

STICKS AND STONES: A COLLECTION  
OF SHORT STORIES WITH A  
CRITICAL PREFACE

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Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
May 1999

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

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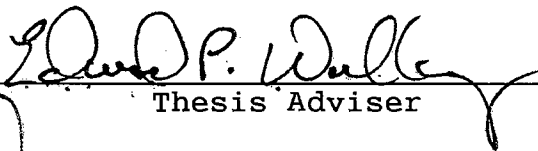
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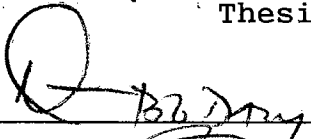
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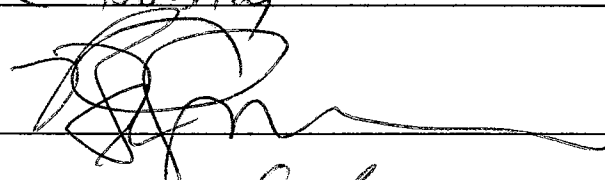
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, thank you to the members of my committee for their patience, which has been vital. I also wish to thank each for what I have learned from him in particular: Professor Robert Darcy: humor has its place--fortunately; Professor Mark Cox: how to create more vividly specific images and to be honest in my work; Professor Brian Evenson: fiction can be varied and still have value. I also wish to thank Dr. Evenson for his unflagging good humor; I am grateful he brought his amazing talent to Oklahoma State University. And Professor Edward Walkiewicz: everything else. I have learned from Dr. Walkiewicz just how deeply men can be committed to feminism and to humanism in general. He has been the best professor among a group of excellent, caring, knowledgeable teachers. May his graduate seminars forever be brilliant.

I extend my thanks to the English Department staff--Kim Marotta, Shirley Bechtel, Cecilia Austell, Gayle Thomas, and Dale McLaughlin--for working so hard to make our lives easier. I could not have made it without them.

Finally, I thank Joanna Campbell-Fife, Beverly Fife, and Peggy Wilson; the workshop groups I've been in for their helpful criticism; William Fife, for all his support; and Professor Gordon Weaver for starting me out well.

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BROKEN BONES AND HURTFUL NAMES:  
A CRITICAL PREFACE TO THE SHORT-STORY COLLECTION  
*STICKS AND STONES*

"We're all grotesque . . . "  
--Flannery O'Connor<sup>1</sup>

Introduction

No self-respecting carnival barker would waste his breath trying to convince gulls to come and be amazed at the oddities who are the characters of *Sticks and Stones*: they are not the right kind of freaks. Neither, however, are they examples of any physical or ethical norm, or at least of the norms Americans imagine exist, where fair skin, height, slimness, and visible morality are beacons in an otherwise decadent universe.

The denizens of the small town of Gafferton, Oklahoma, the setting of *Sticks and Stones*, fall far short of beacon status; in fact, they don't even know any beacons, although a few of them, perhaps, the few who would always speak as "we" when expressing approval or disapproval, imagine themselves at least as moral beacons. Hopefully this study will indicate why, in this thinking, such characters should be viewed by a reader as truly the most grotesque.

The other townsfolk, the ones who appear in their own

stories, though not the kind of rare beings who fill the stages of carnival sideshows or occupy pickling jars on dusty shelves, are those citizens of Gafferton who are so sufficiently marginal, so sufficiently outside some unachieved but omnipresent American ideal of humanity, they may claim for themselves the label "grotesque;" indeed, some of the characters are case studies of liminality, while others live as mainstream grotesques: "normals" in every physical sense, but whose emotional makeup places them at best on the edges of normalcy. Together, all represent an overview of what America at the end of the twentieth century considers truly grotesque.

Although the Gaffertonians represent no cultural or media standards, certainly, that fact might not suffice as an argument that they are, indeed, grotesques. Certainly they are not utterly marginalized beings like Arty and some of his siblings in Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*. While the Gaffertonians may push at the boundaries of general acceptability and appear as borderline freaks in terms of height or weight, they share their physical aspects with a great many other Americans. But the Gaffertonians are more like Dunn's less obvious grotesques: Olympia, the narrator, who, only a hunchbacked albino, cannot compare to the others physically, but who remains on the outskirts by her mere placement within this family; and Arty's parents, Lil and Aloysius Binewski: their avarice and what they are willing to do in the name of crass consumerism render them grotesque according to the "normal" perspectives regarding parenting.



Similarly, in small ways--and occasionally large--the characters in *Sticks and Stones* do not fit easily within the acceptable standard of American humanity. Upon initially meeting them, a reader may find them so sufficiently outside of any cultural ideal that the characters do appear grotesque. What I hope, though, is that they also appear familiar, and that a certain readerly unease grows out of that duality, an unease which might lead to laughter, but definitely to a re-consideration of what constitutes the grotesque in American culture.

#### Defining the Grotesque

The literary view of the grotesque has altered with time, until postmodern and contemporary concepts--which take the bible of the grotesque, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, beyond the level of the body and into a deeper consideration of process and amplitude in determining the grotesque--prove that "writers accept the grotesque as a matter of course" (Muller 5). Despite the fact that it has taken postmodernism to move the literature of the grotesque into the world of "personal vagaries of insanity and the contradictory impulses of identity in conflict with a world that is essentially chaotic and absurd" (5), the core of the grotesque remains unaltered: conflict between expectations and reality. In a world where the absurd becomes status quo and chaos merely an entropic form of order, "grotesque" must become standard application rather than representing the unique or bizarre, which is precisely what I hope the

extremely mundane lives of the Gaffertonians will reflect: the struggle for an identity within a community which seeks continually to marginalize and establish otherness if only to reinforce a desire for one-ness or sameness.

The origins of the term "grotesque" reflect this sense of polarity, of a combination of two (seemingly) dissimilar ideas. During the Renaissance, according to Wolfgang Kayser, the word *grottesco*, used "to designate a specific ornamental style suggested by antiquity" (21), no longer simply suggested "something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one--a world in which . . . the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid" (21). Inherent in Kayser's version of the grotesque is the duality which stems from the very act of marginalizing, of creating a *difference* by setting social standards.

In his discussion of Flannery O'Connor, Gilbert Muller summarizes one aspect of Kayser's view of the grotesque: it "instills the fear of life rather than the fear of death" (6), an argument stemming from Bakhtin's consideration of the grotesque worlds created by Rabelais. Bakhtin observes that the grotesque is physical, connected to the appetites and to the abdomen or lower body rather than to the intellect or more refined physical characteristics. Thus, to Bakhtin, the grotesque occurs in reproduction, consumption, and excretion, and all things connected to these acts.<sup>2</sup> Because these acts of living mingle disparate

states, they call to mind too readily the animalistic nature of humanity: we are what we eat, literally.

Mary Russo uses *Rabelais and His World* to examine the idea of the human body as grotesque. According to Russo, Bakhtin places

particular emphasis on the grotesque body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world. Significantly, Bakhtin finds his concept of the grotesque embodied in the Kerch terracotta figurines of senile, pregnant hags. (325)

These hags, at once emblematic of death and birth, of sexuality gone awry, find their way into Gafferton to some extent: LaRue, the aging prostitute; Violet Barnes, the rotund *isolée*, and Audrey Dunwoodie, the sheela-na-gig of a woman, whose gaping maw betokens pleasure and cannibalism.

But these are still only physical attributes contributing to the definition of the grotesque; spiritual and intellectual tendencies may also fall into that category. As such, even the women who do not literally reflect the idea of womb as tomb or bottomless gullet--the childless and unencumbered Corliss, the childless and soon-to-be unencumbered Molly--still fall into the margins by virtue of their womanhood: the body in flux, experiencing

change, is not the idealized static monument. Indeed, since childhood is the body changing into an adult and menopause-- THE change--is the indicator of the body past the ideal state, the only time a female body could possibly claim ideal status is during full adulthood--the childbearing years. But menses is a form of change occurring every month and falling entirely within the corporeal parts Bakhtin ascribes to grotesqueness. So the fact is unavoidable: females have no ideal state, but are by their very gender grotesque.

Other scholars expand the definition of the grotesque even further, adding more layers to it. Cristoph Martin Wieland "found the very essence of the grotesque to lie in its complete detachment from reality" (Kayser 30), returning to the fantastic quality of the cave drawings from which the Italian word *grottesco* first derived. But these drawings, part human and part animal (a trend which continued well into the artwork of the Renaissance), amplify Bakhtin's argument that the part of humans which is animal, which acts on instinct, is the part from which we derive our concept of the grotesque.

If this instinct, this part of us which still connects to our animal selves as opposed to our "civilized" selves, overtakes us, we tend to lose our ability to fit into the social order surrounding us; this is certainly the case with the characters of *Sticks and Stones*, who display behavior which is excessive and therefore unacceptable. The indication here is that we desire structure to help allay

deep-rooted suspicions we may have that we are less removed from the beast than we hope, as evidenced by our willingness, our ardent wish to seek revenge on wrongdoers; the vigilante approach to an ordered society is a very American characteristic, and one which the character Corliss Gluck embraces in "Blood is Messy Stuff."

This desire for order--and thereby a means of easily recognizing and isolating the grotesque--arguably stems from Claude Lévi-Strauss' observation "that all human category systems begin with the division between us and it, between culture ("our" social creation) and whatever lies outside of it" (Cassuto 8). Lévi-Strauss notes that "an internal mechanics of classification . . . is a response to the natural and social needs of human beings. He begins with our antipathy for chaos [the residence of the grotesque] and corresponding desire for order. Order is not just useful then. We *like* it" (8-9). By definition, then, we dislike that which undermines order and deflects expectations.

Leonard Cassuto also offers a theory of Freud's to support his belief that the grotesque stems from the possibility or reality of disorder: "there is an intellectual function in us that demands unity, connection and intelligibility from any material, whether of perception or thought, that comes within its grasp" (8-9). When this unity is threatened, we fear the collapse of civilization, of a way of life in which we are entrenched, is imminent and to be avoided at any price. Herein lies the same kind of fear created by the clash of the mainstream and the

grotesque, of text and margin, of culture and anti-culture. And here we find the different levels of the grotesque which appear throughout the short-story cycle *Sticks and Stones*.

### The Stories

Every inhabitant of Gafferton lives up to the Flannery O'Connor claim in the epigraph of this study. The primary reason I refer to them as grotesques is because we fear being them: we fear their excessive weight, their lack of physical stature, their inability to connect emotionally with anyone, their absence of understandable morals, their willingness to put up with abuse, their diseases, and their hypocrisy. Each story's protagonist reflects one of these particular fears, and I list them here in an ascending order of what the American culture would consider true grotesquerie.

Jasper Dunwoodie:

"Jesus Was an Albino," the story of a man for whom drinking has replaced living his life, shows the self-imposed isolation caused by overwhelming addiction. Jasper Dunwoodie thinks a great deal and has opinions, but he shares them less and less frequently, preferring instead to simply sit and consider what has been. The closest friendships he has are with his fellow drunks who come in to sate their thirsts and to cadge free drinks whenever possible. His deepest relationship is with his barmaid, Solange, whose closeness to Jasper occurs chiefly in his

fantasies.

Jasper ostracizes himself from a large portion of the citizens through his choice of occupation, saloon-keeper. But even in that function, because of the town's need for his establishment to accommodate tourists, Jasper has some power, and so is part of the community. But when he alienates his first wife--a woman of some civic importance--through an affair, Jasper's power and position erode, a situation increased by his choice of mistress. Despite this increasing decline, however, Jasper Dunwoodie does not lack status completely. Only when his unhappiness in his second marriage leads to an increasingly large consumption of alcohol does Jasper begin what will be his final downward spiral. As he becomes a barely functioning drunk, closed off emotionally by his own alcoholism, Jasper attains the level of "grotesque," isolated from most human interaction and existing as an object of pity and fear.

But more than simply suffering from a frightening disease alienates Jasper; by his very willfulness in opening a tavern and keeping it afloat in the face of the primarily religious objections of his fellow citizens, Jasper liminalizes himself. As a fringe person, he cannot hope to keep his wife, who adheres herself ever more firmly to the status quo until it overwhelms her and she loses some of that bourgeois identity she wishes so desperately to maintain. Certainly the behavior Jasper indulges in leads to the dissolution of his marriage, but Flossie's own lack of perturbation indicates she experiences not so much grief

as embarrassment and relief.

Jasper's continual drunkenness determines his fate. Despite the fact that alcoholism is an acknowledged disease, this sentence contains an unspoken phrase; it should read, "Jasper's choice to remain in a state of continual drunkenness helps him determine his own fate." No matter the lip service we pay the topic, only those who have struggled with the disease themselves--not even their families and friends--can fully comprehend how little choice, at least conscious, goes into it. This inability to understand--or perhaps this ability to understand just enough--in addition to the fear that the two or three beers that we have a day or a week or a month might turn us into Jasper are the very things which make Jasper a grotesque, a source of social terror. He is the monster, the source of the "there-but-for-the-grace-of-God" syndrome we can't help but feel. And yet Jasper, despite his marginalized status, is arguably the least grotesque of the characters in the cycle.

Albert Whitefeather:

In "It Could Have Been a Dumpster," Albert is the child of an unmarried woman, Solange Whitefeather, which in some places, among certain people, is still the kind of point that places him outside what is culturally expected: he is the grotesque in the form of a bastard. But even worse for Albert is the fact that he was conceived during an episode of rape, a fact which he comes to realize and which serves



to make him view himself as marginalized. Prior to that comprehension, his grotesqueness could only exist in the opinions of others, and thus had little or no impact on Albert. But as soon as he himself comprehends the isolation his situation must cause, then he does truly become a grotesque, for he allows the feelings of others to affect his self-opinion: being a grotesque requires active participation in the process.

What Albert is unaware of, but what has begun to nibble at the edges of his consciousness like some particularly malevolent rat, is the fact that his uncle, his mother's brother, is the rapist who fathered him. For Albert, this idea is too hard to face, and he tries to outrun it, literally, along the way finding a baby whose situation--abandoned in a septic tank--makes it an even more grotesque figure than the boy. At least Albert's mother loved him and kept him, and has tried for eleven years to keep him safe within a cocoon of innocence. While the conscious awareness--at least in such a literal sense--of this fact is not in Albert's capacity, he has an emotional sense of it, and responds to it.

For Albert, this is the deciding moment, whether the grotesque nature he instinctively feels he is part of will hold sway, or whether he will overcome that wrong urge and do the right thing. Albert chooses to deny the pull of the grotesque by taking the baby to the best source of help: his mother. He denies what our culture fears must be his own grotesque nature, and thus removes one of the stigma--

incest-induced madness--lurking to claim him.

Jellie Finsterman:

Jellie is an obsessive-compulsive woman whose disorder waxes and wanes in strength, depending upon the emotional stress she is under. She has a true abhorrence for anything remotely dirty, but her meticulous habits increase when she is distressed, and Jellie is frequently distressed. Her sense of a life unfulfilled results from her being a fringe player in her husband's Hollywood life.

"Blood is Messy Stuff" is the story of a true outsider to Gafferton, Corliss' sister, Jellie, who has a fully matched set of emotional baggage she totes around with her like old friends. Because she is not a citizen of Gafferton, she is immediately marginalized and, to the rather close-minded members of the community--those people who like to speak in the first person plural as if any individual opinion must be suspect--she is a grotesque.

But the opinions of the Gaffertonians concerning Jellie are not important in the context of the story, in which two sisters learn a great deal about the true nature of one another. They are members of a family so dysfunctional it moves beyond the cliché and into the grotesque; the family achieves this status, however, not through blatant absurdity or violence against the laws of God, but through an utter inability to speak to one another with love and openness. When Jellie finally admits to herself what she must have guessed (else why go to Corliss?), that her sister loves

her, she frees herself from some of her self-doubt.

In bringing an outsider into Gafferton, I wanted to show the impact anything new can have on a relatively closed community, which Jellie does, à la Dorothy landing in Oz. I considered having the story's main event--the accident--occur early on, which may be where it ends up some day, but decided Jellie was the sort of woman who left the real mess for someone else to clean up, so I wanted the accident to occur at the end of the story. In this manner, Jellie is able to leave Gafferton with most of her neuroses intact to return to southern California and her children, to her life as a decorative fringe, a plump woman in the most unforgiving place on earth, trying to believe she is more than Mrs. David Finsterman.

Carlton Fuller:

The Reverend Fuller, another cliché in his religious hypocrisy, is a deeply greedy man ready to prostitute himself--if only figuratively--in order to enjoy what he considers the better things the world can offer. In "Grace in a Bone-China Cup," we understand that Fuller is less considered with his soul's longevity than with physical pleasure. Were the minister capable of admitting his foibles to himself, he might be a good pastor. But I hope his story conveys the enormous grotesqueness of people who live in blindness--not literal blindness, but the inability to even begin to see themselves for the kinds of people they are.

Fuller's story appears in part in the form of a letter which contains evidence of his hypocrisy and the story of the untimely demise of Sam Zellerbach, which plays as broad humor. But Fuller's actions as he relates the incident to a cousin are the crux of the story: his affected tone undermines his words and suggest we cannot assume he is without doubt the self-centered prig he makes himself out to be; he may only wish to impress this cousin. His putterings, his pleasure in things surrounding him which represent cost and effort, and the absence of serious thought when we are "watching" him instead of simply reading his words create the disparity between word and action which is at the root of hypocrisy.

Within this difference lies the potential for the grotesque, as well as for the humorous. Unmet expectations, as Goffman observes, create "an attribute that makes [a man] different from others in the category available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind--in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak" (204). A number of characters in Gafferton exhibit these characteristics: N. Leon is weak, Burl is bad and dangerous; among the primary characters, however, only Carlton Fuller represents all three.

Certainly his religious hypocrisy, his lack of fellow feeling for God's less-than-wonderful human creations, is enough to marginalize him from the standpoint of "true" Christianity, but the very charity demanded by the latter forgives Fuller his little peccadilloes. It is his lack of

depth, the absence of this charity which renders him grotesque: his existence within the surface of life makes him an absurd figure, and as such he is freakish, despite the fact his freakishness is shared by too many others.

Burl Hansen:

In "Except for LaRue" we revisit the exiled Burl Hansen, who appears briefly in the first story, then again in "He Was Not a Stupid Man." Burl has only two things going for him: he is a good-looking man, but they are the kind of boyish looks that do not age well and are blurred by dissipation; and he is--unlike Carlton Fuller--not a hypocrite. Burl doesn't try to hide the fact he beats his wife strenuously; he doesn't care who knows, because he has convinced himself profoundly that he is right to do so.

"Except for LaRue" is the second of only two stories set outside of Gafferton, although like "Marcus Accompli," the setting remains local to Gafferton. This is also the second story to use graphic physical violence. Trying to create a sense of the comic in a story involving rather graphic abuse of an elderly woman is a difficult task. An audience's state of shock can preclude laughter; certainly fear of appearing grotesque themselves would prevent some readers from admitting any sensation of humor if the topic is sufficiently taboo.

Scholar Leonard Cassuto explores this idea of the grotesque and social taboo, observing that the grotesque is "the anomalous embodiment of cultural anxiety. The

grotesque is born of the violation of basic categories. It occurs when an image cannot be easily classified even on the most fundamental level: when it is both one thing and another, and thus neither one" (6). Thus, in attempting to create horror and laughter together, I end up with a story which violates reader sensibilities. The horror and humor I essay do not necessarily counterbalance one another in this case; instead, they must come close to negating each other through the creation of anxiety.

Because I attempt to give Burl something human without making him overly sympathetic, he fits into Cassuto's definition of the grotesque; Burl is two things: the violent husband not to be tolerated, and the man--once an unhappy boy--who doesn't see himself clearly and is incapable of facing his own ugliness. Certainly the former is a grotesque, a culturally marginal human; but the latter contains the more fascinating aspect of that which is terrifying: to lack the capacity, the sufficiently aware emotional balance to admit--or even recognize--the inappropriateness of his own behavior is that part of him that pushes Burl not just to the margins of society, but off the edge of the world. He is, as Leonard Cassuto might define him, a "moral grotesque" (ix). For Burl, no hope exists; hope requires a thoughtfulness Burl chooses not to experience, and he will die--with his sins unrepented and his soul unredeemed--in "Blood Is Messy Stuff."

When Gilbert Muller argues that for Flannery O'Connor, like Hieronymus Bosch, "the grotesque does not function

gratuitously, but in order to reveal underlying and essentially theological concepts" (7), he speaks of Burl, too. Certainly he refers to characters of O'Connor's like the Misfit, whom we readily acknowledge is a grotesque figure because he is a serial killer. But Muller also suggests that the Misfit's own comments regarding Christ, like the whole concept of religious strictures regarding punishment and reward, contain a subtext indicating the grotesque is an absolute human condition, and those of us who perceive it in others, but not ourselves, miss the whole point.

I hope this idea of the grotesque--the avidness of human beings to compartmentalize others in order to give ourselves not only structure, but a higher position within the system--runs, if only minutely, through the Gafferton stories. And this is why Burl is not, socially speaking, the most grotesque figure I create. Even his wife, Molly, due to her role as "victim," is culturally more marginalized than Burl: others may feel sorry for her, but cannot understand why she would stay in that situation. Burl "needs help," suggesting that outside forces can help to alter his behavior, as perhaps they helped to form it, but Molly needs to develop a backbone, get some courage, be stronger. Molly must find resources within herself, because her failure is primarily hers.

Molly Hansen:

I set Molly's story, "He Was Not a Stupid Man," in

*media res* because her character is a victim; Americans pity victims, and sometimes even sympathize with them, but we do not like them very much. I want her tolerance of violence to be within the framework of her taking action to remove herself from it. People react to victims, especially those of domestic abuse and date rape, in the same way they react to those susceptible to addictions and suffering from diseases; we know how readily things like these occur and we stand too much of a chance them happening to us, so we try to prevent the fear by finding the nearest bucket of sand big enough for our heads. We even trivialize the violence in these situations by "domestic"-ating the abuse and implying the rapee's participation with the label "date," as though somehow this is a lesser form of rape, as though the idea of being raped by someone trusted is less damaging than by a total stranger.

Perhaps the reason for these "classifications" of violence stems from the patriarchy which founded this country; in any case, the theology of eurocentric America, when added to the marginalization of womankind which extends much further back in humanity's span, renders women automatically figures of grotesqueness by virtue of gender alone. When the womb and tomb are so literally and literarily equated, how can the possessors of wombs not be figures of terror? And Molly is subjected to violence for no other reason than her husband mistakes his own childhood anger and adult self-loathing as signs of his wife's failures as a woman.



But Molly certainly puts up with what Burl does, feeling she has little recourse. In fact, she does not leave the relationship on her own; help comes in the form of Corliss Gluck, the Mary Worth of Gafferton. The women decide that Gafferton is too small for Molly to hide from Burl, and Molly doesn't want to leave, so getting rid of Burl is the only viable option. In this story, however, getting rid of Burl consists of driving him away. Molly posts articles about women killing their husbands in a variety of ways all over the house: as killers, the women in the clippings are even further marginalized; by removing themselves from bad situations, however, they show a capacity to step out of the victim-as-grotesque category and into a gynocentric culture of survivors to whom the word "victim" is anathema. The problem with this otherwise positive outcome of killing the abuser (except, of course, for the prison time) is that "survivor" marginalizes as readily as "victim": one can think of neither without wondering "Of what?"

Burl's treatment of Molly also liminalizes her through her scars, which are visible and which mar the one thing Burl valued about her: her looks. Scars indicate the terrible experience which caused them: they remind us, again, that we are susceptible, too; as such, they become emblems, or stigmata in the oldest sense of the world, according to Erving Goffman, who writes that stigma, once emblems "cut or burnt into the body [to] advertise that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor--a blemished

person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places" (203) came later to be dual in definition. Goffman notes that when the meaning of "stigma" expanded, "two layers of metaphor were added to the term: the first referred to bodily signs of holy grace . . . [while] the second, a medical allusion to this religious allusion, referred to bodily signs of physical disorder" (203). Molly's scars, both hidden and visible, evidence the physical disorder of her life. This evidence serves as emblem of both the cause and effect of a cultural attitude that tolerates rape each time someone thinks, "She shouldn't have . . . ." The label "grotesque" in this situation rightfully belongs to all who have ever thought along those lines, but we find it easier to marginalize the Mollies of the world and imagine that is where the grotesquerie lies, not in our own way of thinking.

