn't surface was nagging at him, but he was unable to identify what it was. And he didn't have anything to read, he didn't have anyone to talk to, he didn't have anything to do. He didn't even have any lessons to plan or papers to grade like he used to. It was too hot and humid to take a walk, and he was too wide awake to take a nap.

"Honey?" he asked trepidantly after he realized he'd dialed his wife's office number.

"What is it, Joe? I'm right in the middle of a conference here. Hurry it up."

"Um, well...." He couldn't come up with a thing to say now that he

was talking to her.

"Joe, what the hell do you want? I already told you, I'm busy."

Joe thought for a second, knowing he had to come up with something to say fast, or Barb would really get irked. "Well, did you call Eva yet?" he asked desperately.

"Yes, Joe, I called Eva an hour ago. Is that all?"

"Is she pretty excited about dessert?" He needed to keep her on the phone a few minutes longer, needed someone to talk to.

"About as excited as can be expected, I suppose. I've really got to go, Joe." The student she was conferencing with, who was actually her research assistant lover, was excited too, and had grown impatient. He was now sucking on her pinky finger.

"I'm just kind of bored and lonely, Barb, that's all," Joe said.

"Well, that's just fine, but I've really got to go now, Joe. This is my office hour, you know." It wasn't really her office hour, but that wasn't any of Joe's business. "Why don't you go shopping or something?"

"Can't. I already went to the store to buy the stuff for the wog. When will you be home?" He had a distinct suspicion she wasn't just conferencing in there.

"Not until after six. I've got to do some research in the library for my Blake article about Swedenborg's influence on The Four Zoas. It'll take a while." Her lover by now had begun inserting his own fingers in her mouth during pauses in her end of the conversation.

"Oh, gosh, I was hoping it would be sooner, but I guess Eva will be home a little after five, huh?"

"She said she'd be home right after work if you were going to go

to all the trouble to make wiggly wog, so I suppose so. Oh, and don't cook anything; I'll pick up chicken on the way home. I've got to go now, Joe," she said.

"Okay," Joe replied, but Barbara had already hung up.

Joe began to feel more despondent as he realized Barbara only picked up dinner without being asked if she felt guilty, and she only felt guilty after infidelity. In his opinion, a 10-piece bucket of Extra Crispy wasn't much of a substitute for wifely fidelity.

He stretched out on the tan and navy blue naugahyde sofa, eyes cast ceilingward, pondering his existence. Here he was, 45 years old, with a wonderful family and a grandchild on the way, feeling worthless. Even, yes, it was true, feeling trapped. But by what? Joe didn't know.

He glanced at the clock. Only 2:15. How to spend the rest of the day? Bysse sauntered by, and Joe picked him up and pulled two matted globs of mucous off his cat eyes. Bysse fidgeted, empty-eyed, and struggled out of Joe's grasp. Cats have no souls, Joe decided, believing he'd made an epiphanic deduction. He'd talk to Barb about getting a dog to fill up the empty place in his heart left by the soulless Bysse and Byron. A nice soft fluffy one, he thought.

Increasingly bereft, Joe picked up the Glamour magazine he'd been eyeing suspiciously all day. How Men Really Feel about Condoms: A Glamour Exclusive! the headline announced. Joe decided to read the article, since he had no first-hand experience with condoms and might learn something. He sometimes wished Bethann had been experienced with condoms, but he felt guilty for doing so and didn't dare say anything about it to Barb.

Joe read, Men generally do not optimally appreciate sex when wear-

ing condoms, so it is our duty as 80's ladies and equal sex partners to make condom-wearing more enjoyable for both parties concerned. This requires bravery and aplomb on our parts, girls. Just throw out that good little girl socialization you've been taught to believe all your life. Nice girls do talk about sex, so be honest and suggest innovative, pleasurable condom ideas to your partner. Tell your man to roll up two condoms instead of one. Rumor has it this increases friction (and we all know friction increases sensation) for both parties concerned. Don't hesitate to tell that special someone you prefer specialty condoms, either. Your friendly neighborhood pharmacist should have plenty of ribbed, textured, and sheepskin condoms available for sale, and if he doesn't, we at Glamour suggest you find yourself a new pharmacist who better recognizes the signs of the times.

Joe realized he was in no way a member of Glamour's target audience and abandoned the article disturbed. He seriously wondered what the world was coming to. Alarming enough was the urgent need for condoms to ward off sexually transmitted diseases, diseases which hadn't even been heard of in his day, some of them. Then to make sure rampant extramarital sex continued unchecked, manufacturers provided laboratory-produced condoms designed to maximize pleasure to the extent that the participants forgot they were even using condoms. Ribbed condoms indeed, Joe thought. Malignant carcinoma I guess. Pshaw! He sighed deeply.

