AMERICAN THIGHS AND OTHER STORIES: A SHORT STORY MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

CONSTANCE ELIZABETH SQUIRES

Bachelor of Arts in English
University of Oklahoma
Norman, Oklahoma
1993

Master of Arts in English
University of Central Oklahoma
Edmond, Oklahoma
1999

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
December, 2005

AMERICAN THIGHS AND OTHER STORIES: A SHORT STORY MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Dissertation Approved:

Jeffrey Walker

Dissertation Adviser

Toni Graham

Robert Mayer

Lesley Rimmel

A. Gordon Emslie

Dean of the Graduate College

PREFACE

The short stories that comprise this manuscript were written during my time at OSU. Six were written in workshops directed by Toni Graham and Andrea Koenig. The critical introduction discusses my understanding of the short story form, technical aspects of the composition process, and influences on the stories collected here.

I wish to thank my dissertation committee members—Chairperson Dr. Jeffrey Walker, Professor Toni Graham, Dr. Robert Mayer, and Dr. Lesley Rimmel—for their time, energy and wise counsel.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am profoundly grateful to many people for their help and support during the long process of pursuing the Ph.D. and writing these stories. I would like sincerely to thank my professors at OSU, especially Professor Toni Graham, Professor Andrea Koenig, Dr. Robert Mayer, Dr. Jeffrey Walker, and Dr. Ed Walkiewicz for their invaluable courses, which have helped me and changed me more than I could say, and for their friendship and good cheer, which I will always cherish.

I would also like to thank some of my colleagues whom I had the great good fortune of having in the trenches with me, especially Michael McCamley, Clay Matthews, Tim Bradford, Joel Isenberg, and Matt Sivils. For invaluable insight and criticism on my short stories I additionally thank my dear friend Rilla Askew and my husband Steve Garrison. This collection is dedicated to him with all my deepest thanks for the ceaseless and uncountable ways in which he has fostered my progress through this degree and through these stories. Without Tracy Newkumet, Sherry Leach and all my other friends filling me with faith, hope, and bad coffee, I would not be here, and I thank them. Finally, my thanks to my mother, my father, my brother, my sister, and my amazing nephews and niece, for being themselves.

I would like to thank the following journals for publication and honors for stories in this collection: *The Arkansas Review*: "Cover Artists," (nominated for a Pushcart Prize and recommended to the O.Henry Award Series committee); *The Briar Cliff Review*:

"The Color of Ghosts" (First Place 2004 Fiction Award, Pushcart Prize nomination); *Bayou*: "The Cold War" (Best New American Voices 2003 nomination); *The Gingko Tree Review*: "No Tourist" (Winner of the Bob Schacochis Award for Fiction 2004, runner-up in the *Atlantic Monthly* Student Fiction Contest 2003); *The Chiron Review*: "Contamination" (AWP Intro Journals Project 2004 Honorable Mention); *Eclectica*: "Writ in Water" (Spotlight Author September 2005). I am also grateful for financial support provided by the *Briar Cliff Review* Fiction Award, the Bob Schacochis Fiction Award, and from the OSU Fiction Award in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

A. Introduction

In one of the stories of this collection, "The Color of Ghosts," there is a scene in which a young girl named Elaine creeps up on her father, Major Travis, as he sits in his living room looking at slides he took in Vietnam that show the bodies of people he killed. This is the only scene in the collection based on a scene that actually happened in my life. I found it frightening and disturbing that my father would have taken photographs of his victims, and I asked him why he had done it. He said that he didn't want their deaths to be meaningless. He wanted to hold the moment, stop time, create some proof of their life and their death. He said he knew that soon their bodies would be gone, and he found it impossible to assimilate the difference between a live person, full of will and energy and history, coming at him the moment before with the intention of killing him, and a dead one. He felt himself to be standing in the gap between these states—he had caused it; he had killed them—and, like the narrator in Tim O'Brien's "The Man I Killed," he wanted to capture and hold something of this ineffable moment that breached the distance between life and death as the moment bled into the ground where the enemy soldier fell. The most basic impulse for the stories in this collection comes from a similar need—to capture something mysterious before it is gone, so that it isn't meaningless.

Fiction is mimetic. It has a relationship to the external world and to history. In all fiction, but especially in the short story, that relationship is synecdochical: the actions and events of the story stand in place of the whole of life. The analogy of the snapshot mirrors this relationship well: My father took a snapshot. A lot of snapshots. What exists beyond the frame of the picture, both spatially and temporally—a Quonset hut just out of frame,

details of the battle that made a corpse of the person in the photograph—is suggested by what is inside the frame.

The short story form functions in much the same synecdochical fashion. As Frank O'Connor explains in *The Lonely Voice*, "Because [the short story writer's] frame of reference can never be the totality of human life, he must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it, and each selection he makes contains the possibility of a new form" (21). Referring to novel writing, Henry James similarly describes the process in his preface to *Roderick Hudson*: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so" (1041). Frank O'Connor insists that in the short story the process of compression is much more central to the form than in the novel, "since a whole lifetime must be crowded into a few minutes, those minutes must be carefully chosen indeed and lit by an unearthly glow, one that enables us to distinguish present, past, and future as though they were all contemporaneous" (21).

A short story is more than a snapshot; it is a narrative, something that functions in time as well as space. Unlike the photograph, which has a close correspondence to whatever square of reality it captures, fiction has a much more complicated relationship to reality and to history. The form of the short story, as Frank O'Connor notes, "is not the essential form that life gives us: it is organic form, something that springs from a single detail and embraces past, present, and future" (21).

Writers can write about anything they can make the reader believe, but I return always to my central impulse for writing—to save from oblivion certain significant impressions and thoughts voiced through the characters and dramatized in scenes. I

cannot imagine what would motivate people who decided to write about something they knew little about—what would be the message they were trying to send; where would be the urgency necessary to pull them through the hard process of composition? As James said in an essay gleefully trashing Trollope, "It is only as an historian that he [the novelist] has the slightest *locus standi*" (1343). I tend to think that the short story, because of its more unforgiving formal demands, allows its writer to loose herself from a few of the stays that anchor the novelist to the particularly localized position that James mentions. In each story in this collection, I have personal authority over usually only one aspect of the story and use that as my solid footing for imagining the rest. For example, I grew up on military bases in West Germany, and so I feel qualified to write the stories in this collection set there, although none of the scenes of these stories ever happened to me. Even the Vietnam slides weren't known to me in the way Elaine discovers her father's slides in "The Color of Ghosts." I just knew that whenever my family took out slides of our travels, there was a box of my father's Vietnam slides that we weren't allowed to see because there were pictures of corpses.

In the stories in the second half of the collection I have various *loci* of personal authority. Rock and roll music, alcoholism, the sense of place—Lawton, Oklahoma, Rome, Italy—provide my *locus standi* within the stories. These fragments of experience provide a portal through which reality is transmuted into a fictional world, where the laws of reality are subsumed to the laws of the formal environment of the story. Every story contains a pull between the impulse towards reality and the necessities of the fictional world, in which plot, causality, and character development enforce a rigor upon the randomness of everyday life. Somehow, during this process writers seem to find that life,

where things happen for no reason, is changed to art, where everything happens for a reason.

B. Structure

In his essay "Metaphoric Motivations in Short Fiction," Charles E. May argues that the short story form is unique among literary genres because short story characters must be convincingly realistic personalities at the same time that they are plugged into a deep structure in which they operate as symbolic, essentially romantic projections. The short story uses techniques of realist fiction to convince readers that "it conforms to reality rather than its own laws, even as the mythic and aesthetic laws of the story drive the characters relentlessly towards the end" (67). My abiding interest in fundamental story structures (myth, archetype, fairytales and folk stories) has greatly affected the composition and revision of each story in this collection.

My interest stems from an early insecurity about my ability to plot. In *The Modern Library Writer's Workshop*, Stephen Koch describes my mindset when I began my novel, *Contact High,* in 1997: " In their [Koch's students'] panic, they had forgotten that making up their story was a search. Instead they were trying to 'make it up' out of more or less thin air." This approach fails, Koch insists, because "the search for a story is a matter of slowly, calmly, carefully, tentatively coaxing a hidden set of somethings into visibility" (59). That the "hidden set of somethings" always, but always, fits into one or another age-old story pattern convinced me that facility with plotting may to a large extent be a matter of knowing these old stories. I had already noticed the seeming inevitability of certain story patterns while getting my B.A. at The University of Oklahoma, where I took such classes in English and Classics as Virgil and Dante, *The*

Illiad and *The Odyssey*, Plot Typologies in the Bible, Milton, Vice and Virtue in Ancient Rome, *The Addhyatma Ramayana* and *Paradise Lost*, Shakespearean Comedy, Shakespearean Histories, and Shakespearean Tragedies. Then I took a few film classes, and it was impossible not to notice that all the films shown drew their dramatic situations from elements of one or another of the texts covered by the other classes I had taken. The commercial world of creative writing also accepts that there are a finite and definable number of plots and dramatic situations—go to any Barnes and Noble and you can find books with such mutually contradictory titles as *Seven Basic Plots and How to Develop Them*, *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*, and *Infinite Plots in Infinite Combinations*. I have looked at these books, and they can be useful, but only, it seems to me, if you have read the old texts from which the plots are derived.

My interest in deep story structure received a tremendous energy boost when I began reading the novels of Iris Murdoch in the years before I started my M.A. I was daunted by her novels—I could not see how she was doing what she was doing. Her talent for plotting, as Harold Bloom notes, is "formidable, including a near-Shakespearean faculty for intricate double plots" (1). I felt all the more insecure about my own abilities after reading Murdoch, but also all the more convinced that, unlike many abilities involved in writing which, it seems to me, you either have or you don't, story and plot are elements of writing that can be deliberately studied and learned. I have begun to realize how Murdoch redeploys ancient plot structures into modern settings. My efforts to write short stories owe a lot to Iris Murdoch, although the form of the novel is significantly different from that of the short story and there is little that I know of in my style that resembles Murdoch's style. Short stories are not plotted in the sense of the

novel, but archetypes and myths inform the deep structure of either form and are often apparent in a less diluted form in the short story. As Frank O'Connor argues, "the conception of the short story as a miniature art is inherently false. Basically, the difference between the short story and the novel is not one of length. It is the difference between pure and applied storytelling" (26). Similarly, May argues that the short story is a form "which has remained close to the primal narrative that embodies and recapitulates mythic perception, and whose characteristics are compression rather than expansion and concentration rather than distribution" (64). He argues that:

> Although Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville began with the conventions of story/myth/romance, they subjected those conventions to the demands of *vraisemblance*, or realistic motivation, not as the novel did by the accumulation of metonymic detail and the development of the self through time but rather as the Romantic poets did, by means of metaphoric projection and hierophanic revelation. The early short story writers followed the impulse of the Romantic poets to demythologize the old ballads and folktales and remythologize them by presenting them as basic psychic processes. The ballad story, the legend, and the romance, which had previously existed as received story, became infused with the subjectivity of the poet or the teller and were given a metaphoric structure. (65)

I would argue that this process of deploying ancient and fundamental stories reinterpreted through a modern lens and "infused with the subjectivity of the poet" is still very much the way the short story works today. In any case, an effort to discover and

make use of the old patterns that emerge in the storytelling process contributes to the way I conceived and executed the stories in this collection. Flannery O'Connor talks about this quality in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction": "The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his short story, is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation" (72). I don't know if I have this kind of vision, but I am consciously cultivating it.

I am afraid this sounds more deliberate than it should.[1] I don't mean to suggest that the use of myths, fairytales, or even the influence of relatively modern literature and songs, is usually conscious, and I know for a fact that there are many short story writers I admire who don't make a study of these matters. I am talking about my own idiosyncratic ways. I cannot generalize about the habits or beliefs of all short story writers; I only argue that the tension between an allegiance to realism and an allegiance to a structural core tied to myth and folklore holds through all of the stories in *this* collection.

While it may be inevitable that discussions of literature should often break down into a division between form and content, I believe that this approach is essentially artificial—a literary version of Cartesian dualism. The more I write the more convinced I

[1] Realizing that this emphasis on story structures is bound to remind someone of T.S. Eliot's mythic method, I would like to assert what I see as crucial differences between my entirely practical interest in old stories and the manner in which Eliot and Pound—in *non-narrative* poems—used the mythic method to enforce a totalizing, teleological world view. I don't believe the persistence of basic plot structures suggests any sort of master code and I don't think I'm channeling the Mind of Europe. I am simply a storyteller trying to put my hands on as many useful tools as possible. I am more persuaded by the ideas of writers like Roger Schank and Karen Brennan, who argue that we are hardwired for narrative, and that the eternal presence of recurrent story structures probably results from how our brains work, how our synapses grab information in a process that resembles the causal, time-oriented nature of narrative. In "Dream, Memory, and the Recovery of Narrative," Brennan argues that "by nature[. . .] the activity of the neuron is narrative, metonymic, associative" (121).

become that form and content are as interdependent as body and mind. The content arising from mimesis is shaped by the formal demands of story patterns. Thus these are not discrete arguments to be argued individually, but rather two threads that intertwine. A discussion of the technical aspects of craft will demonstrate the inseparable interplay between form and content in the writing process involved in these stories.

C. Point of View

All of the stories in this collection have been written during my time at Oklahoma State University. Two stories are written in first-person ("Cover Artists" and "Writ in Water"), one in second-person ("No Tourist"), five were written in close third-person ("The Color of Ghosts," "American Thighs," "The Cold War," "Contamination," and "The Jade Green Bong."), and one was written in limited omniscient ("Grand Mal").

"Cover Artist" was my first short story and is one of two stories in the collection written in first-person. All the workshops I participated in at OSU emphasized the importance of point of view, and rightly so, since point of view is really the lens that allows the diffuse light of reality to be focused into the condensed laser light of a story. It is the vehicle by which the synecdochical relationship between reality and fiction transpires. Voice and point of view are especially crucial in short stories, I think, because the subject of the short story is usually intimately tied to the expression of a character who has very little power. These are not the voices of a society's dominant discourse. They are not ideologically unified and tend to be isolated strains of a larger, multivocal context implicit in the boundaries of the voice. Short story characters usually represent no one but themselves and their voice is their chief source of strength. Frank O'Connor argues that we find

> in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness. Indeed, it might be truer to say that while we often read again a familiar novel for companionship, we approach the short story in a very different mood. It is more akin to the mood of Pascal's saying: *Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*. (19)

In all the stories of this collection, one or two lonely voices sound, and the loneliness is expressed through point of view.

Nothing expresses the isolation of a single voice like an unreliable narrator. I suppose I settled into Grace's voice in "Cover Artist" because so many of my favorite novels and stories employ unreliable first-person narrators. I had begun to reexamine degrees of unreliability in the narrators of novels like *Henderson the Rain King*, *The Moviegoer*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Wieland*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as I tried to decide whether the narrator in the novel I had written and revised during the previous four years was reliable. She was, in fact, annoyingly reliable. It was a flaw in the book, I came to feel. Before I undertook yet another revision, one intent upon imbedding a layer of irony between the narrator and the events she recounts, I felt I should try the technique. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* Wayne Booth points out that unreliability is not usually "a matter of lying" but is "most often a matter of what James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him" (159). I wanted a voice that was very mistaken about something and I wanted it to be humorous. Flannery O'Connor describes the shift from novel writing to short story writing as like having "just left a dark wood to be set upon by

wolves" ("Nature and Aim of Fiction" 76), but I was so sick of writing, for so many years, in the reasonable, reliable voice of my novel that Grace's voice felt to me like being let out of jail.

The present task of analyzing the writing process makes every decision sound very premeditated, but what actually happened for me in this case was that I unconsciously absorbed and mimicked these examples of unreliable narrators. So, for example, the device of comic excess that appears in the opening sentence: "I have been to Graceland eighty-two times" followed by a self-conscious gesture that begs for understanding: "I know that sounds like a lot, but I love the King," mirrors the opening paragraphs of many other texts with unreliable narrators. On the first page of *Henderson the Rain King*, Henderson begins answering a question asked just before the story begins (another common device of the unreliable narrator): "What made me take this trip to Africa? There is no quick explanation. Things got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated" (3). Henderson is full of self-conscious gestures, but his first on page one begins "But if I am to make sense to you people and explain why I went to Africa I must face up to the facts. I might as well start with the money. I am rich" (3). Henderson's self-conscious awareness of his audience—"you people"—and his attempt to make himself understood demonstrates a structure also visible in the opening sentences of "Cover Artists."

Next in the unreliable narrator template that I unconsciously deployed on Grace, the narrator reveals a crucial item about himself that tells the reader much different information from what the narrator intends to give. This piece of information is the central throughline for the story. Thus Henderson tells us:

> But privately when things got very bad I often looked into books to see whether I could find some helpful words, and one day I read, 'The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required.' This impressed me so deeply that I went around saying it to myself. But then I forgot which book it was. (3)

Henderson searches for forgiveness throughout the novel—it is the reason he gives for everything he does. (This, too, seems to be almost a rule with unreliable narrators: The story is an apologia, a petition for understanding and forgiveness. Clara in *Wieland* is an especially good example). His attraction to this phrase that he found in a book sets us up for his quest for forgiveness and gives us a sudden glimpse to the very bottom of him, as his subsequent admission that he walked around saying it to himself and then forgot what book it was in tells us a good deal about him that makes him unreliable.

In the same spirit, Grace tells us:

> I have a tendency to sleep with an Elvis impersonator now and then. Pretty regularly, to be honest, because some of them are a close approximation, and that can't ever be bad. I have devised a system wherein I hit on Elvis look-alikes only as a way of dealing with the memory loss that always happens to me as an evening wears on. . . This way I assure myself of a not-too-jarring experience when I come to in the morning and find—well, Elvis next to me.

Grace is proud of her system and cannot quite see that she has developed it in order to keep herself off the road when she is drunk. Like her mother, who died in a drunk-driving accident, she is a blackout drinker. Her real problem is not what she tells us it is,

namely, that the Elvis impersonators she picks up are not reliably handsome. Her real troubles are her unresolved grief over her mother's death and her own drinking problem.

She cannot intentionally communicate information about these troubles to the reader. So it falls to other characters to show us things about Grace that she can't show. For example, when Grace explains her system for sleeping with Elvis impersonators, Ray responds, "You could give up drinking. Then you could drive yourself home." Grace cannot really absorb what Ray has said. She launches into a speech about Ray's "veil of cigarette smoke," but it is her speech that is the real veil—between her and the reader. As is the case with all but the most unreliable narrators (such as those created by Poe and Nabokov), she isn't crazy or stupid. Her judgments about the other characters in the story—Ray, Ali, Harley Charlie—are basically safe to believe, and her discriminations about music are idiosyncratic but sound. In fact, her aesthetic judgments about music and musicians are the principal means of establishing her authority over the story she tells. Like Henderson, she undergoes a series of setbacks in the story that lead her to a hopeful, though inconclusive, moment of clarity at the end of the story in which there is the chance that she will eliminate the blind spots that make her an unreliable narrator. Thus form and content are inextricable; the unreliability of the narrative voice demands that the story address what is lacking in the character by bringing the narrative to a point where some crisis and resolution occurs out of the chain of events set in motion by the character's initial attempt to explain themselves.

"Writ in Water," the other first-person story of the collection, operates through the consciousness of a much more reliable narrator than Grace. Paula Stern knows what she

is talking about most of the time. Her insights isolate her, though, and she wishes she were less reliable:

> One of the things that make me such a good rock critic is my ability to see the future of a band in the seeds of their present. It's easy—I don't understand why everyone can't do it. I can tell by listening to the music, reading the lyrics, talking to the band members, who is genuinely talented, who is just a high school buddy who will be working in a body shop three years on. I can tell when an album is a peak album, like reading a fever. I can tell, most of all, who is the spirit of the band, the one who will go on when this band breaks up and do something better, something permanent. [. . .] Sometimes I hate this ability. I wish I could be like everyone else, and not see what's coming.

Paula is cursed with formidable consciousness from which she seeks relief (through love, through music), but she is not really ready to relinquish control. Alex's dream in which he conflates her with Keats's "*La Belle Dame Sans Merci"* inserts her into another narrative, one not of her own making, in which she finds herself playing her part as if she were only a character in Alex's imagination.[2]

Paula's unreliability is the unreliability of any normal, high-functioning adult. We all have aspects of ourselves that we cannot face, temporarily or permanently, and our inability to do so does not necessarily make us dishonest or cowardly. Paula, during

[2] The way Alex absorbs the structure of the Keats poem and creates his own story (his dream) out of it mirrors the relationship between pre-existing story patterns and new stories I'm talking about throughout this essay.

this story, cannot discern her own feelings about Alex. I think she longs to experience love as a cataclysmic event, a total surrender of her ever-present critical skills, and she is frustrated that this isn't happening with Alex. She is not honest about her own vulnerability, and she can't see the connection between the fears about the worth of her own work as a rock critic and the anxiety Alex's presence causes her because she feels that he's a real artist. On some level she feels it's unfair that someone with a fraction of her learning and insight could nevertheless have more raw talent, and this feeling is exacerbated by her own regrets at having abandoned her own aspirations to become a poet in favor of a career as a rock critic. Alex has a connection to the unexplainable "Let there be Light" energy of creativity while she has access to all the intellectual infrastructure that surrounds it but does not believe she can create something out of nothing the way he can.

Yet she is an artist, too. I think the reader sees that she is, but she doesn't, and this blind spot is her truest claim to unreliability. I was thinking a lot about the different kind of creativity involved in creative and critical writing—doing a lot of both for this degree. I really love and admire both kinds of writing, and I was frustrated at how they tend to be portrayed in English departments as alien and even combative to one another. I think it's a false binary, one that Paula buys into and consequentially suffers from. Her criticism is art, but she doesn't think so. She's your guide through the story, but she can't tell you how her longing for artistic permanence relates to the way she looks at Alex or how it relates to her doubts about her own professional worth—you have to do that work yourself. While the line between reliability and unreliability probably moves a bit for every reader, my sense is that Paula is still a reliable narrator.

None of the other stories in the collection are first-person, and so none of them can contain, strictly speaking, unreliable narrators, but I think of most of the main characters in this collection as suffering from varying degrees of blindness. There is always something that the main character and often secondary characters cannot see or say about themselves, and the process of seeing the content of this blind spot is usually the causal engine that drives the stories. The final scene often involves the moment of vision. For example, Grace realizes she should write the song she's thinking of without drinking, and Paula realizes she will leave Alex. In the case of "The Color of Ghosts," Major Travis, who is literally color-blind, has his daughter in his blind spot. The story is set in 1980, and Major Travis still lives with the specters of Vietnam, manifest in his slides of the men he killed in Vietnam, his lost wife, who is really another of the ghosts in the story, and the ghosts he admits to Elaine that he sees. Elaine's inability to perceive what the reader can see about her, that everything she does—stealing the troll, obstructing her father's attempt to get a date, sneaking up on him while he's watching the *verboten* Vietnam slides, and insisting that her father come see the Nazi ghost in Vacation Bible School—is an effort to get her father to see her, and to understand whatever it is he sees that keeps him from focusing on her. She comes to the realization that he cannot see her the way she would like, and so she resolves to meet him on his own ground. He provides her with an opportunity when, after responding in the negative every time she asks him if he believes in God, he finally says that he believes in ghosts. The next day Elaine sees her own ghost in Bible school. I don't mean to say that the ghost is purely a projection of Elaine's desires and fears—I believe in it, personally—but Elaine's belief in the ghost brings her father to the classroom, where the father makes a

serious effort to see what Elaine is seeing. He doesn't see the ghost, but he does obtain some glimmer of who his daughter is.

Blind spots plague the main characters in the other third-person stories as well. Cate in "The Cold War" is confused about her own rage at her parents' disintegrating marriage and cannot see that her lesbian foray with the daughter of her father's lover is both an attempt to put herself in her father's shoes, to understand him, and an act of aggression towards the family she holds responsible for the demise of her own. She knows she has her mother's temper and she fears "the way rage [will] sometimes strike her like a flashflood, leaving her exhausted and humiliated in its wake." Cate witnesses the disintegration of her mother's personality as her mother yields increasingly to her rage, and she is determined to govern herself differently. The scene in the bathroom stall where she grabs Tina and kisses her shows her effort to channel her anger into a different form: "She tried to think through the ramifications of telling Tina about what their parents were up to. She couldn't think; she only felt rage rising up like something foreign about to take over her body. She felt like snapping Tina's neck with one twist, but instead, as Tina exhaled Cate grabbed her by the chin and began kissing her." This is not a true change of energy from violence to desire; all Cate has done is steer a runaway car into a ditch instead of into oncoming traffic, but she feels victorious. She thinks she has escaped her mother's influence. The reader can see otherwise, especially since rage continues to propel her actions as she grafitti's the snow in the Terry family's yard and beats up Tina. By the end of the story her rage has left her, at least for the moment, and she has realized that she will have to accept the changes about to come.

"Grand Mal," "American Thighs," "The Jade Green Bong," and "Contamination" are centered in the consciousness of female protagonists of varying ages and degrees of reliability. In limited omniscience, the narrative in "Grand Mal" slides from the joined consciousness of Lynn and Margaret, represented on the page with the plural pronoun "they," into the private thoughts of Lynn and Margaret. Neither mother nor daughter is unreliable, but each is blind to the interpretation of their situation the other's point of view provides. Lynn's point of view allows the reader insight into her marital problems, and the complexities of life as a military "dependent" in ways unavailable to Margaret. Lynn's perspective, however, cannot narrate from the inside the two central events of the story—Margaret's epileptic seizure and her love seizure. Margaret's point of view gives us these scenes. They are filtered through her own unique consciousness, and her own consciousness is full of fantasy. Margaret's awareness of quotidian details comes to us in the omniscient voice, not when the narrative is focused in her consciousness.

Her realization about King Ludwig's historical fate after the moment captured in the coronation portrait she stares at echoes the image of the slideshow in "The Color of Ghosts." Margaret stares at the painting and understands that "as he stood there in the frame of the portrait he had no idea what was going to happen to him. He would be certified insane and confined, and the next day they would find his body and his psychiatrist's body at the bottom of a lake. She wanted to scream down the centuries, "Run, run, run!" The painting is another image of the synecdochical relationship of art to life, of the difficulties of encircling a time and a space and letting that stand for all that is outside the frame. This is the sort of abstraction Margaret thinks about, so, perhaps not surprisingly, her relationship to reality is tenuous and somewhat reluctant. Like every

other central character in this collection, she has trouble staying in real time. Indeed, the difficulty certain characters face interacting practically in the world around them is a major concern of many of these stories. Margaret's seizures and her experience with King Ludwig's portrait take her out of her actual time and place in much the same way that drunkenness or being high removes Grace in "Cover Artists," the unnamed central character in "No Tourist," Iris in "Contamination," Cate in "The Cold War," and Jade in "The Jade Green Bong" from what Wallace Stevens calls "the malady of the quotidian" (81)—actually, in Jade's case, from the "malady" of living. Music acts as a sort of temporal slipstream that carries characters in several stories out of the moment: Lucinda and Nately in "American Thighs," Grace in "Cover Artists," Jade and Fern in "The Jade Green Bong," and Paula and Alex in "Writ in Water." Reading takes Lynn in "Grand Mal," Elaine in "The Color of Ghosts," and Paula in "Writ in Water" away from the restrictions of their present moment. Dreams and ghosts arrest the consciousness of Margaret in "Grand Mal," Elaine and Major Travis in "The Color of Ghosts," and Alex in "Writ in Water." I think this theme of the difficulty of staying fixed in real time contributes to the unreliability of many of the characters. At the same time, it is also a vehicle for demonstrating longing and for signifying the sorts of metaphysical questions that short stories can ask, better than most genres, but can't really answer.

Lucinda in "American Thighs" is reliable, but she lacks the perspective to see that music is becoming important to her as a gateway to a worldview different from that of the military hierarchy she has grown up around and which her father represents. Through the music she receives transmissions from another kind of life, one that Nately wants, too, and goes to Amsterdam to find. She is an individual consciousness sunk in a larger

historical context that the story explores around her, of which she herself is not aware. She is also not entirely honest with herself about the feelings she is developing towards Nately, but this blind spot, too, is temporary. He is probably her first big crush and she doesn't really knows what it means.

Iris, the runaway addict who is the central consciousness of "Contamination," has the unreliability of all addicts. She wants something to be true that can never be true, and so her every perception is qualified by the huge blind spot her addiction represents. Addiction-induced unreliability is different from the unreliability of the average person in degree but not in kind, which makes it a useful tool. We all have dreams that we want to realize, traits that we don't want to own. The intense conflict of desires that is fundamental to addiction has been a source of energy useful to me in writing short stories, which are so often structured around moments of crisis and change. Thus, Iris cannot give the reader a fair take on her family. Are they the "utter and perfect assholes" that she says they are? Little about them creates a sympathetic picture, but we have to read Iris's estimation of them through the fact that the intervention they stage is an attempt to get her to admit her addiction, which she does not want to do. Similarly, she romanticizes her Uncle Clay, while failing to appreciate his genuine regard for her well-being. Tricking her into the treatment center is the most loving thing he could do for her, but she interprets it as an act of betrayal. She also makes the false analogy that most addicts—especially very young ones—make between being non-conformist and being an addict, an analogy that fails to factor in the limitations of living in a human body.

Written in second-person, "No Tourist" focuses on the declining fortunes of a full-blown alcoholic, a character who is in some ways the most unreliable consciousness

in the collection but in others a very reliable one, because of her efforts to be ruthlessly honest about her thinking process. Second-person point of view is not popular, partly because it's very limiting, and partly because it has become so identified with the fiction of Lorrie Moore that it is difficult for other writers to use it without seeming derivative. That said, I confess the idea of using second-person for "No Tourist" probably came from Lorrie Moore's story "How to Become a Writer," in which second-person point of view parodies the tone of self-help books. The sunny tone belies the humiliations and letdowns that the story intimates are typical of the writing life and that the hapless second-person narrator cannot seem to restrain herself from confessing while handing out typical bits of writing-manual advice. By signifying the reader in the story with the pronoun "you" in the place of the first-person "I" or a character's name, second-person minimizes the distance between reader and character. It creates an uncomfortable closeness for readers in which they are implicated in the events they are reading and are not allowed to wiggle away by failing to empathize with the character. The character is "you," so the reader becomes the story's agent whether he likes it or not. For this reason, second-person works for stories where the author details something painful in which the reader's desire to distance himself from the events of the story is great. Second-person doesn't let the reader get away.

The story "When It's You," by Fred Leebron, demonstrates the unique possibilities of second-person. The title says it all. Describing the diagnosis and descent into death of a cancer patient through the eyes of the patient's partner, the story is a brutal read, doing what short stories do so well—taking us somewhere we've never been before, into one lonely consciousness. The principal drive of the writer seems to be a fierce

desire to make people see the situation as real, not as a statistic, not, as the title implies, something that always happens to someone else. "It is the way of drama," Flannery O'Connor says, "that with one stroke the writer has both to mirror and to judge. When such a writer has a freak for his hero, he is not simply showing us what we are, but what we have been and what we could become. His prophet-freak is an image of himself" ("On Her Own Work" 117). I knew I had a similar topic in alcoholism, which is why I decided to try second-person in "No Tourist."