N. Leon Klabber:

"If Napoleon'd Been Born in Oklahoma," he probably would have turned out to be N. Leon Klabber, a lost little man who finds almost no humor in life. N. Leon cannot rise above the insult his parents paid him by marrying and begetting him, an abnormally small man. This is not a freak's story, however, at least not in the sense of how the world views N. Leon; the only person who sees a freak is N. Leon, when he stands on his stepping stool to look into the bathroom mirror. But his small stature does establish the character as different from the prevailing norm.

Association with him could lead to the contagion of shortness being passed on; indeed, N. Leon himself desires the largest woman he has ever seen, in part a subconscious yearning stemming from an awareness that such a pairing would potentially produce more "normal" offspring, and in part from the fact that, according to Leslie Fiedler's studies into the topic,

Fat ladies are, in short, the most erotically appealing of all Freaks, with the possible exception of male Dwarfs. Indeed, societies less puritancial than our own, whose taste for skinny women represents, perhaps, a vestigial fear of the flesh, have had no difficulty acknowledging the fact. (131)

In America, these fat-lovers are a cult, made so by their own frequent unwillingness to join the ranks of the grotesque by stepping outside of the cultural norm. N. Leon will not admit to anyone how he feels about Violet, and his purpose is at the heart of the cultural grotesque concerning appearance: he hates being laughed at.

Despite his height, N. Leon is not the icon of the dwarf to which Fiedler refers. Instead, N. Leon remains an asexual being in the eyes of his fellow citizens, who find only humor in the concept of him as a lover. Certainly the humor stems from the Mutt-and-Jeff aspects of Violet and N. Leon in tandem, but the subconscious response to this thwarting of acceptable relationships is the derision contained within the laughter; the laughter, in turn,

becomes the intangible stigma created through the visible stigma of size.

In discussing the concept of stigma, Lerita Coleman writes that the "infinite variety of human attributes suggests that what is undesired or stigmatized is heavily dependent on the social context and to some extent arbitrarily defined" (217). In America, certainly, tallness, pride (the good kind), and morality become mirror images: hence the idea of "upright," or even "he rode tall in the saddle." N. Leon feels keenly that his lack of physical stature is a form of punishment, although he never verbalizes for what the punishment has been meted out. But the story makes clear the sense of futility this kind of marginalization engenders among those at whom it is directed.

Violet Barnes:

Violet Barnes, who appears as an *objet d'amour* in "If Napoleon," is also the focus of "Hoss is My Favorite Cartwright." Violet, like N. Leon, suffers due to her size. She is a very large woman, so I tell her story in the form of an monologue at once dramatic and interior, but in a third-person form, because such an isolated person must converse with herself, yet in a detached way. Humor is not the crux of Violet's tale, but then she fits the profile of the kind of person Henri Bergson would say evokes laughter simply with her appearance, because she thwarts, if no longer the cultural norm, then at least the cultural ideal.

She is grotesque because she can't even approach the cultural ideal of woman: even in catalogues for large-sized women's clothes, the models range from the same size as in every other catalogue up to a size twelve or fourteen, women roughly half Violet's size. She is liminal, existing somewhere between "she" and "it," attractive only to those who feel compelled to hide this attraction, who are themselves grotesques.

Violet is my creation to thumb my nose at a world that says laughter is my sole benediction to lay upon this planet. Leslie Fiedler argues that "a malign or dour human being who weighs more than three hundred pounds seems a contradiction in terms" (126), then continues in his observation of western culture by noting that the "fat man is assumed to be jolly" (126), citing Falstaff and Santa Claus. But being objectified, marginalized, and negated by ridicule is hardly conducive to humor, except, perhaps, for bad humor.

The reason for this, which all intelligent fat people are vividly aware of, is that "certain medieval humanists considered obesity the outward and visible sign of the inward and invisible 'indolence and apathy . . . and laxity of moral fibre'" (126-7).<sup>3</sup> Violet is not simply aware that her obesity is phenomenally despised by others; she herself buys into the feeling that her value decreased exponentially as her sized increased, and that she is now existing in the negative numbers. In a world where "grossly" means "very," "extremely fat," and "disgusting," how can she act

differently than she does?

Violet Barnes' stigma, literally, is written all over her in her obesity; although N. Leon Klabber bears as well the readily visible stigma of a man of slight stature, we hold a slightly smaller amount of fear- and disgust-based contempt for the small person, who is small by accident of birth. Violet's stigma is a moral failure on her part to exert self-control, genetic predisposition aside. Thus Violet is literally the most carnivalesque grotesque of the series, although I believe her true marginality stems from her gargantuan self-loathing; such an absence of self-esteem isolates her from all but a couple of people.

Violet reacts defiantly to the taunts she receives, but she continues to put herself on public display at the hardware store as though those taunts feed the habit of her self-loathing. The closest Violet comes to smiling in *Sticks and Stones* is in anticipation of further gorging; the source of that smile and the desire it reflects overwhelms all instincts she has to do what she knows she needs to do. Despite her claim of wanting to be loved, what she truly loves, like any junkie, is not the object of the addiction (food), but the physical reaction she has upon consumption. Because she can't--or, more importantly, won't--break this cycle of overeating, she lays claim to less audience sympathy than any other main character.

Corliss Gluck:

If Violet is the least sympathetic, then Corliss is the

most grotesque of all: she cannot maintain a healthy relationship with family or lover, she may be homosexual, she is a killer. But where vigilantism is arguably a subconscious ideal, that does not include the voracious, man-killing woman, the Amazon whose strength creates primarily fear. That Corliss could put her hand over the nose and mouth of an injured man and hold it there until he died denies all that is to be worshipped in woman: the loving mother. Corliss, instead, is the gaping maw.

"Marcus Accompli" is the first Corliss Gluck story. She serves, perhaps to a lesser degree than the town itself, as connective tissue holding the cycle together. "Marcus Accompli" sprang from a passage in a later Corliss story and concerns the moment Corliss finds a reprieve from marrying. Corliss uses a dry, sardonic tone in her two stories, a tone which lapses too frequently into sarcasm, arguably the lowest (or perhaps the highest) form of humor. But Corliss is a slightly unreliable narrator in that she relates incidents accurately, but she is a bit more cloudy in the area of self-understanding than she realizes. She considers her life as that of a *grande isolée*, but spends most of her time playing the Mary Worth of Gafferton. If she has a secret desire, it is probably to be elected mayor, so she can legitimately stick her nose into the business of others.

"Zamfir and Split-Pea Soup" is the second Corliss Gluck story, which has been through several incarnations in terms of title, but which has kept the same bones throughout its many revisions. Corliss began the whole cycle in this

story, which I wrote after reading Rita Mae Brown's *Bingo* and realizing why I'd been having such a problem with telling a story: I needed to use a voice more true to who I am in tone and inflection.

Because this story came first in terms of when I wrote it, the physically violent images and suggestions are more limited than in some of the later pieces. But the humor in "Zamfir" ranges from broad to less broad, and includes a little slapstick. Under this humor, though, and Corliss' tendency towards sarcasm, lies the narrative of a woman who wants very much to feel connected to her family, but on her own terms. She represents the person willing to disparage her family, but not willing to permit anyone else to do the same: she is angry and protective at the same time. She believes she wants to love her mother and sisters, as she wanted to love her fiancé in "Marcus Accompli," but she trusts no one, least of all herself. Accordingly, Corliss deals with the world wryly. The danger I faced in telling this story--and perhaps several of the others--was avoiding too much self-pity. Occasionally I feel the story calls for it, when I don't want the character to be too sympathetic. But as Edward Galligan observes, "comedy's strategy for dealing with self-pity is straightforward and manageable: one simply and rigorously shuns the emotion" (151). I hope Corliss' tendency to feel sorry for herself simply strengthens her unreliability as narrator rather than undermining her as the sympathetic character in this story.

Corliss steps the farthest out of bounds in "Blood is



Messy Stuff," when she helps Burl achieve the hereafter by smothering him after he has a bad automobile accident. In becoming a killer, Corliss may act on the violent impulses Burl raises in us, but her act still stigmatizes, still marginalizes her: at what point will she decide someone else should die? Thus Corliss, the favored among my characters, becomes the most frightening of all.

### Conclusion

This is the world of Gafferton, my fictitious town in north-central Oklahoma. But I don't think the setting matters overly much outside of the fact the town is small. I tried to avoid writing all the characters as grotesques, but ultimately, in isolation, a certain level of the bizarre creeps in. At the same time, however, I hope humor comes in, too. As Wyndham Lewis writes,

All men are *some* sort of hero to themselves: equally there is no man who is not, to *somebody* or *other*, a disagreeable person, as unsightly as a toad, or else a first-class figure of fun. How are we to reconcile these opposites--the seeing-of-ourselves-as-others-see-us, and the self-picture? . . . There is, in both cases, *another* truth, that is all. But both are upon an equal intellectual footing I think--only the humanly "agreeable" is more often false than the humanly "disagreeable." That is unavoidable, seeing what we are. (77)

I hope the inhabitants of Gafferton create this doubling effect within the reader; that is, I hope some part of these characters, some reaction or action they experience or commit will resonate with the reader, shedding light on the unavoidable truth of human disagreeableness without sermonizing about it.

As carnival freaks, Katherine Dunn's characters are openly ridiculed and gawked at by adults; only children, in Gafferton, would not hide their derision of Violet's weight or N. Leon's height. The adults do it, too, but behind backs or hands, which serves to keep the marginalization alive instead of in the open where it can be dealt with and ended: grotesques are those whose idiosyncrasies are kept in a cultural darkness; light tends to mainstream things.

But my Gafferton grotesques are not only those characters who live outside the visual norms, but those who act outside cultural limitations, or, even more, those who have experienced those acts; Burl beats his wife and is reviled, but somehow, in our culture, his act is more comprehensible or accepted than that of his wife, Molly, in her staying with him: on some psychological level we understand what motivates him more than what motivates her, and in this understanding we become the grotesques: we are made voyeur. In the rush of self-righteousness which overwhelms us at the thought of how different we are from Burl, we create our own grotesque haven, our own cave in which to avoid the light. We have, finally, to wonder who is more the freak in a side-show tent: the being on

display, or those of us in the audience, laughing our relief.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>From "an interview with C. Ross Mullins that appeared in *Jubilee* for June, 1963 (O'Connor 233).

<sup>2</sup>This idea of the lower body and its functions as a source of the comic grotesque runs throughout Bakhtin's text, significantly on pages 180-184.

<sup>3</sup>Citing J.G. Milligan, M.D., in "Obesity," from Curiosities of Medical Experience.

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## JESUS WAS AN ALBINO

The Chivas and soda in Jasper Dunwoodie's hand had reached the quarter-inch range. As usual, without his having to say anything, Solange brought him another, appearing quietly at the corner table which was his, no matter how full the bar. He tamped his trademark moustache, a handlebar he'd worn since he had been old enough to grow it, in anticipation. That's what I like about that girl, he thought; does her job, no hassles.

Closing time at his bar, but a few regulars, Burl and his boys, were in no hurry to go. He looked out the window on the quiet April night, but could hear Solange behind the bar, prodding them along.

"Come on, S'long, jus' one more. Got time for one more, if we drink 'em fas'." That was Burl Hansen, who liked to go home to his pretty little wife tanked; made it easier for him to beat the crap out of her. Jasper shook his head slowly. She was such a pretty girl. Not as pretty as Solange, but not bad.

Burl's buddies didn't say anything, which meant Burl was buying. If they pressed, too, they might get stuck with the tab. But Solange wouldn't give in. Jasper turned to watch her at work.

"It's two. You guys shouldn't even be in here.

Against the law." She picked up Burl's empty mug, took another away even though the man still had half a beer, ignoring his "Hey!" The third guy, a chronic mooch, snatched his up and chugged what remained before she reached him, then the three of them, grousing half-heartedly, staggered their way out the front door.

Jasper waited until Burl came back in, stood by the door.

"So long, Solong, you hard-hearted woman." He always left with this stale joke. Always.

Jasper downed his own drink and walked over to lock the front door from the inside. Then he went back to his table. A new drink, the scotch a dark gold, stood waiting for him. Solange was already back behind the bar, washing glasses. He didn't know what he'd do without her. A priceless girl, he thought. I ought to pay her more. He knew she loved him, not romantically, not exactly like a father, but in the way women have of loving men they worry about. Solange worried about him all the time, but she never tried to change him, never watered his drinks the way Audrey, his second wife, had.

Audrey. After she left him two years earlier with most of the antique cash registers and old tin ads for Coca Cola and chewing tobacco he'd decorated the bar with, left him with all of the money from that night's till and from the safe she hadn't even bothered to close behind her, he'd run into some trouble. Let the liquor license lapse twice and the fire insurance once. Paying the fines cost him more



than he had. The town council wanted him closed down, thought if they could get rid of the sign shaped like a big, neon moustache that flashed "Jasper's" in red, and the smaller, green "Saloon" underneath it, the town would be more touristy. Downtown Gafferton, a one-block, curved street, was a series of small, wooden buildings housing little businesses. The town went for a particular look here, and the town council hated Jasper's prominent appeal to those same tourists to come in and get drunk, then leave Gafferton with a hangover as their most prominent memories.

Set up north of Lake Carl Blackwell, Gafferton wasn't much of a tourist town. Maybe it was picturesque enough, but the town wasn't on an interstate or even old Route 66, and it couldn't boast of any famous landmarks. Still, folks from Tulsa and--sometimes--from Oklahoma City would come for a weekend's stay at a bed and breakfast to enjoy water sports or watch the leaves turn. The prices in little Gafferton and nearby Perry and Stillwater were affordable.

Though Jasper failed to convince the town council how much they needed a bar for Saturday-night tourists, as long as he was legal, they couldn't close him down. But he knew they were waiting for him to screw up. Flossie Books, his first ex-wife, who couldn't get her maiden name back fast enough, served on the council with sanctimonious Pastor Fuller, who never walked past Jasper without a "Hope to see you in church this week, son," for all Jasper had ten years on him. With the two of them hovering like vultures over armadillo roadkill, Jasper couldn't afford to do anything

illegal at all. The sheriff and one of his three deputies attended Fuller's Lutheran church, which was better than payola. So now Solange kept track of licenses and taxes and made sure no customer was in the bar past two a.m.

As Solange squeezed into the walk-in to stack the perishables, the cream and the fruit she cut fresh twice a week in case someone ordered something fancier than draw beer or double shots of Jack, Jasper watched her, wondering why this girl stayed in a place like Gafferton. Gafferton wasn't just God-forsaken: it was hell-forsaken, too. If other little towns were bumps on the road, then Gafferton, population somewhere around a thousand, was a pothole. But about three years earlier Solange blew into town with her kid, used her soft, Southern accent to talk her way into a job when he didn't really need anyone, what with him and Audrey running the place, and found herself a three-room apartment to rent over the bakery. Jasper figured it took some doing to convince Pascotti, the baker, she was responsible enough to live over his shop in the small apartment he and his family had shared until he had enough money saved up to build him a place out on the edge of town, where the people with money lived. Jasper was glad she had stayed. He didn't know what he'd do without her, and not just because of her dark, frank eyes and open smile. Or her neat little ass.

Flossie lived out where the Pascottis had moved, in the house she and Jasper used to share, the one her dad, Doc Books, left her. She'd been a good wife, but she'd gone

religious on him after her father died. He remembered when he first met her at the hardware store Doc Books owned. Doc had needed a second income, seeing as people in Gafferton generally didn't get sick: they either died old and in their sleep or in hunting accidents. Lots of hunting accidents in Gafferton, usually fatal.

Solange brought him another drink. "Last one, Jasper. I'm almost finished." She turned away, her bar rag in hand, to wipe down scarred tables and stack the chairs. Mornings he came in, emptied trash cans and swept up himself, or, if he was feeling generous, let Zel do it in exchange for drinks.

"Thanks, Solange," he said to her back. He watched her move away from him, bend over the tables as she wiped them down. He sure loved watching her walk away. Not too bad from the front, neither. Although he couldn't for the life of him understand why she'd stayed in tiny Gafferton, he never asked her, afraid if he raised the question, she'd think about it and leave.

He stayed because of the bar, because he was fifty-four and didn't want to start somewhere else. And tonight, with enough Chivas in him to encourage confession, even if only to himself, he could admit he stayed because once he'd been someone here: as Doc Books' son-in-law, Jasper Dunwoodie had been respected.

Flossie was as fresh as they come when he'd first met her, young and kind of pretty with her dark gold hair and grey eyes, not like Audrey, who was taller and thinner, no

waist and the flattest excuse for a butt he'd ever seen, but with a wide mouth that could work miracles. After his first time with Audrey, he was a goner. She'd made him feel strong again, full of power and life. But she'd been a shrew, bad-mouthing Flossie constantly, like she was not the one who'd screwed around with Flossie's husband and ruined a marriage. Helped ruin a marriage. He couldn't get enough of Audrey's mouth.

He blew into town on his chopper with five or six buddies one summer when he was twenty-five or so. Needed a new Phillip's head because he'd snapped his old one in two trying to loosen a carburetor screw. He walked into Books' Hardware and there stood Flossie, smiling at him as though she'd been waiting for him. "Nice mustache," she'd said, giving him the look no man could ever mistake. That was it for him. His pals left town without him two days later. But it was a year and a half before Doc Books believed he was worthy of Flossie, a time Jasper spent working at the hardware store and fixing cars in the evenings. Sundays, after church, he ate with the Books, until one Sunday, a January afternoon, Doc Books asked Jasper, "What do you intend to do with my girl here, Jasper?"

Jasper looked over at Flossie, who wouldn't look back, but who looked pretty pleased with the situation. "We haven't discussed our future yet, sir," he answered.

Flossie shot the look at him, full of a promise of the kind of gratification he hadn't even considered a possibility. He and Flossie married in June. The day after

their wedding, Jasper knew two things: the promise of the look was more interesting than the actual sex, and he was stuck with Flossie until she decided to go.

Solange laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm going home, Jasper. You already locked the front door. I'll lock the back on my way out."

"'Night, Solange. See you tomorrow."

She smiled, looking him in the eye. "You take it easy now," she said, and left.

Strange, he thought, how he could admire this girl's looks and not be tempted. Maybe Audrey had put him off women for good. Maybe he just knew that if he messed things up with Solange, he'd be up the old creek for good. I need her too bad to screw it all up, he thought, smiling a little at his own pun.

Jasper walked over to the bar with his glass, dumped the old ice into the sink, and fixed himself a fresh one. He emptied the Chivas, tossed the dead soldier, and looked under the backbar where all the bottles stood on display, reflected in the huge old mirror with its Harley insignia etching. Two curved wings extended from the logo; they had reminded Jasper of his moustache, so he bought it. Cost a fortune. He knew Audrey'd have taken it, too, if she could have figured out a way to get it down and out of the bar. The only antiques she'd left behind were the mirror and the old moose head in the back room, so moth-eaten and dart-pierced it was probably worthless now. Sawdust trickled from it onto the table below. It looked like it might

disintegrate any old time; only on the most crowded nights would anyone sit under that head. Customers constantly hollered at him, "Hey, Jasper, when you giving this ratty old thing a decent burial?"

With his fresh drink in hand, he walked back to his table, slid into the booth seat to the middle, where his ass had made a comfortable sweet spot. He looked out the window again, down to the other end of the curve of buildings to Books' Hardware, which was now more of a crafts store since Flossie took it over after their divorce.

Jasper hadn't argued about property. After Doc Books died, old and in his sleep, Jasper was surprised to find he and Flossie were left the old man's entire estate as equal partners. At first Jasper worried Flossie would be upset, but that was well before Audrey, and Flossie had been confident in her marriage. She wasn't too happy with Jasper when he decided to buy the old Acme bar when its owner died in a hunting accident. The man's daughter wanted out of Gafferton, so the asking price was more than fair. But owning a bar went against Flossie's religion. Born a Methodist, Flossie had been the only one at home one day when two young men--"So handsome in those clean white shirts and dark ties," she said repeatedly--rode up to the Dunwoodie's house on bicycles. When they left four hours later, they left behind a new-fledged member of the Church of the Christian Angels.

For months she went around happy, and Jasper was glad she was happy, even though she began to ignore him. She

hung a big picture of Jesus on the wall, a picture she found on one of the antiquing trips she and Jasper took. "Look, Jasper," she asked him about a thousand times; "wouldn't you almost swear he was alive?" The Savior was depicted full length in a scene which Flossie swore was the Garden of Gethsemane. Light poured down on his fair brown hair, blue eyes, and pale face and prayerful hands. Flossie, calling herself and her new friends "angels," stopped in front of the picture frequently and refused Jasper dinner--"And anything else you might want, mister!"--on the night he said Jesus probably had darker skin.

"You think Jesus was a Negro?" she shrieked at him.

"You think he was some albino Arab?" he shot back, before heading down to the "Good as Home" diner, which was really called Mary Jim's Cafe, but a straight-line wind had taken the tall sign, leaving only "Good as Home" in chipped and fading paint on the big front window. "Better'n home," Jasper groused to himself as he climbed into his pickup.

But the Christian Angels only held Flossie a few months. One day Jasper came home to an ecstatic wife. Pastor Fuller, the new minister at the Lutheran church, sat in Jasper's living room, his legs crossed at the ankle and drawn back against the couch. He looked like some girl straight out of an etiquette class, holding his cup and saucer carefully in one hand. Jasper watched him, waiting. Sure enough, the pinky curled out delicately when the minister took a sip of tea.

After Pastor Fuller left, Flossie stood by the coffee

table, jiggling and twitching, her hands patting together in a childish clap. "Oh, Jasper," she exhaled, "he looks so much like Jesus."

"How do you know?"

The corners of Flossie's mouth moved downwards and the shaking stopped. "The picture, Jasper. You know what I meant."

"Never noticed Jesus was going bald," Jasper answered boldly, foolishly considering he was hungry and this remark was going to do him out of sex, conversation, and dinner, the first two of which he didn't regret too much. Actually, he felt the resemblance between the picture and Fuller was kind of creepy. But Flossie evidently didn't: she promised Fuller to attend a Lutheran service the following Sunday. That was fifteen years ago, and Flossie, with Pastor Fuller still around to sway her, stayed a Lutheran.

In a small town, everyone pretty much knew everyone else's business, so Jasper knew Flossie had set her sights on the pastor. From experience, Jasper knew how accurate Flossie's aim could be, despite the fact she'd gotten kind of round in middle age. But Jasper also knew Fuller had a thing for Burl Hansen's wife; he figured poor old Flossie didn't stand a chance.

But back then, when Jasper was still married to Flossie, being a Christian Angel or Lutheran made no difference where the bar was concerned: Flossie hated the idea of owning anything so connected to sin. But Jasper won the war; the only battle Flossie came out ahead in was that



the bar wouldn't be named "Books' Bar." Jasper allowed she had the right to veto that. But things changed between them anyway. Flossie got more and more religious and less and less interested in her husband and the things he needed, so when Audrey came along with her big, hungry mouth, he didn't run too hard. Hell, he didn't run at all.

It took two years for Flossie to realize what was going on. She wouldn't have figured it out at all if Audrey hadn't gone into the hardware store one day, marched right up to Flossie, and said to her and to everyone else listening--and in Gafferton they all listened--that she, Audrey Kirby, was doing it with Jasper Dunwoodie every chance they got, and what was she, Flossie, going to do about it? Jasper felt he'd practically been there: no fewer than eight people informed him of what went down. When Jasper got home from the bar at ten that night, it having taken that long for the gossip to reach him, he found every stitch of clothing he owned packed neatly into two suitcases and a brown grocery bag and sitting on the front porch. Flossie sat in the porch swing, not moving, and told him she would appreciate it if he would come by the next day when she was at the store to get the rest of his things.