Only 2:48, he noticed. With almost two hours remaining until Jeopardy! Joe didn't know what to do, at least not until he realized he'd missed lunch, he was so intense about mixing his wiggly wog to perfection. Ah, the wiggly wog! He couldn't, though. He just couldn't.

Absolutely not, it wouldn't be fair to his wife and children. He would simply go into the kitchen and eat a peanut butter sandwich or a Banana Twin or a Twix or something to tide him over.

The wiggly wog, not quite completely jelled, had gone down smoothly, Joe thought, but not so smoothly, he imagined, as it would have if he'd waited until dinner to start eating it. Too late now, he decided, glancing down at the gaping hole in the cut crystal jello bowl. You're really in for it now, buster, the hole seemed to say to him mockingly. Trouble or not, Joe admitted the wog's taste was the closest thing to heaven he'd put in his mouth in a long time. A pleasant, faintly lingering taste of lime jello clung to his tastebuds, and clearly imprinted in his memory was the sublimity offered by a mixture of fine whipping cream, pecans, shredded coconut, and cream cheese. And the crushed pineapple, well, certainly no concoction under the sun showed canned crushed pineapple to better advantage than wiggly wog did.

Joe could admit to himself the validity of eating the wiggly wog; what worried him was that he couldn't exactly remember doing it, or why. He'd apparently had some sort of a blackout between the time he got up to enter the kitchen and his alarming discovery of the wiggly wog's absent portion, considerable absent portion. He could remember the wog's taste, but not the experience of tasting it. He knew he had no intention upon entering the kitchen of eating his family's dessert, but eat it he had. Even Joe, the expert rationalizer, felt compelled to label this a bad sign.

Shaking slightly, Joe tore off a piece of Saran Wrap, then suddenly decided to brush his teeth to remove all clinging, painful remin-



ders of this lapse from his mouth. He felt the emergence of a sugar bump on the base of his tongue, and knew he was helpless in the face of that, that it would just be a painful reminder of his heinous act.

It was now 3:22, and Joe lay down full-length on the sofa, pointed the remote at the console television, pushed the number nine, and for the rest of the afternoon stared blankly at Oprah Winfrey, Judge, Jeopardy!, and Newsline 9 News at Five, none of it registering in the slightest. He was out in some other plane of existence, and he didn't even know it. At exactly 5:12, Eva tramped in. "Hi," she said, vaguely in the direction of her father's form on the couch. "How was your day? Mine wasn't too hot, but at least there's wiggly wog for dessert. Hi, Byron, my little poogy woogy kitty katty honey wonny." She squeezed the cat tightly. "Dad?" she asked.

There Joe lay, eyes fastened to the screen. Eva decided she was too tired to worry about him and retreated to her bedroom to nap before dinner.

At exactly 5:48, Bethann entered the house, stomach first. "Hey," she said, "when's Mom going to be home? When's dinner?" Receiving no reply, she wasn't sufficiently worried to intervene. She was also tired from a long day at the car rental office. Unknowingly following her sister's earlier example, Bethann retired to her bedroom, picking up her dog-eared copy of Creative Baby Naming on the way. All was silent in the house, except for the nicely-modulated, cosmetized Texas drawl of Dan Rather mumbling in the background.

At exactly 6:17, Barbara burst through the door with a flourish, a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken encircled within one big bare arm, grease spots beginning to seep through the outside of the molded card-

board. "Here's the chicken, Joe!" she yelled from the hallway. "I thought you'd already have the table set and everything. Where're the girls? Where's the wiggly wog?"

It took only a few seconds for Barbara to realize something was very wrong, but what Joe didn't understand was that he'd picked a bad time to have something wrong with him. Barb's young lover had for some inexplicable reason been unable to achieve an erection late that afternoon, despite Barb's stringent and sweaty efforts to the contrary. The young man, whose name was Kirby, said Barb's lust was just too overwhelming for him. She told the young man he was a wimp and an insult to the Romantic poets he professed to admire.

So now she was in no mood to deal with Joe, but she tried nonetheless. "Joe," she said, in a valiant attempt to make her harsh voice sound kind, "I'm home. What's the matter?" Joe stared blankly ahead, this time at Gary England, Newsline 9 meteorologist.