The choice of voice and point of view helps determine both the form and the content of the stories. By focusing the diffuse material of reality into a single consciousness, questions about content—Who is this character? What does she want? What will she do?—find answers as formal decisions resolve themselves. In each story in this collection, the character appears through point of view and voice, what she wants provides the forward motion of the story and the events of the story arise with a natural causality as she acts to get what she wants.

D. Military Life

War, or more precisely, the military life and the effect of living with the constant thought of war, became a major theme in the first four stories of this collection. I wrote "The Color of Ghosts" first, followed by "The Cold War," "Grand Mal," and "American Thighs," all set on American military bases in West Germany in the 1980s. My own family was stationed in Germany from 1971-73 and 1980-82. Writing these stories I felt the truth of Flannery O'Connor's assertion in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" that "anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days" (84). I began to realize that the years my family spent overseas

might become interesting material for fiction after the Berlin Wall came down. Suddenly, the worldview upon which my family's presence in Europe was predicated became obsolete. The map was redrawn, and though US troops are still in Germany, there is a profound shift in the use and importance of those bases. Now they are staging areas for deployment to the Middle East, whereas they used to serve as the front line of the Cold War.

My sense of the potential value of this material grew as I read and studied literature. Many of the works of literature that I value most are historical in the same sense that what I have written about Germany is historical. Edith Wharton, Milan Kundera, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, Iris Murdoch, E.M. Forster, J.D. Salinger, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Saul Bellow, Henry James, all typify their own historical period or one they remember from childhood. These authors became historic representatives of their own lifetime, describing a vanished world with the detailed knowledge of someone who was there. I return to my basic impulse for writing—to save something from oblivion. I was especially struck by the parallels between my situation with the material set in Germany and Edith Wharton's relationship to the material of *The Age of Innocence*. Published in 1920, Wharton's novel captures the New York of her childhood in the 1870s, a super-wealthy, rarefied environment long gone by the time she wrote the book. Her attitude towards that environment is ambivalent. On the one hand, she criticizes its provincialism and its elitism as well as its utter failure to provide any legitimate intellectual outlet for any of its members, especially its women, who live purely decorative, suffocated lives at the mercy of the perceptions of others. On the other

hand, the book's title evokes a certain nostalgia and a sense that something unique has gone.

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* also captures a past time and a closed society in terms that are both critical and appreciative. His depiction of the British Raj in India was especially inspiring to me as the society is in many ways the same sort of imperialist outpost as the US military bases in Europe where my stories are set. I hope that the stories in this collection are, like Forster's novel, descriptive of the rule-bound absurdities, imperialistic assumptions, and inherent violence of such a society.

All four of this collection's stories involving military life center on the experience of the family, decentering the representatives of the Cold War's dominant discourse—politicians, the military, and, generally, men. In "Some Call it Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity," Nancy Armstrong points out that "modern institutional cultures depend upon the separation of 'the political' from 'the personal'. . . produc[ing] and maintain[ing] this separation on the basis of gender—the formation of masculine and feminine domains of culture" (1324). Bringing the personal domain to the forefront, these stories treat the Cold War from a largely unexplored perspective. The women and children of these stories, and the men, too, experience the United States's mission in the Central European Theater of the Cold War not as contributory agents, but as individuals whose felt life is circumscribed by their historical situation and who offer a view of the concrete personal effects, rather than the abstract impersonal causes, events, or results of the Cold War.

The father figure in all of these stories stands at the intersection of personal and political discourse and is a difficult figure for that reason. The settings of these stories is,

for the most part, domestic and the father operates in that setting as a representative of home. But he also represents war and death. His active participation in the military implies the acceptance of the military worldview, which is dehumanizing. Major Travis in "The Color of Ghosts" and Major Collins in "American Thighs" are both possessed of the arrogant assumption that rules are for other people, an assumption that we have all become familiar with watching George W. Bush deal with the world. The profound damage this kind of blind spot causes is clear to everyone watching the news the last few years, but I wanted to show the effects it has on the lives and minds of individuals affected by it. Each of these father characters is somewhat dehumanized, victimized, and damaged by his participation in war, and each experiences difficulty realigning himself with the emotional life and morality of his family. Jack in "Grand Mal," Major Travis in "The Color of Ghosts," Major Bender in "The Cold War," and Major Collins in "American Thighs" all marginalize their families because of their own participation in the dominant discourse of the military base and the Cold War in general. In this discourse, the family of the military member is neither subject nor object. They are entirely peripheral, an added dependent clause in the military statement. But the structure of these stories marginalizes the military, placing the voices of the family at the center. PFC Nately and PFC Snowden in "American Thighs," although they are military, are significant in the story not as representatives of the Army, but as powerless individuals. Of course, it is their relationship to the military that highlights their powerlessness. I made a few small textual efforts to emphasize this theme including naming the characters of the two G.I.'s in the story, Snowden and Nately, after characters in Joseph Heller's brilliant black comedy of military life, *Catch-22*. Snowden is the gunner whose death

Yossarian repeatedly sees in flashback, and Nately is the young kid who falls in love with a whore in Rome and who is played by Art Garfunkel in the film version, creating another connection between music and the military. The Nately of "American Thighs" physically resembles Art Garfunkel, and his conversation with Lucinda about the Simon and Garfunkel song "America" is meant as sort of a joking reference to these imbedded allusions.

Frank O'Connor argues that while the novel depends upon some "concept of normality and [. . .] some relationship—hostile or friendly—with society as a whole," the short story focuses instead on what he calls a "submerged population group" (17). His examples include "Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson's provincials" (17). These characters are submerged in a marginal category that insures they are in some way locked out of their culture's dominant discourse. I would add to Frank O'Connor's list such examples as his own Irish lower class; J.D. Salinger's youths; Tim O'Brien's soldiers; Flannery O'Connor's rednecks and Catholics; and Hemingway's hunters, children, soldiers, and drunks. And I find that the American military and their family members overseas is one of my submerged population groups. By placing the voices of the military at the center of my stories, giving them agency, these stories critique military life, a dynamic that is strengthened by the presence of rock music as an alternative to the life lived by the characters of these stories.

E. Formal Influences: Myth, Folklore, Literature, and Rock and Roll

In many of the stories in this collection rock music functions historically. In "American Thighs" music operates as a subversive, centrifugal discourse that competes against the centripetal force of military discourse.

"I feel like spies," Lucinda says to Nately when she meets him to pick up the tapes he has made for her. The scene self-consciously parodies the familiar Cold War plot device of spies exchanging information, implying that music is a dangerous commodity, and it is. As Keir Keightley argues persuasively in "Reconsidering Rock," rock music sets up a critique of the mainstream culture that is accomplished through a series of oppositional binaries. Distinctions emerge "between the 'serious' and the 'trivial,' the 'oppositional,' and the 'complicit,' the 'truthful,' and the 'fraudulent,' the 'anti-mass,' and the 'mass,' the 'authentic' and the 'alienated'" (128). Rock is described by the first term in each of these oppositions. Music is Lucinda's principal means for nascent opposition to her father and the military machine he represents, and which, while perhaps not trivial, otherwise earns the adjectives on the other side of Keightley's duality—"complicit," "fraudulent," "mass," and "alienated." Lucinda and Nately are serious about rock music in a way that goes beyond the diversionary or entertainment properties of rock. Their discussions about music revolve around classification and an implicitly ethical evaluation of authenticity. This concern with authenticity is, according to Keightley, "the compass that orients rock culture in its navigation of the mainstream" (131).

In each of this collection's stories where rock music is a presence, the characters engage in the kind of classification and search for authenticity that Keightley describes. In "American Thighs," Nately dismisses Lucinda's untutored interest in Journey,

Foreigner, and the Eagles, rock bands who earn the second set of descriptors in the oppositions listed above. He classifies rock in much the same way literary scholars classify genres and historical movements in literature—indeed, there is no doubt in my mind that the continual presence of serious discussions about rock music in these stories stand in some way for literature and literary criticism, what I have been thinking most about while writing these stories. Likewise, authenticity is a major theme in "Cover Artists." The title refers to the reason Grace doesn't take Ray seriously as a musician—he is a cover artist, someone who does not write his own songs but instead simply plays the music of authentic musicians. Grace is a real musician, although the title also points out the irony implicit in someone with her concern for authenticity making a habit of having sex with the phoniest of all creatures in the rock universe, Elvis impersonators.[3] Not only does Grace discriminate against Ray for playing cover music, she breaks off her evening with Ali, the Iranian Elvis, after discovering that "he had only two Elvis CD's, and they were Greatest Hits. The walls were covered with posters of [. . .] bands like Motley Crüe and Aerosmith" (104).

The honor conferred upon Jade in "The Jade Green Bong" is intimately tied to her status as an original artist, and much of Fern's anxiety about standing in Jade's shadow involves her desire to shape herself as an original voice, not a Jade rip-off. Finally, Paula Stern in "Writ in Water" makes a living drawing the line between rock and pop, authentic and inauthentic, serious and trivial. Her musical aesthetics are closely tied to her literary aesthetics, and she conflates her musical and her literary vocabulary as she conflates Alex Glimmer and John Keats. Whether evaluating music or literature, she is concerned with

[3] Grace's habit of having sex with Elvis impersonators results from the importance she attributes to her dead mother's story of having been Elvis's lover. By having sex with Elvis impersonators, she is imitating her mother, a form of inauthenticity to which she is blind.

the importance of authenticity, the relationship between talent and hard work, and the means of measuring the status of the artist. Thus the culture of rock music infiltrates all of these stories with its aesthetic evaluations, acting as a tool of characterization and as a focusing lens that situates the stories within the context of rock music's historical discourse.

Rock and roll also taught me how to read for form. I used to listen to songs for their lyrics, and I read books the same way, for the denotative meaning. Then I began to notice how the music of a song carries the meaning as much as the lyrics. For example, in Steely Dan's song "Do It Again" the lyrics are about eternal return and repetition: "You go back, Jack, and do it again. Wheel turning round and round. You go back, Jack, and do it again." The song is broken into three discrete narratives, each containing the arc of a full short story, the first about a man who is narrowly spared hanging but returns to the town from which he has barely escaped, the second concerning a lover who is doomed to relearn the same disappointing lesson about his beloved, returning again and again to the moment "When you know she's no high climber." The third verse tells the story of a gambler who swears off gambling and then finds he's "back in Vegas with a handle in [his] hand." Each verse tells the story of a different character doomed to repeat the same self-destructive behavior. This theme of repetition is supported by a rhythm section that plays the same rolling circle of beats unwaveringly throughout the song, a technique that is, I believe, unique among rock songs, which usually involve a few different types of drumming and a peak in the form of a drum solo. But Steely Dan uses bongos in this song, not a drum set, and the inexorable, unchanging beat is the first and the last thing you hear of the song, the ceaselessly repeating rhythm that carries, more

than the lyrics, the theme of eternal return. It is a weary sexual rhythm that seems incapable of altering. The bass is sexual, the treble (the guitars and Donald Fagan's voice) provide the cerebral balance to the underlying rhythm.

I began to see similar structural patterns in literature. This is not the kind of reading I learned as an undergraduate English major, which, at least for me, was mostly learning to read for theme and symbol, which are still denotative. But this is how writers think about writing, and it was the great discovery of graduate school, where in both my M.A. and my Ph.D. program I was exposed to ways of reading, both in writing workshops and in literature courses, that are congenial with this structural emphasis.

But thinking structurally does not mean building a story according to pre-planned archetypal, mythic, or musical parallels. In his Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James says, "I might envy, though I couldn't emulate, the imaginative writer so constituted as to see his fable first and to make out its agents afterwards: I could think so little of any fable that didn't need its agents to positively launch it; I could think so little of any situation that didn't depend for its interest on the nature of the persons situated" (1073). James insists that character comes before plot, something that is true for my writing process. I am interested in structure and story patterns because I am a storyteller, but looking over my own stories to see what older story patterns appear in them is the province of a second or third draft. There is no telling what the story will be until it is written, and I've never set out to write, say, a prodigal son story, a Lazarus story, a descent into Hades story. The patterns just seem to be there regardless.

Noticing story patterns does have a practical use in later drafts, however, in that it allows me to see the essential shape of the story in a way that can sometimes help me

determine what material is extraneous, what material is going in the wrong direction, or what expectations the story may have set up that I haven't met. For example, this summer "The Jade Green Bong" expanded in numerous directions in a way that, while it was exciting, was hopelessly sloppy and shapeless. For a while I abandoned all efforts to shape it into a short story and let it go in all directions. There were scenes from widely separate periods in the lives of all the characters. It felt like material for a novel. The problem concerned the need Frank O'Connor describes of selecting a point of entry through which the vast, unfocused material of existence can take on shape and meaning.

I could not shape the story until I realized that in what is now the opening scene of the story Jade offers Fern a bargain. In the early drafts, Jade's offer was barely discernible, just a casual comment. But I was grasping for order, so I made Jade's offer more explicit and more morally compromising for Fern. Once that was done, the story's shape began to show itself. Fern's feelings about the deal she makes or doesn't make, depending on whether you believe her, are a main source of causality for the story.

I am continually amazed at how form and content fit together, and in this story, the one most closely connected to the world of rock and roll, I was surprised to find that the plot structure that finally emerged was the devil's deal, basically, rock and roll's creation myth. The legend tells how Robert Johnson, a Delta blues guitar player who is the Adam of rock, while standing at a crossroads sold his soul to the devil so he could play guitar brilliantly. It's a metaphor of ambition, a story about the lengths an artist will go to in order to be the best, and it shows up everywhere in rock lore and rock lyrics. Fern finds herself in an analogous situation when Jade offers to give her a job at the Signal Flare as her opening act if she will have sex with Gram, Jade's son. Jade's offer

places Fern's ambitions squarely up against her morality. She doesn't have to sell her soul to Jade, but she has to offer her body, more or less allowing herself to become a virgin sacrifice at the altar of her own musical aspirations.

The relationship binding Fern, Jade, and Gram reminded me a bit of the one connecting Estella, Miss Havisham and Pip in *Great Expectations*, and this model made me see the usefulness of darkening Jade's character, making her more selfish and decrepit than she was originally. I also tried to create a rock and roll, Oklahoman version of Miss Havisham's creepy mansion and her frozen-in-time bedroom. While Miss Havisham cherishes layers of dust and old wedding cake, Jade preserves layers of ash and bongs that stand for stories about her past to which she clings.

Like "The Jade Green Bong," "Writ in Water" developed through a layering of rock and roll and literary influences. The original idea for the story came from Suzanne Vega's song "Honeymoon Suite," in which she describes a scene wherein a woman's husband is visited by a hundred ghosts passing through their room in a hotel in France: "He said a hundred people had come through our room that night that one by one the old and young asked if he was all right. One by one the old and young lined up to touch his hand. He spent the night explaining they had come to the wrong man." I loved this premise. My story ended up with Paula and Alex, rock critic and rock star, in Rome, and a parallel developed between Alex and John Keats, I suppose because the Keats house is right below the hotel where they stay in Rome. The ghost story was in this draft, but it was my husband who made the next leap when he told me that Alex's dream resembled the Keats poem "*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*" and played Dylan singing "When I Paint

My Masterpiece." Resembling the structure of a Keats poem, Alex's dream filled out the tenuous connection I had been trying to make between Alex and Keats.

More than any of the other stories in this collection, "Writ in Water" convinces me of the truth of Charles May's argument that the short story is "more closely related to the romance form than the realistic mode" and is structurally bound by its "derivation from folktale and myth" (64). Hawthorne, one of the originators of the short story form May discusses in his article, famously defined the romance in a way that may clarify the use of the word in describing these short stories. A Romance, "while as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation" (351). Although "Writ in Water" takes the greatest liberties with realism and moves farthest in the direction of the aesthetic-romance tradition, most of the stories in this collection— filled with ghosts, dreams, songs, and obsessions— also fit the romance category as defined by Hawthorne, though not as defined by the marketplace. Really, the stories fit just as well under the post-postmodern banner, creating a non-hierarchical, playful, pro-metaphorical environment in which, as Rick Moody says, describing this post-postmodern condition in an interview by the *Paris Review*, "everything is permitted" (215). I mean this in the sense that these stories, like many contemporary short stories, exhibit elements of romanticism, realism, modernism, and postmodernism without necessarily being constrained by the beliefs historically attributed to these literary schools.

The presence of addiction in several stories functions as a device for underwriting the unreliability of certain characters, but it serves other structural purposes as well. Specifically, "Cover Artists," "The Cold War," "No Tourist," "Contamination," and "The Jade Green Bong" all dramatize a character at some stage of substance abuse. "Cover Artists" and "No Tourist" are most similar structurally in that the tropisms of alcoholism shape the plot. Affirming Charles May's argument that short stories take ancient stories and "remythologize them by presenting them as basic psychic processes" (65), these stories offer recapitulations of the structure of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." In them the alcoholic mind is analogous to the mind of one of Plato's cave dwellers who, in the beginning of the allegory, do not yet know that they have mistaken effect for cause. In Plato's allegory the cave dwellers, never having been able to turn their heads or leave the cave, mistake the shadows on the wall in front of them—created by figures passing in front of a fire situated behind the cave dwellers and therefore, likewise, hidden from their sight—for the source of motion, and attribute the sounds in the cave to the shadows, constructing meaning and value out of the varying patterns of the shadows without realizing that they are only the traces of the real source of meaning. So, too, Grace, in "Cover Artists," unconscious of all the obvious ways her life and her mind have been determined by her mother's death, and having no idea that she has a drinking problem—these things are the fire behind her—attributes the chaotic life she leads, not to its real causes, but to the difficulties they cause. My awareness of the "Allegory of the Cave" comes from reading Iris Murdoch. She often uses it as a structural pattern in her novels (*The Sea, The Sea*, and *A Severed Head*, especially) and discusses it as a "metaphor of vision" in her essay "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts" (263).

In the eight years since I quit drinking, I have become aware that several mythic figures characterize various phases of the alcoholic experience. Alcoholics who have left their drinking behind often discuss their experience in terms of the mythical Phoenix or of the biblical figure of Lazarus. In addition to the "Allegory of the Cave," the stage of active alcoholism is also mirrored in the story of Prometheus. I used this myth, somewhat subconsciously, as a structural pattern for "No Tourist." Prometheus is chained to a rock and has his liver pecked out daily by a vulture as punishment for stealing fire from the Gods. The narrator of "No Tourist" describes her first drink as "like dropping a match onto a barrel of oil" and insists that the true description of her condition is simply that she is "on fire." At the story's end, she imagines sobriety as a place "you will have to go to live, beyond the borders of imagination, in a quality of air where the fire that rides along your blood vessels cannot breathe." The key to the Prometheus pattern, however, is the endless repetition. The vulture eats Prometheus's liver all day, and every morning Prometheus awakens with a new liver and another day of identical torture. I tried to mirror this structure by bringing the story back again and again to a new morning, with the character's same desire not to drink again expressed in exactly the same language each time: "You are sick and shaking, swearing this is it. Your last hangover. I'm never drinking again."

Major Travis, the father in "The Color of Ghosts," travels a path that also resembles the development of the "Allegory of the Cave." Vision and blindness are major thematic devices throughout the story. The scene in which the major stands in the dark watching the images of the slideshow and seeing his own shadow thrown over the images suggests the stage of the allegory in which the cave dwellers are riveted to

watching the shadows flit across the wall of the cave. The final scene, in which Travis makes a fairly strenuous effort to get out of his own head and see what his daughter Elaine is trying to show him, parallels the stage in the cave allegory when the pilgrim leaves the cave and realizes his responsibility to the others.

"The Color of Ghosts" and "American Thighs" owe huge debts to my favorite short story, "For Esme With Love and Squalor," by J.D. Salinger, which Frank O'Connor calls "a masterpiece if ever there was one" (41). The theme of a soldier's sanity salvaged by the presence of an innocent, pert young girl applies to the father-daughter relationship in "The Color of Ghosts" and to the relationship between Lucinda and PFC Nately in "American Thighs," the last story I wrote, but one that serves as a companion story to "The Color of Ghosts." Salinger's story is told from the point of view of the soldier, while my story centers in the consciousness of the child. Consequently, my story does not have the wonderful irony that Salinger's story has due to its perspective: an adult's view of a child whose bravery and pretentiousness make her powerlessness all the more poignant. My story shows the soldier, not the child, from the outside, and I think as a result, Major Travis's and PFC Nately's lack of power over their situations is very apparent. Major Travis and Elaine, and Lucinda and Nately, are very much like Sergeant X and Esme in that they are all four victims of war in various ways.

"American Thighs" was the last story I wrote for this collection, and so I had begun thinking of influences on the stories and was well aware of the themes running through the collection. Therefore, I wanted to give Salinger a nod in the text, which is why Nately and Lucinda say "for chrissakes"—a usage associated distinctly with Salinger. The dual focus of the collection, with the first half set in Cold War Germany

and the second half featuring a more diverse cast of characters yoked loosely through themes of rock and roll and addiction, was also clear to me when I wrote "American Thighs," and so, in writing it, I tried to bring the themes of the first and second halves of the manuscript together. The story is set on a military base in Germany, like the stories in the first half, but is concerned with music and discussions of authenticity such as appear in stories in the second half of the collection. "American Thighs" is the keystone at the top of the archway holding together what were, for quite awhile, independent stacks of story bricks. Because of the story's central thematic position, I chose "American Thighs" for the collection's title.

F. Conclusion

Everybody who tries to write fiction takes to heart the mantra "show, don't tell." In trying to discuss the synecdochical relationship of fiction to reality/history, and also explore short fiction's formal ties to old story structures, I am afraid I have shown examples of these dynamics without telling much about how they work. But I can't tell how they work—I don't know. I just know that they do. Writing the stories in this collection has been a continual process of surrendering the idea of knowing what's going on. I find it frustrating and a little coy when writers mystify their craft, but after the experience of writing this critical introduction, I believe this maddening lapse into vagaries probably tends to happen because it is an honest response. I have approached the material of this collection in two ways—discussing it as any English major would discuss any text, tracing its themes and examining its structure; and as a writer, creating a narrative of the collection's overall progression. I don't think either of these approaches fully answers the questions raised in the introduction. *How* do short stories achieve the

synecdochical distillation of life into image and action? *How* do old story patterns work their way into new ones? *How* do certain story forms naturally emerge as the appropriate vehicles for certain kinds of stories? I can't *tell* the answers, but through numerous examples from the stories in this collection, I have tried to *show* them, in a form not unlike a slideshow. I only know that stories get written. These mysterious processes do happen; they are taking place all the time for everyone trying seriously to write, and I am so grateful to be one of them.

CHAPTER TWO

AMERICAN THIGHS AND OTHER STORIES

In the Museum
--William Stafford

Like that, I put the next thing in your hand—
this piece of rock the farthest climbers found,
or this, a broken urn, volcano-finished.

Later, you'll walk out and say, "Where's home?"
There will be something lacking in each room,
a part you held casually and laid down.

You never can get back, but there'll be other
talismans. You have learned to falter,
in this good way: stand still, walk on, remember—

Let one by one things come alive like fish
and swim away into their future waves.

Grand Mal

Lynn and Margaret had practiced hard on the morning drive down the Autobahn from Nürnberg while the twins slept in the backseat. Lynn would throw out words from a list of them she had looked up in the dictionary: panjandrum, avoirdupois, stygian. Margaret gave them right back: P-AN-J-A-N-D-R-U-M. They agreed—Margaret was ready. She couldn't lose. Now Lynn, a small, neat-looking blonde sat with the four-year old twins on either side of her in the front row of the bleachers watching as flaxen-haired, ten-year old Margaret floated onto the stage. The last round of the All-Europe

Department of Defense School Spelling Bee was unfolding in an old WWII hangar in Garmisch, West Germany, where Patton had once addressed American troops. Bleachers dotted with concerned parents lined the walls of the hangar, while the stage, an elevated metal structure covered in Astroturf, rose between the bleachers in the approximate place an aircraft would land were the hangar still used for its original purpose.

Margaret had made it to the final round, as they had known she would. She was representing Bavaria against kids from other Army bases all over Europe. It was a big moment for them, one they shared in the space for all the things that Jack, Lynn's husband, Margaret's dad, had been too busy to attend. It seemed to Lynn and Margaret that most of their life was lived in this space. *This, too, he's missing* Lynn thought. She felt a prick of alarm as she watched her daughter take her place under the spotlights. Margaret's face had that vacant look, that stare into the middle distance and rigid cast to her jaw, that appeared only when she was about to have an epileptic fit. *Please God,* thought Lynn, *don't let it happen to her now, in front of all these people.* She leaned forward, her whole body poised to spring across the five feet between her seat and the stage if her daughter should drop to the floor. Looking at the hard concrete stage, she winced, imagining Margaret's fall, wishing she could pull her daughter out of the public eye and onto a soft bed somewhere. But Margaret would never forgive her if she did that. *Let her at least win the contest. She wants so badly to win.*

~*~

Margaret felt the familiar aura of an oncoming seizure as she stood in tight black patent-leather shoes, searching the audience for her mother and the twins. A chubby kid with slicked-back hair from Belgium was center-stage, spelling "palimpsest." Margaret

stood to one side of him, her turn next, and felt the outer perimeter of her consciousness begin to loosen. She visualized the process as one in which rubberbands, which were normally drawn taut across the walls of her skull, began snapping one by one. When the last band snapped she knew she would lose consciousness. For the moments before she passed out—and she never knew how long it would be, seconds or minutes—her entire mind grappled with the rush of darkness. She had learned not to fight it. Fighting it led to panic, to pure mortal terror. Instead, she knew that if she could surrender to it, let the still light places of her mind accept the darkness like the shade of a moving cloud cast over a sunny lawn, the seizure would come with a languid sigh, the rubberbands across her mind going slack rather than snapping, and she would participate in the seizure like someone who, knowing she is going over a fall, does her best to position her body to survive the crash.

"Margaret Bolivar of Nürnberg, ladies and gentlemen," the moderator, a tall gray-haired man with a longish, non-military haircut, announced her. Margaret stepped onto the silver x marked on the stage's Astroturf surface in electrical tape and tried to smile into the lights. She caught a glimpse of her mother, sitting on the first row with a worried frown on her face, making Margaret wonder if she could tell what was about to happen—her mother had told Margaret that she looked "spooky" before a seizure. Or maybe she just wanted her to spell the word correctly, Margaret couldn't tell. "Empyrean," said the moderator. "Margaret, the word is empyrean."

The rubber bands in Margaret's brain were snapping hard. Determined not to let the seizure overtake her until she had spelled the word and removed herself from the stage, she endured the pain of looking at the darkness head on, shadows spilling around

every corner of her consciousness. She lifted to higher ground the part of herself that was trying to spell empyrean as the darkness rushed towards her in foaming, malevolent waves. "Empyrean," she said in a whisper. She saw her mother hold her eyes open past a blink, the crease in her forehead flattening in a way that told Margaret to e-nun-ci-ate. "E-M-P," Margaret said. Then she paused, finding that her vision of the outside world had taken on a fuzzy glow. Halos now surrounded the lights at the foot of the stage, and luminous prisms splintered across her eyes. Letters, the idea of them, seemed flimsy, their patterns difficult to trace. "Y-R," she continued, straining. Lynn leaned forward and began spinning a thick section of her blond hair like a baton between her fingernails. Margaret saw the letter "E" appear and vanish in a flash of color before she lost consciousness and dropped to the floor of the stage, her left side paralyzed, her right arm and leg banging rhythmically against the ground.

~*~

As everyone in the hangar stood up with one collective gasp, Lynn leapt from her chair and onto the stage, kneeling beside her daughter and cradling her head. The twins Abbie and Jacob followed her. Already accustomed in their short lives to the medical emergency unfolding in front of them, they stood on either side of their mother and sister and waved people away like cops at a traffic accident. Lynn recognized the movement of Margaret's arm and leg as belonging to the worst possible kind of seizure, another grand mal. Both limbs were jerking out and in, out and in, like one-half of a jumping jack, the rhythm incessant, mechanical as a needle skipping at the end of an album. Her other side was frighteningly rigid. Nothing Lynn said or did made any difference or reached Margaret in any way; she could only hold her daughter's head and reassure the twins

while someone called an ambulance, the moderator dismissed everyone, and families filed out with their ambitious spellers, trying not to look at Margaret but unable to resist.

~*~

Lynn, who read during every unoccupied moment, sat in a chair by the window next to her daughter's bed in the hospital room, her legs folded under her and her clogs kicked under the bed. She was finishing a biography of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Having lived in Germany for only three months, Lynn Bolivar found it odd that she had begun tracing similarities between the personality and behavior of Margaret and those of Ludwig II. There were shared coincidences: a vivid imagination, a propensity for staying up all night, a tendency toward self-isolation. In Ludwig's case, such tendencies led to the building of fantastic castles, the near ruination of Bavaria's treasury, and years of delusion in which the hapless monarch dreamed himself Parsifal, the Grail King, whose faith and purity were redemptive. Of course, Lynn understood that these same tendencies in an adolescent American child lacking the compass and authority of a member of the royal house of Wittelsbach would register on a much smaller scale. While Ludwig was mad, Margaret was merely strange. "Fey," hyper-linguistic Margaret would probably have said if she had heard her mother describe her as strange. "Like Morgan le Fey—that's what it means—strange."

Doctor Macready, the neurologist whom the ER doctor had called in to look at Margaret, strode into the room. "Hello, Mrs. Bolivar. How's our girl?"

"Unconscious. Not moving," Lynn said, rising in her stocking feet to greet the doctor.

"Margaret's going to be okay," he said, glancing down at the patient. "I see from her chart that she's had a growing spurt since the last time her dosage was adjusted. The dosage of Dilantin she was on wasn't enough for her new body weight all of a sudden. We'll up the dosage."

"Is there anything I could do to keep this from happening again? I mean, she's not finished growing. This is ridiculous." Lynn tried to remind herself that she had never seen this doctor before and he was not personally responsible for her frustration with the seeming inability of anyone to get and keep a handle on Margaret's slippery state.

The doctor said, "Well, next time you notice her growing, get her in to be checked."

Next time I notice her growing? Lynn bristled at his patronizing tone. She snapped at him, "She gets an EEG and a full work up every six months. But you think she needs to be seen more often?"

"Where is your husband, Mrs. Bolivar?"

"Ironing the Curtain, I think, or hiding behind it, why? You want him? Go ahead and try to get a hold of him. I'm sure you'd succeed where I've failed."

"Nevermind. Just increase the EEG's for the next few years. You think this is bad—and it is," he said extending an arm to pat Lynn's narrow shoulder, "but puberty can really exacerbate things. All those hormones. That will be starting any time."