He felt so bad, he did just as she said. After that, in their divorce, she gave him the bar, said she wanted nothing to do with it. They signed the papers there in front of her lawyer. When she wrote the last "s" in "Books," she lay the pen on the table, looked at Jasper, and said, "I would also appreciate it if from here on out you

act as though we never met." He felt even worse then, and again did just as she asked.

He felt bad for a long time, but he still managed to marry Audrey. Her mouth, which could pleasure him so powerfully, was usually used to revile and belittle, until some of his old friends wouldn't even come into the bar. They got no invitations to people's houses, and were stuck with each other. From his table at his bar, Jasper could see Flossie sometimes, crossing the street or outside the store. He knew it was his own fault, but he felt pretty sorry for himself, what with Audrey finally only using her mouth for meanness and never for pleasure. She tore him down, too, in front of his friends and regulars at the bar. "You are so effing stupid, Jasper, my God! How have you managed to avoid falling in a hole somewhere? How do you walk and breathe at the same time? I swear. When you got hit with the ugly stick, it must've been in the head, hard."

One night she punctuated a tirade with a blow to his stomach, and that night, when they got home, he pushed her down onto the couch, ready to tear her a new one. She jumped up and slapped him, then stomped on his foot to make her point. He punched her in the nose, felt a surge of joy at its soggy crunch, then, immediately ashamed, walked out, back to the bar, where he drank most of a quart of Chivas and passed out at his table. He never even heard Audrey come in and clean the place out.

The backwards jerk of his head woke Jasper, so he

finished the last of the drink, the last of the Chivas, then walked back behind the bar to note it on Solange's running inventory list. She'd already put Chivas on the list in the neat handwriting that went along with the rest of her. Jasper poured himself a Dewars' and soda instead, then headed back to his table. He thought about Solange's eyes and wondered if her mouth could do anything like Audrey's had. He sipped his drink steadily. After this one, he might be able to put his head down and sleep. For a few hours, anyway.

## MARCUS ACCOMPLI

First I noticed my foot had entangled itself in something strappy and lacy, something I knew immediately wasn't mine, my lingerie, when I wear it, being more of the utilitarian style. Then I felt the dampness under my right buttock. My initial reaction, the one before the expected disgust and anger, was an odd one, something like relief.

The bed was his and he was sleeping in it, but his usually familiar mound looked odd to me. I was there to surprise him. I don't usually care to surprise people, but on that night, the night of Marcus' grand debauch of a bachelor party, at about four a.m., I felt the urge to see the man I was to marry the next day.

Marriage. I thought what we had was sufficient: some weekends he came out to Gafferton to my farm, and I played *hausfrau*, with huge country breakfasts and sweet domestic tableaux in the evenings. It was a game I liked to play, but only occasionally, only when it suited me.

On the weekends I drove into Tulsa, where he taught at the University of Tulsa in the philosophy department, it was his turn to act the considerate lover, lord of the apartment, and we spent the typical yuppie Sunday of *Times* crosswords over cups of steaming latte he liked to impress me with. We played his game there, and it worked. The

whole system worked, and I saw no reason to screw with something so well-conceived by getting married.

And now he'd messed it all up. "I hate you," I told him, looking around the room. I stood, walked to the trash can, checked it, then the one in the bathroom. I pulled the covers back, then looked under the bed. No condom anywhere. I sat back down, spreading the quilt over the wet place first. "I hate you," I said, and sat looking at him. Hours passed, but this was a big decision. Finally I went over to his phone and called my house. My sister Elaine answered.

"Lainie, it's me," I said.

"Corliss? Where are you? I thought you were upstairs asleep."

"I'm at Marcus' place. The we--"

"Marcus' place? You're at Marcus' place? Corliss, that's bad luck." Elaine worried a great deal about things like that. In this case, she wasn't exactly wrong.

"The wedding's off." I hated to drag things out.

"No, Corliss--this is just a case of jitters. We all get them. I got them, bad. I told Mother I wouldn't marry Kenny every day for at least a week before we got married."

"This isn't jitters, Lainie. I'll explain later. But tell everyone for me, please?"

She knew me well enough to stop arguing. "You mean tell Mother and Jellie. Thanks, Corliss."

"I'll be back soon and face them. I swear." I hung up before she could answer, then walked back over to the bed where Marcus had begun to snore softly. "I still hate you,"

I said, "but not as much." Then I held my right index finger under his nose, laying it gently against his nostrils to stop the airflow. I could feel the suction begin, the twitch of his head, and then his mouth fell open. I covered his mouth with my right hand, still gentle. "I hate you," I told him again, and his eyes came open, unfocused.

"Huh?" After this witty comeback, he rolled onto his right side, presenting me with his back.

"Marcus," I said, mildly disappointed at my reasonable tone. I needed some righteous anger here, or I'd never be able to override whatever woeful story he would throw at me once he was sufficiently awake. "Wake up, Marcus. What the *hell* is this?" I pulled the frilly thing out from under the quilt, then thumped his back fairly hard with my fist. "I said, wake up!" I laid the lingerie, a red garter belt, across his face.

He rolled over groggily, yawned, and a fog of alcohol spread my direction. "Huh?"

I retrieved the garter belt and held it out, dangling the straps in his face. "Who lost this in your bed?"

Again his inimitable wit: "Huh?" But now I could see on the face of my eager fiance that the machinery had kicked in, the brain had finally waded through the swamp of too much liquid fun and was raising its defenses and its weapons. "Corliss,--" he began. He lifted a hand, stretched it toward my arm without actually touching me, avoiding the flinch while still achieving the gesture. Then he surprised me, the sneaky bastard, changing the rules of

the game: "Yes," he answered quietly.

"She was . . . ?"

"Kenny hired a stripper from the Sundowner."

Kenny. My brother-in-law. Such a wonderful man, such an advocate of the cliché, I only wish there were more like him populating the world. Actually, there are. But if I lived a thousand years, I'd never figure out what compelled my sweet sister Eileen to go so far as to marry such an ass. "And?" I asked, just to keep this scintillating conversation moving along.

"And what?" Now he sounded defensive and I knew absolutely that whatever he said next would be wrong. No, not just wrong, but incredibly wrong. "I was drunk, she was here: she meant--means--nothing."

"Whew! Boy, does that ever make things better." I stood up, then walked to the bathroom. I stopped at the door, turned to him. "You didn't even bother to use a condom." I walked into the bathroom.

"Corliss," he urged from the bed, but I ignored him by turning the shower on. I wanted to wash him--and her--off me. I let the water run a few minutes, wondering if she had showered afterwards, or if maybe they'd done it in the shower, their bodies slickly urgent. I stepped in, lathered up, then stood with the water pummeling the top of my head, running down my bony frame. I doubted she was bony.

Marcus came in, naked, and stepped around the back of the plastic curtain into the shower with me. So, I thought, *think you'll get out of this that easily?* When he reached

for me, I moved away, climbing out the other end, saying, "You have got to be kidding." He moved the back of the curtain and looked at me, then closed it. I could hear the sound of him washing himself. He should have done that before trying to touch me.

I dried off and dressed, then went into the kitchen for a plastic garbage bag. Back in the bedroom, I started pulling my clothes from his closet and dumping them into the sack. While I rifled through the dresser drawers, he emerged from the bathroom, still wet, still naked.

"Corliss, honey, don't. Don't make any big decisions when you're this upset."

I arched both eyebrows at him, stretching them as high as they would go, which is pretty high. "And what you did was not a big decision?"

"Not as big as calling off a wedding happening in a few hours."

"You chose to take some strange woman into your bed the night before our wedding. Honey, I'd call that decision colossal."

"I told you, I was drunk. I made no decision. It just happened."

"You bet. And I'm just making sure it doesn't just happen again."

"But--" he started, then stopped. I waited, but he added nothing.

"What? But what?" I asked, then could have kicked myself for letting him drag me into playing the game his



way.

He turned, walked over to the bed, and sat on the edge. His penis hung between his legs. He caught me looking and smiled. "Is the wedding still on?" He didn't even have the courtesy to fake sheepishness. If anything, he spread his legs a bit so I could get a better look. I felt my face going red, which is something that has only happened a few times in my life, and only when the embarrassment is enormous.

I turned away. "You must still be drunk to even ask that."

"Please, Corliss."

"No." I carried my bag to the front door, feeling guilty. Damn the bastard for making me feel guilty.

"I don't want to call it off."

I smiled at him, going for sweetness, although for all I knew it might have come out more of a grimace. "Since when is what anyone wants important?"

"Fine. You're going to have to handle telling everyone. I don't want to call it off, and I won't help you do it."

"What a surprise. Marcus the manipulator."

"I can't believe you're being this childish and impractical."

"Fuck impractical. Fuck you and fuck your fucking practicality." I always knew when I was angry: my vocabulary diminished exponentially and I wanted to kick things, in this case, primarily, Marcus' shin. Or

something. I even started towards him, but made myself stop. I'd heard Marcus' main argument in favor of marrying me--the practical advantages we'd gain--for months, and kicking him now wouldn't help. He did have a point about the joint tax returns, smaller phone bills, grocery bills. And he'd agreed to live with me and commute to work. He was sure he could get a two- or three-day-a-week teaching schedule. I wanted to kick him because his "And we love each other" was always the afterthought.

But when he examined his manicure and said, "I feel you're being immature, Corliss. Acting out. I'm trying to find a solution to our problem and you're blocking my every attempt," I did it. I walked over to where he sat on the edge of the bed, his naked rear end close to the wet spot, and kicked his shin hard. It felt pretty good, but not as good as I'd hoped.

"How did you being a horny jackass suddenly turn into me being the problem? I just came over to see my fiancee."

"You bi--," he started, but cut himself off, instead asking, "Why did you come here tonight?"

"To surprise you." He simply sat, staring at me, then turned abruptly away. "Nothing wrong with that."

"If that's why you came. You've never shown up like this before. Why tonight?"

I thought about what he asked. The best answer I could think to tell him was, "I wanted to be sure."

"Of what, my worthiness? Did you hope you'd find something wrong, some reason to call it off?"

"Of course not!" But I wasn't as sure as I hoped I sounded. Damn Marcus. He could figure me out too easily. That and the way his eyes gave me a stomach ache sometimes, and his laugh, and his big, solid self: these were the things I counted when I asked myself why I loved him. But mostly because he could figure me out and seemed willing to spend the time doing it. But it wasn't enough.

He sat and watched me. "I'm too tired to play with you, Corliss. I've told you I'm sorry and I still want to marry you. Will you?"

I had to laugh. "No, you haven't. You never said you were sorry."

"I meant to."

"You didn't."

"Stop it. Are we getting married this afternoon or not?"

"We're not."

"Because I had sex with that woman?"

"You don't even know her name!"

"I know it. It was Cherie. And she was good at her job." He ran his hands through his hair, then stood and walked to the dresser, pulling a pair of silk boxers out of the drawer, red ones I'd given him for Valentine's. He put them on, then got his robe from the back of an armchair in the corner. He put it on with his back to me, then, still tying the belt, turned to me. "Why the hell did you ever say yes?"

Now I felt like the villain of the piece. Maybe I'd

earned it, but all it did was stoke my anger. "It made people--you--happy. My family. Everyone."

"You're about to make them unhappy. Your mother won't take this well."

"That, Marcus, is something of an understatement. But now I've got the ammunition to fight back."

"Meaning?"

"You slept with another woman. That's it. Period. No, wait, that's not it. Where's the condom you used, Marcus?"

"Why don't you want to get married?" A good defense is always an offense, in Marcusland. "You've spent thousands of dollars on this thing, Corliss."

"Always practical." He was right. Between the lobster souffle dinner, the Moet et Chandon bubbly, and the 3,500 dollar pile of white fluff my mother chose for me to roll down the aisle in, this wedding had cost me a cool ten grand, easy. But I didn't care, not at that moment; twice the amount wouldn't have mattered. I walked over to the window and opened the blinds onto the early June sunlight. I could face my mother and stand firm this one time because Marcus cheated on me. He was at fault, not me. Ten thousand dollars was nothing, and if I'm any kind of an expert on Marcus, I knew he could read that in my expression. He could see any amount was worth my not having to marry him, and he put his face in his hands.

I almost apologized. I almost said, "I'm sorry. Marcus, I'm sorry." But I thought about the condom that was

missing, and the fact of who the woman was, and I stopped with no problem.

"Go away now, Corliss." He didn't raise his head. I picked up my bag and left. On my way down the stairs, I started running.

## IF NAPOLEON'D BEEN BORN IN OKLAHOMA

N. Leon Klabber had to perch on the very edge of his chair for his feet to reach the floor; his feet had to reach the floor because the chair--a huge, old rocker his grandmother left him, probably to torment him--needed regular pushes to keep it going. His only other option was to scoot right up against the chair's back slats, working his whole torso to keep the rocker in motion. Unfortunately, in this position N. Leon's short legs stuck straight out, making him feel like a child trying to be adult, failing. More than anything, N. Leon hated looking ridiculous. At five-one, fey in his slender paleness, looking ridiculous was something N. Leon had struggled with for all his thirty-three years.

On this particular August morning, with the plastic Gafferton National Bank indoor-outdoor thermometer hanging on a porch post already showing red at 93 degrees, N. Leon felt the sweat running down his tailbone, dampening his pants, making him slide on the chair a little each time he tilted back and forth. The seat of the chair was broad, perhaps broad enough even for Violet Barnes' ample derriere. He liked to imagine her sitting there, in his chair, on his porch; sometimes he pictured himself in her lap. Sometimes they were both naked.

Next to N. Leon, on the low 2-by-6 propped on two

cement blocks, sat the closest thing he had to a friend, Samuel Zellerbach. N. Leon knew Sam's only interest in him was the constant supply of Michelob N. Leon kept in his icebox, but a paid crony was better than sitting there alone. At five-five, Samuel was the second shortest man in Gafferton; N. Leon figured he needed the least contrast possible in that area.

Sam slid his beer bottle across his forehead and bald scalp, sweat already shiny on his skinny arms, their stringy muscles flapping each time he lifted his bottle. In between gulps, he rested the bottle on the small beer gut which hung like a kangaroo's pouch onto his upper thighs. All he wore was a pair of overalls; N. Leon, on the other hand, wore a long-sleeved chambray shirt buttoned up to the neck with neatly pressed slacks beginning to wilt under the barrage of sweat. "Man, ain't you hot in them clothes?" Sam asked, one of the stock questions he pulled out every summer morning, as though N. Leon's answer might one day alter.

"Never know who you might see," N. Leon came in on cue.

"Or who might see you. Right, Norb?" Sam responded slyly, his gap-toothed grin revealing his pride in what he considered wit. N. Leon realized Sam did this to get his goat because N. Leon hated his first name, Norbert, which his mother had always called him. Although his mother had been dead for some time, N. Leon felt reluctant to show complete disrespect by going by simply Leon, so he kept his first initial. He also felt the combination of initial and name lent him some stature, some impressiveness. The people

around town, generally, respected his desire to drop Norbert, but they usually forgot to retain the initial when addressing him. Sam was the only person ever to call him Norbert to his face.

Sometimes N. Leon let the ribbing work, just to please Sam, who occasionally left if he got bored enough or hot enough to head over to the Spree 'n' Flee convenience store on the corner, where beer might cost money but the air conditioning was free. This was generally the case on the first and fifteenth of the month, when Sam's disability checks came in. N. Leon could afford to ignore Sam's gibes for about a week prior to each of those dates, but the rest of the time he played the game. As it was only the fourth of August, N. Leon decided to react.

"Told you not to call me that."

"Why, Nor-Bert? Is it a sissy name? Did your old mama give you a sissy-boy's name, Norbert?" Sam grinned, as though that gave his cruelty permission.

N. Leon didn't answer. He saw someone coming down the street; sitting on his front porch was his contact with the world. Although he rarely left his own property, his house stood on the main street of Gafferton; almost everyone passed at some point during the day. N. Leon exchanged greetings from the elevated distance of the rocker on the porch, hiding his shortness, he thought, avoiding ridicule and ridiculousness.

He could tell the person heading towards him was a woman, but it wasn't the woman he was hoping to see: she



was too thin. As she drew closer, he recognized her by the big dog ambling along next to her. "Look, Sam, it's that Gluck woman." N. Leon seldom used profanity; his mother had always told him people with class could find better words to use than cuss words. But the sneering tone of his *Gluck* left no doubt about his feelings.

"Why you hate her so much, Leon? She never done nothing to you." Sam sounded genuinely curious.

N. Leon shrugged, keeping his eyes on the woman. "She's too ugly. Looks like a walking skeleton, she's so scrawny."

"And we all know you like them big, hey, Leon? Bigger the better, the way you see it."

N. Leon, wanting to distract Sam from his line of questioning, dreading the running joke around town, commented, "That Gluck woman'll never find a man, that's for sure. Who'd want a scarecrow like her?"

Sam took the bait. "I hear she almost married that fellow over in Tulsa, that professor at Tulsa U."

"I hear he dumped her like an old bag of trash, ran off with the stripper from his bachelor party." This wasn't exactly what N. Leon had heard, but he knew Sam would jump on it like a duck on a junebug.

"No fooling? Someone told me she's the one broke it off."

Sam seemed intrigued by this new line of gossip being played out to him, so N. Leon kept it going. "Not so. I hear the stripper had some big old tits on her. He just

couldn't take the idea of marrying someone flat as old Gluck. Left her standing in the church, crying and cursing."

"I'll be. Cursing in church." Sam, never a religious man, appeared to be thinking over N. Leon's story as he took a swig of beer, watching the woman's long, easy gait down the sidewalk. "How big was them titties?"

Both men burst out laughing just as Corliss Gluck drew even with them. "Morning, boys," she called from the sidewalk. "What's so funny?" They stopped laughing.

"Nothing, Miss Gluck," answered N. Leon, making his voice as coldly discouraging as he could. She pushed open the gate, even holding it to let her dog in, then walked right into his yard. The dog immediately squatted over the brown grass to take a dump. N. Leon was outraged at this . . . *presumption* on her part, but sat silently.

"Call me Corliss, Leon. How are you fellows this morning?" she asked, coming all the way up on the porch where she stood, towering over them. *She's doing this on purpose*, Leon thought. *She's laughing at me; she wants me to feel ridiculous.* "Sure is a scorcher already," she said.

"Yes, ma'am, it is," Sam answered. "Where you heading?"

"Over to Flossie Books' to pick up some paints she ordered for me."

"That so," said N. Leon, flatly, with finality. "Don't let us keep you, Miss Gluck." But the woman would not take a hint. She simply stood there, looking down on him,

ignoring her dog, who was peeing all over the corners of his house. Then, abruptly, she turned down the steps.

"You men have a real nice day. Come, Boyo." She held the gate open again, gave a wave towards Sam, shot N. Leon a look which he recognized as meaning she had gotten the hint, after all.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Sam started giggling. "I think she kind of likes you, Leon. I think she's a little sweet on you."

"Stop it, Sam." N. Leon's voice shook, but Sam didn't let up.

"Don't Violet work over to Flossie's? Maybe Miss Gluck's really going over there to fight her for you. What do you say, Leon? You got two such good-looking women fighting over you. Ain't you just the world's luckiest man. Course, Violet'd probably just sit on old Gluck; that'd be the end of that fight."

N. Leon tilted the rocker forward, slid all the way off the seat. Turning on Sam, he said, "That's not funny. You shut up about that bony bitch. You shut up about Violet. You just shut up." He turned his back on Sam's amazed look, went into the house, slamming both the screen door and the front door. He simply stood in the foyer, waiting, breathing hard. Finally, he heard Sam's footsteps on the porch boards. But Sam wasn't done yet.

"Don't you be slamming doors in my face, Norbert. What you so pissed off for, anyway? You some kind of pervert who likes fat women?" He stomped down the steps, banged the

gate behind him. N. Leon still stood there in the curtain-dimmed light of the house, staring straight ahead into the living room with its stacks and stacks of paperback novels. Books were piled on every shelf and over all flat surfaces, heaped all over the floor. N. Leon didn't own a television: too many tall men, their smooth hair and shiny teeth flashing across the screen--too many constant reminders. He could skim past any heroic descriptions in books, but television acted upon him the same way as an unexpectedly seen reflection in a store window: *this is your reality, N. Leon.*

After a while, still trembling with anger, he went to the kitchen, pulled an old jelly-jar glass out of the yellow cabinet next to the sink. He ran water from the faucet until it came from far enough below ground to be cool, then drank three glasses full, one after another, pausing only long enough between each to draw a deep breath. Then he went down the hall, its faded *fleur-de-lis* wallpaper shining faintly through the gloom. In his bedroom he again simply stood for a few minutes before returning to the front door to lock it. Once back in his bedroom, he took off his clothes, hanging the shirt over the back of an armchair and folding the pants neatly over a hanger. His closet had two racks for clothes, one high, one only four feet off the ground. N. Leon used only the short one.

Clad only in his white, boy-sized Jockey undershorts, he hoisted himself onto the bed, where he lay back to look at the wedding picture of his parents he'd hung opposite the

bed after his mama died. His mother was the smallest woman N. Leon ever saw; his father wasn't much bigger. They looked happy in the picture. N. Leon couldn't remember a time they weren't happy up until his daddy was backed over by a pickup truck whose driver couldn't see tiny Mr. Klabber over the tailgate. Fortunately for Mrs. Klabber and eight-year-old N. Leon, the truck was owned by the John Deere company and the driver was on company time; the settlement, which Mama invested wisely through the Gafferton National Bank, meant the Klabbers would never have to worry about bills; it meant N. Leon could sit on his porch and avoid most close contact with the tall world.

N. Leon's mother died when he was twenty. She fell from a stepladder as she was stretching to reach a burned out light bulb in her son's bedroom. Her neck broke, killing her instantly. N. Leon, from then on, only used table lamps for light, even in the kitchen and bathroom. He was finally free to stay in the house all the time, never having to go out on errands for his mother, but his loneliness after her death was terrible.

He liked to lie on his bed, look at the portrait, remembering his parents' love with some resentment. "Mama," he'd asked her when he was twelve, and his lack of height had become his burden, "why couldn't you have married a bigger man? Then I wouldn't be so short." It was the only time he every saw her angry. She told him the size of a person's heart was the only size that mattered; she told him they were lucky to have had such a good husband and father.

Then she sent him outside to play with other kids.

*Play, N. Leon thought. Right, Mama, what those kids were doing to me was playing.* He remembered the taunts, constant, multi-voiced. After age eleven, not one kid in Gafferton left him alone. The older girls even picked him up, cuddling him roughly, brushing his soft curls into a delicate halo, calling him their sweet angel. He suffered silently, having long since learned fighting back only made it worse, made the numbers grow as more and more voices sought to drown him out. He tried to tell his mother, but she wouldn't understand; she kept making him go to school, go outside after school to play. She wanted him to attend to college; his grades were quite good. But after graduation, N. Leon, for the first time in his life, refused his mother. His only concession to her wish was to take correspondence courses through the University of Oklahoma; after her death, he stopped that as well. He hadn't quite gotten over the guilt of his refusal.

"Guess I made you pretty unhappy, Mama," N. Leon said to the portrait. "No degree, no grandkids. Not much to show for my life." He rolled over, burying his face in the damask-rose pillowcase his mother had chosen for his room. N. Leon remained in his old room rather than taking his parents' room because it was a familiar haven, because its twin bed didn't engulf him, didn't call attention to his size the way his mother's queen-sized bed did. He wished, sometimes, he had a reason to use his her bed, someone to take into it with him.

Violet. Ever since he first saw her, when she was only twelve or thirteen, he knew she was special. Even then she was a big girl; not tall and skinny like the Gluck woman, but big. Now, at nineteen, Violet stood close six feet and, rumor had it, weighed in at somewhere around 400 pounds. She worked at Flossie Books' hardware and crafts shop as the cashier. Flossie, pretty fat herself, had a special low counter built so Violet could sit behind it, not have to stay on her feet all day.