"Friday night in the Big Town," Gary said, "and it is hot--91 degrees in the shade...."

"Joe," Barb said more forcefully, shaking him, "time for dinner. Get up."

Still Joe didn't respond, and Barb felt herself consciously sublimating some very insistent anger.

By now the girls could smell the chicken and filed into the living room, Bethann first, Eva not far behind. "What's up with him?" Bethann asked.

"I don't know. He seems to be out of it." She glared at him. "I don't know why he had to pick dinnertime to fall apart."

"Daddy, let's eat," Eva chimed in. By now the three women's dark

brown, round eyes were on Joe as they formed a loosely-defined semi-circle around his reclining body on the sofa. They stood there for a few moments. Each knew what was on the other's mind--the call of hunger. Barbara could ignore the call no longer, and finally said, "Let's save this for later," pointing to Joe. "Let's eat while it's hot."

She set the chicken on the dining room table and went to the kitchen to get plates and silverware. There she spotted the wiggly wog, which Joe had unknowingly left sitting on the counter after his encounter with it earlier. By now, time had performed cruel tricks upon its texture and edibility. The whipping cream drooped listlessly, and some had even fallen into the empty space left when Joe attacked it. Its jello portion was no longer firm, but clung rather haphazardly to the sides of the bowl. The cream cheese smelled a bit acrid; the pecans had softened. Barb absorbed this quickly, and, carrying the bowl with her, entered the living room.

"What's the damn deal, Joe?" she accused, thrusting the bowl under his nose. Eva and Bethann came to their mother's side and peered into the bowl, noticing the less than scrumptious appearance of their favorite dessert food.

"God, what'd you do to it?" Bethann asked.

"Is that wiggly wog?" Eva asked. "It doesn't look like wiggly wog to me."

"Apparently your father just couldn't wait to sample it until we got home, girls. No wonder he doesn't have any appetite for dinner."

"Jesus, couldn't you have waited?" Bethann wanted to know. "We had to."

"We worked hard all day, Dad, and we would've liked to have our fair share too, y'know," Eva insisted.

"I don't even know if it's still any good," Barb mused.

Bethann took a really good look at it, and pronounced "Ugh!" with much emphasis. "Now the chicken's getting cold too," she added. "Great."

"Yes, I guess we should try to salvage that at least," Barb decided. As she and her daughters turned toward the dining room to sit down, she didn't notice Joe behind her until he took the bowl from her hand.

"Well, Joe...", she said, wheeling around.

Joe was methodically shoving palmfuls of the gelatinous mass into his mouth and slurping it down. Flecks of coconut lined his mouth amid small beds of watery whipping cream. He looked directly into his wife's eyes as he executed a liquid-sounding swallow. Each time he opened his mouth, his teeth appeared greenish. Plops of wiggly wog that didn't make it to his mouth landed on the brown carpet, the crushed pineapple prominent, pecans blending into the dark backdrop, lime green jello standing out in bright relief.

"Stop it, Joe!" Barb shrieked.

"What's wrong with him, Mother?" Eva wailed.

"This is a pretty bad deal," Bethann announced.

Barbara, bigger and stronger than her husband, struggled to wrest the bowl from Joe's grasp. Joe stomped on her toe, and making full use of his momentary advantage, flung the bowl of wiggly wog as hard as he could against the nearest wall. It hit the wall soundly, and what remained of the dessert slid slowly down, finally coming to rest on the carpet. The bowl did not shatter, but cracked twice upon impact, then thudded dully to the carpet.

"Jesus," Bethann said glumly, watching her favorite dessert's process down the wall on its journey to the carpet.

Meanwhile Joe fell to the floor in a frothing fit--his every joint twitching, flecks of spittle foaming at the corners of his mouth. All three women looked back at the ravaged wiggly wog, around to their gyrating husband and father, and back again at the wiggly wog.

"What a waste of a perfectly good dessert," Barb uttered painfully.

"I'll say," retorted Eva.

"Jesus!" Bethann added.

Barbara's conscience bothered her not at all after she and the girls committed Joe to Central State Mental Hospital in Norman the next morning. Joe looked pretty bad--eyes hooded, blue-black circles under them; face haggard and gray--and he did not speak to any of them when they said goodbye. His eyes were very green, and Barbara was surprised at the hatred emanating from them. She knew in time, though, that he would understand. The girls seemed a tad hesitant to commit their father at first, but Barbara could see they felt considerably better after she took them out for a Braum's Mix on the way home.

VITA 2

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