Outside, the Alps showed in the distance while the grayish-green buildings of the Garmisch Army Base spread out to the immediate horizon. Lynn remembered looking out a similar hospital window in Saudi Arabia, where the twins had been born. Central Europe, Texas, Oklahoma, the Middle East, North Carolina, the base always seemed to

spread out below the hospital in exactly the same way. Only the background was different. She had been alone when she had her twins in a foreign country, and alone in Beaumont Hospital on Fort Bliss when she had Margaret. Lynn laughed when she heard civilian mothers on TV complain about their husbands not going into the delivery room with them. Jack hadn't been within a hundred miles while she was in labor, and she had driven herself home from the hospital after having the twins, weak and terrified with her tiny infants strapped into their seats and her hand splayed over them. When she reached the house she had cried at the steering wheel while six-year old Margaret sat in the backseat crying, too. Soon the newborn twins began to cry. They had all four sat there in the car wailing, the air conditioner blasting and the Saudi heat beating down outside.

Lynn reached for the phone on the night stand next to Margaret's bed and tried for the third time to reach her husband. She tried their house: "Jack, it's me again. Still here with Margaret—I'm not going to repeat the number. If you could call, I'm sure it would help a lot. She wanted to win that spelling bee—she's going to be pretty blue when she wakes up." Then she left another message with her husband's commander, asking him to locate Jack and tell him where she was and to get in touch. She had tried hard to accept the automatic escape route Jack's job offered him—he could vanish behind the wall of his top secret work, and not only could she not reach him, but she felt like a weak link for trying. Now Margaret's epilepsy was hitting more often, like some malicious beast that had memorized the way to their door. Lynn was more aware than ever of how ludicrously difficult and lonely her life was, the life of a second-class citizen in a world not her own, with an absent husband. Each time she brought her daughter to the emergency room they had to sit in the waiting room if any active duty soldier needed

anything at all. Active duty takes priority over dependents—even if the active duty soldier has a hangnail while the dependent is in the middle of a grand mal epileptic seizure, as Margaret usually was.

Jack was no good with Margaret's epilepsy, or any sort of weakness or frailty in the children. He seemed unable to understand that they weren't sick or weak *on purpose*, that the problem was not one of will. After Margaret's first seizure, when she was six, he had stood over her unconscious and half-paralyzed form, hat in his hand, short, gray hair standing up at odd angles, and muttered, "I've never seen her fail before."

The doctor, surprised to hear Jack characterize an epileptic seizure as a failure, had launched into an explanation of Margaret's condition. "Her neurons are misfiring," the doctor had said.

Lynn remembered Jack repeating the word, "Misfiring." Misfiring. She had seen her husband thinking; she had known what he saw. A gun going off in someone's hand. Friendly fire, wrong target. Accidental casualties. "What do you mean?" her husband had demanded of the doctor. "Why would her synapses misfire? They only have one direction to go, one thing to do. Why aren't they doing it?"

Why indeed? The doctor had told them that Margaret appeared to have suffered some damage from the forceps used in her birth. Maybe she would outgrow the seizures, the doctor said. In the meantime, Lynn spent a lot of time in hospitals waiting for her daughter to come back to her. A nurse volunteered to give the twins wheelchair rides down the hall, and she heard them squeal as they zipped by the room. Margaret heard them, too. She began to stretch and yawn, as if she were waking up from an afternoon nap.

Lynn replaced the bookmark in her book and set it on the end table, watching her. When Margaret came fully awake she would be like one of Wordsworth's infants, trailing clouds of glory with one part of her in another world. The part of her that rejoined the here and now would be frightened and furious and confused about time. Margaret had once said she didn't believe in time. Lynn didn't know what she was talking about—how do you not believe in time? She was afraid that if she couldn't weed such flaky tendencies out of the girl, Margaret would be useless.

~*~

Margaret blinked at the greenish fluorescent light of the hospital room, prismatic, with black floaters, like a swarm of gnats, darting in front of her eyes. Fury and humiliation filled her, like the ground saturated after rain. She had known how to spell empyrean. She could have won. Instead she knew she must have fallen hard, shuddered and thrashed, looked awful, horrified everyone. Fortunately her father's military career let the family move every couple of years so she only had to endure the shame and embarrassment of being treated like a crazy person for a little while, until they moved again and she fell somewhere new. But they had been in Germany only a few months, still in the early stage when her mother was reading everything there was to read about their new home and encouraging Margaret to do the same. They had just become fascinated with the ghost stories of the North Carolina coast and the mystery of the Lost Colony at Roanoke Island when they got orders to leave Fort Bragg and go to Germany. Now they would be here at least another year, with the knowledge of her sickness showing on the faces of all her school mates, keeping her separate, like a fly trapped between panes of glass. Lynn stood up when she saw Margaret's eyes open. She bent

down and gave her a half dozen fast kisses all over her face. "How you feeling?" she asked.

"Y-R-E-A-N," Margaret said, twisting the top of the sheet in her fists.

"That's right," Lynn said, then laughed, "At least I think it is."

"Who won?"

"They gave it to the boy who was winning when you fell. They stopped the contest after that because everyone was so worried about you, sweetie."

"Palimpsest boy? The one right before me?"

"Yes, him."

"But I would have stomped him," Margaret said bitterly.

"Listen," Lynn said, eager to give Margaret something to look forward to, "I was thinking that since we're here, you and me and the kids should do some sight-seeing before we go home. How would that be?"

"I would have won. He only won because I didn't get my turn." Margaret was staring at the sheets, her cheeks flushed, not looking up. Trying not to cry, Lynn knew.

"No doubt about it, honey."

"Is Dad coming?"

"No, he's working. He won't mind," Lynn said. In fact she had just decided to leave him. Maybe not forever. *But let him worry for a day*, she thought. *Let him wonder where his family was.* He had barely noticed their leaving in the morning for the drive to Garmisch, barely registered Margaret's spelling bee, which was such a big deal to her. Maybe it would take more than a day for him to notice they were all gone. She would just see. Maybe they would leave for good.

"Where?" Margaret asked limply. "Somewhere colorful?" Margaret couldn't imagine anything from the outside world penetrating the gray wasteland of her mind. It was always like this after a bad seizure, and this had been a bad one. No color, no depth perception. People seemed like depthless shadows barely darkening an equally flat brightness. She knew the colors would begin bleeding in soon, and she would feel back to full strength in a day or two, but in the meantime, it was a mean time. She resolved to try to act normal for her mother.

"Very colorful," her mother said, and nodded. They had soldiered through Margaret's post-seizure symptoms enough times that Lynn knew when Margaret was putting up a brave front. "Bright and beautiful. I thought of that already. And I've got a great idea: Neuschwanstein."

"The Disney castle?" Margaret pulled herself up against the headboard.

"The real thing—a hundred times more amazing than that fake thing at Disney World. It's only about an hour from here. One of Mad King Ludwig's castles. Now, he was a colorful guy—I just read a biography about him. You did too—remember?" Lynn became almost timid, afraid of hurting Margaret's feelings by suggesting she might not remember something that she could remember perfectly well, but also not wanting to scare her if reading the biography of Mad King Ludwig was one of the details of her recent past that the seizure had burned from her memory.

Margaret grimaced. "Yes, I remember it. They killed him, those men in his government. They drowned him in his own lake." The door opened at that moment and the twins, Jacob and Abbie washed in, a wave of purposeful nature.

"Maggie!" They bounded to the edge of her bed, climbing up and lying on top of her, their arms around her waist and their heads against her chest. "Poor Maggie," crooned Abbie, stroking her sister like a pet.

"They don't actually know if he was killed or what happened," Lynn said, continuing the conversation above the heads of her youngest children. "His body was found drowned in the lake with the psychiatrist who had just certified him unfit to rule. Very strange."

"We're going to Neuschwanstein," Margaret said to her siblings, who had begun playing with the buttons that raised and lowered Margaret's bed, and who received the news without much interest.

The twins are a universe unto themselves, Lynn thought, watching them giggle as the button Jacob was pushing brought the top half of Margaret's mattress, and Margaret, too, to a 90 degree angle. And Margaret's in her own world, too. For that matter, so am I. And their father—definitely. You think having a family will solve your loneliness, but if anything, it only emphasizes how discrete personal space really is.

~*~

They stood near the tour guide, who was holding up a paddle that said "English" in the foyer leading into the castle that held the ticket booth and the guest shop. Margaret, who had eaten a good lunch and seemed almost completely recovered, began flittering around the edges of the group with Abbie and Jacob tripping along behind her. She examined a rack of postcards before finding a Neuschwanstein snow globe about the

size of a baseball, which she turned over and over in her hands. She tossed and caught the glitter-filled orb, walking towards Lynn. "Mom," Margaret began.

"No, Margaret. It's cheap junk. You don't need it."

"It's a microcosm, Mom."

"A what?"

"A castle inside a castle. We're inside it, can you see us? So is King Ludwig, look. All times are in there at the same time." Margaret held the snow globe out towards Lynn as if she actually expected her to peer into the plastic castle's tiny windows.

"Can you spell microcosm?" She remembered the disappointment Margaret had just endured and decided to buy the snow globe whether the child spelled microcosm correctly or not, but she knew she would get it right. Her husband would give her a hard time for wasting money on something like that, but the way she thought about it, he had forfeited his rights to an opinion on this matter by his absence.

"M-I-C-R-O-C-O-S-M."

"You're a bright kid," Lynn said, releasing Jacob's hand to dig out her wallet. She wondered if Margaret just read too much. All times are not at the same time, in a snow globe or anywhere. "You don't have the common sense God gave a duck, but you're bright."

"Who wants to be a duck?" Margaret said, snatching the note from Lynn's hand and sprinting to the counter with the globe.

The tour group was large, consisting of the Bolivars, a busload of elderly British women, and a busload of American high school students from the Air-Force base at Ramstein. The tour guide, a British man in late middle-age named Ronald, who let them

all know he held a master's degree, began making his way into the main castle, calling behind him, "Come along, come along."

As they wandered through the rooms, Lynn was alternately awed and repelled. The ornate stuff turned her off, and she found she was much more impressed by the woodwork of Ludwig's cathedral bed than by any of the emotionally overwrought Wagnerian tapestries or wannabe Versailles gold and crystal business. She favored Danish modern herself, the simpler the better. The furniture in the servants' quarters was to her far nicer than any of the stuff upstairs. The thought of all the money the castle obviously cost while people all over Ludwig's kingdom lived and died poor seemed obscene to Lynn—something to hide, not display. "Talk about a gilt complex," she muttered to one of the British matrons in front of her as they passed through the Byzantine Throne Room.

The woman inhaled and looked at Lynn in surprise. "Different times, I suppose."

As they moved past the apse of the long room, where Ludwig intended the throne to sit like an altar, Ronald the tour guide filled everyone in on information that Lynn already knew from having read the biography of Ludwig. She noticed how whitewashed Ronald's version of events was compared to the biographer's, who had interpreted Ludwig's behavior through modern psychological paradigms. He was bipolar. He was obsessive compulsive. He may have been schizophrenic. She couldn't remember all of his various diagnoses, but she knew that Ludwig had been nuts. For Ronald, and it made sense, this being the official tour of Ludwig's house, the young king was a mystic, a gracious embodiment of an earlier time, a lonely boy, a misunderstood genius.

Lynn didn't get it. She doubted whether the poor little guy had ever tied his own shoes. *What's interesting about some self-indulgent rich kid with nothing to do but live out fantasies starring himself?* The boy had needed a job—that would have taught him the value of money. They stood now in the study before a full scale, life-size painting of Ludwig when he was a young king, standing in his general's uniform and coronation robe. He was pretty like a girl, Lynn thought. Maybe they just painted him to look like he was wearing makeup, but he would have looked great in a dress. And Betty Paige could not have done more justice to those white tights and patent-leather thigh boots. Lynn tried to place who he looked like. A young Liz Taylor, actually. He looked just like Liz had looked in *Father of the Bride*. Lynn noticed that Margaret, who had been lurking in the rear of the tour group, had nudged her way to the front and was standing in front of the painting, as absorbed as if she were reading, as unaware of anyone around her as if she were in the throes of a seizure.

Margaret thought King Ludwig was the most handsome man she had ever seen. That's what Ronald was tip toeing around, somehow, incredibly not mentioning, but Margaret found his beauty overwhelming. She felt that if a man that handsome ever walked up to her in real life, white cape swirling, thighs rippling, she would faint outright. Then, when she woke up, she would crawl right into his lap. She had heard the phrase that the eyes are the windows to the soul and thought a lot about whether or not she believed it. She had just about decided that she didn't until she saw this painting. There it was, his soul, staring out at her through those somber blue eyes. She walked from side to side, staring at the eyes first from one angle, then another. His eyes, slightly crossed, but not enough to ruin his looks, actually followed her, as if to say, *Margaret,*

there you are. Where have you been? She felt joy ripple through her like a sound she had never heard before but loved, followed by a sadness that left her staring straight at death, down the long hallway of history with her quiet conviction that it isn't really a hallway at all. More of a swirling mass, she thought, giving her snow globe a good shake. Was a tiny version of this painting inside the castle in the snow globe, with a tiny besotted Margaret standing before it?

Abbie and Jacob appeared suddenly on either side of her. They looked up at her, four blue eyes promising mischief. Suddenly Jacob grabbed the globe from Margaret's hand and jumped behind Abbie when Margaret made a swipe at him. He handed it to Abbie, who hid it under her shirt. Jacob raised his hands in the air, "All gone, Maggie! Where did it go?"

"Give it back, Abbie," Margaret said, feeling suddenly too old and in love for her siblings' childish games.

Abbie passed it back to Jacob. "Where is it, Maggie? I don't have it." Jacob stood behind her swinging it, winding up like a pitcher on the mound then bringing it close to his eyes, watching the snow fly.

"Finders keepers," he said, turning and disappearing into the crowd of legs just behind them. One of the British women bent down to attend to him.

"You can have it in the car," Abbie said, conciliatory, before she, too, was reabsorbed by the tour group.

Ludwig's portrait catapulted Margaret into love, love, love. She loved King Ludwig, and she knew as she had never known anything before that her life would never be the same from this moment forward or backward. All the inconveniences of their

union—he was older than she, he didn't speak English, her German was not very good, he was dead—these things didn't matter. Her love was pure spirit. But she wanted to take off all her clothes and run around the castle alone with Ludwig. This impulse surprised her, but she felt intuitively that he would like that, and she would like it, too. She wanted to meet him in some temporal crawlspace where they would see everyone from his time and from hers moving through the castle, but no one would see them. They would caper unseen like ghosts and would not have a bedtime. In her imagination she felt the cold of the marble floor against the bottoms of her feet and the crisp chill in the air against her naked limbs, and then she was deep under the layers of bedding in Ludwig's astonishing hand-carved wooden bed, the cathedral of ornate turrets and towers rising from the top of the canopy. They would hide in the Venus Grotto among the rocks and colored lights; they would swim in the black water.

But he was dead and she couldn't get to him. She felt the separation of years like a dead phone in an emergency, a channel of communication that would not yield to her. There was nothing she could do to stop his murder—because that's what it was, Margaret knew. Accidental death, no. As he stood there in the frame of the portrait he had no idea what was going to happen to him. He would be certified insane and confined, and the next day they would find his body and his psychiatrist's body at the bottom of a lake. She wanted to scream down the centuries, "Run, run, run!"

"Hey, space bunny," Lynn said, putting her hands on both of Margaret's shoulders and turning her away from the painting. "Try to keep up, okay? The tour's moving upstairs. Come see the Upper Hall—you're not going to believe this." They

walked towards the stairs, listening for the twins, who were already upstairs, moving securely among the British women. “Do you feel okay?” Lynn asked.

Margaret let out a sigh from the bottom of her ribcage. “Yeah, yeah.”

“You’re like trying to raise African violets. I never know what’s happened to make you react.”

“I’m sad,” Margaret exhaled, caving her chest cavity and bringing her shoulders forward like a very old woman.

“Stand up straight. I’m sorry, honey. You miss your Dad, don’t you? He’d have been here if he could have been.” They kept up a front for each other about Jack’s absence. They never spoke disrespectfully of him and never let on that his absence was felt. They just lived without him. The difference was that when he was around, Margaret was happy and held no grudge towards him, while Lynn simmered with frustration and resentment.

“Oh, yeah,” Margaret was jolted back out of her reverie by the mention of her father. He was far from what she had been thinking about, and she discovered now that Ludwig and her father could not exist in the same space. They were not the same type of man. She tried to imagine Ludwig out of his royal robe and tights, changing the oil in a car or going for a run. She tried to imagine him in camouflage fatigues like the ones her father wore. She couldn’t really do it. Not only are eyes the window to the soul, she thought, but the clothes make the man. The clichés were all true. What kind of butt would Ludwig have? Margaret had recently become aware that a good butt was important, and she listened as her classmates proclaimed a butt good or bad. She hated the word “butt”; she always heard it as a qualifier, a good “however.” You never saw

portraits painted of the backside; you just had to guess, but she had a good feeling about Ludwig's butt.

Lynn and Margaret climbed the stairs together, rejoining the tour group where they stood in an oval room under a canopy of stars. The ceiling was a dome of cerulean blue with gold stars—real gold, of course—filling the firmament. A pillar in the shape of a date palm rose in the center, the leaves of the palm appearing to brush the sky where the column met the ceiling. From somewhere in the crowd, Abbie's voice rang out, "Staaars!"

Lynn began making her way towards the sound, when she heard from another quarter, "The sky is in the house!" in Jacob's piercing accents. She could tell by the way he had emphasized "sky" and "house" that he would have his two hands extended as if they were scales weighing the two words, pointing out their inequity by tilting his body heavily to one side. Comparisons were his new thing.

Ronald the tour guide paused his narrative and looked around startled. The crowd was laughing, so he, taking their cue, smiled and said, "Yes, that's right. The sky is in the house. Ludwig's obsession was to sleigh ride at night, and indeed, he became entirely nocturnal for the last decade of his life. This is just the most striking example of how the empyrean appears throughout the castle. Louis XIV was the Sun King—well, Ludwig was very proud of his blood tie to the French royals, and he took every opportunity to draw parallels. So Ludwig was the Moon King, the Night King, the Swan King."

Lynn corralled the twins in front of an enormous limestone dragon that sat in the hallway. Kneeling down to meet their gleeful eyes, she said in a whisper, "Let's try to keep it quiet, what do you say?"

They nodded at her, but Abbie was still too impressed with the ceiling to be quiet about it yet. "But Mama, did you see the stars? Look!" she pointed straight over her head.

"I know, it's cool, isn't it?" Just then, Jacob pitched the snow globe high into the air. Margaret screamed and the entire tour group jerked like panicked cattle as the globe rose half way to the starry empyrean above them and came crashing to the marble floor. It skittered across the marble, stopping right-side-up, the snow inside swirling madly around the small castle. Miraculously, it did not break. Margaret ran to retrieve it, snatching it as if life itself had been at stake. Ludwig's perfect microcosm! Love had changed everything for Margaret; it was a bit like the aura before a seizure—the terrifying loss of control, the certain knowledge of obliteration as it crawls towards you, the final fall. Falling in love—she understood the cliché's cruel accuracy. She was falling, had fallen, but, unlike a seizure, there was no reason to believe that love would pass quickly. She held the globe in her hand and reminded herself that it was junk, like her mother had said. Not a microcosm.

Abbie marched over to where Margaret crouched with the snow globe. "Mom says it's been a long day," she said, grabbing Margaret's hand and pulling her along. "Everybody's cranky."

Ronald's face relaxed when he noticed them leaving, returning down the stairs to the first floor. She trailed her mother and the twins, moving against successive tour groups, one German, one Japanese, working backwards through the rooms to the entrance. When she passed Ludwig's coronation portrait it was surrounded by people six deep. She backed up to the far wall to see as much of him as she could, unable, from this

distance, to see his eyes. All the bodies flowing between her and Ludwig hurt her like blows. She gave him one last hard look and sprinted from the room.

In the entrance, Lynn was talking to the gift shop cashier, trying out her German self-consciously. "Haben Sie eine Münzfernsprecher?"

"Ja," responded the cashier, pointing to the back of the shop. "Es ist da." Lynn made her way to the payphone to try reaching Jack again.

He picked up. "Hello, baby! I got your messages. Poor kid—she okay? Jack's sunny, flat Midwestern voice sounded like nothing had happened—like a gap had not opened up in the center of his family large enough for his wife and children to disappear into. She was never sure if he was really so blithe, or if his cheerfulness was his way of smoothing things over.

"She's fine. Disappointed, but I bought her a snow globe."

"A what?"

"A snowglobe. It's a souvenir. She deserved to splurge a little, Jack. She probably would have won that spelling bee."

"Yeah, she needs a treat. Where are you?"

"Neuschwanstein."

"Really?" Jack sounded genuinely surprised. "I was looking forward to visiting there myself."

"We liked it."

"I always assumed we would go as a family," Jack said.

"We did. I'll see you, Jack."

"When will you be home?"

"Home. Ha. I don't know, where's home? Soon enough, I guess. Don't worry about us, for heaven's sake," Lynn said, hanging up the phone. She enjoyed being vague about their return. And she loved treating him as though he were the worrier, keeping the home fires burning, although this was not true.

~*~

The sun had come out and burned off the fog that had lingered through the morning and most of the afternoon. The alpine air smelled to them nothing like Texas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, or Saudi Arabia. It smelled like ice, even with the sun shining. Margaret and Lynn walked side by side, arms swinging in unison, down the long asphalt road leading from the castle to the lot where the car was parked. "Why do we have to go? There's still more to see," Margaret protested.

"Honey, I'm sorry, but if these kids don't get a nap we're all going to regret it." The twins were walking in front of them, tripping down the steep hill and giving in to the temptation to run every few seconds before Lynn commanded them to stop.

"Where are they going to sleep? We don't have a hotel room, we're a long way from home, where are we going?"

Lynn didn't know. She thought they might cross the border into Austria, spend a few days in Innsbruck. Or maybe they would head straight for the Garmisch airport and take a plane to Tulsa. She only knew that, at least right now, they were not going home to Jack.

"I can't go home." Margaret said. Lynn looked at her. The girl had taken a seat along the stone wall that followed the road. "I belong here," Margaret continued, "with Ludwig. I swear, Mom. This is where I belong."

"Ludwig?" Lynn asked. The twins collapsed along the wall under Margaret's swinging feet.

"This is his house," Abbie offered helpfully.

"I love him, Mom," Margaret said.

Lynn looked at Margaret, whose face looked sage and pained beyond her years, and nodded. "Okay," she said, sitting down next to her daughter on the wall. "At least he's not a drug dealer." They could see the green Audi below them in the parking lot, full of kid's clothes and snack food. They would eventually get in the car and drive away. The twins would fall asleep in their car seats, mouths agape and arms flung wide, like dancers mid leap, and Lynn and Margaret would take out the map and figure out where to go, but for the moment they sat between the castle and the car, not moving, indulging in a space between two moments.

The Color of Ghosts

Elaine felt something hit the back of her head and turned to see the livid face of the woman her father had just insulted. The woman stood at the other end of the cereal aisle with a lit cigarette in her mouth and yellow-and avocado-paisley scarf covering her pink curlers, pelting Elaine and her father with sugary cereal and instructing her three children to do the same. The smell of artificial fruit flavoring was in the air. Her father grabbed her hand and grinned like a skull. "Heavy fire, Lainey. Run for the canned goods. I'll cover you!" he said.

Elaine looked back to see her father grabbing a box of Cheerios off the shelf and tearing it open. Mom would never have done this, she thought, ducking around the corner. "Jesus, that's Major Travis! He's crazy."

"I worry for that little girl." The whir of a shopping cart passed and Elaine turned to look at the women whose voices she had heard. He wasn't crazy. Her guts churned with rage as she stood and pondered the exotic canned goods—what was hominy? Bloated corn. Her father had shown her pictures of corpses on battlefields and pointed out the way they bloated, bursting the seams of their clothing after they died. He slid by her with his feet on the grocery cart, waving his hands like Esther Williams in a water musical. He is a battalion commander, she thought, watching him gliding along on the cart; he has killed people. He jumped down and stopped the cart in front of her. "I'm sorry about that, baby. I didn't mean for her to hear me."

"You were pretty loud," Elaine said, looking down at her toenails. Her mother had painted them for her before she left and now the paint was almost gone. Elaine remembered her mother shaking the bottle of nail polish and explaining to Elaine as though they were both adults why she was leaving Elaine's father, and why she was leaving Elaine with him. "You're the only person keeping him human," she had said, pulling apart Elaine's toes, "How could I tear you apart?"

Elaine's father was eating a handful of the cereal he had been throwing the moment before. "The truth hurts, Lainey. There is *nothing* more revolting than a woman who smokes. But do you know the grossest thing in the world?" he asked her, leaning his face close to hers like he was about to impart something requiring top security clearance. "A fat woman who smokes! If that woman had to live up to military standards she'd look a lot different." He seemed very affected, as if he might get sick. "I tell you, Lainey. You'd better not ever smoke. Or get fat. I don't think I could take it. I might not be able to be your father anymore."

They moved through the checkout line. The cashier, a PFC in uniform, saluted her father and gave him the total. On the checkout counter a turqouise and orange display held a multi-colored population of tiny rubber trolls with tall stands of neon hair and eyes that suggested the entire troll population suffered from hyperthyroidism. Lainey selected one, hot pink with blood red hair, and slipped him into the front pocket of her shorts. Her father said life was for the taking, but only the strong ever realize it. Elaine realized it. They followed the sacker to their car, a day-glo orange Audi with a deep green interior. It had been her father's first purchase in Germany, and his first major purchase without her mother to help him. He was color-blind and thought the car was brown. Reds, pinks and oranges were all brown to him. Elaine had tried to explain to her father what day-glo orange looked like, why it was such a head-turner, but how do you explain a color to someone who can't see it?

They got in the car and drove across the base, which, although American now, had been built for Nazi forces during the Second World War. Above every doorway a stone eagle held a wreath in his talons with a blank center where the swastika had been. It was sunny and hot, rare weather for Germany, and the gray stone buildings looked odd without the gray sky behind them, like bugs with particular protective camouflaging made to stand alone, away from the bark or leaf with which their bodies blended. G.I.s in sneakers, cut-offs and dog-tags all seemed to be outside, running, playing baseball and soccer, and swimming. Her father pulled into the parking lot of the base pool.

"Dad, we don't have our swim suits," Lainey said, turning in the passenger seat to look at him. Since he had come back from Vietnam—as long as she could remember

him—he had had white sideburns, stark and unblended with his chesnut hair like J. Jonah Jameson, the newspaper editor in Spiderman comics.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, sugar," he said, opening the car door and getting out. They met at the front of the car. "These shorts I'm wearing will work, and so will yours."

"But what about a top! I need a top."

"Listen," he said, kneeling down so that they were eye to eye. They were standing on blacktop, and Lainey could feel the heat rising from it, melting her red-white-and-blue layered foam flip-flops like a couple of Neapolitan ice-cream sandwiches and, she was sure, commencing a freckle reproductive frenzy across her nose, brought on by direct sun. She could practically feel them spreading. Her father was oblivious to all this activity, although she felt sure he must have been able to see the freckles as they multiplied and subdivided. He ran his fingers across the short, spiky top of her blond head. "You look just like a boy. Nobody will be able to tell the difference. You should enjoy it. In a few years, you won't be able to get away with going topless."

Elaine looked down at the perfectly flat surface of her blue T-shirt, thinking something might have begun to happen since she got dressed that morning. He was right; she looked exactly like a boy. "Okay," she said.

"It's like a prank. We'll pull one over on them."

"We'll be breaking the rules," she pointed out, although she knew it made no difference to him.

"Rules are there for a reason, baby, it's true. Most people are pretty stupid. They really are, and they need to be given some clear guidelines or they'll just wander around lost. I see it in my troops all the time. My God, in Vietnam it seemed like those kids

were trying to get themselves killed! If they'd followed the rules—my rules—a lot of them would still be around today. But no, it was like they were irresistibly drawn to the stupidest moves they could make, the wrongest places to step or to stand. *They* needed rules. Heed the ones that keep you from getting your ass shot off or winding up in prison. Other than that, rules are for other people." He looked at her then, seeming a little uncertain as to whether what he said made sense to her.

Elaine grabbed his hand as they walked into the pool area, where they kicked off their flip-flops, peeled off their T-shirts and dove in. The lifeguard, a young German girl with stringy blond hair and gigantic breasts, whistled for them to get out of the pool. Pretending not to hear her, Elaine dove underwater and tried to guess what was happening by watching the submerged half of her father. She could tell only that he was facing her. She came up for air and saw the lifeguard standing at the edge of the pool saying something to him. He was treading water on his back, grinning at her, so that he managed to look like someone in a big easy chair with his arms thrown casually around the sides and his feet on an ottoman. Elaine thought she detected flirting. He laughed, and the sound of his voice, probably his reaction to the girl's attempt to evict him from the pool, echoed off the tiles throughout the pool area. The lifeguard blushed and looked down. Yes, definite flirting. Elaine dove underwater again and came up for air between them, spraying water all over the lifeguard. "Ten more minutes, Major Travis, but that's all. Then you and your boy can come back with swimming trunks," she was saying before Elaine soaked her. The lifeguard barely registered Elaine, who could see that her father was closing in on a date. He had begun dating in the last month, and Elaine hated it, although he allowed her to sit in judgment of his dates; he would ask her what she

thought of their outfits, their laughs, their asses. She was unremittingly negative. The implied question was always the same, "Is she on par with your mother?" And they never were. Elaine dropped back under and came up, this time with a huge mouthful of water which she aimed at the lifeguard's pixie face. As she sprayed the lifeguard, she felt her father's calves clamp around her middle and pull her under.

"Be nice, Larry," he said, laughing when he brought her back up. "Gertha here is going to let us swim for a few more minutes. Say thank you."

She looked Gertha over. Gertha could not have been more than twenty. Gertha had hairy underarms and legs. Gertha would not do. "My Dad says German women all get big and fat," she said. Her father's legs tightened around her and pulled her under again. This time when he brought her up, he kept his legs tight around her until she apologized to Gertha.

When he let go of her, the red and pink troll popped out of the front pocket of her shorts and bobbed to the top of the water. She was in trouble. "Hey!" her father's voice boomed. Elaine made a grab for the troll, but her father already had it. He swam to the edge of the pool and motioned her over. "Where did you get this?" Elaine looked down and concentrated on the dead bug corpses trapped inside a pool light. "Where?" he repeated.

"I got it at the commissary. You said we should take what we want out of life."

"That's not what I meant, baby."

~*~

Gertha was at their apartment the next morning when Elaine got up to start vacation Bible school and listened while Elaine and her father continued their duel over

her going. "A thief! My daughter! You're going to learn some goddamned morals, Lainey. End of discussion."

"Yesterday you said rules are for other people."

"Well, yes. But what else did I say? Don't get your ass shot off or wind up in jail. This could land you in jail," he said, holding up the troll who stood at the breakfast table in front of the salt and pepper shakers.