The first time N. Leon saw Violet, she was being picked on by a group of boys. They began by yelling taunts at her, barking and mooing, calling her "Big-as-a-Barnes," letting her know with no room for uncertainty just how they felt about fat girls. She plodded along, not responding, but as she drew even with N. Leon's house, he could see she was crying. The boys circled her, making faces, yelling. Finally, a bold one reached out to pinch her belly.

She stopped in her tracks, but offered no other reaction. They all began prodding, poking, laughing the whole time. N. Leon sat on the edge of the rocker, wanting to do something, to help this poor girl he already felt empathy for, but most of the boys were bigger than him; his fear of being hurt was strong, but his fear of their jibes acted as the real anchor.

Suddenly, right in front of him, N. Leon watched what to him seemed a miracle. Violet grabbed one of her tormentors, surprising him, pushing him to the ground. With a moaning kind of roar, she straddled him, her bulk centered

directly over his chest, and sat on him. His buddies pulled at her to no avail: she was immovable, and her victim thrashed below her, starting to cry, yelling he couldn't breathe. N. Leon watched this avenging angel with an expression of awe, not concerned for the struggling boy's lack of breath given the volume of his yells.

The battle ended when Corliss Gluck came running down the sidewalk, willing to face what N. Leon couldn't. She yelled at the boys; they scattered, including the one Violet had pinned to the sidewalk after Corliss helped the girl to her feet. The two walked away together, Corliss' arm around Violet's shoulder. When they passed, N. Leon could hear Violet crying, a sound which increased his guilt. Corliss Gluck looked up at N. Leon as they passed, straight at him, holding his eyes for a moment. He fancied he saw contempt in that look, contempt and derision. From that moment, he began to hate her: she was strong, and she knew who--she knew what--he was.

Before Corliss showed up, while Violet sat on the boy, N. Leon realized through his concern and amazement he had become aroused by the girl; at that moment he conceived a desire for Violet that only grew as her girth and height increased. Just seeing her always gave him an erection he had to relieve. Even thinking about her now, as he lay on his bed with his face in the pillows, excited him. As he took off his underpants, he thought about how big the sons he could have with Violet would be. But as he manipulated himself, the image of Violet's face and fantasized body gave



way increasingly to the face of Corliss Gluck and the odd look she gave him. It always happened, as though the two women were permanently connected for him; the picture of Corliss always increasing his desire, the increased desire expanding his self-loathing. When he came, the relief was always tinged with anger.

Later, when he awoke from dreams of mounds of flesh pliable beneath his greedy hands, from nightmares of long, thin legs and sharply protruding hip bones, N. Leon felt a sense of desperation. He decided to go over to Flossie's; maybe this time he would say something to Violet. He showered, applied a generous spray of Right Guard antiperspirant under each arm, and then generally all over himself.

Standing on the small stool in front of the sink, N. Leon brushed his teeth vigorously. He could only see his head's reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror, the only mirror in the house. He knew his features were too delicate for a man; at thirty-three, he didn't even need to shave. Like the hair on his head, all the hair on his body was soft and fine, and his face was as smooth as it had been in childhood. Once, after his mother died, he put her make-up on, just to see. He would have been a very pretty girl, he thought, then he scrubbed it all off and threw the cosmetics away. At thirty-three, looking in the mirror as he brushed his teeth, N. Leon realized he had never really felt like a man. Even his sexual fantasies retained the same qualities of those he had had at twelve.

He dressed carefully, his hands shaking in fearful anticipation: a fresh shirt, this one in bright blue, which he thought would set off his blond hair, and a pair of dark blue, neatly creased jeans he'd ordered from the boys' section of the Sears' catalog. He wore a pair of custom-made cowboy boots with a good-sized heel and a hidden lift inside; with these, N. Leon stood a little over five-four.

As he walked down to Flossie's, he planned what he might say. By the time he reached the shop door, he hadn't even decided on the best greeting. He hesitated at the door; the last time he'd gotten up the nerve to come here, he'd learned his infatuation for Violet had become general knowledge when Flossie told him with a gentle smile that Violet was off that afternoon. He'd blushed deeply, then tried to stammer his way past the moment by saying he'd come in for some glue.

The shop door stood open this time as well, but now N. Leon could see Violet in her chair, chewing gum and reading the latest *Cosmo*. Seeing no one else in the store, N. Leon slipped in, hurrying behind the shelves farthest from the check-out counter. His breath came rapidly, his heart thumped. On the shelf in front of him was cat food; thinking only that a purchase would give him a reason to speak to Violet, N. Leon picked up some cans of Nine Lives' Liver and Bacon. But before he could round the shelves towards the counter, he heard someone enter the store.

"Hey, Violet. You seen Norbert today?" N. Leon recognized Sam's voice.

"Who?" Violet asked.

"Norbert. Leon Klabber. I went by his house to apologize, but he ain't on the porch, and no one answered the door."

"He hasn't been here. What you got to apologize for?" she wanted to know.

"I was kidding him this morning about having a crush on you. He didn't take it very good." N. Leon didn't hear Violet answer Sam; wanting very much to see the exchange, he snuck quietly towards the back of the shop, then around to where he could spy from the edge of a row of shelves. From his vantage point, N. Leon could see only part of the counter. Violet had returned to her magazine, ignoring Sam. "Didn't you hear me? I said Norbert's got the hots for you." *Sam*, thought N. Leon, *can't stand being ignored*, which Violet continued to do. Instead of feeling angry at Sam's comments, however, N. Leon felt relief, like he used to in grade school when everyone was short and the girls still considered him a possibility. Back then, no one ever approached the object of their desires directly; they always went through a friend, as though somehow that would make the rejection less embarrassing..

N. Leon's hope diminished at the sight of the frown wrinkling Violet's forehead; she looked angry. But Sam was mad, too, his tone increasingly hostile, his words not well considered. "I swear, Violet, the fat finally got in your ears. Guess you can't hear no more. Norbert's got a hard one for you."

Violet heaved herself to her feet. Leaning on the counter for support, she still loomed over Sam, her lank brown hair hanging in her eyes.

"I don't care, Sam, and if you aren't here to buy something, then you can just get your worthless ass out of this store, right now." Her fat jiggled and bounced with the anger.

"This ain't your store, you big cow. You can't tell me to get." To N. Leon, Sam's voice seemed shaky, feeble in the face of such overwhelming power.

Violet sat back down. "I can tell you what I damn well like."

Sam hesitated, then seemed to settle for a saving of face. "I think I might buy me some beans." He headed towards the back of the store.

N. Leon, mortified by Violet's dismissive "I don't care," set the cans quietly on the shelf nearest him. He walked slowly from the store, not caring anymore who saw him, out into the bright sunlight, and right into Corliss Gluck. "Leon," she began, but his humiliation was complete.

"You been here the whole time?" He pushed past her, but she stopped him a little ways down the sidewalk with a hand on his shoulder.

He turned to her, resenting the angle his head had to tilt to see her, his voice bitter. "I guess you think it's real funny, the idea of me with her." He grabbed her arm with both hands, forcing it off of him.

Corliss shrugged her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Leon."

N. Leon couldn't bear this woman whose looks made him feel every inch of height he lacked, who moved through a world designed for those like her, pitying him. Knowing he was about to cry in the face of such unwelcome sympathy, he turned and ran. He ran all the way home, stopping on his front porch to catch his breath before entering his house.

The house felt cool after the afternoon sun. Without stopping to lock the door, N. Leon headed towards the bathroom, removing his clothing along the way. He stood under the shower until the warm water ran cool, crying, washing away the sweat and humiliation. When he stepped from the shower, he didn't bother to dry off, but went straight to his bedroom, straight to his bed. For a few minutes he stared at his parents' portrait. Then, abruptly, he got up, went to the wall, removed the picture. "You shouldn't have married each other; you had no right to do that to me," he said to the smiling faces.

Carrying it to his mother's room, he hung it in its old place over the head of her bed. He looked at it a few minutes longer, standing at the foot of the bed. When he left the room, he paused to pick up his scattered clothes, putting them neatly into the hamper. Then he dressed himself again in a clean shirt and slacks. After he brushed his hair, he went back out to the porch where he perched himself on the edge of the rocking chair and gently began pushing himself back and forth, back and forth.

## GRACE IN A BONE-CHINA CUP

Carlton Fuller shook the excess water off his hands, dried them carefully on one of the unbleached Egyptian-cotton monogrammed handtowels, and combed the few wisps of hair he allowed to grow longer than the others over his bald pate. Then he picked up his Wedgwood cup and saucer and carried his tea into the study: Earl Grey, of course. Setting the tea down carefully to avoid sloshing it over the side and risk ruining the finish on his mahogany-topped desk, he seated himself, then pulled out his gold-leaf embossed, linen-paper stationary, admiring its fine creamy color.

"12 October. Dear Coz," he wrote, liking the sound of the phrase, although his cousin Henry wasn't overly fond of that particular appellation.

"You'll never guess what's happened here in our little hamlet. Remember that vile little man I wrote you about, Samuel Zellerbach? Last weekend he died a spectacularly gruesome death. It was the only spectacular thing in his whole life, as far as I know. I found it excessively distasteful, even disgusting, but I must admit he died in the ugly manner befitting his sordid life.

"But his funeral, my dear fellow, certainly wasn't spectacular; not that he ever did anything to merit a good

showing at his funeral: never helped anyone, never went out of his way for anything, unless it was a cruelty. I know this because I have comforted those he troubled in my job as pastor for Gafferton's Messiah Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, which, as you well know, is one of the better churches in town. Our congregation consists of some of the town's more prominent citizens. In fact, last year the governor of Oklahoma attended one of my services! I told you that already, though, didn't I? What I didn't tell you is that Carlton Riemer, pastor of Zion Evangelical Christian Church, in Tulsa, tried to plagiarize that particular sermon. I'm truly quite flattered. I notice he didn't volunteer for the Zellerbach funeral, though. Those Evangelicals don't go out of their way for anything, either."

Pastor Fuller paused to savor the feeling of pride he felt when one of his flock informed him she had heard Pastor Riemer give almost exactly the same sermon as the one the governor had attended in Gafferton. What an honor, he thought, to be plagiarized by such a noted personage. Using a tissue to blot his upper lip, Pastor Fuller smiled to himself, then returned to his letter.

"I had to give the Zellerbach fellow's eulogy this afternoon because no one else volunteered, and I saw it as my Christian duty. He didn't even warrant a memorial service before the funeral: just the gravesite proceedings. I wonder how he would feel if he knew only five mourners showed up for the funeral. Flossie Books, the most

compassionate woman in town and an avid funeral-goer, was there with Corliss Gluck, our local eccentric (if that's possible in a town simply crawling with them), who brought her dog along as usual. Imagine, Coz, a dog at a funeral!

"Jasper Dunwoodie, owner of the town's only tavern, and Garner Halliwell, owner and proprietor of the Spree 'n' Flee, our convenience store and the hub of the town's gossip system, showed up to lament the end of their lucrative association with Mr. Zellerbach. I do believe they split between them the unfortunate man's monthly disability checks; I know for a fact he enjoyed his beer very much. And, rather surprisingly, Violet Barnes, the chief object of Sam's ridicule for the last ten or fifteen years, put in an appearance. Such a surprise, let me tell you!"

Pastor Fuller stopped to sip his tea, which had grown tepid, but was not quite undrinkable. He smiled at the thought of how Flossie Books had dropped off a basket filled with all his favorites, mostly imports from England: real orange marmalade, shortbread, his beloved Earl Grey, some toffees in a tin, and, for a special treat, some smoked kippers in a tin with a box of stoneground wheat crackers. That Flossie was a real blessing; if only she looked, well, younger and prettier, he might easily have considered marrying her. He finished the tea, set the cup gently into the saucer to avoid chips, and began writing again.

"More surprising, dear boy, than Violet's presence was Leon Klabber's absence. Leon was the deceased's closest friend and the only person who actually seemed to enjoy



spending time with him, with the possible exception of Jasper and Garner. Everyone knows that Leon's already rare excursions from his house ended two months ago, in August. We all know why, too, because poor Mr. Zellerbach--an inveterate gossip--announced eagerly to anyone who would listen--one of my parishioners told me--how Leon was rejected at the hands of Violet, the most grotesquely obese person I've ever seen outside of a carnival midway. Leon has carried a torch for Violet since she was a mere child. Just thinking of the whole perverted situation makes me give a little shudder." He stopped to shudder, then wrote again.

"Mr. Zellerbach's mouth was probably the reason so few cared about his demise. He liked to discover people's weaknesses and torment them, which for him was a source of great humor. If you recall, I mentioned he always called me "Pastor Carlton," which he seemed to find amusing, or just "Fuller," as though I didn't merit the courtesy of my honorific. And I wasn't the only person on the receiving end of his viciousness. If he couldn't find something private, like Leon's crush on Violet, he'd employ the obvious--Violet's weight, Jasper's unusually large nose, the rather large and hirsute mole in the middle of Garner's forehead--and then, Coz, the man simply cackled away, clearly proud of what he considered great wit. Such a wasted life, I'm afraid."

The light entering the study window began to fade, so Pastor Fuller switched on the brass desk lamp Flossie Books had given him the previous Christmas. "It will look so

handsome, shining against the mahogany," he thanked her, then invited her to tea the next afternoon to admire it. He enjoyed her company; when they were alone, he played a little game, pretending he was British and assuming an accent.

"Oh, Pastor Fuller," she told him, "you sound so genuine. You must have spent a great deal of time there."

"Please, my dear, here you must call me Carlton. Alas, I have, unfortunately, spent only two brief vacations there, but I think of it as home. Someday, perhaps--" he broke off.

Now, sitting in his study, he thought, that perhaps next Christmas, or maybe for his sixteenth anniversary as a minister in Gafferton, he would find an airline ticket in a card. He turned back to the letter.

"He didn't discriminate: everyone in town, at some point, met with Mr. Zellerbach's sophomoric taunts. I remember vividly the night he saw me leaving Molly Hansen's. It was last spring when her husband was out of town. The whole town knows Molly's husband has a cycle of violence: heavy drinking, then thrashing his wife, after which: disappearance, contrite return, about two months of peace, repeat.

"Although my visit to Molly was in my role as minister and spiritual counselor, Mr. Zellerbach went beyond insinuations, snidely and loudly proclaiming me a philanderer. Me! A Christian and a town leader! The man's nerve never failed to astound me. And this town seems to be

made up of ears and mouths: gossip is the lifeblood, recreational industry, and chief source of employment for Gafferton. So the man's little comments fell on avid ears and created hard feelings on the part of Burl, which is a continuing source of fear for me.

"I confess to you, Coz, I didn't like Mr. Zellerbach very much at all, although I find this feeling difficult to reconcile with Christian charity. Giving his eulogy was rather difficult; one doesn't want to appear hypocritical, although I give myself a little pat on the back for putting my responsibility ahead of my inclinations.

"I didn't mind the job too much, standing out in the fresh air. No gloomy day reflecting grief: today was one of the most beautiful days I've ever known. Indian summer is one of the few blessings of this area, complete with skies so intensely blue it simply hurts my eyes to look. The maples are brilliant crimson, the oaks a bright gold, both vivid against the local cedars' dark green. God's hand shows everywhere. Days like these make me walk around wanting to smile all the time, and my duties at Mr. Zellerbach's funeral did nothing to stop the feeling. I had to control the smile, of course; I couldn't have people thinking I was actually glad he was dead.

"And I must tell you, Coz, the casket was, out of necessity, closed. Although I knew Mr. Zellerbach personally--though, of course, only slightly, I decided on the standard funeral text because I hoped the rote wording of it would allow me to concentrate on not letting my

expression show anything but concern and respect; after all, as a minister I have a responsibility to maintain a certain level of dignity in such matters. For two days, since the accident, I've tried to decide how to describe the death metaphorically for the eulogy part of the service. I thought of saying he met his death head on, but that isn't entirely true. My true inclination, given Mr. Zellerbach's life, was to employ the phrase *just desserts*, but that would have been unseemly."

At this point, feeling pleased with his consideration, Pastor Fuller stopped to make dinner, just some soup and a sandwich. He preferred a light evening meal, but made up for it with hearty English breakfasts. He ate, as always, in the dining room, as good manners must not, he felt, be abandoned simply because one was alone. After he washed the pan and his dishes, dried them, and carefully put them away, he returned to his study. Pastor Fuller disliked leaving a task undone.

"The accident can be blamed primarily on Mr. Zellerbach's excessive drinking. Drinking is another popular recreational activity in Gafferton, coming in a very close second to gossip. I don't recall ever seeing the deceased without a beer in his hand, unless, perhaps, he was on his way to get one. He had the drinker's physique, a rotund tummy hanging on a frame that was otherwise skinny; I doubt he ate very often. His limited funds must have required priority budgeting: beer and cigarettes, 90%; everything else was paid out of what remained. He owned the

little trailer he lived in; only in winter did he have utilities turned on so he wouldn't freeze. He slept there; at all other times, he could be found at Jasper's tavern, with Garner at the Spree 'n' Flee, over at Leon Klabber's, or wandering up and down the streets of town. He always had a cigarette in his mouth. He usually smelled. His uniform was a pair of overalls, sometimes with a t-shirt, and in winter with a thin jacket. He would have been a pitiable man if he hadn't been so mean.

"The night of the accident, Mr. Zellerbach was, as I have been given to understand, lounging around outside Garner's store with Burl Hansen and a few of Gafferton's other barflies. The bar closes at one, which is as early as I could get the other city council members to agree to, but these men are often reluctant to leave, especially if Burl or one of the others thinks to bring an ice chest of beer along in the back of one of their farm vehicles. The sheriff seldom interferes with these inebriates, unless they become overly aggressive and take it upon themselves to break someone's shop window or fire their rifles into the night, which is fairly often. On those unpleasant nights when the shots ring out, I hope the sheriff will put them in jail for a few days, because Burl Hansen's violence against poor, pretty little Molly usually follows these episodes closely.

"I can't understand why Molly stays with him, or even how she connected with him in the first place. Burl isn't bad looking; in fact, I believe most women would describe

him as attractive, if, as Flossie tells me, they are the kind of women who appreciate brawn over sensitivity. But I've always felt Molly's gentle loveliness better belongs with a more refined sort of man than with a nordic Neanderthal. She is such a lovely, spiritual creature, both in action and appearance, but I fear she takes loyalty to a point beyond discretion.

"At the time of the poor unfortunate's accident, however, Burl wasn't at the point in his "cycle" where the violence against his wife begins. As I understand it, the men were in fairly good spirits, joking with each other and telling stories as they sat on the curb of Garner's sidewalk watching the intermittent traffic go by on the highway. Gafferton sits on a little two-lane state road which is pretty well traveled by boaters headed to Lake Carl Blackwell and by trucks carrying produce--primarily good Oklahoma wheat--from the farm areas to the cities. Some nights these hooligan men like to throw rocks at the passing cars, and once in a while they even shoot above the vehicles trying to scare the drivers. I imagine one of these days some angry truck driver will shoot back. I must say with all sadness, Henry, my dear, I watch the world around me get angrier and more ready for violence; not even a little place like Gafferton is immune, although most of us do not participate; most of us are decent, God-fearing souls who only want to live in peace. And to help others, of course.

"Actually, from the stories going around town since the accident, I don't think Mr. Zellerbach ever threw any rocks

or fired off any shots. He was more like an incendiary device: he used his twisted sense of humor to spark the violence, then gleefully watched the conflagration he had created. Sometimes I lie awake wondering if Mr. Zellerbach's propensity for starting trouble ever resulted in the beatings Molly receives at Burl's hands. At those moments, despite my struggle against it, I actually hate the man--not to speak ill of the dead--and not with one iota of remorse, for I believe God has little tolerance for those whose words are so cruel and dangerous.

"I hated Mr. Zellerbach as much as I hate Burl when I see Molly's blackened eyes and split lips, her broken nose and bruised arms. Thinking how Mr. Zellerbach was partly responsible for the damage Burl does to sweet little Molly, I found it very difficult to even offer the general funeral service today, when what I wanted to say was that the world was better off without Mr. Zellerbach.

"I did find out yesterday, Coz, he may once have been a different sort of man. I ran into Flossie Books on my way to my church to do some paperwork. She's the one who asked me to do the eulogy; apparently the Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, and Unitarian--and Evangelical Lutheran--ministers all had previous engagements. For the sake of charity, I altered my schedule to accommodate the funeral. Flossie walked along with me to my office. She seemed very grateful to me, so I asked her why she felt so compelled to help such an . . . unfortunate person. She went on vaguely about Mr. Zellerbach's having once lived in the south, with a good job

working nights at a factory, a nice house, a pretty wife, a couple of kids. He didn't use to drink, she told me, before the morning he came home to a street full of firetrucks and the black ruins of his life.

"The investigator determined the fire was caused by matches, probably by one of the children, but a rumor started that his wife had been drunk, had passed out with a lit cigarette in her hand. I could appreciate the irony of one cliché being substituted for another--matches and children, drunks and burning cigarettes--but given this situation, I could not understand how a man who had left a whole region of a country because of gossip, could be the primary source of it now.

"Or then, I should say, since Mr. Zellerbach is, after all, dead. So completely and utterly dead. I feel sorry for the undertaker who had to embalm the body; surely a cremation was more in order. City bylaws, however, require an indigent person to be buried in a coffin. As I looked at his coffin this afternoon, the cheapness of it, and then at the emotionless faces of all the mourners except Flossie, the only one who cried, I wondered where his companions in debauchery were. Certainly not at Garner's, which required extensive repairs after the accident. Even as I recited the 23rd Psalm, I was hoping Burl wasn't at home, taking whatever grief he might feel out on Molly.

"Poor Molly. I remember that night last spring. It was Flossie then, too, who asked me to look in at the Hansen's on my way home from a baptism. Burl had been at



her again, then vanished. I thought of Molly's serious face in church on Sundays, her grave and frightened-looking brown eyes turned upwards towards me, hopeful. She was always pale, always fragile. Once I had seen her smile, her face completely revised into something of rare beauty, and I felt a stirring of real grief that she--her life, that is--was so wasted on such a man. But last spring, as she cried quietly and told me if she left him, he would kill her, I wanted to find a way to protect her. I'd never felt a more intense feeling in my life than I did at that moment. I am confident about where Burl's black soul will go after he dies. Right now I wish it had been Burl who'd been killed two nights ago.

"It wasn't Burl, though; it was Mr. Zellerbach who, drunk as a sailor on leave, sat on the curb with his cigarette hanging out of his mouth as his buddies decided to play a game I believed they call "Light the Fart," if you will please pardon my language, dear man. Burl is renowned in Gafferton for two things: his violent temper, which achieves physical expression only with the small woman married to him, and his flatulence. The way the story was told to me, he emitted a particularly large blast, which, when lit, flamed dangerously close to Mr. Zellerbach's face. One of his cronies, old Gervis Louder, told one of my flock that Mr. Zellerbach jerked backwards to avoid getting singed, causing his cigarette to fall inside the bib of his overalls.

You'll appreciate this dialect, Coz. Old Gervis Louder

told my parishioner, "They ain't nothing as loud as Sam when he gets it into his mind to holler." Not a charming linguistic form, is it? He was chuckling, evidently forgetting "Sam" was no more. As I understand, Mr. Zellerbach jumped up, causing the cigarette to slide into the crotch of his overalls. "At least, the way he kept grabbing himself down there and squealing made it seem that ways," Gervis told my congregation member. Jumping and dancing around, trying to get the cigarette to fall down one of the pants' legs, Mr. Zellerbach apparently didn't realize he was out in the highway.

As Gervis tells it, Mr. Zellerbach had his back to oncoming traffic in that lane, so as he stooped to retrieve the cigarette once he achieved his goal of dislodging it, he failed to see the oncoming cattle truck. He stood, replaced the cigarette in his mouth, and was promptly struck by the truck, which was already in a swerve as the driver tried--desperately, I imagine--to avoid Mr. Zellerbach. How strange his death was caused by such a bad habit, what a case of divine irony that he, like his family in the South, should be killed by tobacco and drink.