It seemed to dawn slowly on Gertha that Elaine's father had referred to her as a daughter. "You are a girl?" Gertha asked, pushing back her chair to get a better look at Lainey's clothes. Flip-flops, green shorts, white T-shirt. Elaine and her father looked at her.

"She's a girl. Her mother's a goddamned beauty queen. Lainey will get there."

"Do you want to see a picture?" Lainey asked excitedly and began to get up, thinking that Gertha would dissolve into a quivering mass of inadequacy and leave if she saw a picture of her mother. This tactic had worked on more than one occasion. "Sit down, Lainey. We were having a talk. Religion is bullshit," her father said as he slid a cheese omelet from the skillet onto her plate. "Just another set of rules to keep stupid people in line. But we live in a Judeo-Christian society, so you need to know the stories. They're the foundation of our culture. They teach you about morality. Even the krauts know these stories. Gertha, you know the story of Noah's ark?"

Gertha nodded from within Major Travis's red terry cloth robe, which he thought was brown. "They were in the ark forty days and forty nights. Mein Gott, how boring would that be?"

"You see?" he said, taking a seat between them. He had poured himself a bowl of what Cheerios he had not thrown the day before.

"You don't believe in God?" Elaine asked her father. She asked him the question all the time, like opening the refrigerator over and over again when you're hungry, even when you know nothing's in there, hoping one time you'll open it and it will contain everything you want.

"No," he said seriously, as if she had never asked him before. Then he said something he never had, "but I believe in ghosts."

~*~

Vacation Bible School was held in a building used now for the base church facility, but which had been a hospital when the Nazis built it. Elaine's teacher told them all the history of the building offhandedly, adding, "and this room was the morgue. That's where they prepare bodies for burial. Nazi bodies."

Elaine had a hard time paying attention as her teacher, whom she recognized from a 4th of July party as Mrs. Harner, the wife of a master sergeant in her father's battalion, told them the story of Adam and Eve. She read every scrap of brightly colored cardboard lettering on the bulletin boards that lined the walls and then she let her eyes go out of focus and was looking at the fuzzy forms of her classmates and her teacher when she saw the crisp, clear form of the ghost standing in front of one of the billboards. He was young and very handsome in the blue-eyed blond way that Hitler so admired. He wore a hospital gown and stood in bare feet with his hands loosely clasped behind his

back. He turned and, it seemed to Elaine, knew that she saw him. He stayed there, shifting his weight slightly from foot to foot, staring at the bulletin board, all morning. Elaine never took her eyes off him, but he did not look at her again.

After lunch he was gone. That afternoon, Elaine deliberated over whether or not to tell her father. She was dying to, but she knew that he would not think it was a coincidence that she had seen her first ghost the very day he had told her of his belief in them. "Tell me about the ghosts you see, Dad. What kind of ghosts?" she asked him later that afternoon as they walked into their quarters after he had picked her up from Bible School. Gertha was there, lying on the couch listening to her father's Credence Clearwater Revival records.

Elaine expected him to act like he didn't know what she was talking about, but he didn't. He strode across the living room to the stereo and turned the volume down. "People that won't go away. Those kinds of ghosts." Gertha snapped into an upright position.

"You want me to leave, Daniel? I can leave."

"No, no," he said, winking at Elaine. "Ghosts live in the imagination. We carry them with us in our heads." He sat down next to Gertha and patted her forearm. "You're not in my imagination at all. You're just right here."

That night, while her father and Gertha went to the movies, Elaine stayed home and read *The Ghost of Blackwood Hall*, one of the dozens of Nancy Drew mysteries that had made the trip with her from San Diego to Nurnburg. *Apocalypse Now* had finally made it into Department of Defense circulation, six months after it left theaters stateside, and was being shown at the old, single screen theater on base. Elaine knew her father

would hate it. He hated all Vietnam movies; they never got it right. But he had high hopes for this one.

He returned home alone a little after ten o'clock and went straight to the hall closet where he kept his slide projector and his box of slides. Elaine had never been allowed to see them, but she knew they were of his tour of duty in Vietnam. He was completely absorbed. Bringing the slide projector over to the coffee table, he noticed her, under a blanket on the couch, quietly awash with relief that he was home, only after he almost sat on her. She had not been able to get the Nazi ghost out of her head. Even Nancy Drew had seemed trite; Elaine knew that Carolyn Keene, the author of the Nancy Drew mysteries, had never seen a ghost. She didn't get it right. Nancy Drew ghosts were hardly better than Scooby-Doo ghosts. Real ghosts weren't so talkative. He sat down and turned to smile at Elaine, who crawled onto his back and squeezed both arms around his neck. He pulled her over his head and sat her on his knee. "Whatcha reading?" he asked.

"Nothing. How was the movie? Where's Gertha?"

"She went home. *She* liked the movie," he snorted. "Fucking civilians. What do they know? You should have seen it, baby. They had this fat guy—Marlon Brando; he looked like hell—playing a US Army Colonel. It was absurd. He had gone nuts and was deep in Cambodia. They think we weren't in Cambodia, but baby, I was there, and I didn't run into any fucking Captain Kurtz."

"It's just a movie, Dad," Elaine said, patting her father's arm. After he put her to bed, Elaine crawled on her elbows from her bedroom, down the hall and behind the couch, peeked out and watched the slide show projected onto the wall. Her father drank a

Pabst and flipped the controls, lingering over some slides for long minutes and speeding past others. The first few slides were of her mother standing in front of a hangar in a red minidress, long blond hair pulled over her shoulders, holding an infant Elaine. Elaine wondered if her mother had known that her father was colorblind when she bought the red dress.

The next slides were of street scenes in a big city, Saigon, she thought, many slides of Vietnamese women in doorways, shots taken from the air, of air strikes in progress, smoke rising from holes in the dense canopy, shots of her father and other men in a room, posing in front of maps scrawled over with grease pencil, shots from a gunboat riding through the jungle, with her father on deck, shirtless with an AK-47 strapped across his chest. From growing up in military circles, underfoot at cocktail parties, she knew that M-16's were US government issue in Vietnam, but that most soldiers preferred the enemy's AK-47's. She had seen the gun before, with its long, arching magazine, and she knew that if you had one, you had killed to get it. She knew this the way she knew two plus two is four. Then there was a slide of two Vietnamese men on the ground, clearly dead, their guns at their sides, the head of one of the men turned at an unnaturally acute angle. Elaine could see that they weren't bloated yet so she knew they hadn't been dead long when the photograph was taken. In the next shot, her was father posing with the dead men's guns. Her father got up and went to the refrigerator for another beer. He stood in the living room and stared at the projection of himself, holding the weapons of his dead opponents, for a long time. After he sat back down, Elaine crawled back to her bedroom, thinking that she could probably tell her father about the Nazi ghost.

The ghost was there again the next day, staring at the wall in his hospital gown while Elaine's Bible School teacher told the story of Lot and his wife, fleeing from Sodom. She knew she should listen, but she heard nothing and let her eyes go out of focus again until the ghost became clear and sharp, the way the slides she and her father had watched had been, fuzzy until he brought them into focus, having to refocus after almost every slide. "Elaine?" Her teacher was asking a question. "Elaine, why was Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt? Do you know?" Elaine shook her head. "Does anyone else know? Julio, how about you?"

"She looked back and she wasn't supposed to."

"That's right. She looked back." Momentarily distracted, Elaine looked back to where the ghost had been and couldn't find him. She tried to relax and let her eyes go out of focus again and finally she saw him. He had moved to the door that led into the hallway. He stood exactly as he had before, just looking. Elaine was afraid he might leave. Without thinking, she stood up and began to excuse herself. "Elaine, where are you going?"

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"Our bathroom break will be in fifteen minutes. Can you wait?"

"Nope."

"Well, okay. Hurry up." Elaine walked to the door where the ghost stood, sidestepping carefully to avoid him before she passed through the doorway and ran down the hall and out of the building. Her father worked at base headquarters, which she could see on top of a hill overlooking the rest of the base. She found Pershing Boulevard and followed it all the way. It took thirty minutes and she was hot and sweaty when she

finally stepped into the air conditioned building. A black and yellow Ranger crest spread before her, tiled into the floor. She headed for the stairs. She was familiar with the building and found her father's office, down a long tiled hallway with olive drab cinderblock walls decorated with aerial photographs. Sergeant Oakley looked up from his gray metal desk when she entered. "Hi Jimmy! Is my Dad here?"

"Sure, Lainey. What did you do, walk?" She nodded, and he gestured to the opaque glass door with her father's name and rank stenciled on it. She walked through and only then thought about how she would explain herself.

Her father, behind a slightly larger version of Sergeant Oakley's gray metal desk with an American flag and a map of West Germany behind him, looked up when she entered. He was on the phone and writing something. Lainey noticed the pink and red troll standing on his desk in front of her 4th grade picture. "I have to let you go, sir. Emergency. I'll call you right back." He stood up. "What's wrong?"

"I need to show you something, Dad."

"What? Why aren't you at Bible School?"

"That's where I have to show you something."

"Lainey, goddammit," he spread his hands over his face and looked at her through his fingers the way he had with her mother when she was yelling at him.

"Dad, you need to see this. If you can."

"What do you mean, if I can?"

"It's a secret. Can we take your Jeep?"

"Is it a good secret?"

"It's the best." They pulled up to the Nazi hospital-turned-place of worship ten minutes later in her father's jeep. Elaine led her father by the hand into the old morgue where her classes were being held. Mrs. Harner was walking among the tables where the children sat cutting and pasting magenta, red, orange and lime green cardboard into animal shapes. " Elaine—oh, Major Travis, hello. I was just about to call you. I didn't know where Elaine had got to."

"It's okay, Maureen."

"He's going to join our class," Elaine said, pulling an extra chair to the where she had been sitting. Her father sat down and attempted to fold his legs under the table. The other children giggled and then just stared as Mrs. Harner started the story of Noah's Ark, looking at Elaine's father every few seconds. He was her husband's boss. Elaine ribbed her father, "At least you get to hear Noah's Ark. Isn't that the one you like?"

"What am I doing here, baby? What are you trying to show me?"

Elaine picked up a piece of pink paper and began tearing it slowly. "Dad, what color is this paper to you?" she asked him, always curious at how his color-blindness distorted what he saw.

"Brown, kind of light brown." He shifted and lifted the table off the ground with his knees.

"Maybe you really see colors the same as everyone else, but you just call them different things. Maybe when you were little your parents taught you that red is brown and pink is light brown. We could be seeing the same colors and not knowing it," Elaine said.

"I don't think so," he said. He looked at her, waiting.

She looked at the doorway. She had not seen the ghost when they came in, but she had been trying not to see, then. Now she let her eyes go out of focus, taking a deep breath and watching as the overhead lights all gained prismatic aurioles and her father's features lost their clarity, then she turned her head towards the doorway. The Nazi ghost wasn't there; he was back in his original position, staring at one of the bulletin boards. "Can you make your eyes go out of focus, Dad?"

"I don't know. Lainey. . ."

"There's a ghost right there," she said, nodding her head in the direction of her gaze.

Her father followed her eyes and squinted. "What does he look like?"

"He's in a white hospital gown open at the back. He's barefoot. Young, handsome. I think he's a Nazi soldier. Mrs. Harner told us this used to be the morgue when this was a Nazi base."

She heard her father let out a sigh. "Can you see him with your eyes focused?"

"Yes, but just a shadow. Like this, he's all the way clear, like with your slides." She realized too late that she had betrayed herself. She kept looking at the ghost.

"Oh, so you saw some slides, did you?" He patted her back. "Yeah, the ghosts I see are all Vietnamese. It would be nice to see something different for a change." He looked at her for a long minute and then leaned forward and put his chin into his hands. He was trying to see the ghost. "Baby, are we kidding around?"

"Are you?"

"No. I really see them. But you shouldn't."

"Well, I do."

"For real?"

"For real."

"I wonder why?" he asked, almost to himself. "Come here," he said, lifting the table off his knees and standing up. Mrs. Harner paused and looked about to scold him, but looked back down and continued her reading. "Show me where he is." Elaine walked over to the ghost and stood close enough to touch him. She wanted to, but she was afraid. She imagined him turning and roaring at her, or, and even worse, disappearing permanently.

"He's right next to me. Don't stand in him." Her father stepped aside to make room for the ghost. They all three stood facing the wall. Mrs. Harner had stopped reading and she and the class watched them in shocked silence. The bulletin board was a multi-colored cardboard version of Jacob wrestling the angel. Jacob was midnight blue and the angel was canary yellow with chartreuse wings. "Do you think he likes this bulletin board, Dad?" Elaine asked softly.

"Maybe. But do you see this seam?" he asked, running his finger along a line where brick met cinderblock. The wall was whitewashed, so she had never noticed it sitting down. "I think this was a window."

"That's it. He's looking out a window. Doesn't he know it's bricked over?"

Her father shrugged. "He probably sees things the way they used to be."

"Do you see him, Dad?"

"No," he said, "but I like this bulletin board. That angel's really bright."

"He's not brown," Elaine said.

"Oh, I know. He's yellow with green wings. I can see those colors." Her father crossed his arms across his chest and looked over Elaine to where the ghost stood as if he were sizing him up. "I'm sorry, sweetie, I wish I could see him."

Elaine shook her head. "He's just like red and pink; you don't see them either. That's okay. You can only see what you can see. I'm just glad you tried." She looked at the ghost, who blinked at regular intervals but showed no awareness of Elaine and her father, whom she saw watching her through the ghost. He seemed to be waiting like a soldier at attention for her to tell him, "at ease." She recognized this, and for a moment longer they stood, side by side with the ghost between them.

At a distance, a secondary expositor.
A being of sound, whom one does not approach
Through any exaggeration. From him, we collect.
Wallace Stevens

American Thighs

Lucinda had been surrounded by men in green all her life. G. I.'s were part of the background on military bases, but she had never thought much about them and certainly had never visited where they lived. As her father pulled his Audi into a parking space in front of the Kaison Barracks on a Saturday morning, she began to imagine for the first time what it would be like to be a G.I. here in Grafenwoehr, West Germany, only 30 klicks from the Iron Curtain at the Czech border. She knew that most of them were eighteen or nineteen, which, now that she was thirteen, didn't seem so incredibly old anymore. What did they do when they weren't doing what they were told?

Apparently they listened to rock-n-roll same as she, or at least PFC Nately did.

"I'm not really supposed to bring you here, you know," her father said, handing her the bag of blank tapes they had just bought at the PX. "Just follow me and keep quiet. Don't be a smart-ass, okay? What will my troops think if they see my authority undermined by a little girl? I don't even want to think about it."

Lucinda grabbed the tapes. She and her father had bought two six-packs of 90 minute TDK's. She also had, folded in her jeans, a list of albums she wanted PFC Nately to tape for her if he owned them. Her appetite for rock had begun to grow exponentially, faster than her allowance could keep up with, and much faster than her parents were willing to subsidize. When her father had discovered that PFC Nately, a clerk who worked in his office, was a real rock aficionado with a vast record collection, he had seen a way to satisfy his daughter's burgeoning habit inexpensively. Nately couldn't very well say no, and so here they were on a Saturday, about to intrude upon the leisure time of one of her father's men.

The barracks was a grim, gray building with a number, 2047C, stenciled in black on the corners. Small, uniformly spaced windows lined all four floors. In fact, the building didn't look much different from the family quarters where Lucinda lived with her parents and her little brother and sister. Her father had told her that Eastern bloc architecture was horrifyingly ugly, and we would all have to live like that if we didn't fight the spread of communism, but Lucinda couldn't imagine anything uglier than what the U.S. Army had erected here on the Western side. When she had first arrived in Germany five years earlier, she took her father's first explanation for their presence in Germany too literally and thought that the uniformity of the architecture was what he meant by the Domino Effect. The windows, she pointed out to her father, look like the

dots on the dominos. She tried to imagine the buildings all falling, one against the other, tipped off by some gesture from across the border, but she was unable to convince herself that this was very likely. Her father's second explanation seemed much more plausible, clearing up not only why she and her family were in West Germany, but also why the whole Cold War was going on in the first place: "It's just a job." Her father strode ahead of her now, hands in the pockets of his jeans. The backs of his ears were bright red from the cold. She pressed her white earmuffs harder to her head and tried to stay behind him so that his body blocked the piercing North wind that tore across the compound.

A rail-thin Black soldier sitting in a metal folding chair at the front desk, whose uniform said "Snowden," rose and saluted when Lucinda and her father walked through the doors. "Hello. May I help you?"

Her father looked annoyed. He expected to be recognized and saluted even out of uniform, but Snowden clearly didn't know who he was. To Lucinda's shame, he filled Snowden in. "I'm Major Collins and this is my daughter Lucinda," he said.

Snowden duly saluted. "Major Collins, sir. What can I do for you, sir?" he asked, peering at Lucinda.

"May," her father said, rocking back on his heels. *Oh, God*, she thought. *Here comes the grammar cop*. Lucinda realized she must have given her father a look of unaffected scorn by the smirk that crept onto Snowden's face.

"Sir?"

"What *may* you do for me, that's what you meant to say."

"Yes, sir. What *may* I do for you?" Snowden smiled at Lucinda, pulling a clipboard off the olive drab painted cinderblock wall in front of him, preparing to look up whatever room assignment Major Collins asked for.

"Here to see Nately."

Snowden looked surprised. "Oh, yes, sir. He's here. He's my roommate, matter of fact. He's in 109, that's right down the East hall, sir, let me call him."

"At ease. We'll go knock on the door."

Lucinda saw an expression of grim fear settle onto Snowden's face. "Um, um, sir?"

Major Collins, who had already started down the hall towards Nately's room, turned and looked at Snowden. Lucinda knew that her presence in the barracks was against the rules, and she knew that her father intended basically to pull rank to get her in to see Nately's record collection. Normally she would have felt ashamed and embarrassed about her father's behavior, but the prospect of quadrupling her rock library in one move had made her willing to take advantage of his inexplicable conviction that rules were for other people. Still, as she watched her father staring at Snowden, daring him to say they couldn't go to Nately's room, she felt that not all the Jimi Hendrix records in the world were worth the kind of scene this might become.

"Dad," she said, grabbing her father by the elbow, "I'm going to wait in the car. Just whatever Nately thinks would be good sounds good to me. Ask him for his favorites."

Snowden looked relieved and jumped in to endorse her plan. "Thank you, Miss Collins, that's great, because I was just saying, or fixing to, that we can't let you past this

desk, you being a girl. I know it's not fair, but those are the rules, and we got to follow them. My boss, Sergeant Stinson, he won't like it if he finds out."

Her father shot Lucinda a look that told her to stay put. "Snowden, I'm glad to see you're upholding standards. But this is a different situation than the one that rule about women in the men's barracks is meant to prevent. Or does my daughter look like a cheap German whore to you?" he asked, gesturing to where Lucinda stood growing mortified in her powder blue parka and white earmuffs.

The look of dread was back on Snowden's face. He held out his hands pleadingly. "No sir, of course not. That's not what I meant."

"I didn't think so. I'm glad we're in agreement. Come on, Lucy," he said, turning his back on Snowden and striding down the hall without looking back.

Lucinda touched Snowden by the sleeve and whispered, "Sorry. I'm so sorry. We'll be out of here fast, I promise."

"It's cool, just go on," he said snatching his arm away from her and waving her off in the direction of her father's fast-moving form.

No one answered the first time Major Collins knocked on the door of room 109. "He's supposed to be here," her father said. "I told him we were coming today." Lucinda couldn't tell if he had any sense of having made a scene just moments before. She didn't think he did, but she could never be sure. He knocked again, this time louder. Finally the door opened and a tall, skinny boy with a quarter inch of bright red hair and pale, nearly invisible eyelashes stood looking down on Lucinda and her father. He ran a large, freckled hand over his scalp and straightened his posture, becoming even taller than he had been when he was leaning against the door. "Major Collins, hi. Come on in, come

on in—what's your name?" he asked, extending a hand to Lucinda as he moved out of the way so they could enter his tiny room.

"Lucinda," she said, grabbing his hand. "I don't mean to bother you. My dad said you didn't mind, but he's your boss, so I don't really see how you had much choice. But you can tell me if you're too busy to make these tapes for me, don't worry."

Her father reached out and palmed the top of her head. " My daughter," he explained to Nately, "is a smart ass, you see."

Nately grinned. "No problem. It's hard saving up your money for a new album, always having to pick one out of a dozen or more that you'd like." When Nately spoke Lucinda could not keep her eyes off his adam's apple, which seemed to her incredibly pronounced, probably because he was so thin. She wondered if it ever got cold. She hoped Nately owned a good scarf. He sat down on his bed, a metal cot covered with an Army issue wool blanket pulled tight from corner to corner, and reached under it, sliding out, one by one, five wooden crates full of records. "Have a seat," Nately said, gesturing to the cot on the other side of the room, "Welcome to my castle." The crates filled the two feet of space between the cots so that there was no way, once Lucinda and her father sat down on Nately's roommate's cot, that they could get up and walk around. "Snowden's on duty," Nately said. "He's my roommate. He won't be coming in until tonight."

Lucy nodded. "I have a list here of what I'd like you to record for me, if you have these records." Lucinda drew her list out of her pocket and handed it to him.

"That you in the middle, son?" Lucinda's father was holding a picture he had taken from Nately's bedside table. Lucinda leaned towards her father and looked. The

picture was of a family of six, two old parents with red, weathered skin, three girls and one boy, with long, shaggy red hair and a black leather jacket.

"That's what I really look like," he said, touching the top of his nearly bald head and pointing at the photograph. "That's the real me. One more year of this and I'll be home."

"Maybe nobody told you, son, but there's no draft. Why did you join up if you didn't want to?"

Nately looked embarrassed. "I got busted with some illegal substances in my hometown, sir. Gainesville, Florida. The sheriff is my uncle and he talked to the judge. The deal was, I go in the army for eighteen months instead of jail. They thought it would make me grow up. Sense of responsibility and all that, sir."

"Is it working?" her father asked.

"Oh, yes sir. I'm all better." Much to Lucinda's surprise her father stood up and made to leave the room. "You kids have fun," he said as he left. She supposed he couldn't resist the chance to poke around the private quarters of some of his troops. He had told Lucinda that he could always tell a soldier was smoking pot if incense burners were lying around and he could tell a soldier was gay if there was no porn on the walls. Nately didn't have any porn on his walls, although there was a risqué poster of Wendy O Williams in bondage gear in front of her band, the Plasmatics, and a scantily clad blonde astride a Harley Davidson motorcycle. Lucinda knew that Wendy O Williams was a singer whom a music aficionado like Nately would know about, and she imagined that Nately probably just liked Harleys.

He unfolded Lucinda's list and began reading it. He made disapproving sounds and a few approving ones as he read down the list. "Okay, let me make a suggestion," he said, raising his green eyes and taking in Lucy in a teacherly way. "You've got some good stuff on here—Beatles, of course, Hendrix, of course, Fleetwood Mac, yeah. Blondie—good for you. That's showing some promise. But then you've got some stuff that's just wrong. There's no way you really want the Eagles. No."

"I like that song 'Take it to the Limit,'" Lucinda said, startled that Nately would cast aspersions on her list.

"You don't really. You just don't know any better yet. And Journey? Foreigner? I wouldn't let those records in the same crate with my other records. So here's what let's do. Let me make a list that makes sense, that puts things in context for you. I promise you, you'll love it. You don't even have any Zeppelin on here, for chrissakes. No Dylan! And you need to know what's happening with punk. The classic stuff is great—it's essential—but it's 1982 now and times they are a changin'—where's the Clash, where's Elvis Costello, where are the Sex Pistols, the Slits, Patty Smith, the Dead Kennedys, Siouxsee and the Banshees?"

Lucinda felt ashamed. "I don't know," she said.

"Exactly," he pointed a finger at her excitedly.

"Nately," her father said, reappearing in the doorway. "Did you say the Sex Pistols?"

Nately looked abashed. "Yeah—sorry, sir. I wasn't thinking."

"That's a great name," her father said. "What a name. Sex and violence all rolled into one. Rock's a great tool—you can take a sluggish, demoralized bunch of guys and get them to haul ass if you let them get all jacked up on their music."

"Radio Free Europe," Nately said cryptically. "Spreading the love."

~*~

A few days later Lucinda's father knocked on the door of her bedroom and handed her all the TDK tapes, no longer blank. Moving her ballerina jewelry box to the closet, she made room for the tapes, lining them up across the dresser in front of the cassette player, and began playing them one by one. The Velvet Underground and Nico, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, The Doors. The Band, The Allman Brothers, Janis Joplin. David Bowie, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, Roxy Music. Black Sabbath. Steely Dan. It took a full week of afternoons after school just to hear everything once. Nately had started with the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan, and worked forward from there, tracing three lines of development like a genealogist tracking a population back to its original ancestors. The tapes were chronological and color-coded. Blue ink for Beatles descendants, red for Stones descendants, and green for Dylan's children.

The window to Lucinda's room had a wide ledge that she covered in pillows and sat on, staring out the window at the medieval-looking, half-timbered Nazi water tower that rose above all the other buildings on the base. Its red-tiled roof and the traditional Bavarian shutters drew her eyes as she concentrated on the music. Soon Lucinda began to have questions. She began to doubt Nately's tripartite approach. It seemed too simple, and it left out other threads of rock that didn't seem to Lucinda, from her humble, newcomer's perspective, to fit in under any of the big three umbrellas Nately had laid

out. What about Elvis? Simon and Garfunkel? Sly and the Family Stone? Where were John Mayal's Blues Breakers, considering all the bands that formed from its original members: Cream, Blind Faith, Faces, the Yardbirds? If the Flying Burrito Brothers were formed from members of the Byrds, what bands did the other members of the Byrds form? How were the Velvet Underground related to today's punk rock? What were the boundaries between rock and country, rock and blues, rock and jazz? Why did lyrics by the Police always refer to works of literature? When and why did Jefferson Airplane become Jefferson Starship? She resolved to go see Nately with a new list of records she wanted him to tape for her and another long list of questions. One evening her father knocked and came into her room. She was listening to Three Dog Night sing "Shambala." "Who sings this?" her father asked. When she answered he said, "Now that's a song." He stood and listened until the end of the song, then he nodded and walked back out of the room.

Maneuvering freely in Grafenwoehr was always something of a challenge for Lucinda, who was constantly warned by her parents that she should never walk anywhere alone. The actual base was tiny, with a permanent population of only 400, only about a dozen of whom were kids near her age, but with a fluctuating G.I. population of around 100,000 troops. The area around the base was the largest training area in Europe, and a huge percentage of troops of all NATO nations came through on six-week training exercises. A thirteen-year-old American girl stuck out. Fortunately it was winter, which meant that night fell at 3:00 in the afternoon, about the time Lucinda got home from school after a forty-five minute bus ride through the dessimated wasteland of the training area from another base,Vilseck, where the junior high was located. One dark Tuesday

afternoon, Lucinda lit out for Nately's barracks as soon as she stepped off the bus. She reached the familiar gray exterior after a brisk ten-minute walk through biting cold. Right away, she realized that she couldn't go through the front door. Whoever was on duty would turn her away immediately. So she circled the building until she found a side door that opened onto the East hall, near Nately's room. It was locked. She knocked.

A short, muscular Chicano guy in gym shorts and a gray ARMY T-shirt opened the door. "What the fuck?" he said, drawing back and looking at Lucinda in amazement. "We don't want no Girl Scout cookies, chica," he said and began to close the door.

"No, wait." Lucinda held out a hand to hold the door open. "I just need to drop something off for Nately. I'm Major Collins's daughter and he asked me to come. Kind of an emergency. Quick errand." She slipped through the space held open by the G.I. and found herself standing in a sort of gym area plastered with posters of naked women, where half a dozen G.I.'s were working out on the gym equipment stationed around the room. The windows were steamed over and the whole room reeked of body odor. AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long" was cranking full blast. They all stared at her.

A huge, red-faced man in a Nike sweatsuit cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed "Jailbait on the compound. Jailbait!" The G.I.'s in the gym laughed while most of the doors down the hallway were flung open and the faces of several more G.I.'s peered out, Nately's among them. A chant was beginning, "Jail-Bait, Jail-Bait, Jail-Bait." Lucinda was overwhelmed at the immensity of her miscalculation. What had she been thinking? She felt as if the blood in her veins had suddenly revolted and begun running in the opposite direction, backing up against her heart like a tidal wave. She

waved at Nately, becoming suddenly self-conscious of her white mittens flying above her head like a surrendering flag and which seemed so little-girlish, she now realized. Mittens, for chrissakes. “Nately! Nately!”

He strode towards her looking surprised and embarrassed. “Lucinda Collins?”

“Hi, Nately, I just brought some more blank tapes and was wondering if you could tape some more music for me.”

“Holy shit,” he said, shaking his head. Around them the chant was giving way to whistles and a teasing refrain, “Nately’s got a girlfriend.”

“Fuck off!” Nately bellowed. “Come here, Lucinda.” She followed him to his room where he gestured her in impatiently. He closed the door and stared at her.

“I just wanted some more music and I had some questions. I guess I didn’t realize what a big deal it would be. I’m so sorry.” Lucinda felt like a character in one of the Pink Panther movies, in one of those scenes where stealth gives way to ludicrous farce and people trying to accomplish some simple act of subterfuge wind up swinging from chandeliers and sailing into fountains from plate-glass windows.

Nately grinned at her. “I guess you come by it honestly,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Your dad kind of does whatever the hell he wants, too, doesn’t he?” It was true. Lucinda hadn’t realized it before, but her coming to Nately’s barracks the second time was just as brazen if not more so than the way her father had brought her the first time. She didn’t want to be like her father in this way that had caused her so much embarrassment over the years. She resolved to be circumspect forever more, to paint a circle around herself and never step outside it. “You gotta get out of here, seriously. But

let me see your list, since you're here," Nately said. "And what are your questions?" He sat down on his bed and again slid his record crates out into the middle of the floor.

"At the beginning of the live version of Rhiannon, Stevie Nicks says, 'This is the story of a Welsh witch.'" What's she talking about?"

"No idea. Next?"

"That song they're playing out in the gym, 'You Shook Me All Night Long'—that's a great song!"

"It's brilliant, but that's not a question."

"I can't hear all the lyrics—what's he saying after 'She was the best damn woman that I ever seen' and before 'knockin me out with those American thighs.'"

"Oh," Nately said, blushing. "Let's see. She was a fast machine, she kept her motor clean, she was the best damn woman I had ever seen. She had the sightless eyes, telling me no lies, and knocking me out with those American thighs."

Although it was clear to Lucinda that the woman in the song was being compared to a car, and that there was something sexual about it, she didn't really see the point of the comparison. "So, if she doesn't keep her motor clean, does it slow down?"

Nately fell over sideways on the bed laughing. He grabbed his middle and shook with laughter. "Usually not," he said finally, "but it would be better for everyone if it did."