No coroner's inquest has been called to determine at which moment exactly Mr. Zellerbach went to our Maker for judgement. We aren't sure whether it happened upon initial impact, when the speed of the truck or a strap of his overalls pinned him to the grille, or if he died when the front end smashed into the side of Garner's store, with Sam sandwiched between the metal and the concrete. I do wonder

if he saw the building coming, what brief remorse he may have felt at his wasted life. I find the whole episode tragic, simply tragic, although not entirely undeserved.

I must go now, Coz, dear: duty calls, you know. Drop me a line soonest.

Yours,

Carlton

p.s. By the 'bye, Coz, the truck was empty, so no cattle were injured, nor was the driver.

After addressing an envelope, Pastor Fuller recapped his pen and put it away. With the letter neatly folded and inserted into the envelope, which he then carefully placed a first-class stamp on, he arose from his desk wondering if his cousin Henry kept his letters in the event that someday someone might wish to publish the Carlton Fuller sermons and correspondence. He went to bed after deciding the night simply wasn't chilly enough to warrant a flannel nightcap.

## ZAMFIR AND SPLIT-PEA SOUP

What do you do when your mother says, "Corliss, you were born evil," her voice so matter-of-fact you can't even redeem her by her own anger? Most people would hang up on her; I decided to throw a family reunion. I should have known that twenty-four years of living on my own had not prepared me for an onslaught of people--family, at that. By their second day in my home, my family had become invaders of my peacefulness, looting of my stock of joviality until only a little was left, and I began to think my mother was right.

I pulled my head away from the cool window where I was leaning, fantasizing about silence. Focusing my sight on the glass itself, I could see, reflected from behind me, both the Christmas tree--always depressing the day after Christmas--and my sister Jellie's youngest, six-year-old Cameron Lee, who was picking his nose. I watched as the child examined the prize, almost speaking when Cameron draped his arm casually over the side of my dark blue couch to wipe his finger against the material. Scolding the boy was too much effort; after all, I'd done the same thing at his age, and it would brush off when dry. Jellie, though, saw what he was up to with that radar-vision mothers seem to have when their children are doing something naughty. She

shrieked, "Cammy! That's disgusting. Don't let me ever catch you doing that again! Go get some tissue and clean that off right now. And tell Aunt Corliss you're sorry."

Not wanting to be drawn back into the tableau behind me, I turned around slowly. If I told Jellie and Cameron just to forget the little incident, it just wasn't worth it, Jellie would corner me later. "Corliss," she'd begin in a voice so sweet it was scary, "please do not interfere when I reprimand my children. After all," as she would be sure to point out, "you are not a mother, now, are you? How could you be expected to understand a child's need to learn good manners?" And I would stand, fists clenched, wanting so much to show my own bad manners to this sister I could not relate to. She has never and will never forgive me for our youth, but I long since stopped feeling guilty about the two or three of Jel's boyfriends who fell for me, her older, less attractive sister.

My appearance, in fact, has always been a source of contention in our family, which couldn't really help itself; all that we were came from one another. My mother was mean to me because, like my father, I was tall and thin--statuesque on my better days--with his dark coloring and sharply angled features. More than that, though: I reminded her too much of her failure with him, I, her first born and his favorite and Mother was not one to come in second. My sisters looked like her: tiny, plump, and pale. Pretty, all of them.

One afternoon, not long after Dad died, my mother drove

all of us to the mall to have a portrait made. I felt keenly the significance of her timing, and sulked all the way there, as only a fourteen-year-old girl can sulk. When the photographer's cheery command, "Give me a big smile, now" turned into a plea aimed directly at me in the back, my mother turned to me. "You don't add much to the picture. If you can't smile, go wait outside." I smiled, a grimace which hung on our living room wall until I moved out at eighteen and she immediately had a new portrait taken of herself, Jellie, and Eileen, all blonde and happy-looking. I think the reasons my sisters and I look so unlike is I got Dad's genes before they succumbed to my mother's vanquishing personality. He simply retreated into a passivity which finally failed him, sending him permanently AWOL.

I don't mind how I look; it's what I am. I'm stuck with it, having no inclination to end up with a face looking like my ponytail holder is too tight. And the old boyfriends of Jellie's who fell for me--three, I think--were probably just picking up on her strange signals. My own passiveness would have kept me from ever encouraging Jellie's beaux; besides, when I left for college, they all turned their attentions to Eileen, the youngest and prettiest of the Gluck sisters. Jellie didn't understand her sisters weren't doing anything overt to cause these defections. She frequently whined, "Mother, Corliss is flirting with David" or "Mother, Corliss is hogging the conversation." As she usually did this when the boy was

sitting there, it was her own fault she scared them off. In her last year of high school, Anjelica Gluck was described under her senior photo as the "Girl-most-likely-to . . . get married." She might as well have worn a sandwich board with *References concerning future prospects necessary; serious applicants only* emblazoned across the front, and, as a postscript on the back, *Apply within*. The boys figured her out very quickly.

Jellie's not entirely to blame for her sourpuss ways; I never said to her, "Come on, Jellie, let's spend the afternoon bicycle riding" or suggested we go shopping. I hated spending time with her. She spent most of her time reading too many paperback romances as she hit puberty, those cheap little novels with heroines who doubt everything about themselves--physically, emotionally, and intellectually--and exude such a lack of self-appreciation that I was sure the books were a plot by some secret Masonic organization to keep women submissive. It worked with Jellie; any time the subject of my unmarried condition comes up, Jellie feels obliged to inform me, "Corliss, you are too aggressive."

"I'm assertive," I tell her. "There's a difference."

"You're bossy and pushy, and men hate that," is her final statement on the matter: "men hate that" is the doctrine by which she makes her choices.

I believe--after her sixteen years of marriage and four children--Jellie began wondering if perhaps she had left a disturbing hole in her life. Something was bothering her,

but she never spoke of it to me, because--despite my reasonable financial security--my lack of marital bliss marks me as strange in her eyes. "*Queer old thing, aren't you?*" was what she said to me once, and the stress she put on it made it clear she wondered about my sexual preference, which of course made me even less desirable as a confidante.

I once regretted our distance, but lately it has become a source of relief. Besides, in a house full of people related to yet remote from me, I had far more than simply Jellie to worry about, such as the loud crash and treble scream from the kitchen.

My mother called to me from the couch, "Corliss, you'd better get in there and see what's going on." *I'm not ten, mother. Quit ordering me around,* I couldn't quite say aloud. I dragged myself away from my window, making my way to the kitchen over the bodies of children, their Crayola drawings as visible on my beautiful wood flooring as they were on the sheets of paper. I smiled at my Aunt Edith as I passed through the haze of cigarette smoke in the living room, where I regretted my impulse to permit smoking in the interest of hospitality because, as a non-smoker of only eleven months, it was a terrible temptation.

I reached the kitchen, where my brother-in-law Kenny--Eileen's husband--had dropped a tray of sandwiches I made earlier. Boyo, my Irish wolfhound, was gulping the sandwiches down as fast as possible and growling at Rat and Mouse, my two cats waiting their turn. Tiffany--my sister is pretty, not *original*--Eileen's only child and a very



spoiled one, lay flat on her back behind the dog, trying to shatter eardrums. I knew Boyo must have knocked her down as he made for the people food, but she seemed uninjured. In his usual ineffective way, Kenny yelled at the dog rather than comforting his daughter. "You miserable beast! You hairy monster! Someone needs to teach you--" He saw me, changing targets in mid-sentence: "Corliss, this dog shouldn't be in here with all these kids! He might bite someone!"

Boyo never bit anyone in his life, and as this was his house and Kenny dropped the goodies in the first place, I wanted to tell him I was the one likely to start biting people. Instead, staying calm with difficulty, I simply said, "Ken, Boyo can't help his size. Just calm Tiff down; I'll take him out." As the sandwiches were gone, I easily tempted Boyo to follow me to the utility porch, where I put on gloves and a ski jacket.

The porch, poorly insulated and unheated, suggested the coldness beyond its door, and I zipped my jacket fast, desperate to escape. Unfortunately, my mother chose that moment to enter the kitchen, where Kenny had helped Tiffany to her feet, ignoring the tray and all the bits of lettuce, tomato, and onion spread across the tile floor, which Boyo left as inedible and the cats disdained.

Close at Mother's heels was Bertram, her fourth and most anxious-to-please husband. Mother was complaining to Bert, "My first husband would never have spent an entire afternoon watching sports."

Bert, who'd probably heard the litany over miraculous husband number one before, a refrain finally boring her husbands away, leaving my mother to her next victim, stood behind her, an unfocused look on his face. Even though the litany I heard was altered, my mother was equally at ease griping to me, "Your father had that heart attack just to spite me. He was only thirty-seven, for Christ's sake. He died just to saddle me with three daughters, too many unpaid bills, and your Grandma Gluck. He practically forced me to keep getting married. It's his fault I keep winding up with bad husbands. I should have died. That would've showed him." The last time she said this to me, on the day of my aborted wedding, I said, "You're right, mother, you should have." That remark led to months of her not speaking to me until she called to tell me I was born evil.

Grandma Gluck, on the other hand, always insisted her son had been done in by "that ungrateful shrew" he married against her express wishes. The matching personalities between the two women kept them equal in battle. What amazed me was that Mother never left Grandma Gluck behind when she remarried, keeping the old woman by her side like a thorn whose prick has somehow become a balm. I think my mother sincerely missed Grandma Gluck after her death; after all, her relationship with the old woman lasted longer than any of her marriages.

Once in the kitchen, Mother, tired of nagging Bertram in the living room, looked for new prey: me. "Corliss, where on earth are you going? I hope you're not leaving

your company to go traipsing off with that damned dog again."

*Give me patience*, I thought, and answered, "No, Mother. We're low on wood. I'm going to grab a few logs."

"Have one of the men do that for you. Bertram, get outside and get some wood. Take a break from pestering me, for Christ's sake." Long-suffering Bertram, who at seventy-three, quiet and slow-moving, seemed a less likely wood-fetcher than a hale forty-two-year-old woman familiar with the place's contours at night, obediently and silently turned to find his coat.

I wanted out of there; I had to stop him and risk Mother's disapproval. "Wait, Bert," I said. "I'm already dressed for it. Anyhow, Boyo needs to go, and I have to keep an eye on him."

Mother, frustrated in her attempt to order Bert around and ignoring Kenny's possibilities as a firewood collector, returned to her original dog theme. "That damned dog is spoiled rotten. Why d'you even let him into the house? The barn'd be fine for him," she continued, never one to pass up a captive audience.

Kenny, having finally deposited Tiffany in her mother's arms, found an ally in his dog-discrimination suit, and hastened to press his advantage. "That's right, Aggie," Kenny whined, his voice aggrieved. Mother never allowed her sons-in-law to call her Mrs. Husband-of-the-moment's-name or Mother; it would age her beyond her sixty-five-but-claiming-forty-nine. She refused to get to fifty, even though I was

now only seven years behind her and looked every year of my forty-two. Kenny claimed her attention again: "A dog that big shouldn't be in the house. He tried to bite Tiffy, and she didn't do anything to him."

God, Kenny tried my evaporating patience. Even if Boyo had tried to bite Tiffany, she'd have deserved it. For the past six days she'd been using him as a tug-of-war rope, a punching bag, and, two days earlier, on Christmas Eve, a trampoline. Since I couldn't reprimand my sisters' children, only threats of leaving Santa a note about what a very bad little girl she'd been, so he ought to just take her presents away with him, got her off my dog. She told on me, of course, and for the rest of the evening I was subjected to adults shaking their heads at me in disbelief, even when we filled the last two pews at Christmas Eve service. I don't think any of them heard a word about the Blessed Birth; they all just waited to catch my eye so they could shake their heads, Mother's going the most vigorously.

Knowing she was only biding her time until the children were asleep to vent her shock and disbelief at my cruelty, I took Boyo out on a long walk as soon as we returned to my house, and stayed gone for several hours, until I knew everyone would be asleep. That walk is what Mother was referring to when she said my dog and I *traipsed*.

So, two nights after what my mother called "attempted child-abuse," I opened the porch door and let the cold air blast in to shut Kenny up and force him and Mother into the warmer regions of the house. Boyo leapt out past me, as

disgusted with my family as I was. I didn't really need to watch him. He was free to wander as he pleased, but we both enjoyed our walks. This time, though, I let him run off on his own. I didn't want exercise, just peace. I walked over to the barn, going around to the back of it where I couldn't be seen from the house, to sit on my old wooden bench. The cold was a welcome relief, but I did brush the snow off the bench so I wouldn't get wet. I sat there for a little while, mostly not even thinking, just wanting a cigarette more than I ever had before. I looked out across my big pasture.

The moon, almost full, was rising directly behind me and the barn, and its light spreading beyond me on the snow-smoothed field reflected as though on water. I wanted to get to my feet and follow the light, to head into the dark cedars that looked like land on the horizon, away from my family until I was so cold my anger was frozen out of me. But I just sat there until a little while later Jellie's voice floated out across the yard, shrill even at that distance: "Cor-liss! The fire's almost out! What's taking you so long?"

I lurched to my feet, trudged through the snow to the wood box on the side of the house, and carried four good-sized logs into the living room. "Corliss," my aunt Edith cried, "you're tracking snow in here! You'll ruin the wax!" Liking Edith usually, and feeling sorry for her, too, I didn't bother to point out the children had already made a new wax job necessary; I returned to the porch where I kept

a pair of slippers.

Edith, like me, was a spinster, but unlike me, always wanted to be married. I almost married once, at the insistence of the man I thought I loved, Marcus, and my mother and sisters. Once I agreed to marry, however, I put my foot down against a large ceremony, asking for just immediate family in an office at the county courthouse. Mother, Jellie, and Eileen stomped all over my foot, and before I knew what was happening, I had bills on my desk for a \$3,500 wedding dress that made me look like the Sta-Puf Marshmallow man, it was so loaded down with fripperies and frills; over \$1,000 worth of flowers; the rental fee for a huge church and reception hall; caterers; champagne (only the good stuff, Jellie insisted--no use in people thinking the family is cheap); bridesmaid's dresses for my sisters, who nominated themselves for roles I didn't hold in their weddings; and 600 engraved invitations which Mother sent to people I'd never heard of.

It took me a three-year bank loan to cover the expenses, and the gifts I got did little to make up for it: a yellow and pink platter with little oval depressions in it made to hold deviled eggs, some orange bath towels, a three-foot vase the green of split-pea soup, seven blenders, and the complete collection of Zamfir's pan-pipe music.

Then, on the eve of our wedding, my fiance slept with the stripper my brother-in-law Kenny provided and set me free. I stood up to my mother's, "Corliss, men will do these things. It doesn't mean Marcus doesn't love you."

"No, Mother. I'm not getting married," I told her.

She wailed. Yelled. Threatened never to speak to me again, then yelled some more when I looked too happy at that idea. "Corliss, he's a professor! How can you pass up a professor?"

"No, Mother. I'm not getting married."

And the *coup de grace*: "Don't hold your breath for another chance." Come to think of it, there was a great deal of head shaking going on then, too, only then there was no snow with which to throw away the anger. There were, however, a broken platter, seven broken blenders, and yards of unwound cassette tapes. The animals got new orange bedding, and I got to relearn how it felt to sleep alone on a smooth expanse of cold, white sheets.

I found ignoring my family's effort to outwait my reluctance to find another man increasingly easy, but I felt sorry for Aunt Edith's spinster state in the face of what must be constant nose-rubbing on my mother's part. But Edith lived in her sister's shadow all her life, and after Grandma Gluck's death, moved in with Mother. A quiet woman, Edith seldom spoke unless questioned directly, and never, ever disagreed with my mother. So, on that last night of the family gathering, I thought about asking Edith if she wanted to stay on a while, assuming she, like me, desired nothing more than to be rid of Mother's bossiness. I thought I might like having her there, someone to talk to who wouldn't want to talk all the time, and who wouldn't need to talk about children or men.

While Jellie and Eileen put the kids to bed, Mother directed Bertram and Howard as to the placement of players for canasta, and Kenny ransacked my pantry for alcohol, I stoked the fire and quietly asked Edith, sitting in an armchair next to me, if she'd like to stay on.

"Oh, no, honey, I couldn't dream of it!" she exclaimed, glancing at Mother. She looked afraid, had even grown pale at the thought of leaving Mother, so I didn't push the issue.

"That's okay, Edith," I said in my most soothing tone. "Maybe you can just come for a little visit sometime." She seemed to relax, her hands easing their grip on the chair, but when Mother proclaimed all to be ready, Edith excused herself from the game. Mother scowled, but I guess she figured she had enough players with the rest of us: she left her sister alone. Mother plays cut-throat canasta, and her objective is to clean everyone out. She never plays unless money is involved, so money is always involved.

We played for hours with an odd sort of system: Mother yelled, "Canasta," then hummed Jerry Lee Lewis while she tallied the points. Every few hands, Howard apologized, "Canasta," and Mother tallied the points grimly. Kenny too drunk to know what he was doing, chimed in occasionally, "Haven't I won anything yet?" Bert, Jellie, and Eileen never dared to win, sitting silently for the most part. But I didn't lose quietly. I slammed my cards down each time Mother sang out. I laughed when Howard won a hand. I prodded the others to try harder. And then it happened: I



won a hand. I couldn't believe it.

"Canasta," I screamed. After about four hours, nearly all of us had had more than a few glasses of wine.

"Canasta!"

"Let me see your cards," mother commanded. "Let me see them right now."

"Are you accusing me of cheating?" I demanded, and I heard one of my sisters gasp.

"Yes. You never win. Ever." She held her hand out for my cards. I drew my hand back and realized I was going to throw them at her, hard. I couldn't. I know it was partly because it was my house and I couldn't drop my rôle as host so easily. But I know it was mostly because I wasn't ready to step off that edge yet, to risk permanent eviction from them. And I knew they would do whatever Mother told them to. I handed her my cards.

She looked them over, then, grudgingly, "This hand does win." Not, "You win, Corliss." Just the hand. But the moment passed. She added up the points aloud, as though to prove she wouldn't cheat me, and the game went on.

Upon winning her sixth or seventh game, Mother, giving in to the euphoria of winning and of several strawberry daiquiris, called for champagne. I still had several of the hundred cases my mother ordered for my aborted wedding four years earlier. I had just offered to go to the basement to get a couple bottles when Boyo, returning from his wanderings, announced his desire to come in.

Then Bert surprised me by offering to go to the

basement while I let the dog in. "Thanks, Bert," I said, and then, because he had never been to the basement before, I added, "Edith, would you show Bert where it is?" as I headed for the porch door. Mother was busy getting some snacks together, with Jellie's help, and Eileen was trying with no success to persuade the drunken Kenny to go to bed. Howard, as usual, just sat there looking bored.

Boyo's long fur, of course, was covered with ice balls, and I spent a little while with a blow dryer and my fingers working them out. When I returned to the living room, Kenny was passed out, his head on the table, and Mother, her mouth full of cheese and crackers, was regaling the others with a rehashing of her card prowess. "What took you so long, Corliss? That damned dog is too much trouble." She spoke around the last crumbs of a saltine, tiny bits of which shot out of her mouth with each word.

"His name is Boyo, Mother, not 'that damned dog."

"Aren't we Miss Particular," she said, tossing her purplish-auburn-tinted curls. "Where on earth is Bert with that champagne? What's he doing, drinking it all himself?" She took another piece of cheese. "See what they're up to, Corliss."

I stopped myself from saying "yes, sir" and headed for the basement. I padded down the stairs in my slippers, skirting the empty Christmas decoration boxes and going around the corner to the cool, dark area where I kept the champagne. Even with the overhead light on, the corner was still dim, and it took me a second to realize what I was

seeing was Bert with his pants down around his ankles, one of his hands up under the back of Edith's skirt, and the other on her left breast, which was still covered by the bra exposed by her unbuttoned blouse.

We stood there for a few seconds, all three of our mouths hanging open, and then suddenly and, I will always hope, unintentionally, I said "Oh my God" in the strident voice I had inherited from my mother. She must have already been on her way to the basement, because she was there in a matter of seconds, before Bert could get his pants up or Edith her clothes buttoned and pulled down. At least he no longer had his hands on her. I was still in shock, whether from realizing people their age still wanted to do it, or from finding anyone who would intentionally risk such an extreme level of wrath from Mother.

She, however, recovered quickly from her shock, and, as her face rapidly turned purple, began to shriek. Bert stepped in front of Edith, between her and Mother, and I realized Edith's reluctance to stay with me had nothing to do with Mother and everything to do with Bert. Mother leapt at Bert, fingers curved and extended like well-manicured claws, and he calmly pushed her away. She tripped over a case of champagne and went down, winded; pulling up his pants with one hand, Bert grabbed Edith with his other, leading her up the stairs, leaving me alone with Mother angrier than I'd ever seen her.

I moved towards her, wanting to laugh but stifling it, deciding to be soothing, to offer her the reassurance she

would need regarding her femininity, to express the love she still received from her offspring even though I wasn't sure I meant it. But as I reached her, she got her wind back and screamed, "Edith, you backstabber! You ungrateful hussy!" as loud as she could, which was impressive, and I laughed . . . just one snort, smothered as soon as it came out. But she heard it. She heard it and turned her glare on me. Pointing a shaking finger at me as she struggled to get up, she started in: "You! What kind of daughter are you? After everything I've done for you, you pimp for my husband and my sister!"

That was all I could take. I howled with laughter, cried for the stupidity of the situation, of my mother's selfishness, and almost wet my pants. I laughed so hard I could hardly see, so when the first bottle of champagne hit my knee, it surprised more than hurt me. I sobered up enough to see her arming herself with another missile from the torn-open box, and I ran. As I went up the stairs, I could hear the explosions behind me as bottle after bottle came flying after me, crashing harmlessly against the concrete steps. Everyone, including the children and a barely conscious Kenny, gathered at the top of the steps. Bert and Edith explained nothing, so a chorus of "What's going on? What'd you do to her?" met me at the top. I was still laughing, and shoved my way through, ignoring their questions. Boyo was barking, trying to get to me, and he must have accidentally stepped on Mouse, who yowled and turned to claw him, evidently missing and getting little

Tiffany's calf instead, judging by the scream she let out. My cat Rat, wisely, was nowhere to be seen. I made my way to the back porch, where I pulled on my boots, gloves, and jacket. As soon as I opened the door, both cats streaked past me, headed for the barn. Then Boyo came bounding out, and I ran after him, skirting the barn and heading for the big pasture, where I stopped for a minute, still grinning while I sucked in deep draughts of the cold air.

The moon, close to setting, was now directly in front of me, its light making pale skeleton fingers out of the sycamores on the edge of the field across which its path beckoned me. The ripples and dips in the land hollowed the fresh snow into waves in a night sea. I felt a benediction in the silence as I scooped up handfuls of snow to press against my face. I knew as though it were fact my mother would soon be seeking number five; Edith would have her man; and my cross, the thorn in my side, was this family who made me feel . . . something in the vast loneliness I tried to think of as solitude.

Finally, holding on to my laughter, I set off towards the moon's bright promise, leaving deep footprints on the moon-blued sea. Sometimes it really was solitude.

## HE WAS NOT A STUPID MAN

"Wife Kills Husband with Weedwhacker" read the headline of the newspaper article Molly Hansen taped to the bathroom mirror. Her own reflection showed fading evidence of the last beating Burl gave her, the bruises brown with age, the swelling of her nose almost gone. The rat bastard. It would not, absolutely not happen again. No more forgiving him when he cried about how sorry he was. No more taking him back from fear of what he would do if she said no to him.

Molly only saw her reflection peripherally, not wanting to look any closer at the ugliness the mirror offered. She realized the main reason she could no longer find her own prettiness was because that's what Burl first saw in her, what he first spoke to her about, what--she soon understood --he cared only about. She was heartsick over the awareness she responded to him primarily because of his own blond good looks. She felt like puking when she thought of her blushing giggle at the first words he ever spoke to her, at the all-night diner where she started on nights when she was only seventeen: "Damn, woman, you must be just about the finest-looking thing God ever put on this planet. Did anyone ever tell you you look just like Donna Mills?" She'd only been working there three nights. Not yet hardened to

the overtures of drunken, early morning customers, she allowed him to buy her breakfast when she got off work. Her third night of work was her last job outside of her own house for seven years. They'd been together ever since.