Just then the door opened and Snowden walked in. He was in uniform and stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips like a mother who has just caught her son with one leg out the window in the middle of the night. "I know," he began, pointing his finger at Nately, "that I am not seeing what I think I'm seeing and that all this ruckus I'm

hearing up and down the hallway is just crazy talk. I know there is not a little white girl in my room. No, I know that I am not seeing that, because that would be flat-out insane. And yet," he said, extending his arms wide to encompass Lucinda standing amidst the crates of records, "there *is* a little jail-bait-white-girl-officer-spawn in my enlisted black man's room. And that is how I know that my life is over. What the *hell* are you thinking, Eddie?"

Snowden's reaction to her presence shocked Lucinda. She felt that she and Snowden had something of a bond from her visit when he had let her and her father in the barracks to see Nately. Hadn't they had shared a moment when her father corrected Snowden's grammar? May and can? Now he stood before her enraged and talking to Nately, whose first name was apparently Eddie, as if she weren't even there. Her feelings were hurt. The seriousness of her presence in the barracks was being impressed upon her a little too strenuously, she felt. Everyone was a little hysterical. She just wanted some new music.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sorry, Jay. She's on her way." Nately stood up and nodded to Lucinda. "I'll make your tapes. Come on, you need to go before Snowden here starts crying."

"Crying? Crying?" Snowden reeled back as if he had been shot. "Black people've been lynched for less back in that great country of ours. Now I'm serious, snowflake, you gotta go."

"How will you get the tapes to me?" Lucinda asked Nately as Snowden stood in the hall outside holding the door open impatiently.

"I'll meet you by the water tower Friday at five o'clock, can you do that?"

"The Nazi Castle water tower or the new one?"

"The Nazi one."

"Okay, yeah. Five o'clock. Thanks, Nately."

Snowden, in a parody of a white newscaster's voice, delivered his version of the nightly update aired by the American Forces Network, "And so the white people have arranged a delightful rendezvous for Friday afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's four o'clock in Central Europe. Do you know where your children are?"

~*~

"I feel like we're spies," Lucinda said as she stood shivering in the rounded wooden doorway of the old half-timbered Nazi water tower, a stone's throw from the general's quarters where Hitler had resided when he visited the training area. A broad sidewalk passed between the structures, providing a short cut through the wooded area between the residential neighborhood where Lucinda lived and the PX/Commissary compound and library, where Nately had been. "Trading dangerous information that could end the whole Cold War in one fell swoop."

"Be careful," Nately said, leaning forward conspiratorially, "my bow tie is really a camera." His pale pink skin was red from the cold, his green eyes watering. "What's that from?"

"Oh," Lucinda squinted in concentration. "I know those words. Hang on." The melody began to come to her. "Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike, they've all gone to look for America," she sang. "Simon and Garfunkel."

"Good call. It's a great song. Great album."

"It's not one of my favorites," Lucy said.

Nately smiled at her. "I was about your age when I first heard it. I found it in my big brother's collection. *Bookends*. I listened to it because of the cover. Those two guys and all that gray around them. They looked like they knew something they were afraid to tell you. I didn't much like it then, either. I didn't really understand it, what it's about."

"What's so hard to understand?" Lucy said, thinking she had caught a dig at her age.

Nately's eyes were still smiling at her. "You're just not far enough away."

"Away from what?" She felt herself getting angry. Nately was acting like a big brother. She didn't like it.

"Home."

"Home?" She looked up at him. "We're at the end of the world here, Nately. Don't tell me I'm not far enough away from home to understand stupid Simon and Garfunkel."

Nately reached out with his gloved hand to touch her shoulder. Lucy shook it off. "Look what you've got here, Lucy. You've got your mom, your dad, your little brother and sister. Me, I've got Simon and Garfunkel."

"Oh, cry me a river."

"I'm just saying the lyrics might mean a bit more to somebody who's away from everything he knows, like the guy in the song. And one of these days it'll mean more to you, too. That's all, dear Prudence."

"Prudence?"

"That's your new nickname," he said.

She loved it. "I brought a few more blanks," she said. "And a list."

"You've got a bad habit, sister."

~*~

The next Friday, Lucinda waited at the water tower for Nately to show up with her tapes. Her parents thought she was at ballet class, so she had no trouble getting away, and in any case she didn't have far to go—she could see her own quarters from where they stood. She knew she would have to stop bothering Nately, but she couldn't. She didn't even have time to listen to all the music she requested of him. She just kept asking so she could see him. She hadn't told her father that she was meeting Nately, and she knew, somehow, that Nately hadn't mentioned it, either. She wasn't sure why their meetings were a secret, but she knew that they exhilarated her, a secret door in the center of her life. He was late and she had almost decided that he had forgotten about her. Just as she was about to leave, feeling sadder than she should have for not being able to pick up her new music, he appeared over the top of a rise, trotting in a long, black leather coat that she had never seen before. He wore a Russian ushanka and dark shades. "You look like KGB," she said.

"I've been to Amsterdam," he said, as if this explained his new look. "Things are happening there, Prudence. There's a music scene there that's wired. One more year and I'm out of the Army, and that's where I'm going. I'm going to start a band. I had a feeling about the place."

"One more year," Lucinda said. She would need five more years before she could think of moving to Amsterdam or anywhere else without her parents. She realized that in five years she could be anywhere. Nately would be a memory. She envied people who stayed put, who had physical correlatives to tie their memories to. Her memories seemed

to her entirely fabricated because she could never return to the places where they happened to verify them, unlike other people who, she imagined, had traces of their own lives everywhere around them in their neighborhoods and towns. Often she felt that she had an advantage over these people. She knew where her self stopped and her environment started because she was so frequently torn from her environment. But more often than not she envied civilians the sure accretion of meaning that let them become bound to where they lived until the place became a part of their personality. This experience of being grounded was a mystery that she wanted to experience, and its absence struck her at odd, inappropriate moments.

Nately stood before her breathing hard from his run, his breath crystallizing and falling on the air. Lucinda concentrated on him. She could tell that their meeting was one of those moments that shine out from the continuum of moments, a luminous freeze frame that would later be all she would remember of the entire month or perhaps the entire year the moment belonged to. He reached into his new coat pockets and withdrew the tapes she had asked for. *London Calling*, *Station to Station*, *Disraeli Gears*, *Exile on Main Street*, *Darkness at the Edge of Town*, *Bella Donna*. All there. "Do you spend all your paycheck on music?" she asked.

"Pretty much. Here, I got you something from Amsterdam. He pulled one more tape out of his pocket, a store bought tape. *Unbehagen* by Nina Hagen.

"Unease," Lucinda translated. It was sheer coincidence that she had run across the word in her studies that week. "Thank you, Nately. Wow. Thank you for thinking of me." She stared down at the cassette in her gloved hand, Nina Hagen's theatrical face staring back at her. Music sounded the same wherever you were. You could hear the

rain at the beginning of "Buckets of Rain" before Dylan began singing, you could hear Mick Jagger's voice become the texture of ground glass for "Ventilator Blues" whether you were in any of the fifty states or thousands of feet above the ocean in a plane or sitting in a small room an hour from the Czech border. Music lived in time like she did.

"I'll bet you've got a new list for me, don't you?" Nately asked.

"Depends. I don't know if you'll have all this," she said, handing him her list.

"*Shoot Out the Lights,* how did you hear about that? But have no fear. I've got it. I *just* got it, but I've got it. I'm going to Amsterdam again next week, so I don't know if I can get to everything, but I'll try hard. Let's meet here same time two weeks from today and I'll give you what I've got."

~*~

Two weeks later a heavy snow was falling and Lucinda could hardly make out the figure standing in front of the heavy wooden door of the water tower as she approached. It felt like years since she had seen Nately and she reviewed all her insights about Nina Hagen and Richard and Linda Thompson as she walked. She didn't want to forget anything. She saw him pacing in front of the door and realized that he must have been freezing, so she began to run. As she drew closer she realized that the tall, thin figure was not Nately, but Snowden. He had stopped pacing and stood with his hands deep in his front pockets staring at her. She stopped running and waved. Nately must have the flu going around, she thought. She was pleased to see Snowden—his presence showed that he didn't hate her—in spite of her white, jail bait status. "Snowden, hey! You order this weather?" She reached him and ducked under the narrow easement over the door.

"Hey, Prudence," he said. His face was grim and tight.

"You know my nickname! What's the matter? What's got you out today doing Nately's dirty work for him?" The look on Snowden's face prepared her for what he was about to say. There was no question, with that face, what was the matter.

Snowden puffed out his cheeks and said it. "Nately's dead. Got killed in a bar fight in Amsterdam last weekend. Wasn't his fight—he was trying to break it up and he stepped in front of somebody's knife."

Lucinda stared and stared at Snowden. She watched his exhaled breaths crystallize then fall. She watched him blink. "Is he. . . where is he?"

"Shipped home already. He's going to be buried in Gainesville, where he's from. I can't believe it. I've already been assigned a new roommate. Every morning I open my eyes and I have to remind myself that Nately's not the one breathing across the room."

"No," she said. She felt her face become a mask of ice as tears fell and froze on her cheeks.

"He had marked his calendar. I thought I may as well show up in case your dad hadn't said anything. Here," he said, handing her a plastic sack that she could tell were the tapes she had given Nately to record with the last time she had seen him. Snowden patted her on the shoulder. "He put so much time into making those tapes for you. You were a bright spot for him." Lucinda nodded. He hesitated for a moment, then said, "You know, he never had any girlfriends."

Lucinda looked up at him. "Thank you, Snowden."

She walked home slowly, the snow seeping through her clothes and her boots. Her dad hadn't said anything. Not a word. Of course, her father didn't know she and Nately had seen each other more than once. *For a week*, she thought, *Nately has not been*

in the world and I didn't know it. She absently reached into the bag and drew out a tape. Still blank. She reached in pulled out two more, both blank. Then she pulled one out and saw Nately's handwriting. *Shoot out the Lights* by Richard and Linda Thompson. She stopped and stared at his handwriting. Black ink, because she had convinced him that his color-coded tripartite system didn't work. She thought about his hands, the freckles on the tops of them, how they had written these words, and where they were now, his hands. She was colder than she had ever been, the cold going all the way to the center of her. She wondered that her heart didn't stop. As she walked past her house, where she saw her mother's shadow moving in the kitchen, she picked up her speed until she had covered the three additional blocks to her father's office. It was just ten minutes past 5:00 and the building was still bustling. She could see the light on in her father's second-floor office.

"Hello, little Collins!" Three NCO's who worked across the hall from her father were coming down the stairs.

"Have good weekends," she said automatically as they separated to let her past. She climbed the stairs and pushed open the door to her father's office without knocking. He looked up from whatever it was he was reading and stood up when he saw her.

"Lucy! What brings you here? I thought you had ballet?"

"Dad, is Nately dead?" She didn't know why she phrased the information in the form of a question, except that part of her wouldn't accept the news as true until she heard it from him.

"Yeah, he sure is. News sure travels fast on this little base. Yeah. Got himself killed, the poor dumb bastard. It's a shame. He was a good boy. That time he made all

those tapes for you—that was good of him, didn't you think?" Lucinda nodded. "That reminds me, sweetie, I keep forgetting to tell you. Yeah. When I heard he died I went over and got these for you." He gestured behind where Lucy was standing. In the far corner of the room under the windows sat Nately's crates of records, lined up against the wall. "They would have probably just been thrown away or all the other G.I.'s would have divided them up. I thought you should have them." Her father was standing beside her. She went down on her knees in front of the crates. In the first crate she saw *Shoot Out the Lights* by Richard Thompson, along with all the other albums she had most recently asked him to record. As she thumbed her way through the records, she realized that he had separated those he had already taped for her from all the others. He had been keeping track so he could tell, she supposed, how many he had yet to record for her, how close he was to running out of music.

The Cold War

There was nothing to do but wait for World War III in Grossengstingen. In the two years since Cate Bender and her parents had been living at the high security nuclear missile base in the Schwebisch Alps, Cate and her father had become ski freaks. Once every couple of weeks Colonel Stan Bender would arrive at Cate's high school, skis fixed to the roof of the car, and tell her principal that she had a doctor's appointment. Then he would wait until they were leaving the parking lot of her thirty-four-person, two-building school, give her a high five and sing a bar from "Bad Moon Rising" as he headed up the mountain to the closest slope. They would race each other down the mountain, ride up the lift together, and do it again, until they were both exhausted. Then they would eat dinner in the ski lodge, where Cate's mother, who had broken her femur skiing a year

earlier and afterwards refused to set foot on the slopes, would sometimes join them, although less and less often.

The last time he had taken her out of school, her father, who had not seemed fully present to Cate for some time, waited until she had fastened her seatbelt, then handed her a brochure about mental illness. "I don't know anything about this kind of crap," he'd started. "But what do you think? About your mother? I don't know what to do, Cate. Do you think she needs to go away for a while?"

Cate sat there stunned. She had always known that her mother was high strung, of course, and Cate wondered sometimes if the tiny woman had simply been cursed with a body too small to contain her massive energy, which pulled her around like a kite in a strong wind. When Alyson Bender was happy, the whole family moved like their own private beach party through the cramped quarters and rigid protocols of military life. It stood to reason that a woman of her intensity would be as much a tornadic front when unhappy as she was a tropical paradise when happy. The bad with the good.

"No, Dad," she finally said. "Are you nuts? Mom's not sick. She hates it here. She misses her job back home. She was just starting to get somewhere, and she just doesn't want to be here."

"I know," her father said, downshifting to take the steep, winding road. "But the way she rages. She's never been this bad before, and she's just making it worse with all this self-pity."

"How can you say that? She's picked up and moved for your career over and over without thinking of herself at all. She's had it. That's all."

"This family is a team, and a team is only as strong as its weakest link, Cate. She cries all the time, and she's letting herself look like shit. I hardly know her. She talks about dying."

"Okay, maybe she needs a shrink, but she doesn't need to *go away*, Dad. She just needs a vacation. We're a day's drive from Paris. Maybe she and Marcie could take a week and just have fun."

Marcie Byers, wife of Major Leonard Byers, lived in the quarters next door to the Benders. She and Cate's mother had become friends the way people do when they're thrown together with no choice but to fight or play bridge. They had nothing in common—Marcie was a servile Southern Baptist, while Alyson Bender, whom Cate's father had met when he picked her up hitchhiking as he drove to basic training in Fort Leonard Wood at the peak of the Vietnam War, remained staunchly unaffiliated and treated Cate like a sister, Cate's father like a beloved pet. Yet the two women had developed a bond.

"Catie, you're a genius," he said as they drove into the parking lot of the ski lodge. A vacation might be all she needs. I wasn't really thinking of committing her; I just wasn't sure *what* to do."

~*~

Cate sat on the bed watching her mother pack. She could not remember the last time her mother had looked so cheerful. "Let me borrow your black mini skirt," Cate's mother said, standing in front of her closet. "You never know. Marcie and I might go clubbing."

Cate laughed. "Oh, yeah. I can see Marcie in a night club."

"You've never been in a night club."

"Well, you know what I mean. I can just imagine her standing at a bar showing some hot man pictures of her kids."

"I would never show pictures of you to any hot men at a night club. I just want you to know that, my sweet," her mother said, throwing a series of sweaters into the suitcase, open on the bed in front of Cate. She moved back and forth from the closet to the bed like a hummingbird zipping from flower to flower, too fast to see.

"I know, Mother. Anyway, they would just think you were showing them pictures of yourself." It was true. Cate looked almost exactly like her mother, from her straight black hair to her thin nose to her green eyes. They wore the same size clothes. They had their periods at the same time, and every single detail of Cate's developing characteristics paralleled her mother's— the age she started wearing a bra, the way rage would sometimes strike her like a flash flood, leaving her exhausted and humiliated in its wake, everything. "What are you and your dad going to do while I'm gone? If I find out that he's taken you out of school to go skiing again, I'll wring his neck."

"We wouldn't do that."

"Like hell you wouldn't. Your father wants me out of the way. Not to take you skiing—I don't really care about that. He just doesn't want to deal with me. 'Here, darling, take a vacation. See the sights. Do some shopping. Above all, come back smiling and forget that you were the best real estate agent in the state and now you're sitting in a medieval hovel watching ski reports and ironing my fatigues. Snap out of it!' Prick." Her words accelerated as she spoke until she was tripping over them, like

someone running too fast down a hill. She was getting worked up. If you let her talk long enough, she would always threaten to kill someone.

Cate was on her mother's side, but she knew how her father felt. She wanted her to snap out of it, too. Every impulse to appease her mother by giving her what she wanted was useless. What she wanted was a different life.

"Catie, I don't want you to ever get married. I'm serious. Put yourself first. If somebody wants to come along for the ride, fine, but don't expect some man to put you first, because he won't. And don't have kids. Whatever you do, don't have kids. They steal your life, your youth, your identity. I don't mean that you did that to me, honey," she said, rushing over to hug her daughter. Cate winced and pulled away. "You know I love you. That's why I'm telling you—don't do things the way I've done them. Anybody that tries to muffle you, or shut you up—what kind of a sick bastard would that person be? What are they afraid of? They should be killed! Taken out!" she said, making a pistol out of her fingers and firing her weapon in the direction of the headboard. Cate never knew who "they" were, but her mother could see "them" and could hit "them" point-blank, every time.

* * *

The first night her mother was away, Colonel Bender told Cate he was going to drive down to the village and have a few drinks with some of his troops. Cate decided to have a few drinks herself. She carefully got trashed on her parents' peppermint schnapps, pouring in water to replace the amount she had drunk. By the end of the evening, the bottle was almost pure water—she would have to replace it soon—and Cate was passed

out on the couch in front of the image on the television of an American flag waving in the breeze above the words "The American Forces Network Has Signed Off."

She woke when the grandfather clock in the entryway began chiming in a disorganized, crazy way. The orderly chiming every fifteen minutes never woke her, she was used to the sound, but this cacophony broke her drunken sleep and she lay, terrified, watching as a dark figure crept into the hallway. Whoever it was had bumped into the clock—evidently a stranger to the layout of the house—and was carrying a flashlight. Christ, whoever heard of a prowler on a military base high in the mountains in the middle of winter? She watched as the figure opened the linen closet in the hall. Looking for valuables, Cate surmised. She watched, trying to think of a plan and wondering where the hell her father was, as the figure bundled two heavy, wool blankets under his arm and closed the closet. She heard the front door close. What the hell?

Cate slipped along the hallway in her socks and tipped open the blinds of a window that looked onto the driveway. Skiing was evidently not the only way her father had found to pass the time before nuclear winter. She saw him, unmistakably under the streetlight, sliding back into his car, handing the blankets to a woman sitting in the passenger seat. She recognized the silhouette of Loretta Terry, wife of Major Dan Terry, mother of Tina Terry, by her unbelievable beehive hairdo, which Cate's mother never failed to make fun of whenever they saw her at base functions. "I liked the sixties, too," she'd say. Loretta's roots often showed, and she had adopted the young German woman's habit of wearing bobby socks with high heels. Her daughter, Tina, an angry, square-jawed girl reportedly able to unroll a condom with her teeth, went to school with

Cate. They weren't friends, but they had, on two occasions, silently shared a joint in the girl's restroom.

Cate wished Tina were with her to witness her mother reaching over and kissing Cate's father. Then Cate could have reached over and clocked Tina in the jaw and stepped over Tina's moaning form to walk outside, yank the keys out of her father's car, and give him and Loretta a good thrashing. But Tina wasn't there, and Cate didn't move. She watched as they pulled away, and followed the headlights of the Audi for as far as she could see them. Then she went to bed.

* * *

The next day at school, Cate found herself checking the girls' bathroom for Tina between every class. She found her during lunch, staring at herself in the mirror, dragging hair gel upward from her scalp and then teasing the hair so that her bangs stuck out like tumorous growths. Bad hair is hereditary, Cate thought, approaching Tina and turning to talk to her through the mirror. Tina was super blonde with dark eyes while Cate's hair was straight, black, cut just below her chin, and her eyes and skin were pale.

"Hey."

"Hey," Tina said, rinsing hair gel off her fingers.

Cate pulled a joint out of the pocket of her ski jacket and looked at Tina. No one else was in the bathroom. Tina opened a window, letting in a blast of sub-zero air for ventilation, and they stepped into the farthest stall from the door to the hall and lit up.

With her lungs full of pot, she watched Tina inhale and took the joint as Tina handed it back. She tried to think through the ramifications of telling Tina about what their parents were up to. She couldn't think; she only felt rage rising up like something

foreign about to take over her body. She felt like snapping Tina's neck with one twist, but instead, as Tina exhaled Cate grabbed her by the chin and began kissing her. Tina kissed her back and they sustained the kiss until the joint burning down between Cate's fingers began burning her.

Pushing away from Tina, Cate said "I'm not a lesbian."

Tina shrugged. "I'm not, either."

"My father and your mother are having an affair. I saw them last night."

Tina sat down on the toilet and looked up at Cate. "My dad's in Berlin this month. She went out last night and didn't get in until dawn."

"Yeah. She was with my dad. He came home and took two blankets out of the closet and left again. I recognized your mom in the car by her silly goddamned hair."

Tina wrapped her arms around herself and looked at the toilet paper. "What were they going to do?"

"I don't know. I guess they were going to climb in the backseat and didn't want to get cold. I don't know. We don't exactly have Holiday Inns around here for such moments." Cate pushed against the wall of the stall with one foot.

"Your father's an ass."

"Your mother's a total bitch. You have no idea what this could do to my mother. What about your dad? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Do you think they're in love?"

"God, I never thought of that. I'm hoping it will blow over before my mom finds out. I can't tell her; she'd lose her mind. But if they're in love—shit. There's just no way my dad could be in love with your mom."

"Fuck you!"

"I don't mean anything about your mother," Cate lied, "but my dad has always seemed crazy about my mom. Not in a while, though."

"We could wind up being step-sisters," Tina said, standing up and stroking Cate's hair. "Your dad could be court-martialed, you know."

"For adultery?"

"You know the code: an officer and a *gentleman*. That's serious business, not just some movie. On a military installation with the wife of another officer—hell, yes, he could go down."

"I'm not going to let that happen. I'm going to stop this," Cate said, opening the door to the stall.

~*~

That night, still several days before her mother was due home, Cate's father was out again, no doubt with Loretta Terry. Cate put on her long underwear and pulled her jeans over them, preparing for at least thirty minutes in the elements. She doubled her gloves, pulled a ski mask over her face, took a flashlight out of a kitchen drawer and retrieved the gasoline can her father used for the lawnmower out of the garage. Then she set off down the hill towards the Terrys'.

The Terry's quarters looked exactly like the Benders'—white stucco with dark wood crossbeams, tiny, deep windows and heavy, rounded wooden doors. The base had been a Nazi installation during World War II, and over every door a stone eagle held an empty wreath in its talons, with a blank center where the swastika had been cemented over. Shining her flashlight over the house, Cate saw that Loretta Terry had covered this

circle with a perfectly fitted sign that had "The Terry's" painted in baby pink lettering encircled with daisies. "Tacky woman," Cate said out loud. She knew that Tina was in the house alone and considered abandoning her plan and instead inciting Tina to invade *her* parents' liquor cabinet, but she opened the gasoline can and began pouring the gas over the hard-crusted snow in the front yard until she had spelled out the word "SLUT" in large letters. She stood and watched as the gasoline melted the snow, down to the ground, until the letters appeared written in mud. She felt sure that Loretta would stop whoring around with her father when she knew that someone was on to her.

Cate had always thought of her parents as lovers. Other people's parents seemed like functionaries, necessary parts of an equation whom she could not imagine caring for one another. Her parents had always seemed different, until the last couple of years, when what could only be described as a chill had crept slowly through their life. Cate craved some heat-generating conflagration, some loud and burning absolute to right or finish their lives one way or the other.

She walked home. The hard snow was slippery, and she had to walk sideways in order to get back up the hill without falling, leaning her weight against the mountain, feeling strange. In one day she had kissed a girl and vandalized a house—the same girl's house, as a matter of fact. Her mother would not have committed either of these acts, she thought. She was glad about both events.

* * *

Cate avoided her father. She slept in until after he left for work at 6:30, going to do whatever he did. Cate imagined him watching the missiles all day to make sure they still pointed at Moscow, twiddling his fingers above the red button. She didn't think she

could confront him, but she was equally unsure that she could look at him and talk to him normally. After hitting the snooze bar twice, Cate turned the alarm off entirely, rolled over and slept until 10:00. What can he do to me, she thought. Besides, she didn't want to see Tina on the bus.

She called a German cab, which drove her by the Terry home. The word "slut" was no longer visible where Cate had burned it into the snow, because someone had taken a shovel and scraped snow back into the grooves created by the gasoline. She wondered if Tina was going to be angry. She would have understood perfectly had Tina felt the need to burn a derogatory term about her father into her lawn. She tried to come up with the right word for what her father was, but nothing came to her. There were a dozen words for the woman. Her father was—what? An adulterer. Their lawn wasn't big enough for that word.

Tina *was* angry. She was waiting by Cate's locker at the beginning of the lunch period. "How could you do that?" she asked, shoulders flat against Cate's locker. The set of her jaw made it look even squarer than usual, Cate noticed, recoiling from the memory of having kissed her.

"Gasoline. It cuts through everything," Cate said, shifting the books in her arms.

"*To me*. How could you do that *to me?*"

"Like we're so close, you and I. Anyway, I didn't do anything to you. I did it to your mother, and I promise you that what she has done to me is much worse." Then she couldn't help asking, "Did she see it?"

Tina pushed herself off Cate's locker and lunged for her. She grabbed Cate's hair in one hand and landed a solid punch to Cate's eye with the other. Cate felt rage build

and overflow, too fast for her to contain it. She knocked Tina to the ground and fell on top of her, landing clumsy blows on Tina's neck, face, and shoulders. She heard nothing, felt nothing. She released herself completely into the service of her rage until someone pulled her off Tina.

After receiving first aid from their gym teacher, she and Tina were both suspended. The principal, Herr Bausch, had been unable to find any of their parents, so he called a cab that they would have to share and made them sit in the office together until their cab had come. In the cab, which was nothing more than a rusted out VW bug driven by Herr Bausch's out-of-work brother-in-law, Cate pressed her body as far against her side of the backseat as she could, flattening her nose against the window. The cold felt good to her burning, swollen eye. She could have looked at Tina through her good eye, but she made no effort to do so. When the car hit a bump, and her knee touched Tina's knee, they both drew back. She was still angry, but her rage was gone, and all she felt was depression settling in like a fog on a mountaintop. She couldn't imagine having to see or deal with Tina again. The day seemed terminal, like nothing would come after this. She heard rather than saw Tina get out of the cab when it stopped at her house before continuing up the mountain to Cate's.

Cate's father's car was in the driveway, which was very strange. He never came home during the day. Cate remembered that her principal had been unable to find him, but she had assumed he was at a missile site. As she walked by her father's car, she saw high-heeled shoe prints leading from the passenger side to the front door of her house. Her mother's car was also in the driveway, three days early. She quickly paid the driver and walked toward the house, fear making it hard to breathe. From the yard she could

hear her mother screaming. Cate couldn't tell what she was saying, but she didn't need to. She knew what must have happened.

She didn't want to go in. She walked to the middle of the lawn, threw herself down, and made a snow angel. Then she stood up carefully, so as not to mess up the angel's wings, and hopped left a few feet, fell backward and made another one. She did this one more time, listening all the while to the muffled screams of her mother. She wanted her to shut up. She was terrified. She considered walking back down to Tina's house and waiting out the apocalypse with the only other person who would be affected as she was, but she thought about her mother. Alyson Bender's temper, her violent figures of speech, the fact that she smoked more bad guys with the tip of her finger in the course of any given day than any bad-ass soldier in combat, all combined to pull Cate out of her stupor and force her to open the front door.

Her mother might really kill the two lovers. She may have done so already, but Cate doubted it, because she was still screaming at them. Cate stepped through the door and could hear what she was saying—obscenities and threats to cut his dick off, mostly. She could also hear her father now, voice lower, saying "Now, Alyson. Baby, I'm sorry. Calm down." Loretta was silent.

Cate slammed the door as loudly as she could, called out, "I'm home!" and walked down the hall. The door of the master bedroom hung open, a huge hole kicked through the particleboard. Her mother was standing in front of the bed with a kitchen knife, and her father was in front of her, wearing only under shorts, stepping side to side like a boxer trying to fake out his opponent. Cate didn't see Loretta, but she heard her finally, from behind the closed bathroom door, sobbing.

Her father, displaying an Uncle Sam skull tattoo on his lower abdomen that Cate had never known he had, saw her first. "Cate! Oh, God. This is something different from what you're thinking."

"Oh, it is?" Cate said.

"Go away, honey. Go away for a little while."

Cate's mother spun around. "You see, I told you, Catie. They won't put you first. They'll . . ."

"Mom! Stop it." Cate stepped toward her mother and hugged her, taking the knife out of her hand. She used all her strength to hold her mother's body, as if it might fly apart if she loosened her grip. Her father walked over to the closet, pulled out a suitcase and threw it open onto the bed. He started packing, not taking his eyes off his wife and daughter. Cate saw the bathroom door open and Loretta, her beehive asunder and her makeup off, walk stealthily past them, fumbling to button her blouse, glancing at Colonel Bender as she left the room. A moment later Cate heard the front door slam. She walked her mother to her side of the bed and tried to get her to lie down. Her mother was drenched in sweat, muscles quivering beneath Cate's hands like those of a horse ridden to its breaking point.

"I can't sleep on these sheets. No, no, no," Alyson said.

Cate was out of ideas. None of them knew how to proceed. They stared at each other. Finally, Cate's mother left the room. Cate followed her, afraid of what she might do. She saw her mother open the hall closet and take out a blanket. Then she walked into the living room and lay down on the couch, pulling the cover over herself. Cate

marched back down the hall, passing the master bedroom without looking in at her father, and went into her own bedroom.

* * *

Cate spent the rest of the day and the evening in her room. She didn't hear a sound in the house. Neither of her parents left; neither of them moved. At around eleven o'clock, Cate got dressed, took a bottle from the liquor cabinet behind her mother's quiet form, and slid out the front door. It was snowing. The air was so cold that her breath crystallized as it left her nostrils, freezing them with a thin sheet of ice. She walked down the mountain, allowing herself to slide sometimes, as if she were on skis, to the Terry's quarters. The house was dark. She had never been in it, but she assumed that Tina's bedroom would be in the same place her own bedroom was in her nearly identical home. She walked around the back and saw that light was on in the ground floor room. She made a snowball and threw it against the window, making and throwing three more before Tina finally came to the window.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Tina whispered loudly from behind the screen on the window.

"Has the shit hit the fan at your house?"

"My dad doesn't know. But I confronted her. I had to—she came dragging in, all shook up, after I got home from school. I guess you know. I guess you found her."

"My mother found her."

"Holy shit. She didn't tell me that."

"Yeah. Do you want to come out? I've got a bottle of licorice schnapps and a joint."