She made her decision to end the marriage on Thanksgiving, when she got the worst beating she ever had. He'd put her in the hospital before, but this time she had a ruptured spleen, a broken arm, and a face that was barely recognizable as human. Two other differences in this beating were that Burl was not drunk when he did it and he never came crying for forgiveness. Before, she could always rationalize letting him stay: an alcoholic, Burl was not responsible for his actions when drunk. She knew this from how sorry he was when he'd finally come home a week or so later. This time he left, as usual, after the beating, on a job driving some cattle in western Montana over to Chicago. When he came back, he acted as though nothing ever happened, as though the cast on her arm, her hideous face were invisible.

"Man Dies of Internal Bleeding; Wife Feeds Him Glass in Crunchy Peanut Butter Cookies" was the headline of the article she attached to the shower head. It took her these three months since that beating to formulate her plan, to make furtive trips to the Oklahoma State University library over in Stillwater with Corliss Gluck when Burl was out on a job. Burl wouldn't let her have her own car. He was not a stupid man. In the moments when he used to cry to her of his shame, he expressed his fear of her leaving. At other

moments this fear came out as "Don't you even think of going anywhere, Molly. I'd find you no matter where you went; I swear I would. I'd find you if you went to the ends of the earth." Molly believed him with all her heart.

"Husband Dies From Snakebite" headed the article about a wife who put a black mambo snake in her husband's fishing waders. "You'd be surprised how easy it is to get any kind of snake you need," the article quoted the woman. Molly underlined that section, put a big star by it, and attached the article to the coffee maker. She thought about her time in the hospital, making her decision to leave. Despite the pain, she felt no inclination to cry; she hadn't cried in over two years. Instead, she thanked God for preventing her and Burl from having any children and asked Him for help in ending her marriage. But she'd been asking for divine intervention for over six years, and God had yet to send a semi-rig for Burl the way He had for Sam Zellerbach in October. She still believed in Him, but she no longer believed He would help.

Molly taped "Wife Spikes Beer with LSD; Man Dies of Overdose" to the steering wheel of Burl's pickup truck. She still felt sore from her husband's last round, but she'd needed these three months to accumulate all the articles, to plan for all possible contingencies. She knew at Thanksgiving that beating wouldn't be her last, but she had to find a way to make Burl leave her for good, before she stopped caring about anything, before living and surviving came to mean the same thing. She realized, lying in that



hospital bed trying to breathe through a crushed nose, the idea of love no longer had any application to her own life.

Love. As she stuck "Woman Castrates Husband"--an article describing a man's shock when his wife, having tied him to the bed in a sex game, sliced his testicles away from his body and juggled them--to Burl's wallet, Molly smiled. The reporter interviewed the couple in the apartment next door.

"We could hear him screaming, hear her yelling, 'You won't have the b--ls to ever hit me again, will you?' We dialed 9-1-1 immediately," the young husband said.

"You dialed, you mean," said his wife.

This was Molly's favorite piece. She felt it captured her new views of love, as far as men were concerned: love equals sex. An equation she could no longer comprehend. When Burl took her to bed, it felt like rape. She stared at the ceiling, praying for him to hurry and finish. She didn't move unless Burl moved her, hiked her legs to a more convenient position, mauled her breasts. He didn't seem to notice her limpness or indifference. He just kept at it.

Molly resented this thing most of all, that she had come to despise sex, to resent any man who looked at her. Her growing desire to commit her own violent acts came rushing over her whenever she encountered any man, but she hadn't really thought about it until Thanksgiving, when Pastor Fuller came to visit her in the hospital. In desperation, she once went to her minister for help. She

knew the whole town was aware of her situation, but until she actually acknowledged to someone else what her husband was doing to her, she was able to maintain a sort of desperate dignity around town.

She wished as soon as she said it she hadn't told Pastor Fuller. When he stopped at her house one night, the day after a really bad time, she allowed herself the luxury of confiding in someone. When she finished her story, she looked into his face and recognized the compassion in his expression; but she recognized as well something else, something she saw in the faces of most men when they looked at her.

And then, at the hospital, Pastor Fuller, someone she'd turned to for some form of salvation, wore that same greedy expression on his face every time she looked at him, although it was muted somewhat by obvious pity and horror at the extent of her injuries. But still the piggy little eyes in his grayish, middle-aged face darted over the outline of her body under the cheap hospital blanket, reminding her of Burl. Pastor Fuller looked nothing like Burl, but she realized she was feeling the same way towards her minister she felt towards her husband. Was it all men, she wondered, or just men who looked at her in that certain way?

Pastor Fuller quit ogling her and began to commiserate. "Poor girl! Poor girl! That man should be locked up and the key thrown away. Why on earth does he do this to you? He's certainly strayed from the path. Tell me, dear girl, what can I do to help?" At his most solicitous he roused

only a vague antipathy in Molly which she tried to squelch; after all, he was her pastor.

"I'm all right, Pastor." Her words were indistinct through her stiff facial muscles and split lips, but she got the feeling he was paying little attention to them anyhow. "There's nothing you can do."

"Can I bring you some water? Another blanket? Has someone called the sheriff and helped you file a report?"

Molly filed a report once, when she stopped believing in Burl's regret. As soon as he was released on bail, less than three days later, she learned quickly what would happen if she refused to drop the charges or if she ever filed a report again. It was her first trip to the hospital. The doctor called the same deputy who arrested Burl the night before; the officer said he'd pick him up again if Molly would just fill out another report, but he recommended she didn't unless she had somewhere to go.

She didn't. While Burl was in jail was the time Molly asked her parents for help. Gafferton had no women's shelter and Burl had the only set of keys to their GM pickup. She had no friends because Burl wouldn't let her. "You got enough to do around here," he said. "You don't need to go yakking around with a bunch of dumb bitches who sit on their asses all day getting fat and watching other bitches on Oprah whining about their husbands. You stay here where you belong." If she'd had any humor left, she could almost laugh at what a cliché he was.

Pastor Fuller interrupted her thoughts. "Molly, dear,

you're not listening to me. I'm here to help. Just tell me what you need, anything at all. I only wish--" he broke off when the door to the room swished open and Corliss Gluck came breezing in, loud as always.

"Molly, my God! Conrad? Offering comfort to the afflicted?" She moved to the window. "How does this damn thing open? Oh, there it goes." Outside a dog barked frantically. "Hi, Boyo! You stay there and shut up. It's a frigging cat. You live with two of them. What's the big deal? Be quiet!" The last came out as a roar, effectively silencing the dog. Corliss turned back to the room's occupants, both of whom stared at her. "Figured I better not try and sneak him past Nurse Ratchitt out there. She's kind of scary." Molly began to feel oddly hopeful.

"Miss Gluck!" The minister sounded as if he were mustering every bit of God-fearing shock he could bring to bear upon his words. "I hardly think Mrs. Hansen needs this kind of upset. You really should be more considerate of the ill."

"You're sputtering, Conrad. Molly's fine. She and I need to have a little talk now, if you'll please excuse us."

"I was here first; I mean, it's hardly the best . . . " But Corliss was already pulling him toward the door with a tight grip on his arm. "I suppose I really should be going now. I have a number of other parishioners to visit here. Mustn't outstay my--" The final click of the closing door cut him off.

"Molly. I know you don't know me very well. I know

this really isn't my business. But may I please talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Yes." Molly often saw Corliss striding around the town, always with her big dog. She was a little afraid of both of them usually, but reaching the end of her endurance proved a freeing sensation, and she admired this tall, pushy woman. She carried herself as though acknowledging she was indeed a presence, and she was the only person Molly ever saw stand up to Burl.

One afternoon the previous August, Burl and Molly were walking toward the Spree'n'Flee for some beer. Molly forgot to get extra when she did her shopping the previous day, and Burl, already drunk and angry his day off started so inconveniently, backhanded her across her face, pushed her down, and kicked her in the back, hard. She lay there, curled into a ball, her arms covering her head. "Get up, you worthless bitch. Good God, you're pitiful. When'd you get so dog-ugly? You're going to get me some beer like you should have, and I'm going with you since you're too damn stupid to remember anything." Moving down the sidewalk, her back in pain and her right eye already starting to turn black, Molly saw Corliss heading their direction, a bag from Flossie Books' craft shop on her arm, her dog loping along with her. Despite her pain, Molly wanted to smile at the way Corliss moved: she never simply walked anywhere; nor did she jog. She strode, the only word which truly defined the woman's brusque movement.

Molly watched Corliss' face as they drew nearer to the

woman, knowing part of Burl's plan was for her to experience the humiliation of having people see her in her ravaged condition. He never seemed to consider what it made people think of him; Molly thought he was really rather proud of himself. Corliss' face was very expressive. By the time she actually stopped on the sidewalk, blocking their way, Molly was certain she would hit Burl, or maybe sic her dog on him.

"What the hell have you done to her, Burl? What kind of worthless excuse for a man are you anyhow, going around beating up women? Your dick must be awfully damn small, the way you keep trying to compensate for it."

"You fucking bitch, I ought to . . . ." Burl, moving closer to Corliss, retreated a quick two or three steps when the dog, an Irish wolfhound, bared his teeth, the hair on his back rising. Molly wanted to laugh at his fear, but stopped the smile, knowing what it would get her if Burl caught it. But Corliss wasn't finished.

"You're a chicken-shit, Burl, and the whole town knows it. You should dump this piece of trash, Molly. You could do way better than him. Come on, Boyo."

The next day, another hot August afternoon, Corliss came to the Hansen house. When Molly opened the door, Corliss saw the evidence of Burl's reaction to her taunts. Her eyes filled and she could only manage an "I'm sorry, Molly. I should have thought first" before she and Boyo turned back toward the street. From then on she avoided both of the Hansens carefully, it seemed to Molly, going so

far as to cross the street if she saw either of them out.

This avoidance was what made Corliss' hospital visit so surprising to Molly. She felt a sense of anticipation as Corliss pulled the room's only chair, so abruptly vacated by Pastor Fuller, closer to the bed. Molly let out a breath, realizing she'd been holding it.

"Here's the deal, Molly. I have a proposition for you, and I want you to really think about it before you answer. I want you to come stay at my place. It's big, you know, so there's plenty of room, and between Boyo and me, I think we can protect you."

For a single brilliant moment, Molly allowed herself to think what it would be like to have someone protect her, to sleep without waiting for the sounds of stumbling feet as they made their way to the bed for whatever act of violence their owner was in the mood for. But always with her was Burl's threat. "I can't stay with you. He won't give up if I leave him, and I can't just live with you forever." The last part, Molly realized, came out kind of hopefully. "He'd make it his one goal in life to catch me alone, and he'd kill me."

"Isn't there some damn thing I can do? Anything?"

"I'll let you know, I promise." After Corliss left, Molly thought. She wanted a way to make Burl do the leaving. She remembered how he relished her fear. *For someone so tough, Burl, you sure managed to avoid every other opportunity to fight. You're a bully, pure and simple. A stupid bully.* She recalled how he always acted

so swaggering to her, but she had never actually seen any evidence, any bruises or blood to suggest he'd been in a fight with anyone but her. As she grew slowly to understand the depths of his own weakness, his own fear, she came up with her idea of scaring him into leaving. That night she called Corliss to let her know a way she could help.

Three months later, three months she spent being as sweet and subserviant as a 'fifties' sitcom mother, Molly pulled out the newspaper articles she had been clipping and hiding at the bottom of a box of Kotex she knew Burl would never check. She papered her house with the clippings early in the morning while Burl slept off the previous night's drunk, putting the articles in every one of the places her husband's morning routine would take him. Then she silently pulled their old suitcase from the closet's top shelf and filled it with his clothes, setting it by the front door when she was finished. To it she attached a different article, one from *Time* that read "Spousal Abuse on the Increase: Number of Women Dying at Husbands' Hands on the Rise." In bright red Magic Marker she scrawled across the statistics: *I am not one of this number. Get out.* Then she went outside and silently got into Corliss' car.

Molly returned home a day later, feeling jangled, feeling both scared and confident. She went up to the house with Corliss and Corliss' dog, turning the doorknob slowly, trying to push the door open silently. Inside, a search through the house showed all the "dead husband" articles



were gone, the suitcase was gone, the TV and VCR were gone, Burl's hunting rifles and fishing gear were gone. Burl was gone. The kitchen floor glittered with the shards of her broken wedding china. Her collection of snowglobes in the living room was smashed, a ball peen hammer lying in the midst of glass splinters and shattered figurines. Molly stuck out her foot, gently touching the decapitated head from one of the tiny figures with the toe of her shoe, then kicked it away from her.

## HOSS IS MY FAVORITE CARTWRIGHT

Back in October, a cattle truck croaked the last guy she had sex with, so she hadn't had any lately--sex, that is; she ate beef frequently. Her favorite kind comes in the form of hamburgers and is usually accompanied by fries and a chocolate shake, both large. Right now, as she drives around town, she get an occasional whiff of them from the Dairy Queen, McDonald's, Whataburger: kind of greasy, but when they're cooked just right, the best. She won't stop and get any, though: she is on a mission to find a man. The man, maybe.

She likes driving. In her car, she feels people can't really see her, just her head. They don't know how fat she is, unless they're in a van or pickup and can look down at her. She hates when those pull up next to her, the moos and barks that follow. They *Hey, you're fat!*s, like it happened overnight, like she is unaware. Sam, the dead guy, reminded her how fat she is every time she saw him. She doesn't miss him too much. The lousy lay, he came over only when he was so drunk he didn't mind her fat body as much, came to her at three a.m., singing badly *Violet big-as-a Barnes, you let me in, girl;* done and gone five or ten minutes later. Calling what they did sex was a generosity. But she got to being so lonely anyone'd do, anyone except Leon Klabber. He's so

short and skinny, he'd be like doing it with a little girl with a penis.

She's had her share of men; more than her share, some would say, given how big she is. But she hasn't had any who wanted her because she's fat, like Leon does. Every guy she's had has been in spite of her size; most were drunk at the time. See, she knows these things. She sees what's really going on. What does she want? Shit, same as everyone. The human biggie: love. If she could, she'd sneak up on it from behind, grab it. She's pretty sure the only way she'll ever catch it is by a flank attack. No direct confrontations for her. She would hold on to it, learn what it means; she would know it, at least from the back.

As she waits through the world's longest red light, here at the corner of Sixth and Washington, she wonders about having one of those fat admirers--that's what they call themselves on the talk shows, those men who refer to women even bigger than her, women who can't move on their own, as beautiful--but she doesn't know if she can get into that. Thinking about it, though, which is why she's driving around, looking for this particularly jazzy little black car, being careful because when she did this the other day, she almost got in a wreck she was staring so hard at a black car going the other way. She doesn't even know what kind of car he has; just knows she'll recognize it when she sees it.

This light is too damned slow. Stillwater has so many college students with so many potential angry parents, she

thinks the city decided to slow traffic down as much as possible. Maybe this guy is a student. She toys with the idea of a younger man.

She admires those fat fans' nerve, their saying to the world, *if you don't like it, fuck off*. But fat is ugly, it's slow suicide. They're loving those fatties to death. She wants someone to love her hidden behind blubber, not the blubber itself. She wants a man to say--and mean, this time--*hey, Violet, I love you because I can't help myself*. The one time someone said that to her, she lost so much weight she looked normal, for a while. But turned out he was lying, that he wanted her for room and board, for a purse he could steal drinking money from, for sex whenever he couldn't get lucky elsewhere, for a punching bag when he got mad at her for trapping him. He told her he lied about loving her, and the fat poured back on. She knows that wasn't his fault. He wasn't forcing the food down her gullet. Since then she hasn't trusted one of them, but she hopes maybe a man who likes fat women might not need to lie to her.

That's why she's out here driving, looking, hoping to spot this one who told her almost a year ago, his eyes moving around fast, like a bird finding seed on the ground, nervous, expecting a cat, *hey, baby, you're a fox*.

*Yeah, right, all 400 pounds of me.*

*The more to love, babe.*

*Fuck off*. She was picking up a delivery in Stillwater for her boss in Gafferton. She shouldn't have been so rude,

but he scared her. He's beautiful. It had to be a prank. Only after she drove away did she realize he must be a closet fat freak. That's why he was so nervous. Afraid to let anyone know of his compulsion, to be seen holding converse with a fat woman. What the hell; she can't blame him for feeling the same as her. The main reason she wants to find him is he sure is beautiful. She's no better than anyone. She's entitled to expectations.

Thinking about him this morning, about the liar, too, about others. Decided to make a list of all the men she's been with. All she can remember, at least; there were a few in college, one-nighters about whom she can say only: good looking, young, desperately horny, drunk. The kind who trolled the bars at closing, looking for sperm depositories, any old gash would do. The kind she didn't take to her place because the one time she did she came up against his humiliating horror the next morning. After that she went only to their places, left after they fell asleep, walked home or back to her car. She's pretty sure they weren't all asleep. She heard unspoken *Thank Gods*, but at least avoided the bullshit *Hey, I'll call you soon*, when they didn't ask for her number, didn't know her last name to look it up. Hell, she'd lay money most forgot her first name; it left them as soon as they got what they wanted. It left some of them the second after she said it. When they called her Vivian, Virginia, Beverly, *something-with-a-V*, Janet, she answered. Not to piss them off, because she didn't care. Whatever.

But sometimes she likes to remember some of her men, like now when she's driving around. They're the guys with whom nothing ever happened, who remain potential, and the ones who came back for seconds, even thirds. The worst of these was Sam Zellerbach. Her list starts with the most recent because her memory of him makes her the sickest. Get him out of the way. Last fall, when she used to see Sam in public--before he was run over--he called her names, picked on her, offered advice as though his life were so spectacular, and him basically a bum with nothing better to do than drink and bug people.

The first time he came to her house, staggering, she surprised herself by letting him in. Surprised herself by letting him kiss her, fuck her. He had this thing he did, this line, so stupid, clearly something he'd said before: *I like to think of you as a beautiful princess, lonely and locked away. And I'm the handsome prince sent to rescue you.* The first time he started this up she laughed; if he was out of a fairy tale, he'd have been Rumpelstiltskin. she's more the evil step-sister type, whose fat foot'd never fit in a frigging size ten even. That rescue thing he said bothered her, though, stayed with her. The second time she heard it, she asked *Do you really think I'm beautiful?* Set herself up good.

*Looked in a mirror lately?* He never used his corny line again, never made the gesture of staying the night again.

She doesn't spend much time with mirrors; when she

does, she uses small ones: compacts, make-up mirrors, the mirror on the medicine cabinet, the rear-view mirror here in her car. Neck and face mirrors only, where she can admire minute beauties, the blue gleam light makes on her dark hair, the soft bow of her mouth, the clearness of her eyes' pale grey. Images she can control. She painted over the full-length mirror on the closet door. When she buys clothes, she just gets the biggest size, tries them on at home. If they don't fit, she returns them. She does not go into dressing rooms and face herself naked. Hell, she doesn't even face herself naked in the eyes of the men she sleeps with: darkness, nightgown on. Like she's fooling anyone, like fat is something purely visible, unknowable in the blackness. She's just avoiding their expressions, knowing she'll see there the same thing she feels when she accidentally catches her reflection in a shop window and, feeling really sick, wants to cry, to smash the glass, to find her own semi or a brick wall.

She can hear the self-pity, is aware it's as ugly as her fat. If self-pity were electricity, she could keep Las Vegas blazing. For years. It's been with her as long as the fat has, which is all her life except for that short time she thought a man loved her. It's the mud she wallows in, not knowing how to live without it, afraid it would stay even if the fat left. But self-pity is only how she feels; fat is who she is. Fat removes more than one definition in a person: more than just shape is blurred, more than just bones disappear. She defines herself first as fat. Not

brunette, not tall, not intelligent, not funny or nice. Just fat. Just like the world defines every fat person. "Big and beautiful" is a crock. There's no such thing, except to fat admirers, and she figures they've got deep reasons for feeling that way. Anyhow, even though they like it, they still define fatties by it. But if she can find this guy, this beautiful man, he can define her any way he wants.

There's something intriguing in the idea of being in bed with someone who revels in her size. Who'd take walks with her and not snatch his hand away as if hers were a live flame. Who wouldn't walk a few steps ahead, like *How the hell should I know who this bitch is?* She understands the men who do that, but she still hates them. Like this guy she's looking for; she's seen him since that day in the store, driving his little European job. When he's alone, he stares, smiles sometimes; once he waved. She's afraid to wave back. She's afraid the fear is permanent.

She knows he's not married to the blonde she sees him with, the days he ignores her. Married women here wear their rings like trophies; most of them make their husbands wear rings, too, like those little personalized tags on expensive dog collars, announcing ownership: if lost, please return to \_\_\_\_\_. She knows if she finds him and he wants her, if it isn't a frat boy joke, she'll get to see if sex will be less humiliating.

She does have a couple of those fat fetishers on her list. One called her, woke her late at night. Lorenzo.



*It's been ten years; met you outside a club in Stillwater when you were at college. I was in Oklahoma visiting friends. They found out where you live. I'm from Mississippi, visiting again. I've never forgotten you. I think you're beautiful.*

She couldn't remember if that had been the one, brief "normal" body period she experienced in her twenties. *I'm really fat now*, she told him, hopeful.

*Good.* She agreed to let him come to Gafferton, to Flossie's shop. Figured meeting at work was safer. After all, she already knew he was a pervert. He was also Klan, and damned proud of it. Limply blond, he was uglier than something nasty you'd wipe off your shoe. And scary.

Not wanting to anger him to any gun-brandishing extreme, she told him, *I lose weight when I'm happy in love. You wouldn't want me then.*

*Losing weight ain't that easy.* He sounded smug, grinned through his two or three teeth, his eyes pinning her like she was some fat, juicy beetle and he was a hungry--and ugly--bird.

*Inspiration. I'm sorry, but just like you have a thing for big women, I have a thing for men with brown eyes and dark hair.*

*Where I come from, we know what to do with trash like you!* You supposed to support the superior white race! He screamed this as he left. She remembered she was blonde ten years earlier. She slept badly for weeks, a big iron pipe by her bed. He was a bad one. She didn't think Mr. Sports

Car could be so awful.

The other fat admirer on her list really just obsessed over large breasts. To the exclusion of all other parts of a woman. All he wanted or needed lay above the waist, below the neck. Kind of cute, but not for her. At seventeen, she'd just discovered for herself what the big to do over sex was all about. He couldn't do a thing for her. Too many of them can't, or won't. But even this guy, the chest magnet who followed me around Wal-Mart and out to her car to ask her to a drive-in, was flattering, gave her something she wanted with his words. The least she could do was give him something back.

Oklahoma in spring is beautiful. Even though her search isn't panning out, she enjoys the wind coming through her car windows, snaking hair into her eyes. She feels, in her car, almost beautiful. She remembers feeling beautiful one other time. At a bar, with a friend from school, she spotted this man across the room. Every Harlequin romance she'd read in junior high and high school, every plain-Jane-into-princess fairy tale, every stupid Barbie and Ken game she'd ever played began to unfold. He looked at her and came over. Her reading? Their eyes met; instant chemical transference. He walked--no, sauntered--toward her. His good looks were rugged and them some. Her heart banged away. He stood in front of her, still staring, put his hand out. They moved in powerful silence to the dance floor, on the dance floor, still looking at one another, his hands in the curve of her back, her thoughts bouncing from how hot he

looked to how her belly stuck out as far as her breasts, to how his arms could barely meet behind her, to *He picked me!*

When the song ended, he led her back to her seat, asked her friend for the next dance. For the rest of the night, he went around asking each woman in the place to dance. She watched him talk to all of them; his silence with her added mystery, made her still special, made the whole thing the most fundamentally romantic experience she ever had. Two weeks later she was still talking about it, when her friend, the bitch, sick of the words after a couple hundred times and by that point probably ready to kill her, said, *Look, Vi, he told me on the dance floor he didn't realize you were so fat until you stood up.* The worst thing of all? It's still her most romantic moment.