"Meet you in the front yard." Tina emerged a few minutes later with the keys to her mother's car. They got in and turned the car on, the heat full blast.

"Where do you want to go?" Cate asked.

"I thought we'd just sit here and get as fucked up as we can."

"Yeah—better not to drive. Here," Cate said, handing her the bottle. She unzipped her parka and took the joint and matches out of the inside pocket. She lit it and passed it to Tina, who received the joint and handed back the bottle to Cate.

"Are you going to tell your dad?" Cate asked.

Tina, holding in a hit, shook her head.

"You're not?"

"No," Tina said, exhaling. "She promised it was over. She swears she'll never do it again. It's worse at your house than mine."

"I wonder what will happen tomorrow. I just can't imagine. I can't imagine that we'll wake up and there'll be another day." Cate took the joint. As she watched the snow hit the windshield, accumulating quickly, eliminating any view outside the car, she felt like a character in one of those movies about nuclear war, one of the survivors who has to walk out into the desert after the war is over and rebuild the human race.

No Tourist

On a Monday morning you will wake up, afraid to open your eyes, because you will not know where you are. Somehow, you are in your house. You roll over and peer through a slit in the blinds, checking your driveway to see if your car is there, wondering if you drove it home. You have lost a shoe that you will never find, and your keys hang from the lock of the front door. You check your body to see if anyone had sex with you while you were in the blackout. This happens. You are wearing underwear and tights and a skirt, all of which are still on in the correct order and facing in the right direction, which suggests to you that you are okay, you don't need to spend the next month wondering who it was, how many and if he or they had AIDS, or any other sexually transmitted diseases, or if they got you pregnant, and getting these things checked. You

are sick and shaking, swearing this is it. The last hangover I will ever have. I'm never drinking again.

"How was your weekend?" asks one of your coworkers. You have a good job writing greeting card copy for a major greeting card company in a glass high-rise off the freeway. You got the job right out of college and have been there for five years. The insurance plan is great; it provides coverage for alcohol treatment, which you have looked into in your more defeated moments, but you are pretty sure that padding around in your pajamas all day and talking about your feelings with a bunch of fuck-ups won't have any bearing at all on this organic invasion in your bloodstream. This problem has nothing to do with your feelings or your childhood; you can say that with certainty. You are on fire.

"Oh. I don't remember a thing about it," you say, not meaning this as a figure of speech.

"Me either. Weekends just fly by, don't they? Before you know it, Monday is here, and I can't think of a single damned thing I did." You agree. You remember going with your coworkers to The Basement, a bar in the, yes, basement of your office building at quitting time on Friday. You remember them leaving one by one, after one glass of white zinfandel or two drafts, to go mow the lawn, get ready for a date, or pick up the kids. You leave too, pretending that you have a date to get ready for, but that's about all you remember until Monday morning.

That evening you make it home without stopping at the liquor store. You even stop and buy groceries, avoiding the beer aisle with determined indifference. You get home and make yourself a nice salad and some pasta and a glass of water and use your

nice Delft blue dishes that belonged to your grandmother. You put the dishes in the sink. The icemaker drops ice and you jump. You decide to do dishes later and instead you open up a book, a good book, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. You love to read. After a page, it occurs to you that a cup of hot Earl Gray tea is what you need to really make the evening perfect—your first sober evening, sipping hot tea and reading the classics. Peace. You look around, and light some sandalwood incense and dim the light on your halogen lamp slightly. You feel proud and centered, and you think, this won't be so hard. Not hard at all. I've been making a big deal out of nothing.

You leave your apartment and get in your car and drive to the grocery store to buy some Earl Gray tea. The British put gin in their Earl Gray; you remember reading this somewhere. The flavor of Earl Gray comes from bergamot, which is also used in gin. You realize that the evening would be even more perfect, serene, gentle, with a little gin in your Earl Gray. This has nothing to do with the blackout drinking you have now ceased to do. That was beer and tequila. So vulgar, so American. This is gin and tea. Totally different aesthetic. You will sip it. You go to buy the gin.

While you are at the liquor store, Sam tells you that Rolling Rock is on sale, and so is Cuervo Gold. "I called and left a message on your machine. I thought of you as soon as the liquor distributor told me about it. It's going fast, and the sale's only good for the week," he says as he points at the green tower of Rolling Rock cases stacked in front of aisle three. You are a working girl, not some fucking princess who can waltz in and buy fancy wine and premixed strawberry daquiri mixes. You work hard, you drink hard, you're no fucking tourist. You cannot afford to walk away from a sale. You get a case of Rolling Rock and a pint of Cuervo. You look at the gin in your shopping basket,

remember that you hate gin and put it back. The amount of the check is more than you have in your account, but you will get paid on Friday. It's Monday now; checks take a few days to clear, and banks are already closed today, so you will probably be okay.

You go home and drink fifteen beers and three tequila shots and listen to Radiohead and look at Jane Austen splayed open at her spine on your coffeetable and you imagine how someday all this pain and suffering will be over and you will possess uncommon wisdom. You take out a pen and paper to catch any thoughts. You don't catch any; you are like a child chasing fireflies that go dark just when you're about to cup your hands around them. You remember taking your last beer to bed and thinking that you really were doing better, since you remembered going to bed. You even sleep in your nightgown.

~*~

You are sick and shaking, swearing this is it. Your last hangover. I'm never drinking again. You think about the evening, how nice it had started, the Earl Gray, and you can't understand how it happened. You will not make the same mistake again. Get up and take a multi-vitamin and drink black coffee and Gatorade in tandem to wake you up and restore your electrolytes. Somewhere you read that wet brain is actually the opposite—dry brain, dementia brought on by dehydration caused by drinking. You worry about this.

At work, your supervisor flips the pages of her day calendar distractedly as she asks you to explain your latest offering, for the hip, cutting-edge sympathy card department which reads, "He's dead. It's sad, but you'll be dead, too, soon enough."

She stares at you across her desk. "This is a little *too* cutting edge. I mean, it is a sympathy card, not a fucking-get-over-it card. We can't use this. Come on, you know better."

You don't know better. You can't really see what else a sympathy card would need to say, but you know that you used to be able to deliver these truth blows more winningly. "I'm sorry, Eleanor. I've got some other ideas I can try."

She has a call, but before she picks it up, she says to you, her eyes on the red button beeping, "Are you okay?"

You assure her that you are, and later that afternoon you hand in a new effort: "On the death of your husband, try to remember the good times and be grateful that at least now he will never leave you for a younger woman."

Driving home, you stop to get gas and while your car is filling, you watch some idiot light a cigarette while waiting for his tank to fill up on the other side of the gas island from you, and you are sure this is it, someone will be sending your family members sympathy cards that you probably wrote. You are not incinerated, but standing on the asphalt next to your car, you imagine the explosion and it feels like your first drink, at fifteen, how the alcohol hit your bloodstream like dropping a match onto a barrel of oil. The idiot emerges from the store with a twelve-pack of Bud bottles, which you notice from the signs in the window is on sale. You make a mental note of the sale, but you don't want to write another bad check, and you still have nine Rolling Rocks in the

fridge and the dregs of the tequila, all of which must now be thrown away anyway, since tonight you are beginning your new life as a sober person.

At home, you decide to kick off your new life with some new, positive habits. "Replace a bad habit with a good habit." You've heard that somewhere, and it sounds obvious enough, so you strip out of your slacks and blouse and slip into a pair of running shorts, a T-shirt, and running shoes, items you bought the last time you attempted to replace a bad habit with a good habit. You strike out into the neighborhood, head up, smiling at your neighbors as they pull into their driveways or leave for dinner. "Look, I'm a normal person, like you!" you want to scream at them. You are sure that they all know about your drinking.

Ever since you saw your next-door neighbor standing over your recycle bin, which was full of dead soldiers, bottles and cans, shaking his head, you have been more careful. You would like to be a part of the solution to the world's environmental troubles, separating your recyclable items from the rest, but your nosy neighbors have made this impossible for you, and now you put all of your empties in black, opaque hefty sacks and put the sacks in your garbage can and fix the lid on the garbage can, which you take to the curb under cover of darkness the night before the trash collectors come.

You walk and hope your next-door neighbor sees you, knowing that it's sad to worry about the opinion of a total stranger. You try to worry about the opinions of people you know, instead, but all of your high school friends, college friends and family are out of your life now, each leveraging their company against your drinking and losing. You reflect on a few of those bewildering scenes, those faces raging against you as if you didn't agree with them, as if you could just turn it off.

You think of your grandmother, when she was furiously dying of cancer. "I'm a strong woman," she tells you, spitting the words out through gritted teeth, her blue eyes watering. "I've been able to do anything I set my mind to, all my life. Not always easily, or well, but if I tried hard enough, I could do anything. Not this disease. It's having its way with me, it's in my body, and there's nothing I can do about it." You know, you know, and before she dies, you tell her about your drinking. It's the same way with you. She is the only person you have ever admitted it to, and once you told her, you waited for her to die as if she might somehow take it with her and leave you clean.

Walking is upsetting, and you're sweating and hot and faint. You turn around and go home and, before you've had time to think, you're standing in front of your refrigerator pouring an ice cold Rolling Rock down your throat. Realizing that you've done it again, you try to throw up, but you know it's too late, the match has touched the oil, and it will burn all night. After you finish the nine Rolling Rocks and the tequila, you race to the liquor store, realizing you have less than ten minutes before they close. You don't feel drunk, you feel lucid, the colors of everything you drive past look supersaturated, and you swear you can hear a chair scraping in the recording studio at the beginning of a Dylan track you are playing full blast in your car stereo, and your awareness of these things seems proof enough that everything is going to be okay. You are capable of wonder. You always have been. You still are.

Police lights like fireworks, sirens that seem to peel back your flesh and vibrate directly against your nerve endings let you know to pull over. You make a mental note to yourself to raise the need for sympathy cards for people busted on DUIs. Afterall, it happens all the time. This is your third in a year.

~*~

You are sick and shaking, swearing, this is it. The last hangover I will ever have. I'm never drinking again. You see the door of the cell open and you are released into the care of a bail bondsman, a tiny, balding man with gold nugget rings and a single, pencil-thin braid hanging down the back of his cheap suit. He drives you the short distance from the jail to his office, and once in his office takes a bottle of Jack Daniels out of his top desk drawer and slides it across his desk at you. He doesn't even offer you a glass, and he looks at you knowingly, as if you and he share a secret. "Here, sugar. Clear your head."

You are wildly offended at the suggestion that you need a drink. "My head is perfectly clear."

He points at your hands, which are shaking. "Only one thing for the shakes. A little hair of the dog that bit you. You know that, don't you?"

Yes, you do. "Just tell me what I need to do, so I can get out of here. I have to go to work today."

"Well, you're facing prison time with this third offense. You were driving under a suspended license. Get a good lawyer. You blew a 0.27. Do you know how high that is?" You shake your head. "A 0.12 gives you a DUI. At 0.25, most people are in a coma, and 0.30 is legally dead. You were right between those two, driving fifty-two in a thirty-five, okay? About the bail. Your friend Tracy posted for you, just like the last two

times. She wanted me to give you a message. She says don't try to call her, don't worry about paying her back, but this is the last time."

You take this information with a swift nod and try to look as if the message from Tracy was asking you to pick up some milk on the way home. Tracy had been your college roommate and best friend, the first person ever to tell you that you drank too much, and the last person to leave you because of it. Reflecting that you hate whiskey, you knock back a couple of quick hits from the bottle, purely out of anger, and slam it on the desk.

Your car has been impounded and you don't have the money to get it out, so you take a cab back to your house, using the last cash you have in the world to pay the driver. Everything is just the way you left it the night before, lights and radio on, a row of white candles guttered out on the coffeetable, and Jane Austen looking broken and open. The answering machine light is blinking and it's Sam, from the liquor store. "Your check bounced. Come in and take care of it today, or I won't be able to keep the boss from sending it to the district attorney to press charges. I'm sorry, little lady."

The second message is from Eleanor, at work. "You're out of sick leave. We need to talk about this. Call me as soon as you can." As you stand in front of the answering machine, you begin to hyperventilate.

You flip through all of your options, what's left, what can be saved, and you know that you have to go to work and accept whatever kind of punishment Eleanor wants to hand you, even if it means checking yourself into a treatment center and letting everyone at work find out about your problem. Take a shower, drink a black coffee and Gatorade cocktail and force yourself to eat a few Saltines. Wear your new black blazer

and a crisp white shirt and khakis, put your hair up. You look every inch the professional, not like someone who, two hours before was barefoot in a construction-sign-orange, county jail jumpsuit. Smile at yourself in the mirror. Harder. Laugh apologetically and wave dismissively. "God, Eleanor, what can I say? Things haven't been going well, but I swear, it's all behind me now. I'm at your mercy."

Sit at the bus stop sweating while the lunch hour traffic speeds by you. You are sure that everyone you have ever known is driving by, seeing you at the bus stop, with all the people too poor to own cars. Somehow, you can still taste the whiskey from the bail bondsman's office. Thinking only to get the taste out of your mouth, you leave the bus stop and step into the convenience store behind it, to buy a Pepsi. You remember that you have no money and will have to write a check for the dollar and seventeen-cent drink. This seems silly to you. If you're going to write a bad check, for which you will end up paying between twenty-five and seventy-five dollars in bounced check fees, you should at least make the purchase worth it. You buy a case of Budweiser instead and walk back to your house, watching as the bus stops and speeds off towards the freeway and your former job.

~*~

You feel as though you have been carried down a river for years now, gradually sensing the increase in speed, the roughness of the rapids, always aware of the sound of crashing falls ahead, echoing from a deep drop-off. Ceaselessly, you have tried to get to one shore or the other, tried facing against the current, tried pretending that you were just

on the water for pleasure, enjoying the passing scenery, and hoping that you were wrong about the falls ahead, that some miracle would pluck you from the water before you got to that point, but suddenly, you are there, in the last turbulence before you go crashing over the falls, and all you hope for now is a quick end, not to survive in some barely recognizable state, a wet-brain in an institution, a bag lady on the street.

You're almost certainly going to prison, if not for writing bad checks, then for DUI. If they can find you. As you sit in your apartment drinking, you realize that you have to get out of that house. Your rent is due in two days, and although you'll get paid in three, that will be the last money you'll have coming in for the foreseeable future. You can't spend it on rent. You figure that the amount of the check will keep you in alcohol for two weeks if you get your car out of impound, closer to a month if you learn to live without your car. You aren't supposed to drive with a suspended license, anyway. You remember a vacant house not far from your house and you break in that night and start moving your things there, making four trips with your arms full of clothes, toiletries, books, CD's and your grandmother's Delft blue china. You crash there, and you never go back to your old house. Each time you think about it, you become convinced that your next-door neighbor, the one who spied on your recycle bin, is now in cahoots with the cops. As soon as you round the corner, he'll be on the phone, and you'll be surrounded.

You sell your CD's and your jewelry for food and liquor. This is all temporary, you remind yourself. You are young and intelligent with a college degree. You are, as your politically incorrect father would say, free, white, and twenty-one. The world is yours. Your father lives a thousand miles a way, has never been to your apartment, and

does not need to know you have lost it. You have a folder with your resumé in it, which you intend to send out to jobs you have circled in the paper, but one night in the vacant house, you spill tequila all over the resumés, which ends your efforts to get a job. You have your resume on a disk at your old house, but it's too risky, and your landlord has probably confiscated all your stuff anyway.

You give plasma and you find that not only do you get thirty bucks, but after they've taken all that plasma, you get drunk really fast. They will only let you give plasma every three days, so you find another plasma center a quick bus ride across town, and you alternate. You can live for days on thirty bucks, really. Liquor, gas, food, like the signs over convenience stores say. These signs seem profound to you, a trinity, a deconstructed truth, all you need. Since you have never retrieved your car—and your license is revoked, anyway, you really only need the two things. Liquor. A little food. You are living purely, like Thoreau in the middle of the city, a simple shaman with eyes that make others uncomfortable because you can see the corruption in their souls. But you get below a hundred ten pounds and the plasma center won't take you anymore.

Someone is on to you living in the vacant house—you come home one day and it's all boarded up. You try prying the boards off the windows, breaking down a door, but you can't get in. Your stuff is in there—your clothes and books. You can't get them. You have still been trying to read Jane Austen. When you can concentrate, it feels as though the perfect structures of her sentences might enter your mind and hold back the decay like scaffolding, but she is locked in the vacant house. When you remember that your grandmother's china is in there, you sit on the front steps and weep and think of burning the house down to get the china out, but you decide that it's better this way. You

can't carry antique dishes around with you, and even if you could, they remind you of your grandmother, and you have decided that in this new life to which you are heading, you want no memories of what you were.

You have always loved the library. You take the bus to the nearest university, your old university, in fact, and you move into the library. It's perfect, and there's a plasma center just off campus, targeted at college kids in need of beer money. You concentrate on stuffing yourself with starches at the soup kitchen where you go for food, until you have put on enough weight to go back to the plasma center. During the day you read at the library, and drink from whatever you have managed to get, and you think about how you always meant to go to graduate school. You walk over to the admissions office and get an application. Stepping into the building, you are flooded with memories of being eighteen, brand new to college, clean and pretty, full of wonder. The secretary looks incredulous when you ask for an application.

You are not sure how long you have been hanging out at the library. A couple of days, maybe. One of your old classmates, Will, probably in his final year of graduate school now, stands over you where you are curled up sleeping on a couch on the fourth floor, near the Jane Austen. Will has started wearing glasses since you saw him, and he looks very tidy in a white T-shirt and jeans. You went out with him a couple of times, and remember that his determination to see you in terms of F.Scott Fitgerald's pantheon of women depressed you and you dumped him, leaving him stricken with the conviction that you were Zelda, Zelda, cursed angel, crazy witch. He is afraid of you now and he can't even fake it. Hugging a spiral notebook to his chest, he leans down towards you, wincing a little, as if you were a dangerous animal, and says, "Christ. It's you. Oh, God, you

smell like booze. Holy shit. Holy shit," he shakes his head. He seems to be getting all emotional, which fills you with revulsion.

You sit up quickly, moving the grocery bag with your change of clothes from your lap. You want to kill him for seeing you, for looking at you with such pity. You stand up and point your finger into the center of his white T-shirt, leaving a smudge, "Let me remind you that I made an A on that Nineteenth-Century British midterm that you made a B on—don't act like you don't remember—so you can just come down off your high horse, motherfucker."

He presses his finger to the spot where you have touched him, and his nostrils flare. He shakes his head. "That was six years ago," he says, and leaves. You are glad you never fucked him. As you watch him disappear into the stairwell, you feel like your fury could carry you across time and space. Something has to hold you to the earth or you will simply burst into flame and float away. You pick up your stuff and walk to the women's restroom, secreting yourself in the last stall. First you get sick, and then you take the bottle of Old Crow out of your bag and look at it. You imagine pouring it out, but you don't. "Miss?" You see a pair of sensible shoes from underneath the stall door. "Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. It's ten o'clock and we're closing. You can't stay here, I'm sorry. And I'd like to ask that you find somewhere else to spend your time--we can't have you threatening our patrons. Please go, or I'll have to call the police."

Standing outside the library, with no idea where you will go now, in what can only be called a moment of truth, you remember that actually, Will dumped you because he thought you drank too much, like Zelda, Zelda, cursed angel, crazy witch, *lush*. It

occurs to you that you have become a homeless person selling her own blood for alcohol. You think a lot about the word *spirits*, meaning alcohol, but also meaning ghosts, or souls, or your innermost part. There's something there, some clue in the etymology, if only you could uncover it.

You begin to walk away from the library, and you notice a police car driving slowly past. The police officer inside leans forward against his steering wheel to get a look at you. For a minute, you think he's attracted and straining to see more, but then you remember what you look like now. You turn quickly and head down a sidewalk, realizing that if he were to stop you, and discover your outstanding warrants, he would take you straight to jail. The last three years before your grandmother died, she would grab your hand and say fiercely, every time you saw her, "I don't feel any different inside. I can't believe this has happened to me. I'm old." You feel this way now. You know you are still in there, somewhere, but you are becoming unrecognizable. It only gets worse from here, and you can't take it; you would rather die. This is not a figure of speech or an exaggeration. You would rather die. You glance around and realize that you have walked to the southern edge of the campus. A house you used to share with Tracy is just two blocks away. It has an old, detached garage with a rotten back door that you could easily get into. You will go there to sleep, to wake up tomorrow and to start your new life. This bottle of Old Crow knocking heavily against your hipbone from the inside of your bag will be the last. After this one, you're never drinking again.

Remember that you are capable of wonder. You have always thought that what people call impossible only marks the outer border of their imagination. You can go beyond that since you don't recognize the borders when you're passing through them, an

ability that will save you, since that is where you will have to go to live, beyond the borders of imagination, in a quality of air where the fire that rides along your blood vessels cannot breathe. You will walk around in a strange world and you will look like everyone else, who cannot tell what you are, or that your insides are clean and empty, razed until nothing is left.

Contamination

"Uncle Clay wants to see you one last time," Iris's father said. He and her brother stood out on the landing of the apartment she shared with her friend, Mark, all the guys in his band, their girlfriends, and some other people. "He's had a heart attack. Come with us." Her father twisted the bill of his John Deere hat into a sharp concave. "We'll take you to him. It's not that we don't respect your decision to run off and live with these lowlifes," he said, nodding politely at Mark and another guy, who were sitting, trancelike, in front of a television. "We wouldn't bother you if it wasn't an emergency. You've always said your Uncle Clay is the only one of us you can stand, so we thought you'd want to be with him."

"God, please not Uncle Clay," Iris said, grabbing her sunglasses, pulling on her combat boots and jumping into the pickup between her father and brother. She felt the buzz of a late-morning smokeout in her apartment leave her, chased away by a cold and fearful sobriety. She loved her Uncle Clay more than she loved the rest of her family combined and could hardly keep herself from crying, but she couldn't cry in front of her brother and her dad. Old as Clay was, it was hard to imagine anything going wrong with him. Then it dawned on her. "It's the radioactivity, isn't it?" she said before she realized she had spoken out loud.

"We don't talk about that, Iris," her father said. "He just likes to tell stories. You can't believe a word he says."

Iris remembered when she had first found out that her uncle was radioactive. At a 4th of July picnic when she was eleven, she caught brother Dave, who was thirteen, ducking around the corner of the house to avoid their great-uncle Clay. He was loping towards them carrying a handful of fireworks. Dave told her then that Clay was highly radioactive, the result of landing at Hiroshima to collect data for the government four days after the bomb dropped.

"What is radioactivity, anyway?" Iris had asked. "Do you even know what it means?"

Dave had fumbled for a definition. "It's really bad. That's all you need to know. It's too complicated for me to tell you more."

Iris knew that Dave had no clearer picture of what it meant than she did, and all of her notions of the term came from sci-fi movies. "Well, does Uncle Clay glow in the dark, or what?"

"I've never seen him glow. But I hear he sets off metal detectors. Didn't you ever notice that he doesn't ever go to the airport?" he asked, deriding her inattention to details.

"We never go to the airport, either." Despite her initial skepticism, Iris loved the story and believed it explained what made Clay so special. She wanted to believe, as Clay did, that his radioactivity gave him special powers, that the contamination that should have killed him had actually made him stronger.

She noticed that her father was pulling up to his driveway and recognized the cars of her relatives in the driveway and along the side of the street. She choked then, the convocation of the family making Clay's death suddenly real and inevitable. "Is he here?" she cried. "Why didn't you take him to the hospital?"

"There wasn't time," her father said, patting her leg. "Just settle down, Iris." Iris pushed her brother out of the cab and ran up the steps to the house.

All the members of Iris's family were in the living room, knee to knee on seldom sat-upon couches. The plastic protective covers had been pulled from the furniture for this special occasion. She stood in the front door, scanning their faces. Something strange was going on. She was familiar with the look and feel of a room full of her own bereaved relatives. Aunt Barb, Uncle Clay's wife of forty-two years, had died just seven months ago, and Iris remembered the streaked faces and the sobbing and the sound of stricken voices in the hospital waiting room. But the same people were grieving then didn't seem to be grieving now. Instead they looked mostly embarrassed. *Because they don't like Clay,* she thought, contempt for them all rising in her chest like steam.

"Where is he?" she said, rushing to the hall and running down it, opening all the bedroom doors. Clay was not there.

"Clay's fine," said her brother, meeting her at the end of the hall. He grabbed her by the elbow and led her back into the living room. "But you're not. This is the end of the road for you, Iris." She looked up into his face.

"Dave, I don't understand. Where's our uncle? What's this got to do with me?" Overwhelming relief that Clay was not dying rushed over her, followed by a confusion that the expressions of her relatives did nothing to dispel. Clay was fine. She was not. They were all there to tell her she was not fine.

Her stepmother Anita was circling the room with a plate of sandwiches, and called out over her shoulder, "This is an intervention," in the same chipper voice that usually touted a new drink recipe, "a kamikaze." Iris's confusion clarified into a bright rage. She turned back toward the front door, but a wall of uncles and cousins, looking somewhat sheepish, blocked her path.

Her Grandmother Mary, Uncle Clay's sister, rose and put her arms on Iris's shoulders. Iris noticed that she had made all her preparations for crying—she was wearing her eyeglasses instead of her contacts, and no mascara. With a firmness that Iris had never heard in her voice, she said, "Iris, we can't watch you die. We don't want to see you kill yourself." She smoothed Iris's hair and said more gently, "If you go back to high school soon, honey, you could still graduate with your class. I still have that dress pattern you picked out for homecoming—I could finish it in time for the junior prom!" she said.

Grandma Mary's was the inaugural volley. They made her sit in a straight back chair in the middle of the room where the coffee table usually was. Then they took turns, laying out everything she'd ever done wrong and not letting her respond. She wondered where they read how to do this, and if they had rehearsed what they were going to say.

Her stepmother Anita was next. "Iris, you've made it impossible for your family to continue at the First Baptist Church since you beat up Reverend Carold's son behind the baptistry." Iris snorted. That boy had pinned her to the floor with his hand against her windpipe and was ready for romance before she managed to rack him and clock him in the jaw. Now *he's* the victim? All right.

Iris could tell that her father was none-too broken up about not being able to go back to church, but he was mad at other things. "You've totaled two cars, sweetie. Those were both good cars." His ears had turned bright red, and his eyes were wet. "You were such a sweet little girl."

Her Aunt Julie stepped forward with the unnatural formality of someone taking the stand to testify in court and revealed that she knew Iris was responsible for running over her mail box. Then Lewis, her five year-old step-brother, not looking up from the toy trucks he was smashing together on the carpet, demanded she return money he accused her of stealing from his piggy bank. She had never touched his piggy bank.

Then her Uncle Don stood up, rubbing the turquoise nugget in his bolo tie. He must have been selling to some Native Americans this morning, thought Iris, looking at his tie. Trying to impress them with his cultural sensitivity. "I always knew you were headed for trouble," he said. "You'll end up like your Uncle Clay, if you're not careful. Or like your mother. If you survive, young lady."

Iris was furious. She hated Don anyway. He had always expressed his affection by holding her down and giving her Indian burns on her head until she cried "Uncle," to which he would respond, "That's me!" and release her, laughing merrily at his wordplay. Now this moron was her moral counselor. It was too sickening. "I'd be happy to be like my mother or Uncle Clay!"

"You're not supposed to talk," her brother Dave said, pointing his finger. "It's my turn. If that creep you're living with has got you on methamphetamines, you'll be a snaggletooth old skank before you're twenty." Iris knew that they all thought she was having sex with Mark, just as they all thought she had assaulted that dickhead behind the baptistery instead of the other way around. None of it was true. She was depressingly virginal. Mark was just a friend, one with too serious a drug habit to have a sex drive, who had been willing to let her crash after the incident at the church had convinced her that she had to get away from her family. What did she have to lose? She was presumed guilty no matter what she did, just like her mother, who had run off when Iris was three, unable to stand their judgment either. Iris had started drinking or smoking anything that came her way. The worst part of listening to her family's accusations was that even though most of her family members were utter and perfect assholes, she really was addicted.

Her father held forth a colorful brochure. "We're sending you to Crystal Meadows in Oklahoma City, honey. They're expecting you this afternoon."

Iris took the brochure. On the cover, a photograph showed a group of people, mostly young, sitting in a circle on the green, green grass next to a blue, blue lake.

Talking about their feelings, Iris thought with disgust. "I see," she said, handing the brochure back to her father. "Looks divine."

She had taken all she was going to take. The prospect of a treatment center made her feel as if she were being buried alive, shouting from inside the casket while they all shoveled dirt over her and Anita served sandwiches. She would not go down in front of them. She had to get out of there immediately. She needed a drink. Uncle Clay, who was supposed to be dying, wasn't even there. She knew he had probably refused to be a party to their busy-body nonsense, had probably told them all where to go, if they'd even invited him at all.

She told them she was going to the kitchen to put more ice in her tea glass. They looked doubtful. "Can't a girl enjoy a cold glass of iced tea before she's carried off to some stupid treatment center?" she yelled as she walked to the kitchen. The easement behind her parents' house ran along between the backyards of her parents' street and its parallel neighbor. Veering towards the gate, she opened it and sprinted through the backyard, fortunately empty, emerging in the front of the house and at the edge of the neighborhood. She saw the 7-Eleven and the video store at the corner and ran towards them. At the 7-Eleven she quickly pulled a 6-pack of Bud from the cooler and swung it onto the counter to pay for it, throwing money and her fake ID onto the counter.

"Iris?"

Iris looked up, startled. Her Uncle Clay stood right behind her, jangling his car keys and blocking the Oklahoma sun pouring through the windows with his huge frame.

"Dammit!" Iris said, turning to face him, making an effort to distance herself from the beer on the counter. She whisked her fake ID back into the back pocket of her

jeans and shot the clerk a warning look before she turned back and stared up at her uncle. "You're not on your death bed. Do you know what they're doing in your name?"

"What who's doing? Are you stoned, kiddo?"

She squeezed his leathery forearm. "You don't know what's going on, do you? I knew you wouldn't. They want to ship me off to drug rehab. I don't need that. They just want me out of the way, Uncle Clay."

Clay stood still, processing her words. No one in Clay's life had ever been sure whether he was unintelligent or just so poorly socialized that he always appeared to receive any information with a built in delay, like a bomb set to go off after the person who triggered it was well away and out of range. He absorbed Iris's words slowly before he finally boomed, "Let's take a ride. You can tell me what the hell's going on. You want this beer?" he asked, paying for it along with a Dallas newspaper and a can of cream soda.

They adjourned to his old, green 1987 Z-28, a car that looked like it belonged to a teenager rather than an eighty-one year old Navy veteran, oil wildcatter, and ladies' man. The back bumper of his car was covered with X-Files bumper stickers. In the back windshield were stickers, one that said, "I Want to Believe," and another that said, "Ship Happens," with a picture of a flying saucer. Iris assumed that Clay's willingness to believe in vast government conspiracies stemmed from the radioactivity he had carried away from Hiroshima. Or maybe it was all those years in the oil fields, watching what men will do to cover up their misdeeds. Iris told him about the intervention while Clay drove towards the Wichita Mountains that rose from the plains west of town. He reached

1-44 and jumped onto the highway, driving north towards Medicine Park, Chickasha, Oklahoma City, Chandler, Tulsa, and points out of state.