No luck on her search, not that she'd know what to do if she did see him. The waning afternoon sun means headlights are coming on. She can't see past the lights to the driver, so she's thinking of heading home to a pizza and beer. On her mind also are the doughnuts she slipped into her grocery cart today; doughnuts she stashed under the lettuce and celery she will let rot at the bottom of the refrigerator, untouched; doughnuts she circled a few times like a vulture until she thought no one was looking.

## EXCEPT FOR LARUE

To his thinking, Burl Hansen had taken it up the ass his entire life. Gripping a bottle of Miller in his left hand and a shot of Wild Turkey in his right, Burl grimaced, evidence of both his disgust with how life found it so necessary to screw him over and his awareness of how the shot would taste as he slammed it back. Although he always drank Boilermakers, he had yet to acquire a taste for the hard stuff. Beer was different, though. Beer he loved.

The booze brought tears to his eyes, but he held back a cough, not wanting to look like a pansy. Leaning back, Burl glanced around at the other people in the bar. The lounge of the Snooz-n-Crooz Motel was full; Burl couldn't figure out where all the people had come from, since the motel stood alone on an off-ramp of I-35 near Wichita and only a few cars were parked out front. He wouldn't be stuck here himself if that bitch of a wife hadn't kicked him out. He never did nothing to her that she didn't ask for--shit, she practically begged for it. Who the hell'd she think she was, anyway? It was his house. But he believed her when she showed she could--and would--kill him, sticking those goddamn clippings about wives murdering husbands all over his house, until everywhere he looked he saw them. Like she'd ever have the balls to go through with it. But the

women in the stories had found terrible ways to get rid of their men, so Burl had grabbed his things, loaded them in his truck, deciding to head north to Alaska, where he could be a man in the way God and nature intended him to be. Anyhow, Alaska was as good a place as any.

This crummy motel in Kansas was as far as he'd gotten. Hell, he'd barely crossed the Oklahoma border. He'd been here going on two weeks, taking all his meals in the little cafe, watching TV in his room all day while he drank beer, and sitting at the bar, mostly alone, every night. He felt as if he were waiting for something, some sign to show him what to do. He missed his buddies in Gafferton, where he'd been somebody. Here he was just some guy no one knew. Hell, even after two weeks the regulars weren't warming up to him, except for LaRue, the motel's whore, a phony redhead with about an inch and a half of gray roots showing. Every night when Burl got to the bar, there was LaRue, 60 if she was a day, sitting on the stool just left of the waitress' station. Burl had yet to see an actual waitress, but her place was ready for her should she ever decide to show up. With his luck she'd be older than LaRue.

On his first night at the bar, Burl was willing to be drawn into a conversation with LaRue, who, holding tightly to the edge of the bar, turned towards him and eyed him up and down. She fluttered her scanty eyelashes at him, offering him a grotesque wink with bloodshot, heavily made-up eyes set in a nest of crow's feet. "You're new," she remarked, her deep voice testifying to forty years of

smoking. "Buy a girl a drink?"

Burl figured he had a better shot at being a girl than she did, but said, "Sure. Happy to."

"Fuzzy Navel, Gordon, and make it strong," she ordered before speaking to Burl again. "Passing through?" she asked him, but her attention was focused on the activity of the bartender.

"No, I think I might just stay here a while." Burl surprised himself by saying, getting a kick out of LaRue's own surprise. What ever she had intended to ask him next--a standard "Where you heading?" maybe--had to be reconsidered and it seemed a new sentence was giving her booze-soaked brain some trouble.

"Why?" was the best she could come up with.

Burl shrugged. "Nothing better to do."

Before he could say anything else, a man sitting in one of the booths called her over to join him and two other men: "Hey, LaRue. Get your wrinkled old ass over here. Curtis here needs him a woman." All three men laughed at this, but LaRue slid off her stool, swayed for a minute, then staggered over to the men. One of them said something Burl couldn't hear and slapped LaRue on the butt; the men all laughed again. LaRue just stood there, still swaying. Burl went to his room.

Every night for two weeks Burl bought LaRue a drink at her request. Every night for two weeks she asked him the same question: "Passing through?" For a few nights he answered the same as he first had, reminding her he'd

already told her that. But when she responded with a slurred "Did you?" for the third time, he got fed up. After that he started giving her crazy answers, like "No, I'm not passing through. I'm really a rich sheik looking for a way to spend my money. Think I'll buy this place," or "Yeah, I'm passing through on my way to Washington, D.C., because I was just elected president." She always just smiled at him, watching the bartender making her Fuzzy Navel, telling him to make it strong.

On this night, for the first time in two weeks, LaRue was not at her post when Burl arrived. After his shot of Turkey with a beer back, Burl asked the bartender where she was. Gordon's reply was merely to raise his eyebrows in an indication of ignorance. "Give me another round, then," Burl said. He was irritated. The old woman sure was ugly, but she beat no one to talk to at all. He sat there staring at his reflection in the mirror backing the bar. Women. Who the fuck needs 'em?

Molly hadn't been too bad, as far as women went. She was a pretty little thing, so young when he met her. He remembered thinking, I ought to be able to train her pretty good, as he watched her carry trays of food around the little diner where she worked. She seemed impressed by his height, and he used what he knew the ladies liked--running his fingers through his short, blond hair, crinkling the corners of his blue eyes so his wide grin would look authentic--to convince her to have breakfast with him when she got off her late shift. They went to his apartment and

that was that, although it always troubled Burl a little that she was so easy to get into bed.

Burl had to admit she tried pretty hard there for a while, 'specially considering she was only seventeen; he bought her some sexy things, the kind you pay way too much money for, and she wore them for him at night. Once he had her wear them under her uniform, but he thought she acted different, too confident around the male customers. He never let her do that again, and that night, for the first time, he made her understand what he meant when he said "consequences." Didn't do much good; she never got the hang of thinking things through. If she hadn't been so goddamn dense, if she'd just have used the brain God gave her, she'd have been a good woman. A good woman. That was his pop's favorite line; he used it on Burl's mom while he still used words: "Doris Hansen, you'd be a good woman if you'd just use the brain God gave you. You'd be a good wife if you'd just think things through. You know better than to put my meat on the table before I'm sitting here. What's it going to take to help you learn?"

As a boy, Burl had learned quickly. On nights like that, he'd eat as fast as he could, then sit quietly staring at his plate until his father excused him from the table. In his room, he'd put on his headphones and blast some Hank Junior to block out the sounds from below, one fist thumping his pillow to keep time with his mantra: *Why won't she think? Why won't she think? Why won't she think?* He could learn what his daddy wanted very quickly. Why was his



mother so eternally fucking witless? How could his daddy have married such a moron? His daddy wasn't a mean man; he just couldn't tolerate stupid behavior, and as Burl discovered, women were given to being slow a lot more often than men.

Her stupidity finally made Burl's father leave. Burl remembered the day very clearly. He came home early from school because of a teachers' meeting. His mother was still at work at the nursing home where she cooked on the day shift. Burl assumed his father was still at work, too, at the company where he was a plant manager in charge of the guiding equipment. "I make sure the toilet paper goes onto the rolls straight," he liked to joke. But when Burl went into his parents' room to sneak one of his daddy's *Hustler's*, he found an envelope on the dresser with "Doris" scrawled across it and his father's wedding ring sitting on top of it.

For about an hour Burl stared at the ring and the envelope. Ten years old, he could guess well enough what it meant. After a while, he went to the dresser and picked up the ring. It was too big for any of his fingers, even his thumb. His daddy was a pretty big man. He put the ring in his pocket and picked up the envelope. It wasn't sealed. "Doris," the note inside began, "Can't take it no more. If you only learned to think things through. I don't expect you'll hear from me again. Take care of the boy. Try not to make him as stupid as you." No signature. That was it.

Scared, Burl ran to his own room to find the note his

father must have left him, the one that would tell him how to find his father, how to get in touch with him, but there was nothing. He sat on the edge of his bed, but didn't cry. Instead he considered the depths of his mother's ignorance and what she had cost him. He thought how he could repay her.

When his mother came home, the note was gone. He'd torn it up and flushed it. He hid his father's ring in the old cigar box where he kept his other prized possessions, possessions he carried in his suitcase, still in the same cigar box, which he had taught Molly early on she needed to leave alone. He never said a word to his mother. He left home the day after his high school graduation, not bothering with a note. Burl decided then if he ever got married, his wife would not be a slow woman. Too bad men can't really tell until it's too late and they're stuck with the stupid cows.

He shuddered slightly after swallowing his fourth shot of bourbon, shifting on the stool when he noticed his butt getting numb. "Hey, Gordon," he called, motioning the bartender over. "How much'll it take for you to sell me the rest of that bottle of Turkey?"

"Against the law." Gordon stared at him. "Where you going with it?"

"Just back to my room," Burl answered, sliding a twenty across the bar.

The bartender pocketed the bill, then pulled the pour spout out, capped the bottle, and put it in a paper bag.

"If anyone asks, I don't know where you got it. Get it?" he asked.

"Thanks, friend." Burl put the package under the left side of his leather bomber jacket and headed for his room. When he stepped through the door, he ran into LaRue who, drunk as usual, almost fell over. Burl grabbed her upper arm with his free right hand, his fingers sinking into her skin; the feel of the too-soft flesh made him want to retch. As soon as she regained her balance, he let go, intending to hold the door open for her. But she just stood there, looking blankly at the open door before swinging her head towards him.

"Buy a girl a drink?" Her words were more slurred than Burl had heard them yet, but he let the door swing closed.

"If you don't mind bourbon, you can come have a drink with me," he invited.

She seemed to think about it. "Where?" she wanted to know.

"In my room."

"'kay." She turned around, grabbing his arm, trying to smile at him coyly and keep her balance at the same time. Her head bobbed on her wrinkled neck like some old tom turkey. "Cost you more'n a drink, though."

"I don't want anything from you," Burl told her.

"Huh?" she asked.

"Nothing. Watch your step there." He fumbled for his key, opened the door, guided her into the room. "Have a seat," he offered. "I'll be right back. That beer goes

straight through. We'll have a drink in a minute." He turned on the TV before going into the bathroom. As he stood in front of the commode, he could hear the heavy moaning of some porno flick, wished instead for a re-run of *The Honeymooners*, or some other better programming like that, where women had some self-respect and men were men.

When he finished, he stepped out of the bathroom, washed his hands, and unwrapped two of the plastic cups. Looking up into the mirror, Burl focused on the room behind him to ask LaRue if she needed ice. She was sprawled on the bed, spreadeagled, naked. Her breasts hung down on either side of her chest, almost touching the bed. He stared at her in the mirror, then turned and walked to the bed. She was out, cold. He had never seen so many wrinkles in his life. Every inch of her sagged, and where the flesh was not stretched smooth by gravity, she was covered with wrinkles. She also had a huge number of little moles or warts or something sprouting all over her. Her pubic hair was sparse and gray.

Burl swallowed. She reminded him of when his mother lay dying of cancer in a hospital and he'd visited her for the first and last time since he'd left home. He hadn't actually seen his mother naked at the hospital, but LaRue's unconscious face had the same slack quality as hers.

"Get up!" he shouted at the old woman on his bed. "Get the hell up and get out of my room." He pulled on her arm, raising the upper half of her torso from the bed. But when he let go, she flopped back down. He tried shaking her, but

her head just lolled. He pulled her hair sharply. He pinched one of her breasts, hard. Then, holding her upright by one arm, he slapped her. Not hard at first, but with a heavier hand with each slap.

Finally she started coming to. "What?" she said.

"Get dressed. Get your fucking clothes on now and get out," he yelled.

She looked down at herself. In an upright position, her breasts hung down to her paunch. Like two empty bags, Burl thought. She looked back up at him.

"Cost you more'n a drink," she said.

He hit her again. "You're not listening to me, you stupid bitch." He swung his hand. "Why won't you listen?" Again. "Too stupid to learn." On his next strike, she fell back on the bed again, bleeding from her nose and the corner of her mouth. The blood made him think of Molly, aroused him even more than the violence had. While he did her, he thought of Molly, sweet Molly. Molly who deserved another chance.

When he finished, Burl washed himself off, dressed, and gathered his things. Before he left the room, he looked down at her. She was snoring. He drew a five out of his pocket, dropped it on her belly, and left. When he pulled out of the motel parking lot, he turned his truck south, towards Gafferton and Molly.

## BLOOD IS MESSY STUFF

Anjela Finsterman, neé Gluck and called "Jellie" by most, tried to foresee every possible direction her phone call to her sister, Corliss, might take. She sat in her little powder-blue Mercedes 350sl, her hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel even though she was parked by a pay phone in front of a mini-mart. A passer-by could have seen she was talking to herself, might wonder, for a minute, how anyone with her kind of money could get so crazy, but Jellie, for once, didn't consider appearances.

A quarter hour later, she stepped out of the car gingerly; although she'd had the presence of mind to avoid pulling up next to a puddle, the ground was wet and her pumps were genuine calfskin, perfectly dyed to match the pale peach suit she wore. She locked the door to her car, even though the parking lot was empty and the store clerk visible, reading a *Penthouse*, through the store window. She pulled on the handle to make sure the car was locked before moving carefully to the phone.

Jellie picked up the handpiece with a certain wariness, using a tissue, looking at it closely in case she could spot some lingering disease the previous user might have left. After wiping it off with a second tissue, she put the receiver up to her ear, regretting having thrown the nice,

clean cellular phone in her car out the window earlier when her husband, Howard, called to ask when the hell she'd come to her senses, remember who she was--who he was--and bring herself home.

"I'm not," she'd told him, and when he'd suggested her behavior was childishly excessive, "Screw you," she'd told him, surprising herself, then, after pushing the down button for her electric window, after signalling and pulling into the fast lane, with a flick of her wrist sent the phone sailing into the center median. Deciding she liked the way the wind whipped her pale hair into her eyes, she drove the next fifteen miles with the window down. But when she caught a glimpse of herself in the rear-view mirror, she quickly raised the window and began regretting her hasty discarding of the phone. After all, a lot of kooks were out on the roads these days.

Now Jellie was brought to the point of using the pay phone at a convenience store to call her sister and face the possible humiliation dished out as only Corliss knew how to do it. But before dialing, she let the receiver hang down on its cord, not wanting to put it back up on the dirty phone, and went to check whether she'd locked the car. Back at the phone, Jellie retrieved the receiver and, with a fresh tissue, wiped it clean again.

The phone at the other end rang three times before Jellie heard her sister's voice ask, "Hello?" Jellie immediately burst into a loud hee-hawing of sobs, her plans involving dignified, sensible requests destroyed.

"Where are you, Jellie." Corliss' way of turning a question into a statement full of resignation always made Jellie feel foolish. Her sobs turned into full-fledged wails.

"What's wrong, Jellie? Where are you?"

Jellie, still crying hard, could hear the concern this time. She struggled to control herself, something, she reminded herself, she'd had years of practice at. After a moment, her efforts paid off. She swallowed a couple of times. "Near Hutchinson, I think."

"Hutchinson? Hutchinson, Kansas?"

Jellie felt a briefly odd emotion, power maybe. She usually couldn't surprise her older sister. "Yes."

"Do you need me to come get you?"

"No, I can drive."

"You've got another two-and-a-half, three hours on the road." Jellie didn't respond. "I'll be waiting up for you. With coffee, no less, and if you're really lucky, I'll feed you." Typical Corliss, who always tried to remove emotion from situations, defusing what she termed "potential mush" with jokes, but for once Jellie was glad. "I appreciate it," she said, but Corliss was already telling her to drive carefully on the state highways, to watch out for speedtraps and cattle trucks.

After hanging up, Jellie walked towards the store entrance to discard the tissues in a trash can requiring those conscientious enough to use it to push open a flap. She tried to simultaneously open the can with the tissues



and drop them in. The flap, swinging shut, caught the Kleenexes, which fell to the ground. Jellie looked at them for a moment, weighing which action would be less offensive to her, to retrieve unsightly litter or to touch the now really filthy tissues. She left them lying there and went into the store to buy a toothbrush and some packages of rubber gloves.

Once she paid, Jellie walked back to the Mercedes, stopping briefly by the soggy Kleenexes; she pulled on the door handle--just to make sure--and then inserted the key.

When Jellie pulled into the driveway in front of Corliss' old farmhouse, the older sister was standing on the porch, waiting. Every light in the house was on; Jellie knew her sister's habit of keeping the lights off except in the room actually in use, so when she saw the farmhouse from a distance, a beacon, she understood her sister was welcoming her. Jellie was surprised.

Corliss came down the porch steps as Jellie brought the car to a stop. "Pop the trunk, Jel, and I'll grab your bags."

"I didn't bring anything." She'd considered this on the drive up, knowing none of her tall, thin sister's clothes would fit her much shorter, more voluptuous build.

Corliss remained briefly silent, then said, "I think you and Eileen left some things the Christmas before last, and we can drive into Tulsa tomorrow, if you want, although it's hard to imagine you in the latest Oklahoma fashions."

That was Corliss: no hugs, no questions, although Jellie guessed the latter were just a matter of minutes away.

"Come on in. Coffee's on, as promised, although I made it decaf."

The two women went into the house, where Corliss had a tray with coffee and sandwiches waiting in the living room. "We can sit in the kitchen if you'd rather, but I figured the couch is more comfortable for someone who's been on the road straight through from L.A." Jellie knew Corliss was dying to ask what happened, but she volunteered no information, instead helping herself to a sandwich and a cup of decaf. Corliss had remembered to cut the crust off the bread and to put out skim milk instead of half-and-half. Jellie couldn't remember Corliss ever being this thoughtful before. The sandwich was chicken salad, clearly freshly made, and Jellie realized Corliss must have spent the time since the phone call cooking. She felt pampered, wanted to start crying again. Corliss unwittingly forestalled the urge.

"Howard called me about an hour before you did."

Jellie swallowed wrong, and the next few minutes were spent with her coughing and Corliss thumping her fist on Jellie's back while asking if she could breathe, whether she needed the Heimlich. "I've seen it on TV. I'm pretty sure I could do it." Jellie held up her hand to stop her sister, who looked a little too eager to try out her TV knowledge.

When the choking episode ended, Jellie took a sip of coffee and asked Corliss what Howard said.

"He wanted to know whether you were here."

"What did you say?"

"I told him the truth, I hadn't heard from you at all. When I asked him what had happened, he told me, 'Nothing,' and hung up on me." Jellie didn't comment. "Well? What happened? What'd he do to you? Is he having an affair?"

"No. At least, I don't think so."

"Did he hit you? The kids?"

"Corliss! You know Howard better than that."

"Sorry. I have a friend; her husband hurt her, bad. He left town, but who knows if he'll stay gone. The woman who owns the hardware store thought she saw his truck a couple days ago. But what about Howard? Is he verbally abusing you?"

"Howard? Verbally abusive?" Jellie laughed.

Corliss abruptly jumped up from the couch, stalked across the room. "It's harder than hell to get information out of you, Jellie. Are you planning to tell me why you're here or not?"

"If I don't, may I still stay?"

"Don't be an ass, Jel."

Jellie picked up a second sandwich. "These are very good." What she wanted to say was "Thank you for everything you're doing for me," but the words "thank you" seemed too artificial to be used in what she considered the real world, that vague space outside of Los Angeles, where Howard D. Finsterman was Accountant to the Stars and where she, as his wife, was, if not A-list, then certainly high on the B-list.

She had everything she wanted: a successful husband, who, with hair plugs, plastic surgery, and a year-round tan, had even become attractive and who probably still loved her; three children, two boys and a little girl, who, if not geniuses or even particularly skilled at anything, were at least not in jail or threatening to kill their parents; and an active life on the charity circuit, where lunching at the best places with other women living lives like hers was *de rigeur*. In her world, "Thank you"'s, always followed by bright endearments, by the hackneyed "Let's-do-whatever"s were as fake as the noses on everyone's faces. The spoken word was no longer invested with any meaning, and Jellie had found herself growing tired of speaking.

Corliss' voice interrupted Jellie's thoughts. "Guess you'll tell me when you want. I've given you the same room you had last time you were here. I already put everything you need under the bathroom sink. Vacuum's in the bedroom closet. I washed all the sheets and towels after you called; they're folded and stacked on the bed. If you need anything else . . . you know the drill. Let's get some sleep, maybe take that trip into Tulsa tomorrow afternoon."

"Did you lock the door?"

"Yes, and all the windows. You can check." Jellie checked.

Once in her room, the first thing Jellie did was look under the bathroom sink. Sure enough, although Corliss remembered the Lysol disinfectant spray--three cans--the scouring powder, the paper towels and plastic garbage bags,

the Pledge, and even the Clorox, she'd forgotten the rubber gloves. Jellie pulled one package of them out of her purse, used manicure scissors to cut a slot in the plastic wrapper, removed the gloves, and folded the wrapper into a neat square before setting it in the trash basket. Jellie knew Corliss kept a clean house; she couldn't see dirt anywhere. But germs had a way of sticking around, so you couldn't be too careful.

After putting on the gloves, the first thing Jellie did was to move the plastic bag holding the clean linen off the bed and spray the mattress with Lysol, dousing it heavily, even lifting the mattress to spray the box springs. Next she vacuumed the entire wood floor with the long-handled attachment that would reach under furniture nicely. She vacuumed the drapes, the high corners where the walls met the ceiling, the overhead light fixture, and the mattress and box springs. When she finished, she Lysoled the bed again before turning her attention to the bathroom.

When everything was as clean as she could get it, Jellie took off the rubber gloves--pulling them down so they came off inside out--folded them together, and discarded them next to their wrapper. Then she washed her hands before hanging the towels in the bathroom and stretching the sheets onto the bed. She took off her suit and hung it in the closet, where she retrieved extra hangers so she could let her silk camisole, bra, panties, and pantyhose drip-dry over the tub after she washed them out in the sink. Then, with the same precision she'd used earlier, she opened a

second package of rubber gloves and re-scoured the sink. Since she was already wearing the gloves, she decided to do the whole bathroom again, adding to her mental shopping list her need for some more gloves. She needed to save a package for the next day, just in case.

After brushing her teeth, Jellie went to bed. Her last act, before turning out the light, was to wipe each of her feet with a tissue, which she dropped into the little trash basket next to the night stand, before slipping them under the covers. She felt unbelievably tired, but couldn't sleep. After a few minutes, she turned the light back on, and went into the bathroom. There she retrieved three plastic bags and the roll of paper towels from under the sink. After neatly removing five towels from the roll and replacing it under the sink, she folded the towels in half and emptied the bathroom trash can into one of the plastic bags, twisting and knotting its top when she finished. Then, carrying that bag and the two others, she moved to the can by the bed and, using the same paper towels, emptied the two tissues in it into a second bag, dropping the paper towels in when she was through. She perched on the edge of the bed, re-wiped her feet and discarded those tissues into the second bag, then tied it off. After placing both bags into the third, she dropped them at the end of the bed, got under the covers, and turned off the light. She fell asleep wishing there were a way to wash her hands without stepping on the floor.

She slept ten hours, solid, not waking up until eleven

in the morning. She stretched as she walked toward the bathroom, where she washed her hands, sprayed the toilet bowl with Lysol, and, after using the commode and flushing, sprayed it again. Then, because she still needed gloves, she settled for spraying the shower, too, before using it. When she showered, she made sure the water was very hot.

Afterwards, she sprayed the shower again, brushed her teeth, sprayed the sink, and put her underthings on. When she went to the closet, she found Corliss had hung a few things in there next to, but not touching, her suit. She recognized an old jumper of her own and a t-shirt her sister Eileen must have left. She knew Corliss would have washed them, probably that morning while Jellie slept, but just in case she went out to the landing, leaning over the railing without touching it. "Corliss?"

"What?"

"Did you wash these clothes?"

"This morning."

"Thank you." Jellie opted for the old, but clean, clothes before making her way downstairs.

"Morning. Want some breakfast?" Corliss sat in front of her computer, chewing on a straw, which she called her "surrogate cigarette."

"Coffee's fine. I'll get it."