"Are we running away?" Iris asked from the depths of the bucket seat, deciding whether she could get away with opening a beer.

"Just driving. Driving north. Where did you say they wanted to send you?"

"Drug rehab in Oklahoma City! That Crystal Meadows place. Sounds like a freakin' mall. Or a funeral parlor. You're not on their side, are you?"

"Hell no, I understand about polluting your body. Sometimes you can pollute yourself for the better. I'm the most polluted person you know, actually. Let's just get out of town." The inside of the car was freezing, Clay having turned the air conditioning on so high that Iris had found it necessary to crawl into the backseat and dig one of Clay's old flannel shirts out of the floorboard. Now she sat in a blue-and green flannel that smelled of engine oil and covered her to her knees while scenery rolling past testified to the heat outside the car: parched trees, dead prairie, and roadkill turned to papery wafers of dessicated flesh baked into the road with bits of hair waving in the wind. "It's silly, you keeping the car this cold. You'd save a lot on gas if you didn't crank the AC this way," Iris said, pulling her knees into the shirt.

Clay turned up KOMA and began singing the lyrics to "San Antonio Rose" along with Bob Wills.

"I thought old people were always cold," Iris continued.

"Just old frail people, not hot-blooded strong types like your Uncle Clay," he said, punching Iris in the shoulder. She could remember him punching her like that when she was a little girl, nearly knocking her over, but she had loved it. It was different from the

Indian burn her Uncle Don always gave her. Uncle Don's Indian burn made her a child, there to be humiliated, but Uncle Clay's punch in the arm made her an adult, and pulled her conspiratorially into the world of men.

"I think it's because you're radioactive that you don't get cold. Nuclear energy heats, right? Your body is stoked with its own heat source."

"Oh, you know about me, do you? Well, maybe so. There's no way of knowing all the ways my radioactivity has made me special. I set off metal detectors. Did you know that? That's why I never fly. Your Aunt Barb used to say I glow in certain kinds of light." Aunt Barb been dead only seven months, but already Iris found her difficult to recall. She had been a pear-shaped woman, built like a nautical liquor decanter designed for stability at sea, delicate on top and heavy on the bottom. Iris could never help equating her physique with the stolid, unresponsive way she seemed to handle the rough waters of her marriage. Iris guessed that it was Barb who had discouraged Uncle Clay from telling people about his radioactivity.

"You'd think you'd be dead for sure. I know they didn't know much about radioactivity back then, but they had to know better than to send soldiers in before the smoke had even cleared." She watched her great-uncle as he leaned forward in the driver's seat, intent on passing a semi. He wore his hair in a longish pompadour, like Jerry Lee Lewis circa "Great Balls of Fire," pure silver but thick and healthy looking. He always wore one piece in the front pulled down, a studied, roguish affectation. Iris had never seen him when that piece of hair was not perfectly pulled forward over his forehead, curling at the end.

"We were what the government calls acceptable losses. You should have been there in the dentist office the day they figured it out. Poor fella's equipment short-circuited whenever he brought it near me." He slapped his palms against the steering wheel, laughing. "He'd start that drill and just when he brought it into my mouth it made this pitiful sound and stopped." Iris listened intently. She had heard the dentist story only from her brother and so only half believed it. To hear it now from her uncle was like reading some forbidden government document. She felt strangely exhilarated. "I wasn't that surprised when the tests came back. I've always known something was different about me. Your Aunt Barbara wasn't all that surprised, but she sure was scared."

"That's because it's scary. I can't believe you didn't go to a doctor or a dentist in all those years."

"Doctors kill people. Ever notice that most people die in the hospital? I stay out of those places, and look at me. I'm in perfect health for a man twenty years younger than I am."

"I don't like doctors either. That's why I'm not going to Crystal Meadows."

"Speaking of treatment," Clay said. He lifted his pelvis slightly off the seat and reached deep into the front pocket of his khakis, pulling out a handful of change and handing it to her. "Why don't you fish around in those coins and see what you find?"

Iris wondered what he was talking about, but she held the coins in the palm of one hand and sifted through them. "These aren't American, most of them. They're beat-up looking. Oh, wait," Iris said, as she realized what she was looking at. She dropped them

into the unused ashtray as if they were searing her palms, and wiped her hands against the flannel shirt.

"Japanese. I picked them up on Hiroshima after the bomb. I didn't know much, but I knew I was walking over ground zero in more ways than one. I remember thinking that I was a twentieth-century version of somebody walking through Golgotha in the days right after Christ was taken down from the cross, before his blood had faded from the ground. Seeing all the physical proof before it became just a story, you know? I wanted some souvenirs, and coins were about the only thing recognizable I could find to pick up. They were still hot to the touch."

Iris was fascinated; she wanted to turn them over in her hands and study them, but she recoiled. She had heard of the coins from her brother, who had tried to scare her with stories of them. He had told her that they made clocks run fast, changed traffic lights and television stations, and made cell phones accept collect calls from Japanese ghosts reaching out from the other side. She had always wondered if they were real, assuming that, if they were, Clay kept them in a lead-lined box at the bottom of a drawer. But now here they were. "I touched them! Pull over. I want to wash my hands."

"Oh, you're okay, Iris. You're not afraid to touch me, are you? I held you in these two hands when you weren't big enough for a snack, and I've hugged you more times than we could ever count. Hasn't done you any harm."

"How do we know that? Maybe that's why I'm so messed up."

Uncle Clay turned to look at her through his yellow-tinted sunglasses. "At least you admit it."

"Okay. Yeah, I'm screwed up." As if to demonstrate, Iris tore a beer out of the six-pack. She felt uncomfortable drinking in front of him, but she couldn't wait any more, and took a swig. "Want one?"

"No, thanks, but you go ahead."

"I have nothing in common with my family, and they just want me to be like them. God, I'd rather die."

"Well, you'll be real different when you're dead and they're alive," Clay said. Iris flinched at this remark. She turned towards the window and watched scenery—the Cherokee Nation Bingo Hall and the thick stone walls of the old Fort Sill corral, where the Trail of Tears had terminated. They rode in silence for some time before Clay spoke again: "You're a lot like your mother."

"Really?" Iris loved to hear this coming from Clay, who had always liked her mother and had always hated her stepmother, further proof of Clay's superiority to the rest of the family. She heard about her similarities to her mother often enough in a negative light from her stepmother, Anita, who had been attributing wild and lascivious motives to Iris since a day when she was seven and a boy her age walked up to her in a Dairy Queen and shyly offered her his baseball, kissed her on the cheek and ran back to his own table. Iris accepted the ball—she loved baseball. This transaction had been all the evidence Anita needed that Iris carried the slut gene and would turn out just like her mother, whom Iris had expected to blaze into town and reclaim her, and maybe even her brother, any day, every day of her life.

Clay was in the middle of one of his suspended delays before responding to her. Finally he nodded hard and said, "This family didn't know what to do with your mother,

either. Just like you. She was a sweet girl, but they were determined to think the worst of her, and finally she just gave in and became what they thought she was. They were always calling her 'flighty.' One day she just flew. I hope you don't do that."

Iris turned and looked out the window again. They were passing the sign that marked where the path of the Chisholm Trail had crossed I-44. Her mind conjured an image of one of those massive longhorn herds on its way to Kansas crossing the highway in front of them, stopping traffic.

"Listen, I've got a plan to cure you of these addictions or whatever it is that's got you."

Iris looked at him. She knew she needed help. Over the last few weeks she had begun waking up in a panic, remembering nothing of the night before, feeling like a lazy day floating down the river had suddenly turned into a one-way trip over the falls. "I am a little scared. I don't want to die, but I can't go into that stupid treatment center and come out all white-washed, telling them how sorry I am and that I'll never do it again. Fuck that."

"You can sure cuss, for a sixteen-year old. Want to hear my plan?"

"Yes." Iris turned in her seat. She trusted Clay completely and felt herself ready to do whatever he asked. She thought he was probably the only person who could save her.

He reached into the ashtray, scooped up the coins and held them out to her. "Take them," he said solemnly.

"What?" she said backing away from his outstretched hand. "Why?"

"The thing is, Iris, the radioactivity I got from carrying those coins has kept me from ever getting sick. I've never even had a cold. I think somehow what's in those coins is just the right dose to heal instead of kill."

"That's your plan?" Iris said, pushing his arm away. "Put them down, Uncle Clay. I thought you were really trying to help me."

"The coins will fix you, Iris," he said, shaking them at her. "They will. I'll need them back after a while—I've still got good reasons for staying young—but carry them till you kick your bad habits. Go ahead, kiddo."

Iris felt disappointed and frightened. For the first time in her life the collective unease her family felt towards Clay began to seem like something other than sanctimonious clannishness. "No way. I thought you really had an idea. What if I died of cancer in a year, then how would you feel?"

"You'll probably be dead in a year, anyway, if you keep on doing what you've been doing. What have you got to lose?"

"I can stop by myself."

"But the coins can fix you right up, Iris. Really. I'm going to tell you something. Your family's against me, but you'll understand. I'm about to get remarried. Most men my age are food for worms, or wish they were. I'm about to take a bride. A young one. And let's just say that I have no fears about being able to satisfy her. I'm telling you, it's the coins. I'm potent!"

"Uncle Clay! You're eighty-two years old! And aren't you supposed to still be mourning Aunt Barb?"

"I'm eighty-two. I don't have time for mourning. Her name is Doynia."

"Where'd you meet her?"

"Found her on the Internet. She's from the Ukraine. She's twenty-nine, and she's some hot number. Here, look." Clay pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and laid it on the dashboard, wrestling out a folded-up piece of paper and handing it to Iris. "Feast your eyes on the next Mrs. Clay Parker."

Iris unfolded the paper. What she saw was a color photograph printed from a computer of a young woman with long dark hair, pale skin, and blue eyes. She had a large nose and a bad complexion and her eyes looked tired. "This is some kind of scam, Uncle Clay. This woman just wants a green card."

"I just want a bride. We can help each other. Anyway, I was only trying to make a point about those coins. You need to take them, Iris. Something's got to be done for you. Here's the deal, Iris. Here's the deal. Listen to me. Here it is." He lowered the sunglasses on his nose and turned to face her. Iris could see that he was in the grip of an epiphany. "You take the coins, or I'm taking you to rehab."

Iris smashed her fists against the dash. "Stop the car, Uncle Clay. Let me out." They had reached the outskirts of Oklahoma City. Iris knew plenty of people in Oklahoma City that she could hide with. She would call someone.

Clay sped up, whipping the car into the fast lane and passing a caravan of tanks and humvees rumbling away from Fort Sill. "Just make a choice. Personally, I think those treatment centers are scams. You know what happens in there? You know that most stories of alien abduction come out of treatment centers? They cover it up, of course, but it's the truth. The government knows about it. You might come out of there sober, but with a chip in your brain so that the government can track your every move.

They know people don't listen to addicts. That's why they'll use you. They'll chalk your abduction story up to the DT's."

Iris flattened her empty beer can into the floorboard and opened another beer. She tried to think. The coins were the most immediate of all the threats she faced. She would try to pacify him without taking the coins. "Listen, Uncle Clay, I know that radioactivity has worked out really well for you. You're young for your age, got a sharp mind. You're virile. You're strong. But maybe it's just you that's special. How about the rest of the soldiers that landed on Hiroshima with you? Are they all still young and strong?"

"They're all dead—long dead. But you're my blood. We're made the same."

"I'm only partly your blood. I'm diluted. The other blood in me might not be able to handle the radiation."

"So you'd rather take the chance of alien abduction, brainwashing, and who knows what else? Do you want to spend the rest of your life as a pawn in a huge government cover up, the way I did? At least if you die of the radiation you die on your own terms, unpolluted by their vile propaganda."

"Yeah, I'd be polluted by nuclear radiation instead. That's much better. I'll take my chances in the treatment center, Uncle Clay."

"What about the alien abduction? You can't fight it. You might not even remember it."

"Then, I wouldn't mind."

"Here," he said. He tried to get her to take the coins again, gesturing for her to open her palms.

She shrank against the passenger side door and turned her back to him. "No! Stop it, you're freaking me out, Uncle Clay!"

"All right. I tried, Iris." He sighed, stuffing the coins back in his pocket. "Not many people have the fountain of youth handed to them. Not many people would throw it away. Someday you'll see that I was right."

"I'll take my chances."

"Suit yourself," Clay said, changing into the exit lane. They drove in silence, Iris finishing another beer and trying to bring her breathing under control. Clay steered the Z-28 off the highway and pulled almost immediately into the gravel parking lot of an austere, fenced building. The treatment center. How did he know where it was? "Come on. You've made your choice."

Iris stepped tentatively out of the car as he pulled the Z-28 to a stop. She slammed her beer and tossed it back into the floorboard of the car, burning at his betrayal. Did he think it would be that easy? "Well, thanks anyway for the offer, Uncle Clay. I think I'll see what these folks have to say."

"I'm going in with you. I want to see the facilities. Might be that I can tell from looking down the halls what rooms to avoid. Alien abductions most often occur in sound proof rooms. Stay out of those, and you just might make it."

They walked together into a small, sterile-looking waiting room with a receptionist who asked Iris to sign a stack of papers. An orderly told her to take off her shoes and walk through a metal detector. She unlaced her combat boots and set them on the counter. Then she walked through and stood on the other side, looking back at Clay,

who was taking off his shoes, preparing to pass through the metal detector, too. She called to him, "Uncle Clay, you'll set it off, remember?"

But it was too late. She clamped her hands over her ears, ready for a loud buzz as he loped through the metal detector, but none came. He stood next to her. "I wanted to give you a hug." He bent down and picked her up, holding her off the ground, crushed into his chest as she hugged him back. When he finally let go of her, he said, "I hope you still know me when you come out of there. Remember, I'm your Uncle Clay. Don't believe everything they tell you. Question everything. People are tricky." She watched him as he walked back through the metal detector which, once again, failed to respond to his presence. "Yes," she said, "I see that."

Cover Artists

I have been to Graceland eighty-two times. I know that sounds like a lot, but I love the King. When I am there, I can feel him move through me, much the same as when my mother, who was Pentecostal in her last days, used to feel the Holy Ghost, only I don't speak in tongues. Rather, I stay quiet and hold him inside of me until he goes of his own accord.

Maybe that's why I have a tendency to sleep with an Elvis impersonator now and then. Pretty regularly, to be honest, because some of them are a close approximation, and that can't ever be bad. I have devised a system wherein I hit on Elvis look-alikes only as a way of dealing with the memory loss that always happens to me as an evening wears on. Before I take my first shot of tequila I close my eyes and say, "Remember, only Elvis. Only Elvis." This way, I assure myself of a not-too-jarring experience when I

come to in the morning and find – well, *Elvis* next to me. It's not a bad system, except that more and more I seem to wake up with old, fat Vegas Elvis and not the young, fine Sun Records incarnation.

I've been feeling like it was time for a change, but last night, the two-year anniversary of my mother's death, cinched it for me. I pulled up to Mojo's, the club in West Memphis where I do an acoustic show five nights a week, before the main band comes on. It was about 5:50, and I was sitting in my car, sipping on the bottle of Cuervo Gold I keep in my glove compartment. I could see the happy hour crowd filtering in, paying the cover charge and getting their hands stamped for re-entry as they passed through the green flashing entrance, and I knew I needed to hurry. But I never play my guitar without first praying for good luck, which I do by unhooking the black fuzzy dice from my rear view mirror and rolling them on my passenger seat.

I got a four and a two.

No great roll if you're playing craps, but I try to see beyond the obvious. Four plus two is six, which is how old I was when Elvis died, the number of DUI's my mother got before her last, fatal night of drunken driving, and also what time I had to be at work. I thought the roll was a pretty good sign, but I can see now that each of those portents was negative. I should have known.

Maybe it was that roll of the dice, maybe I wanted to do something to mark the anniversary of my mother's death, but I decided that, for the first time ever in public, I was going to play some of my own songs. I normally just play covers of other people's music, the obscure B-sides that your average radio listener probably won't recognize. I want the audience to assume they're my songs, which is wrong, I know. But it doesn't

much matter anyway. I'm just background music to all those people, like Muzak with a body. They come to Mojo's after work in bright ties and low pumps to talk about their lives, their hard weeks. They want to hear the *real* band, the Compromised Gifts, who come on around 8:30. Most of them leave while I'm still playing, and come back just as I end my last set, changed into jeans and T-shirts, the men shaved and the women in darker lipstick and with their hair down.

I know they don't care. But sometimes I feel so much love in my voice that I think the room will surely grow still. Everyone will stop talking and look at me. Then one person will start clapping slowly, but hard, the sound of his hands carving out the silence. Then everyone will join in clapping, smiling, even standing. I'll say, "Thank you very much," like Elvis used to, looking modest and surprised. My hope is foolish, but it's the living truth.

I walked into the bar and saw the Compromised Gifts up on stage plugging in their amps. "Hello, darlin'. Are we in your sweet little path?" The lead singer, Ray, always hits on me in the most condescending manner, like he's offering me the winning lottery ticket. He tried to help me with my guitar case, but I swung it at him.

"Ray, you are beneath my notice," I said, in a voice of withering contempt that I have cultivated for just such lowlifes. I don't care what anyone says, he sucks. If it weren't for the Rolling Stones he wouldn't have a song. The Compromised Gifts take about seventy percent of their material from the Stones and the rest from blues guys like Willie Dixon, and have neither the honesty to call themselves impersonators, which is what they damn well are, or the slightest desire to write their own music. Ray starts out every night by yelling out to the audience, "Hello, people! In the words of Jim Dandy, do

you believe in the hereafter? Well, you now know what I'm here after!" Women seem to find his pathetic word play exciting, but what woman doesn't like to have a night with her compared to the eternal reward? Me, I guess. I've heard him say it more times than I've been to Graceland, and I don't care if I never hear it again.

After I had set my guitar case on stage, I went to the bar and ordered a beer and two shots of tequila and some cheese fries. Ray took a seat next to me and started flipping through the sheets of handwritten music I had on the bar in front of me. My music. "What's this, Gracie? I never heard of these songs. Who wrote them?"

"I wrote them Ray. I did. And tonight I'm going to play them. I don't expect your feeble imagination to understand any of it, so just keep your comments to yourself, okay?"

"Hey, I think that's great, Gracie. I didn't know you could compose your own songs. What are they about, getting drunk and sleeping with any guy that looks halfway like Elvis Presley?"

"Fuck you, Ray. I've got a system."

"So you say."

"It assures a certain predictability in my mornings."

"You could give up drinking, Gracie. Then you could drive *yourself* home." Ray was peering at me through a veil of cigarette smoke rising from the cigarette in his hand. I don't think I've ever seen him without that veil between us. Maybe he thinks the smoke acts like a soft focus lens. Maybe he thinks it makes him look mysterious. He's wrong.

"You don't understand anything." I knocked back my shot.

"I don't understand why you will sleep with any man with two legs and a pompadour, but you won't sleep with me."

"I would Ray," I said, swiveling my bar stool around so I could kick him in the shins, "but you're just so far beneath me."

"I see. I'm your best friend, you know. I know all about you."

"You do not." I should say that Ray knew my mother—she was a regular at Mojo's and had in fact been driving home from the club the night she died. He exaggerates the importance of having known her and uses it to try to tell me what to do, usually after I've rejected him again. I do not buy into his presumption to speak for my mother, but I've never called him on it either. He's never said so, but I think he feels guilty about letting her drive home that night.

"You don't know me that well. I'm a different story altogether from my mother."

"Oh, Grace. You and your mother. Anyway, how do you figure I'm beneath you? I believe I'm the headlining act, aren't I? You're my warm up act," he said, tossing his long dark hair like a shampoo model.

"You're trash, Ray, and you'll never be anything but a cover artist. I write my own songs. After I play my songs tonight, everything's going to be different. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last."

"You're amazing, Grace. I may be trash, but what did your daddy do for a living?"

"Sometimes he welded, but I don't trace my ancestry in a patrilineal fashion. My mother was the clandestine lover of Elvis Presley, who was the King of Rock and Roll—which makes me kind of like royalty."

"Your mother was a drunk."

I poured my second shot into the rest of my beer and swallowed all of it. Then, deciding not to dignify his meanness with an answer, I slid off the barstool and started my set. Just to spite Ray, I started with that Bob Dylan song from *Blood on the Tracks*, "Idiot Wind."

"Blowing every time you move your mouth," I sang, looking right at Ray, who sat there grinning at me and finishing my cheese fries. "Blowing down the backroads headin' south." I've often wondered if I would be able to feel anything without rock-n-roll to give words to all these chaotic emotions that flow around inside me like water that needs containing. I try to make them organize themselves in some different fashion in the music I write, but I doubt there could be a better way to say "You light my mornin' skies with burnin' love" than just how Elvis said it. My own songs are a pale comparison.

Looking out into the audience, I saw that no one was paying me any mind. Ray had joined a table full of fans who were, men and women alike, leaning toward him and watching his lips move as if he were a prophet. Harley Charlie was standing by the front window, looking weird from the way the light from the neon signs washed out his features and gave him a face full of shadows. I guess we all look like that in there. He whooped and raised his glass when he saw me looking at him. Charlie is all right, although he no longer rides a Harley, if he ever did. He's brain damaged from a motorcycle wreck and says that the damage would have been worse if he hadn't landed in mud, but that's hard to imagine. I guess he means he would have been dead. His thing is to stand next to the neon beer signs against the front window and listen to them hum. He

says it's the sound of the ocean. He's even gotten to where he says that the Coors signs carry the sound of the Atlantic, while the Budweiser signs—all Bud products: Bud Light, Bud Dry and Bud Ice and Bud Ice Light—sound like the Pacific. Given this kind of strange thinking, I guess I shouldn't be surprised that he still, even after seeing me play every weekend for a year, yells for me to play "Freebird," every single time.

I never do it. I have my pride.

Then I noticed someone else watching me from the bar. He played down the street at House of Orpheus. I had seen his show once, but we had never met. His name was Ali, the Iranian Elvis. His distinguishing features among the impersonators were being Iranian and playing a sitar, that slow, twangy instrument, instead of a guitar, so that listening to it you kind of got this Ravi Shankar-does-Elvis kind of vibe. He was reaching. Still, he looked a lot like Elvis, except Iranian.

I was so enjoying the undivided attention of Ali, who had the blackest hair and the sharpest blue sequined vest I had ever seen, that I launched into one of my own songs almost without thinking about it. It's called "Popcorn and Black Mollies." I wrote it about my mother on the first anniversary of her death after I left Graceland and was driving the section roads outside of town to the four-way stop where she died. She's buried in a regular cemetery, but I also keep a small wooden cross at the spot on the side of the road where she landed after she went through the windshield, and it was while I was bringing a dozen red roses to set against the cross that I remembered an afternoon when I was about ten that she had pulled me out of school and made me stay with her, all day and all that night, watching while a cable channel showed every single Elvis movie back to back. My dad had just left her, and she didn't want to be alone for one minute.

She told me that night during the commercial break between *Fun in Acapulco* and *Blue Hawaii* about the weekend she and Elvis had spent together, and how heartbroken Elvis had been when she married my father. She kept calling our movie marathon, "Girls' Day Off," and then "Girls' Night Off" and hugging me until I couldn't breathe. She bought microwave popcorn and kept burning it until, after she'd set the fire alarm off for the third time, she let me do it. She watched all the movies standing up behind the couch, swaying foot to foot, chewing her fingernails down to bloody stumps, and in the early morning, when I started to fall asleep she shook me awake and handed me a black pill and a glass of juice. "Come on, honey. You gotta stay up. This is one of the best parts, coming up. The way he looks at Ann-Margaret; it's the way he used to look at me, only with me, he wasn't acting. Don't leave me alone, sweetie, wake up." She had just gotten her second DUI, which was why my dad left, and she was feeling guilty and had sworn off, but that had only lasted through the first two movies, and she had just about finished a case of Pabst by the time she gave me the black molly. She would never have done that sober.

The memory of that first speed trip with my mother floated in front of my eyes like a screen between me and the audience and I got pretty carried away singing the song, so much that I forgot about all those people and didn't care if they were listening. My daydream about everybody clapping didn't come true, of course. They gave me that automatic slap of the hands that's triggered in their brains when they hear a song stop, without breaking their conversations or looking up at me at all. Ray stood behind a speaker at the side of the stage for the whole song and didn't come out 'til I was finished. It was still just Harley Charlie and Ali, the Iranian Elvis, watching. But I kind of liked

him watching. He seemed to be really paying attention, and he smiled when I hit an important lyric, like he heard me, and he got it. I began to imagine him in the black leather suit unzipped to the waist that Elvis wore for his 1968 televised comeback special. I have noticed that I can superimpose this vision onto almost any man and do him a great service, unless he has a big stomach, in which case my vision is most unkind. I moved on to another song of my own, a blues number called "She Didn't Know What Hit Her," and this time I sang it just for him.

I ended my set in the usual manner, by singing "How Great Thou Art." I used to end with "Amazing Grace," but I was afraid people might think I was singing about myself, so I changed it. Singing gospel music, when everyone in the audience has nothing on their minds but sex and booze, may seem like casting pearls before swine, but it sure gets a rise out of them. Not the kind I hope for, but what do they know? Elvis was devout in a way that I understand. He was singing to his Lord, "How Great Thou Art," whereas I am singing more to Elvis himself, if you want the truth.

At the end of my set, I came down from the stage and Ali met me at the bottom with a big, bright colored drink that smelled like candy, with an orange on the rim. I am suspicious of fruity drinks, as they usually mask cheap liquor, so I said, "What's this big ol' thing?" looking at it as if he had just showed up with funeral flowers for a date.

He stuffed his hands deep in his pockets. "It's called a slow comfortable screw."

Well.

I have not worked in bars for too long, but long enough to know that anybody that has to hide behind a dirty-sounding drink in order to announce his intentions lacks quality, but I had tasted the drink, and it was strong. By the time I'd had a few more of

those drinks, I was willing to forget his pathetic come-on. We danced all night to the Compromised Gifts' over-blown covers of Rolling Stones' songs. Ray kept shooting me evil glances from the stage and shaking his head like I was a dog that had just gone to the bathroom on the carpet. He sang "Ruby Tuesday," looking sad when he hit the lyrics, "Dying all the time. Lose your dreams and you will lose your mind," which I understood to be him getting philosophical about my wayward life. He really made me sick.

Then I noticed the boys in the band whispering together for a minute before starting up "Let's Spend the Night Together." It's not one of their usual songs—they rarely do it because of all the harmonies. They can't harmonize worth anything, and they were doing a particularly bad job of it, but I knew it was for my benefit. During the second chorus I noticed Ray giving Ali his nastiest stare. I gave Ray the finger over the back of Ali's shoulder blades. "How long have you been in this country?" I screamed into Ali's ear. "You don't have an accent at all."

"I'm only half Iranian," he screamed back, closing all the distance between us. "My mother is from Knoxville."

"Do you know that the sitar is an Indian instrument? The Beatles used it on Norwegian Wood, you know, after, they got all spiritual over there with Mia Farrow and the Hindus. I didn't know it was an Iranian instrument, too."

He grinned. "It's not."

My memory had started to go, the way it does, so I don't remember much about leaving or getting to Ali's apartment, but I knew I had made a mistake the moment I got there. He only had *two* Elvis CD's, and they were Greatest Hits. The walls were covered

with posters of scantily clad blondes on Porsches and bands like Motley Crüe and Aerosmith. I asked myself, who's he think he's foolin'?

Then, as I was taking off my coat, he told me the measurements of Priscilla Presley's wedding dress. This is what I mean about the impersonators. He can sure enough tell you how your hips compare to Priscilla's, but he probably never even heard Elvis Presley sing "Amazing Grace."

I decided to get out of there before I had to listen to any more of his cruel trivia, but I excused myself to go to the bathroom first, which was through his bedroom, which is when I saw the earring on the nightstand beside his bed. It was a cheap metal thing painted pink and shaped like a howling coyote, with the paint chipped and dirty green corrosion around the posts. Poor manners were not his only failing. Judging by that earring, he didn't much care who he got into bed. Still, I was sad for the girl who'd left it. I imagined her biding her time, waiting for him to call and hoping he was holding her earring with tender remembrances, hesitating at the phone, when in fact Ali the Persian Elvis hadn't even noticed it, and was there with me. I felt something turning in me, like a spring-loaded ballerina in a jewelry box, turning just enough to change my mind.

I rushed into the bathroom and retched, rapidly and uncomfortably pouring slow comfortable screw into his toilet, heaving until there was nothing left. "I threw up," I said when I came out of the bathroom. "I'm really sick. I'm sorry, but I feel terrible. You need to take me back to Mojo's so I can get my car and go home."

"Couldn't you just drink some water? I've got some Pepto, if that would help."

"Thanks, but I can tell this is just the beginning."

"Oh, c'mon. I think I have some saltines; maybe they would help."

"I'll probably throw up all night. At the most inopportune moments, too." He ran his hand through his hair and looked like he might hit me, but he gave up after that, and I wound up back at Mojo's as The Compromised Gifts were loading their equipment into their van, next to my car in the parking lot. Ray stopped at the back door of the bar and watched me get out of Ali's Mustang.

"Grace, you are a scandal. You weren't gone long enough to shake his hand. What's got into you?"

"He's an idiot poseur, that's what," I said, pulling my keys out of my purse and heading for my car.

"An Elvis impersonator? Well, my stars. Who would have guessed?" Ray said, walking towards me. "Give me your keys. I'll take you home."

I woke up the next morning on Ray's couch under an Atlanta Braves comforter with all my clothes on. My head was killing me, and Ray appeared in gray sweatpants with a glass of water and a handful of aspirin. "Thanks," I mumbled.

"Grace, you need to eat something," he said, and started slicing sausage patties in the kitchen, which I could see from the couch. As I watched him, hungover as I was, I began to visualize him in the black leather suit unzipped to the waist that Elvis wore for his 1968 televised comeback. I closed my eyes and willed the vision to leave me. A minute later he brought me a cup of coffee and started to open the blinds, because it was a beautiful day, but looked at me and thought better of it, understanding what bright light is to a hangover.

While he cracked eggs, I went to the restroom to see how atrocious I looked. It pleases me when I come to and find my lipstick still on; it's almost always a good sign. I

know, then, that whatever I don't remember of the night before did not involve any activities that would mess up lipstick, like waking up safe in your house with none of the locks broken and all of the screens still on the windows. I wiped the black circles from under my eyes, fished through Ray's impressive array of hair care products until I found a comb. Then I ran the comb through my hair and borrowed his toothbrush, throwing it away when I finished.