"Want to go into town to do some shopping?"

"In a while. What're you working on?"

"They sent me a damned romance. A fat one, though, so it's big bucks. Let me tell you, if this author had to

spell and punctuate to save her life, she'd be dead. Or he." But Jellie wasn't listening, having wandered into the living room. She sat in the window seat of the big bay window and watched her sister's two cats unsuccessfully stalking birds. She wondered where the dog was. When Corliss entered the room a few minutes later, Jellie asked.

"In the barn. I told him you probably would rather not have to deal with him right now."

"It's just . . . he's so big and so hairy. How can you stand it?"

"I'm bigger and I lose more hair than he does. Why'd you leave Howard and the kids?"

"I didn't leave the kids. Inga's there; she's quite good. The best *au pair* we've ever had."

"Jellie. Why?"

"Howard was unbelievably cruel to me last weekend." She paused, realized she wanted her sister to pry it out of her, although she didn't know why.

"What'd he do? God, sometimes you make me so frigging crazy, Jel."

Jellie started crying. "That's what he did to me."

"What?"

"He said I drove him crazy." She waited to see what Corliss' response would be, but none was offered. She continued, "We were on our way to the desert for a weekend, to have some time to ourselves, and I thought maybe I'd left the oven on."

Corliss interrupted. "You were just going to go sit in



the desert for the weekend?"

"Don't be stupid. Palm Springs. Anyway, I sent the kids over to Mom's--"

"Poor kids."

"Corliss, do you want me to tell you this or not?"

"Sorry."

"I sent the kids to Mom's and gave the staff the weekend off. That morning I made breakfast for the two of us. Including croissants, which I bought the day before and decided to warm up. I started worrying about the oven by the end of our street. By the time we were twenty miles out of town, I was certain I'd left it on."

"What'd you do?"

"When I told Howard, he pointed out--you know how he does that: 'Let me just point out to you--' as though I'm a moron. He pointed out that I probably checked the oven twelve or fifteen times, that it was most certainly--another one of his little phrases, 'most certainly'--off, and we weren't going back."

"Then what?"

"I told him I absolutely had to check, so he said he'd checked it himself since no one would be in the house. But he was lying. I always know when he's lying. He finally admitted it. By then we'd gone another twenty miles, and he said that if we turned back, by time we finally got to the desert, the day would be shot, so we might just as well stay home. I said that was fine with me. That's when he said I drove him crazy."

"But he understands you can't help it; I mean, he knows how you are."

"You can say it, Corliss. Of course Howard knows. He reminds me of it every time he pays my therapy bills."

Then Corliss did what Jellie was afraid she'd do: she took Howard's side. "You know, Jel, he probably just reached a breaking point. This isn't easy to live with, I know. I bet he's sorry for what he did."

"Did he say so on the phone?"

"No."

"Has he called back to see if I'm here, if I'm safe?"

"No."

"Then you must be right. He must be very sorry. In fact, he's so sorry he's become paralyzed with remorse and can't even pick up the phone."

"You don't need to cop an attitude with me, Jel. I'm not the one who wouldn't cater to you."

"No. You also aren't the one who gave me support by taking my side. Oh no, not you. You have to point out how irritating I am to live with."

"It's true, Jellie. It's very difficult to measure up to your definition of passable, much less perfection."

"Screw you, Corliss. You haven't got a fucking clue, so screw you!"

"Jellie!" Corliss sounded like she was about to laugh.

"I hate that name. I'm not some breakfast condiment."

"A little late to change it, don't you think?" The smirk Corliss wore as she left the room irked Jellie.

Corliss always found a way to be irritating. Corliss was always right. Her appetite gone, Jellie carried her plate into the kitchen where she washed it, dried it with paper towels, and, pulling the cabinet open with the damp towel, put it away. Then, carrying her coffee cup, she walked to the living room window. She watched Corliss outside playing with the dog, noticing that the outside of the window needed to be washed. Then a muddy pickup that looked like it might be red under all the dirt pulled into the yard. "How disgusting," Jellie said aloud as she watched her sister stop playing, saw her grab the dog by the collar.

The phone rang, startling her. Because she had to carry her cup back into the kitchen and get a fresh paper towel, she didn't answer it until the fifth or sixth ring. To her questioning "Hello?" the voice at the other end said, "I'm glad you got there safely."

"Howard."

"Jellie, it was irresponsible of you to run off."

"I believe we've had this conversation." A man got out of the truck, but didn't approach Corliss. Even from in the house, Jellie could see his angry expression.

"Kids want to know when you're coming home."

"Are they there? Let me talk to them." Now Jellie heard the man outside shouting, but couldn't make out the words.

"I'm the only one home right now. When?"

"I don't know, Howard. I--probably in a few days. A week, maybe." Corliss was saying something back to the man,

gesturing dramatically for him to leave.

"A week!"

"I said 'maybe,' Howard." This time Jellie heard the man's *No! Tell me where she is!*

"Jellie, a week is most certainly too long. I think you should start back tomorrow. I think--"

"Don't, Howard. You're not very good at it." Jellie gently replaced the receiver, watching the man start to walk towards Corliss. The dog lunged at the man, but Corliss didn't let it go. The man returned to his truck, churning dust and taking out Corliss' clothesline as he roared off.

A few minutes later, Corliss returned to the house. She was covered with the dust the truck had sprayed over her. Jellie drew back as Corliss passed. "God, you're filthy. Who was that?"

"That bastard I told you about last night. Flossie Books was right: he's back. I'm going to go clean up. After that you want to ride with me into town? Need to pick anything up? I thought we'd go to Tulsa tomorrow, get up earlier."

"I do need a few things. Rubber gloves."

"Shit, I'm sorry. I had a feeling I was forgetting something." Corliss sounded like she meant it.

"I bought some when I stopped to call you."

"Figures."

"I want to take my car into town, if you don't mind. I know you let that giant hairball ride with you all the time.

"No problem."

While Corliss showered, Jellie donned her last clean pair of rubber gloves and went outside to wash the window. About halfway through, the phone rang again. Jellie decided to simply keep her gloves on as she answered it.

"I'm sorry, Jellie. A week's fine." Jellie hadn't realized how tightly wound up she was until she felt a sudden loosening sensation in her chest.

"I only said 'maybe' a week, Howard. 'Maybe' means I might leave tomorrow."

"I miss you. But I understand if you want to stay and visit a while."

"Howard, Oklahoma has too much dirt. I'll leave tomorrow after breakfast."

"Stop and get a new phone--I don't want you on the road without one. Too many psychos in the world."

"I will."

"Drive safely, and call me."

"I will."

"See you in a couple days."

On the way into town, Jellie told her sister she was leaving.

"What a surprise."

"I don't have time to go to Tulsa. Is there a place here that sells cellular phones?"

"Yes, we have a little place that sells computers and things. The twentieth century arrived here quite a while ago, Jellie."

"Why are you being so bitchy to me?" Jellie turned away from her sister.

"Sorry. Worried about Molly."

"Molly? Is that your cow?"

"Molly is the wife of that guy who stopped by today. He can't find her. Thinks I'm hiding her, or at least thinks I know where she is, but I haven't seen her for over a week."

"You should be careful. He looked mean."

"He is. Pull up in that space there so no one'll ding your car. While you're in Ed's Electric, I'm going to stop in Flossie's place to see what she's heard. Need anything besides gloves?"

"Some Kleenex."

"See you in a bit."

On the drive home, Corliss cranked up the volume on the CD she bought in town, the soundtrack to *Immortal Beloved*. "'Ode to Joy' is one of the best fucking songs ever written," she yelled over the music.

Jellie smiled, took a swig of her Dr. Pepper. She'd almost bought Evian, but Corliss teased her about being a health freak, waved the bottle of Dr. Pepper in front of her, reminding her how addicted she was to the stuff when she was a teenager. It seemed too sweet to her now, but wasn't too bad.

Then the new phone rang. Jellie, reaching to set the bottle in the console, bumped into Corliss's hand, which was

reaching for the volume knob on the CD player. The bottle rolled under Jellie's legs, pouring its brown, syrupy contents all over the light blue carpet.

"Oh shit, oh shit!" screamed Jellie, bending down, her right hand searching for the bottle.

"It's right there, there! You almost had it! It's under your left leg." Both women were bent over, looking down, Jellie panicking, Corliss knowing she was. When Jellie's fingers closed around the bottle, both straightened in their seats in time to see they were on the wrong side of the road. To Jellie's left she saw a blur of red, brown, but it was so fast it didn't seem real, until a minute later when, even over the still-loud music, they heard the unmistakable crunch of crumpling metal.

By the time they slowed and turned around, the red truck was smoking heavily. Corliss got out, walked until she could see inside the cab, and Jellie let her go, let her take care of things, wishing Howard were there, wishing whoever was driving that truck would get out and be fine. Jellie could see the driver's-side door stood open, as though the force of impact with some tree that looked too scrawny to cause so much damage had sprung it, but the door and angle of the truck kept Jellie from seeing the driver from where she sat. Corliss leaned in, and didn't straighten up. "Taking his pulse," Jellie thought. "It must be bad." She knew she should dial 9-1-1, but wasn't sure if Oklahoma would put her in jail for reckless driving. She couldn't bear jail. Never. "I'll see what Corliss

thinks," she told herself, figuring the driver was dead, because Corliss was still leaning inside the cab. Jellie looked at the truck; "It's old," she thought, and then realized she knew the truck; it was the one that had been out at Corliss' place earlier, the man who beat up his wife.

Corliss straightened up, both hands covered with blood. Jellie felt ill at the idea that Corliss would want back into her car. But Corliss stood looking at her for a second, then turned to the bed of the pickup, pulling off her shirt. Her pale, bony back gleamed in the sunlight. Jellie noticed her sister did not go in for attractive lingerie. She watched as Corliss, using the shirt, picked up a squat, orange water cooler, pulled the spout, and soaked one end of her shirt. She pushed the spout back in, then used the dry part of the shirt to put the water cooler back.

"All that blood," she said when she got back to the car, still rubbing the blood off her hands. "Drop that bag my CD came in out the window. I'll put my shirt in there."

"You're going to ride around naked?"

"We're only going to my house."

"Should I dial 9-1-1, Corliss? I don't want to go to jail."

"They wouldn't put you in jail for an accident. Anyway, he's dead, Jellie."

"You can't be sure of that."

"Look for yourself, if you want. But he's dead all right."



"My god, I killed him." Jellie got out of the car, feeling an odd agitation she hadn't felt moments earlier, when she was pretty sure he was dead. She headed toward the truck.

"Come on, let's go," Corliss urged.

"Corliss, we can't leave the scene of a crime."

"God damn it, Jellie, the son of a bitch needed to be dead. Burl Hansen beat his wife on a regular basis. I can't prove it to you, but I know that if he'd have found her this time, he'd have killed her. She'd be dead. Instead, he is. There is no crime here. This is justice. Justice at the hands of an anal woman who has a thing for pastels, her mean sister, and good old D.P.--Dr. Pepper justice!" She started giggling, pulling Jellie by the arm back towards the car. "Let's get out of here."

Jellie let her sister pull her back to the car, beginning to understand what she had just watched happen. She made Corliss drive because her hands started shaking. Corliss giggled the whole way home. Finally, as she pulled onto her own driveway she said, "God, Jel--you're like fucking Dorothy; only you left the land of Oz to come to Kansas and kill the wicked wizard!" Her giggles broadened into sniggers; when she finally hit a full-fledged bray, she sprayed spittle onto Jellie, who cringed away from her, one hand already pulling a tissue from her pocket to wipe her face.

"Corliss, what have you done? What have we done?"

Corliss stopped the car. She looked straight ahead.

"Look, Jellie, there's Toto." Her dog, the size of a pony, was pulling on his tether, barking welcome. This time Corliss' laughter was almost a scream.

Jellie looked at the dog. She felt like crying, but said nothing.

Corliss had a surprise for Jellie the next morning.

"Corliss! You washed my car."

"Scrubbed the Dr. Pepper stain out, cleaned the vinyl, and vacuumed, too. I know you want to get going, so I thought this'd save some time."

"I appreciate everything you've--"

"Shit, the biscuits are burning." Corliss ran toward the house, flinging a "Come eat!" over her shoulder without actually looking back. Since they were kids, Corliss liked to know what she did for others didn't escape notice, but the interchange of gratitude made her uncomfortable. She'd never make it in L.A., where the ability to kiss up was a city ordinance. Jellie knew she'd leave after breakfast without either of them saying more than they'd already said. This is how they were sisters. The dead man would never be mentioned again unless Jellie brought him up, and she wouldn't, not to her sister, certainly not to Howard. Probably not even to herself.

## IT COULD HAVE BEEN A DUMPSTER

By the time he was seven, Albert Whitefeather had it all figured out: he knew his dad's name was Rape; he heard his Grandma say on the phone once, "My poor Albert, he's a child of Rape." His dad must've done something, something pretty bad, or the grown-ups wouldn't stop talking or look at him so funny when he came into a room. Albert figured out his dad hurt his mom, and that was why she wouldn't let him come live with them. He was pretty sure his dad wanted to.

When he was eight, Dana Plank got mad at him because he said, "No way!" when she asked him to kiss her. Maybe he shouldn't have said, "You're gross," because that's when it all started.

"Your daddy's a rapist," she yelled in his face. "He raped your mama an' got her pregnant. I wouldn't want no dirty Indian bastard with a rapist daddy kissing me no how." And she laughed, pointing at him.

When he asked his mom about it that afternoon, she squeezed her lips together so tight they turned white around the edges and Albert almost couldn't see them. "Who said that to you, Albert?" she wanted to know, almost shaking him. Her hands hurt his shoulders.

"Ow, Mom," he said to her, twisting under her hands,

but she was too mad to let go, and he never said anything about it out loud again, not even though she never answered his question. He looked it up in the dictionary, but the only thing he understood was "robbing," and didn't know what that had to do with him. He thought maybe his mom and dad stole him, but he was afraid to ask his mom again and watch her mouth disappear.

When his third-grade year ended, he and his mom moved to Oklahoma. "Too many people know too much here, Mama," she told his grandma; "Albert deserves a better way." That's how they came to Gafferton. "A man at the restaurant, a trucker, told me about Gafferton. He made it sound like a nice place to live. Get us away from this place, anyhow." Albert learned a lot by listening to his mom and grandma talk; he knew when being quiet paid off.

Now, at eleven, Albert knew what rape was. too. Ever since he found out about sex at school, he understood his what his father had done, even though he didn't understand why it was so bad. But now he didn't know his father's name, and somehow that seemed important to him, to know this much about his father that wasn't bad.

As Albert rode his bike down Main Street, he thought *I like Gafferton all right, but I sure miss Grandma*. Before Main became the highway, Albert turned off onto a dirt road. He slowed, because the road was pretty bumpy. He and Patrick liked to get past this part of the trip and onto the old road that was so overgrown with grass that they could barely tell it had ever been a road. Patrick named it the

Weedy Path.

Albert had friends at school, and he liked to hang out with them and play a little ball, but he liked it best when Patrick Bointy and him rode their bikes way over past the lake. Sometimes they got Albert's mom to make them some sandwiches, and they went down to the Spree 'n' Flee, where they bought some root beer off old Mr. Halliwell, and he tossed in a handful of bubblegum for free. Mr. Halliwell drank at Jasper's all the time, and he liked Albert's mom. He was okay, but Albert was pretty glad that when he asked his mom one day if she was going to marry Mr. Halliwell, she looked really surprised and said, "Where on earth did you get that idea?" He knew from the tone of her voice it was safe to take the gum from Mr. Halliwell.

He and Patrick had lots of fun on their trips, looking for cool things they hadn't seen before, each time going a little further and further. Summer got too hot to do anything but go to the city pool or get his mom to take them to Lake Carl Blackwell, but in spring and fall, that was when Albert liked to ride. The last time they went was a couple of weeks ago, on a Monday when school was out for a teachers' meeting.

The weather was starting to get cooler; they even had a couple of nights of freeze, and the leaves had started to turn. Albert wanted to make one more trip, but Patrick couldn't go on this Saturday, because his sister was in some stupid old piano recital, and their mom told Patrick, "Some day you'll be happy you showed your sister some support."

Albert was pretty glad he didn't have any sisters.

He didn't want to miss out, though, on one last trip, and it looked like it was going to be a good day to ride. His mom asked him, "Where are you boys going today?" Albert didn't tell her about the recital, thinking his mom wouldn't let him go alone.

"Just over around the lake, Mom."

"Be careful. Don't let any strangers get near you." His mom always told him that, and Albert listened. But he didn't tell her he planned to drive all the way to the interstate today, which was about fifteen miles each way. He and Patrick had never been so far before, but he was pretty sure he could make it. *I'll show Patrick*, he thought. *Man, he's going to be so pissed off!*

By the time Albert pulled up on a little hill where he could make out interstate a few miles away, his legs were pretty tired. He was kind of wishing he hadn't done this by himself, because it was no fun not being able to high-five Patrick at how far they'd gone. But he kept on, because he wanted to say he'd been all the way there. "Almost there" wouldn't impress Patrick at all. Albert figured he'd ride to the rest area just north of the Gafferton highway turnoff and eat lunch at one of the picnic tables. If no one was looking, he'd carve his name on a table so he could prove to Patrick he'd been there the next time they got to ride.

The rest-stop was farther than it looked, and by the time Albert got there, he knew he'd never make it home before dark. His mom was going to be pissed big time. He

thought about turning around, but thought even more about how impressed Patrick was going to be, how jealous. He kept going.

When he pulled up to the low concrete building where the bathrooms were, he saw a woman walking back towards a station wagon; she was kind of hunched over, walking slow. A couple of little kids sat in the back seat, and a girl maybe his age sat in the front passenger side. Her eyes were big as she stared at him. She never even blinked, and she watched him until the woman got in and started the car, backing it out slow. They drove off toward the interstate.

No one else was around, so Albert got his pocket knife out. He looked at the table for a little while; he'd promised his mom never to use the knife for anything bad. Since so many people's names and initials were scratched into the old tabletops you could barely see the green paint anymore, he decided it would be okay. He started with the "A," then stopped, thinking he heard something, a high sound like a kitten crying. The sound stopped. *A bird*, he thought, and moved to the "L."

When the sound started again, he tried to find where it was coming from. He looked in both bathrooms, in all the stalls, but inside the building the meowing or whatever it wasn't as loud. Albert walked outside and around to the back of the building. There stood a big, old septic tank. Albert knew what it was; his grandma in Arkansas had one out behind her trailer.

He looked around on the ground, in the tall grass along

the back wall and under the septic tank. He couldn't hear the sound anymore. The smell back there wasn't too good, and he figured he'd give it a couple more minutes to see if the sound came again, and then he had to hurry. He was already in big trouble. His mom'd probably think he drowned in Lake Carl Blackwell. He still had his knife out, so he idly scraped the tip along the side of the septic tank, listening to the hollow sound it made as it flaked away the rusty metal. Then the sound came again, hollow, too, and Albert knew whatever it was making the noise was inside the septic tank.

This was too much. No way was he digging in crap for something he didn't even know what it was. He stood there, though, thinking. He wouldn't want to be a kitten or a puppy and die like that. But what if it was something else? What if it was something bad that might bite him? He decided to knock harder on the tank and see if the noise changed, if some animal'd start acting ferocious.

He closed his knife and knocked with it, but still scraped his knuckles on the rust. No animal noises. No noise at all. He banged again with the other hand. Then the noise started again, this time louder, and suddenly Albert knew it was a baby inside that tank, a human baby, and he ran for his bike, ran blindly, thinking only that he had to get help. But once he straddled the crossbar, ready to go, he didn't know which way: Gafferton was too far, and his mom told him never to talk to strangers in cars, never, no matter what, and he had promised her because she seemed



so scared that it scared him. He had never broken a promise to his mom. "We're all we have, Albert: just you and me," she told him.

"What about Grandma?" he asked her.

"We have Grandma, too, but she's not here with us. Here it's only us, and we have to help each other. Promise me."

"Promise, Mom. I promise." So he couldn't go to the interstate. Albert climbed off his bike, let it fall to the ground as he ran back to the tank.

The baby'd stopped crying again. Albert looked for a way to open the tank, found the one the baby must've been put through. The opening was small, and Albert was afraid he wouldn't be able to reach. There couldn't be much crap in it, or the baby would've drowned. He stuck his arm down the hole up to his shoulder, his fingers spread out, searching for something to grab hold of. He waved the arm slowly back and forth, straining to push his shoulder just a little farther in when his fingers felt something, plastic maybe, and he pushed down with his shoulder as hard as he could until it hurt so bad he wanted to scream, and he grabbed the plastic and pulled it upwards.

For a minute he was afraid he'd wedged his shoulder into the hole, but then it jerked free and he fell backwards, barely grabbing the handle of the hatch to stop from falling off. The plastic bag banged against the top of the tank's insides, and the baby started crying again. Albert pulled the bag up through the hole, trying to turn

the little body so it would come through and not get hurt any more.

When he had the bag free, he slithered down the rusty side of the tank, holding it away from himself. The bag wasn't tied off or knotted, but it smelled of crap and that sick smell they use in bathrooms. Albert laid the bag on the ground, opening it by folding it away from the baby like a banana.

The baby was naked, and Albert looked at its privates: a girl. A long red thing stuck out from her bellybutton and she was all bloody and slimy. She didn't move much, but when she did move her arms, they sort of jerked around. Her eyes stayed closed, like a newborn kitten's did. Albert wanted to go into the bathroom to get some paper towels and wipe her off, but he didn't want to leave her alone. He wished hard for someone to come by. Why didn't anyone need to pee?

Finally he carried the baby with him, first taking off his shirt to wrap her in it. He put her gently on the floor, then dampened some paper towels and knelt beside her to clean her off. He wiped her face, trying to be gentle with the scratchy towels. He wiped her chest, and her butt and her privates. Girls looked funny. He pulled back the flap and wiped inside. The baby started crying again, so he stopped. He wiped her legs and arms, got some more towels and did her hands and feet. He didn't touch that thing by her bellybutton. It was bleeding a little.

When he finished, Albert wrapped her in his shirt

again. He was glad it was long-sleeved, but it still didn't fit around her so that he could tie her to him and ride. He'd have to ride with one arm and hold her with the other. He figured he better get started; it'd be dark pretty soon.

It took him five hours to get to Lake Carl Blackwell. Albert pedalled until his legs felt like they were going to fall off. Sometimes he had to get off and walk, pushing the bike with one hand and holding the baby with the other. With darkness it was too hard to see the bumps and ruts in the Weedy Path, and he didn't want to fall on the baby. His shoulder throbbed and his arms hurt, and once he stopped and sat on the ground and cried. But the baby wasn't crying at all anymore, so he got up and went on.

He could see the lights from a campsite at the lake, and he must have stopped trying to feel the road under him, because suddenly he was airborne, his left foot tangled in the bike frame dragging it on top of him. He tried to keep from landing on top of the baby, but he could feel she was half under him when he landed. She still made no sound. He lay there, the breath knocked out of him, his eyes closed.

He opened them to a sheriff's deputy standing over him. He never even heard the car pulling up. Albert looked around. The baby was gone. "Where is she?" he yelled at the cop, trying to stand up.

"It's okay, son. Just take it easy. Everything will be okay. Your mother is on her way. Take it easy."

Albert pushed past the deputy and ran to the car. Peering through the window, he could see the baby on the

back seat, and he knew she was dead. He hadn't saved her. Maybe he even killed her, falling on her like that. He wanted his mom to hurry up and get there. He wanted that worse than he ever wanted it before. He could hear her tell him how it wasn't his fault, he did his best, out there all by himself. He was a good boy, no matter how he came into the world. And she would hug him and it would be better.

While he sat there waiting for her, he thought of the hunched-over woman at the bathroom. He thought of the eyes of the little girl in the car. She looked like she never learned how to smile.

VITA

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Recipient of the May Wilson Woods Prize for the best essay dealing with English literature before 1800 or Jane Austen for "A Celtic King: Irish Echoes in Arthurian Legends" in April, 1998.  
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