He brought out breakfast on ruby red enamel plates with Elvis heads going around the edge where you'd normally see a daisy chain, or fall leaves or something, and sat down on the floor with his plate on the other side of the coffee table. We ate in silence for a couple of minutes until I realized he was watching my hands shake. "Hair of the dog," I said, nodding at my hands. "That's all I need." He still didn't say anything. "Do you have a beer?" I said finally, feeling a sudden spike of anger at him for making me ask. He shook his head, and I started looking around for something to talk about that would prevent the moralizing I felt coming on.

Crates and crates of records lined the walls of Ray's living room. Sitting at the very front of one bunch was a record cover that my mother played all the time before she got religion and threw all her records away, in hope that Jesus would stop her drinking if she sacrificed her music. It was "Aloha from Hawaii via Satellite," and it's got this picture of Elvis singing in his white sequined suit and the picture shows through the letters of his name against a white background. I had seen that cover probably every day of my childhood. The sight of it took me all the way back, and I remembered the day Elvis died, watching the caravan of cars passing my house on their way to his funeral. We were living right off a rural highway an hour south of Memphis. Usually there

wasn't much traffic, but on that day they were bumper to bumper for hours. My mother watched out the window, played his records and drank and cried all day.

"I was six," I told Ray, "and when I realized that the King lived right up the road, I felt horribly cheated. Elvis had seemed like someone too perfect to live anywhere near me, but in fact, he was practically my neighbor. I could have visited him if someone had just told me, and now it was too late. I remember going outside and roller skating round in circles in the driveway, looking at the cars as they passed. Sometimes I caught a glimpse of the face of someone in one of those cars, and I felt like I had witnessed something private, but not shameful." I took a sip of my coffee. "How many times have you been to Graceland, Ray?"

"Once. I wouldn't mind going back, though. I pass it all the time on the way to work, I just never have time to stop." He picked up my breakfast plate and warmed my coffee, then he handed me a sheaf of typed paper.

"What's this?" I asked.

"This is a list of my music. Vinyl's on pages one through six. Cassettes are in the middle, and the last ten pages are CD's. It's cross-referenced by artist, if you'd rather. All the Elvis is there." I looked at him.

"I never knew you liked Elvis."

"I love Elvis. You don't have to dress like him to be a fan, Gracie."

"I know that."

"Did you know that Elvis himself was mostly a cover artist? He didn't write those songs."

"I know. He sure made them his own, though, didn't he?"

"Sure. I'm just saying that I don't know why you're so fascinated with those impersonators. They're copies of a copy."

"You're a cover artist yourself, Ray."

"I don't impersonate Mick Jagger. I play his songs. It's a totally different gig."

"Not really. You're still making a living on somebody else's inspiration," I said, but as I took Ray to task for being a copy, I knew what I was. I was a copy of my mother. Right down to the tequila. I had remembered something while looking at that poor girl's earring the night before, something that had made me sick. My mother kept an earring in her jewelry box that she never wore because it didn't have a match.

"Gracie," she said once, lifting this dangling cubic zirconia teardrop from the red velvet of her jewel case and swinging it in front of my eyes like a hypnotist. " I was wearing this earring one night when I was with Elvis, and I left the other one, *accidentally,* in his limousine. He kept it, I guess to remember me by, because I never saw it or him again. Star-crossed lovers is what we were, Gracie. Some loves are just too pure to live long in this world." She set it back in the jewelry box, where a plastic ballerina was spinning to the tinkling music of "I Can't Help Falling In Love With You," which I realized was also coming out of Ray's speakers.

And sitting on Ray's couch having breakfast, I realized the truth. I wasn't royalty. My mother had had a one-night stand with Elvis. She'd left behind her earring like she was just some sad girl instead of somebody's mother, and he had not kept it to remember her by, but because he did not care. He probably never even knew he had it.

Ray was saying, "I can play music—I'm a good musician. I just can't come up with my own stuff. Whenever I try to write my own songs, they just sound like bad

Rolling Stones. The only original artist I know is you, Gracie. I liked your songs last night. felt like giving you a standing ovation, but I didn't want to embarrass you."

"Oh. Yeah, good thing you didn't. I would have hated that," I said, thinking of my constant fantasy of the standing ovation. I could feel a song percolating in me and I knew I would write it today, something about an earring. It would be a gritty song with a lot of hard strumming and somewhere towards the end I'd bare my teeth and growl like a warning, like a trapped and angry dog. I looked at the closed blinds of Ray's windows and thought about the bottle of tequila in my glove compartment and how hot it would be, from my car sitting in the sun all morning, and how that didn't matter. I thought that after Ray took me back to my car, I would drink some tequila and drive out to Graceland, as I always did for good luck before I wrote a new song. But then I thought, maybe I won't. Maybe I'll just write the song.

well, the queen of spades is a friend of mine
the queen of hearts is a bitch
someday when I clean up my mind
I'll find out which is which
Gram Parsons

The Jade Green Bong

"Fern," Jade said, sitting cross-legged on the huge, high bed where she transacted all of her business. She patted a spot in front of her on the iridescent peacock-blue and scarlet tie-dyed bedspread, holding a pinch of weed between her fingers and looking at Fern over her bifocals. Fern hesitated a moment, then crawled onto the bed. "Fern, love, who let you in just now when you knocked?" Looking out from under her curtain of long black hair, Jade asked this as if it were a riddle.

"Gram. Why?"

"How was he looking, my son?"

"Like his usual preppy self. I guess he's been working out, so he looked like himself, but sweaty. Totally mute—he hates me, you know."

"No, no, he doesn't. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. He loves you."

"He what?"

"Worships you. And he's a virgin and you're a virgin—right?"

Fern nodded, wondering what was up. She had been thrown off a little by the glasses Jade was wearing. Fern had never seen her in them before—Jade hadn't worn them on her album covers or in the appearances on Cavett or The Midnight Special that Fern had seen rerun. They made her look like her age, which Fern realized, with a start, must have been somewhere close to sixty.

"You've been like a daughter to me these last few months since you've been coming by to buy grass, Fern, and he's so uptight. He says he's going to go to college and major in business when y'all graduate and that's just crazy and he wants to quit my band. I can't have that, Fern. My son may want to grow up to be some kind of suit, but he's the best rock drummer since John Bonham whether he likes it or not. I can't let him throw it all away just because he's going through a phase." Jade was talking faster now, leaning forward as she spoke so that her hands pressed on either side of Fern's thighs and her face was close enough for Fern to smell her patchouli perfume and her smoker's breath, with its underlying odor of decay.

Fern had known something was up when Jade invited Fern to join her on the mammoth, Victorian bed. Ordinarily Fern stood at the side of the bed while Jade sat ensconced in fur and velvet, the headboard behind her making her look like a queen on her throne. But today Fern sat on the bed, too. She was beginning to see that Jade expected something in return for this privilege. Fern tried wriggling away from Jade, sending pillows scattering to the floor. She leapt off the bed to pick them up. "Gram's

just trying to be different from you, Jade," Fern said, tossing jewel-toned velvet and satin pillows onto the bed. Gram was no mystery to Fern. What could the child of southwest Oklahoma's most famous and rebellious citizen since Geronimo, its only hippy-gypsy-rock star-queen, do to rebel against his mother but become a straight arrow? Fern had seen him cringe in History class when everyone looked out the window and saw his mother's purple Cadillac drive down the street past their high school, throbbing bass. While the rest of the students cheered, he took the end of the thin metal spiral to his spiral notebook and pulled it straight, then tied it into a knot. Fern herself was Jade's biggest fan. She had posters of Jade from the seventies when she was still making hits, and had saved all the clippings of her local shows and her various arrests.

"Being different from me can only mean being mediocre and lame, sugar. I don't have time for him to find himself if he's going to do it in such a dumb ass way. I need my drummer. I thought I was prepared for his teenage rebellion. Sex, drugs, rock-n-roll, you name it—I can deal with that stuff."

"But that's how you live. Those things are normal to you. It wouldn't be rebellion if he got into all that."

"I see that now, but never, never did I expect to see him turn into a puritanical little prig."

"I don't see that it's got anything to do with me. He hates me and we have nothing in common. He's going to be a normal guy, like you said. I'm not going to college. No way. I'm going to be a singer, like you. Not the same kind of music, but still." Fern felt it necessary to bring up her own musical aspirations every time she saw Jade. There was no one else in southwest Oklahoma who could possibly help her. It

seemed to Fern that Jade had the power to save her from oblivion, if she only would. She had been persistent in her pleas for Jade to listen to her songs, the real reason she started buying weed from Jade in the first place. So far, Jade had put her off.

Reaching into her nightstand, which was draped in black velvet and covered with incense burners, one-hitters, pipes, hookah pipes, and water bongs made of ivory, onyx, turquoise, acrylic, varnished wood, and anodized metal, Jade drew out the fanciest bong Fern had ever seen, made of a deep green jade with mermaids, writhing and swimming, carved all over it. Every time she used it, Jade told Fern, "I want to be buried with this bong. David Bowie gave me this bong the night he wrote 'Queen Bitch.' " She took a long hit and handed it to Fern, waiting until Fern had exhaled her first hit before she spoke. "You got a fake ID?"

Fern shook her head, coughing.

"Never mind. Come to the Signal Flare Friday night. I want you to see Gram in action."

Fern had never been inside a bar in her life and had only seen Jade sing in a documentary about Rock Music of the Seventies that showed the notorious footage of Jade performing her biggest hit, "Trip the Wind," on the Midnight Special so stoned that she sat down in the middle of the song and started braiding her hair on live television. The idea of getting into the Signal Flare at all, much less as Jade Stone's guest, thrilled her to her toes.

Jade slid out of bed and threw open her closet. "Let's see. I don't know how my clothes will work for you, but maybe they will. You need to dress up a little. Show Gram what you got."

Fern couldn't imagine herself in any of Jade's baroque, hyper-feminine gear, and knew that her only pair of shoes, a pair of combat boots from the Army surplus store, weren't going to work, but the idea of wearing one of Jade's costumes was too thrilling to worry about it. She would shimmer when she walked.

Jade tossed a black skirt and blouse to Fern and said, "Wear this. You and Gram are going to be a great couple. Trust me. I know what I'm talking about."

"Listen, Jade," Fern said, folding the clothes against her chest. "I'm flattered that you want me to date your son."

Jade interrupted, "Not date him, deflower him. I guess you can date if you want, but I want him to lose his virginity."

"Why?" Fern was high, so she couldn't tell if what Jade was proposing was really as weird as she thought it was, but she was sure that most parents spent a lot of energy trying to keep their teenagers from having sex, not arranging it.

Jade drew deeply on the bong and handed it to Fern. While she was holding in the smoke she struck a pose, contemplative, resting the flat of her hand against her cheek and turning her eyes to the ceiling. When she finally exhaled, she rose to her knees and said, "Rock lives at the intersection of spirit and sex. It's all about sex. That's what you like about it, if you didn't know. Not the only thing, but it's a big part of it. Gram's trying to turn off that part of himself. He's trying to resist sex, I can just tell it by his drumming, and the rock's getting locked out in the process. Once he opens the door to sex, the music will flow again. I know it sounds weird, me being his mother and all. But it's the life source, and I want my son to draw as much from that source as he can."

Fern thought this was deep, maybe the deepest thing she had ever heard. Jade was so much more than even her iconic image conveyed. She was subtle. She was smart. But still, Fern thought of Gram and his superior smirk and the way he wore his hair buzzed on the sides like a GI, and the way he carried around *Money* magazine, and she knew she couldn't oblige Jade. She wanted a highwayman. "Jade, man. It's so true. All that. Why me, though? Gram and I—I just don't see how that could ever be."

"You're the right kind of girl. You're going to be a great success, I can tell."

"But you've never heard me sing. And you don't like my kind of music, as you keep telling me." Fern had always thought of Jade's music as kind of rural psychedelic, Emmylou Harris meets Jefferson Airplane. Fern's musical models, on the other hand, were Kim Gordon and Lucinda Williams, and she also liked to think she sounded a bit like P.J. Harvey, with what she felt was a better howl.

"All right. Sing for me now. Go ahead."

Fern looked at her. "Right here, right now?"

"Yeah," Jade nodded. "Go stand in the middle of the room. Grab that guitar in the corner if you need it."

Being high was suddenly like being tightly wrapped in wet sheets at a moment when she needed her full range of motion. It was unbelievable, but this was an audition. After retrieving the guitar, she stood in front of Jade and twisted the pegs, tuning it. It surprised her that Jade's guitar would be out of tune as it always surprised her that Jade was never playing any music in her house. Fern figured Jade probably heard enough rock-n-roll playing her own sets at the Signal Flare two nights a week. "I'm going to sing a song called 'You People Bore Me, You Really Do.' "

"Title's too long," Jade said, arranging herself against the headboard. Her bright, glassy eyes shone with amusement. "Call it 'You Bore Me,' or 'Bore Me,' or even just 'Bore.'"

"Well, but you don't know how it sounds yet. Wait til you hear it. It's got to be the whole thing, because that's what I say in the chorus." Fern stood on the exact center of the red Persian rug strumming the guitar. As she played, she watched as Jade's face became a maddening surface of shifting emotion. Fern had no idea how she was doing. The song was harsh—she deliberately sang against the rhythm in places and she howled, not in a traditional love-lost way, but the way you want to howl when someone has bored you and you can't get away from them. Fern wondered if Gram could hear her sing and what he thought. She had often wondered if he liked playing in his mother's band and if his own musical tastes were any different from Jade's. She imagined him and his admittedly sexy body doing bench presses in the basement, sweating and listening to jock rock, annoyed to have the steady rhythm of his exercise interrupted by her more difficult syncopation. He probably hated it. He probably didn't get it and she was surely too much woman for him. She imagined him hooking up with some simpering zero of a girl, someone who would think business school was a swell idea and would put his unimaginative goals ahead of her own unimaginative goals and would act impressed while he talked about mutual funds or whatever. Whatever, whatever. She growled at the end of her howl.

When she finished, Jade clapped and whistled and yelled. "Fern, Fern, Fern!" She sprang from the bed and joined Fern on the rug. "How did a virgin ever get so angry?" She laughed and took the guitar out of Fern's hands. "Here's my thought," she

sang, strumming the guitar and strolling barefoot across the room. "I'll let you open for me. I'll give you a gig. You'll get a following. You'll get really big," Fern laughed, but Jade kept her eyes on the frets of the guitar, singing her offer. "No, I'm not joking, but there's just one thing. I want you and my son. . ." Jade laughed this time and played a little guitar solo before she finally finished, "to show each other some affection." She gave Fern a stare that was like taking her by the shoulders. "So that's my deal, child. Do you want to open for the lady who opened for the Rolling Stones? Mott the Hoople? David Bowie? Is that a good enough rock genealogy for you? That's where Gram comes from. Or are you going to save it for some redneck? Do you think any of these local boys will understand your music? Gram does. He's going through a creepy phase, but he's still my son, and he's going to need someone like you." As she spoke, Jade strummed the guitar with one long, red fingernail.

Fern wasn't sure how to feel. Her heart was still pulsing from the energy she poured into singing her song. Jade's offer of a chance to play at the Signal Flare was more than she had dared hope for. She smiled at Jade and reached over to the bed for the dime bag she'd bought, stuffing it into the front of her jeans. *My dream has arrived*, she thought, *but it's attached to this weird stipulation about Gram. It's blackmail, if you want to get right down to it.* Anger flooded her and she knew she needed to get out of the room before Jade, who had settled herself back onto the bed and laced her fingers together over her breasts, could see how she felt. Fern could feel her expectant gaze as she said "Let me think about it," and shut the door firmly behind her. She grew angrier and angrier as she strode down the dark hallway. Gram was finished with his workout, lying on the sofa in the front living room leafing through a copy of *Money.* He didn't

even shift the magazine to look at Fern as she passed by him on her way to the front door, much less say *good-bye, have a nice day, nice to see ya, your song sounded great in there.* This infuriated Fern. Her hopes and dreams were being compromised by this little fucker's virginity and he couldn't even acknowledge her presence? She reached the front door, then stopped, turned around and walked over to Gram. She snatched the magazine out of his hands, bent down and gave him a hard kiss on the mouth. Then she dropped the magazine in his lap and left. As she pulled the front door shut she glanced back over her shoulder and saw him staring after her.

~*~

"Mom? Hey, Mom?" Gram walked in first. It was Sunday morning, and she and Gram had arrived to make their usual post-Saturday night concert brunch, a habit they had developed over the last five years since Fern and Gram's band, The Black Sheep, became Jade's opening band at the Signal Flare. She was carrying groceries and a bottle of champagne for mimosas that she and Jade, but not Gram would drink with breakfast. Abstinence had always been the cornerstone of Gram's quiet resistance to the rock-n-roll lifestyle he had been born into. In point of fact, it was the only vestige of his resistance, since he had renounced his college plans and kept going as Jade, and now Fern's, drummer.

"Yo, Mom," Fern called, stopping to set the champagne and the bag of eggs and orange juice on the kitchen counter. Three years after her marriage to Gram, and it still gave her a weird kick to refer to Jade Stone, rock goddess, as her mother-in-law. Fern followed Gram down the long tiled hallway to Jade's room where they expected to find

her propped up in bed, long black hair brushed out and spread around her, red silk kimono wrapped around her tiny form, joint in her hand, smile on her face. Instead they found her dead, slumped against the massive mahogany headboard, eyes open, syringe standing in her arm like something that had landed there from a great fall.

Gram fainted. Fern stood still, for a minute, then she walked to the bed and held Jade's wrist in her hand, looking for a pulse, although she knew that Jade was gone. She had never touched a dead person before. The cold, dry feeling of Jade's tiny wrist—the thingness of her body, the absence of anything Fern could appeal to for an explanation—forced Fern to the floor beside the bed. She put her head between her legs and tried to breathe. When she heard Gram begin to move on the floor in the doorway, she stood up, closed Jade's eyes gently with the side of her hand the way she'd seen it done in movies, pulling the needle from her arm and lifting the weightless corpse enough to lay it flat in the bed and cover it. She wasn't sure why, but she felt that these small gestures might make the sight of his dead mother less horrifying to her husband when he got off the floor and tried again to take in the unthinkable.

At some point in those first pain-drenched hours, a feeling of relief, of having reached escape velocity, had pricked Fern's consciousness. She knew that she had been released, that the sign she had been waiting for had arrived. She and Gram could finally leave town and pursue their dreams, away from controlling, benevolent Jade, whose help had always carried with it a patronizing estimation of what she thought they were capable of, a judgment that kept Gram right where she wanted him—with her. No longer would Fern have the afternoon she played her guitar for Jade hanging over her head. Fern had said no to Jade's offer, she remembered that clearly. She had fallen in love with Gram

later, and on her own. It was just coincidence that her relationship with Gram was what Jade wanted. But Jade insisted they had made a deal. Said she would tell Gram about it if Fern tried to talk him into leaving town with her.

As the ambulance drove away with Jade's body, Fern stood on the lawn of Jade's old cobblestone mansion in Medicine Park holding her husband's hand and hating herself for her momentary thought. Fern wasn't accustomed to having thoughts that shamed her. Seeing someone else's death as an opportunity, a sign. How sick. It was something Jade, who had been so blithely self-absorbed that no one expected anything else from her, would have thought. When Gram had been accepted to the University of Oklahoma, the University of Texas, and Indiana University, Jade's only comment had been, "I guess God did this to punish me." Unable to console his mother, who had threatened that she would relapse on heroin—after being clean all of Gram's life—if he went to college, Gram had said no to all of the interested universities and stayed home. Fern had often been flabbergasted at Jade's capacity for seeing people as props in her own self-starring drama, and now she recognized the same kind of thought in herself. After discovering Jade dead, Fern's first thought, like a wisp of airy flute music escaping from an orchestra pit in front of a sonorous booming dirge, had been *Free at last, I'm free at last*.

~*~

When the preacher said, "Brothers and sisters, let us pray," everyone bowed their heads. Southwest Oklahoma's rockers and druggies, hippies and cowboys, closed their eyes and heard Jade's voice singing "Trip the Wind" through the funeral parlor's sound system. The preacher had started the prayer in time for Jade's long-ago recorded voice to

sing into the silence "I don't believe in Heaven/You can't cheat me that'a way/We'll trip the wind, slow it down/make the night come out and play."

"Let's hope heaven believes in her," Fern heard someone mutter from a pew behind her.

She felt the muscles of Gram's thigh, pressed against her, grow tight. "Fucker," he growled. Fern grabbed his arm and pressed him into his seat.

"He didn't mean any disrespect. Be cool," Fern said, keeping her eyes closed. She felt Gram turn around, trying to identify the speaker from the crowd of lowered heads behind them. Nobody's voice Fern recognized, but all kinds of people had shown up for Gram's mother's funeral. Just fans without the sense to stay away from what wasn't any of their business. Gram gave up and settled back into his pew and began to sob.

When the prayer ended, Fern opened her eyes. There was Jade, laid out in front of them, her beautiful profile visible above the side of the casket, the jade green bong with which she'd brokered so many deals, including the one Jade had erroneously believed was responsible for Fern's marriage to Gram, poking out of the casket like a periscope. Jade's face was no more pale in death than it had been in her last, hard-partying days. She never had any wrinkles, something she always thanked her Apache blood for, and she still had the same long black hair featured so prominently on her album covers. Her face was thinner, deep blue circles under her eyes covered with the pancake makeup morticians use. She was wearing the long, black buckskin skirt and the purple velvet empire top with belled sleeves and Moroccan brocade trim that she had been wearing on her second and most famous album cover, "Trip the Wind."

Now the album cover was mounted on a tripod next to the casket, together with her other two album covers and a picture of Jade with Gram as a baby, standing in front of a purple Cadillac in front of the old mansion she bought in Medicine Park. Looking at the photograph, with Jade standing in the same place Fern and Gram had stood when paramedics carried her body out of the house, the purple Cadillac on the same quadrant of the curved driveway as the ambulance had parked when it came to take her body away, Fern thought how good it was that no one could see their future.

On the cover of "Trip the Wind," Jade had been wearing huge white-framed shades and amethyst chandelier earrings, legs slung across a white chaise lounge in a sunny, bare room. The purple velvet blouse featured her breasts prominently, and there had been no way to change the cut of the top now that she was dead. Fern found it disconcerting to stare into the coffin at the tops of Jade's breasts, shelved and featured like produce. But Jade had told everyone she partied with over and over that she wanted to be buried in this outfit.

Gram sat next to Fern on the front row, rocking back and forth, keening sobs pulsing from his chest. Since Sunday when they found her, Fern had begun hoping that Gram would go into shock soon, but he hadn't. He was wild with grief—it seemed like he would die, too, if he kept on like this much longer. It was Wednesday, and she knew for certain that Gram had not slept since Saturday night. She was so worried about Gram that she had barely slept either, waking up every couple of hours to see if he was sleeping, finding him in front of the television, or standing in their backyard staring at his mother's house, which was in front of theirs. She held his hand, helpless, in shock

herself, and tried to listen to the preacher, who had made a real effort to find all the scripture he could pertaining to music and musicians.

Jade's band members, her best friends, were in the front pew with Fern and Gram, sitting pressed together in suits that Fern realized they must have bought for the occasion. Fern could smell some strange old cologne that one of them had dug out, and Cole's cigar smoke, and also the whiskey that one of them had been drinking. The smell really seemed to be coming from Gram, but she had been with him all day and hadn't seen him take a drink, never mind that he never drank anyway. In suits, Leland, Jody, and Cole looked like different people. They looked like the middle-aged men they were, and Fern wondered for the first time if Jade had subjected them to the same kind of pressure she and Gram had felt—if Jade had convinced them to devote their lives to keeping the show going around her, holding them to her when they might have done better to leave rock-n-roll and become the attorneys or businessmen that they looked like now. Leland, her lead guitar player from the beginning, had slicked back his long blond ponytail; his angular face with its shiny expanse of forehead that extended to the middle of his scalp was pink and splotchy with emotion. He was rolling and unrolling a piece of paper with something he intended to read.

But it was Gram's turn first. The preacher called him up and he rose, sliding by Fern's knees and walking up the aisle. She watched her husband stop and close his eyes in front of Jade's casket. It didn't look like he would get past it, but he finally cut left and found his way to the podium. He had told Fern that he didn't have anything good to say about his mother, something she knew wasn't true at all. But Gram believed that there was no other explanation for a fifty-eight-year old woman with twenty-five years clean

time deciding to go back to dope except that she intended to kill herself. He was furious, feeling bitterly betrayed. Fern didn't believe she had deliberately OD'd, but she didn't know what to think beyond that. No one knew why Jade had decided to take that terminal hit of dope, or where she had gotten it. A doctor told Fern that Jade had probably cooked up the same dose she had been accustomed to before she quit twenty-five years earlier, not realizing how much stronger the stuff was now, or how much weaker she was. She had gone out instantly, not unlike her son's namesake, that ill-fated country rock star, Gram Parsons, whose own corpse had been stolen and torched by drunk buddies intent on honoring his wishes after he OD'd in Joshua Tree National Park.

Fern watched Gram look out over the audience, his blue eyes scanning the crowd with contempt, his black curly hair wild around his face. His lips were pursed in fastidious disgust. She thought he might faint again. He began, however, to speak. And everything seemed fine. "Everybody knows my mother's biography. You all know her voice, we can all sing her songs. You know what she looks like, looked like. But I guess I'm the only one who can tell you what a good and loving mother she was. She gave up her rock-n-roll career to come back home to Oklahoma and raise me. She always told me she didn't mind. Maybe it seems like she could have done both, or that I didn't need to be reminded all my life of what she gave up for me."

Fern leaned forward. Gram was voicing his resentments against his mother—in a hypothetical way, but Fern knew this was how he really felt. She prayed he wouldn't keep going, but he did. "She told me she couldn't write any new music after she got off the heroin, but that she got clean for me and I was a more important creation that any old song. Most ex-junkies, you know, they'll say the opposite. Tell you how much more

creative they are without the drugs. But I guess it wasn't like that for my mom. She was always saying, 'It's like gunpowder without a match. Just sitting there inside of me. I can't light it. It's dry.' So I guess it's just because of me that she never wrote another damned word. So you all can blame me that there were no more Jade Stone albums," he said, taking a bow. "And I'm real fucking sorry."

Beside her, the guys in Jade's band swung into motion. Leland stood up and said in the voice that had been the closest thing Gram had to a father's voice for most of his life, "Nobody's blaming you, son. Time to sit down."

But Gram continued, his voice shaking. "I guess you see what she chose at the end, though. Yeah, she made her choice. Maybe if she hadn't OD'd, her creative juices would be flowing right now, and you'd all have some new Jade Stone songs to look forward to." Almost before Fern knew he was out of the pew, Leland had joined Gram at the podium and put a big hand on his back. Gram looked for a minute like fighting. He was drunk, Fern was sure of it. For almost the first time in his life. He must have taken a bottle into the restroom at the funeral home, Fern surmised. Leland steered him away from the microphone and Jody and Cole met him by the coffin, in front of the center aisle. Always the tight band pulling together a show, they were treating Gram like he was out of his head with grief—which he was— for the benefit of the crowd. But Fern could see how angry they were.

After Gram's outburst, Jade's band took turns speaking. Each of them spoke, telling the stories that they wanted to be Jade's legacy. And it was all true, Fern knew. Jade had been the great lady, the visionary, the rogue talent they painted her as. At least two of her songs were emblematic of the early part of the 1970's—she had received a

dozen letters from GI's who told her they were playing "Trip the Wind" in their helicopters during the fall of Saigon. It was true that she had perfect pitch and could play any song on most any instrument after hearing it once. It was true that she almost single-handedly kept the music program alive in Oklahoma schools by her generous support, and probably true, although the story reminded Fern of the one about Arthur pulling the sword out of the stone, that when she was a girl, a hummingbird had landed in her bare hand after Jade had imitated its song. These loving stories were the right way to bury someone, not with Gram's rage or with her own shameful feeling of freedom. She could not believe she had felt freedom at seeing Jade dead. She didn't know if she could ever like herself again, but she knew that to pretend she hadn't felt as she had would be even worse. Then she would be like Jade, made fragile by the things she could not see or say about herself.

~*~

Fern and Gram each grabbed an amplifier out of the back of their van and began carrying them into the back door of the Signal Flare. Gram hadn't said a word since his explosion at the memorial service. It looked to Fern like he was sobering up and getting depressed, but she didn't try to talk to him. All the other musicians, who hadn't joined them at the grave site, were already there setting up the stage for the benefit concert that was to be Jade's wake. Fred and Leanne, the bar owners, had "Falling Star Catcher" playing. A huge blow-up, probably ten feet by ten feet, of one of Jade's old publicity shots was hanging from the back of the stage, where she would oversee the evening's festivities. She looked so young.

It was standing room only by the time Fern and Gram and the rest of their band, The Black Sheep, took the stage. Fern and Gram moved around each other without speaking. So many musicians had shown up that everyone had agreed to play no more than 15 minutes, with everyone coming together on stage at the end to sing a Jade Stone medley: "Trip the Wind," "Falling Star Catcher," "Queen of Spades," and "Apache Mountain Stomp." Fern stood in front of the microphone, looking over the amazing show of support. Someone had hung Jade's tambourine over the mic stand, so Fern picked it up and began shaking it slowly over her head to get everyone's attention. Behind her, Gram began a slow count on the snare.

It took awhile before anyone heard them. The musicians intending to play were a crowd by themselves, but then the place had filled up with the regulars, most of whom had been at the funeral, followed by people from the community who did not usually come to the bar, but who knew Jade—her attorney, her mechanic, her accountants, and most of her old teachers. There also appeared to be a large number of people who had heard about the benefit on the radio and were there to hear all the bands. Some of them probably didn't even know Jade's music, Fern thought. But tonight we will turn them on.

Fred and Leanne had been forced to use tables that could have held paying customers to set out all the food that people from the community had brought. Coconut cream pie and watermelon, fresh fried okra, buffalo chili, venison chili, longhorn chili, emu chili, chicken chili, turkey chili, pink ambrosia, green bean salad, macaroni salad, red velvet cake, a case of moon pies, hand rolled tamales, Indian fry bread and many cases of beer—Budweiser,because everyone knew what Jade drank—all weighted down the tables set up against the front windows. The people still in line to get food were the

last to heed the calls to sit down, but finally Fern picked up her guitar and the show started.

~*~

When the Black Sheep finished their set, Fern left the stage and pulled up a chair with the rest of the musicians. "Hey Fern, how you surviving?" asked Maybelline Proudfoot, a contemporary of Jade's and a one-time rival who had driven in from Dallas. "I was trying to tell these folks about how Jade fixed you and Gram up together. I can't tell it the way Jade told it to me—nobody could tell a story like her. You met the devil at the crossroads, though. I know that much. Sold your soul so you could play music."

"I don't think of it that way, Maybelline," Fern said.

"Why not? I would. Puts you in the line of the finest musical tradition going back to Robert Johnson."

"Or Faust, if you want to go back a little further," said Andre, a harmonica player from Santa Fe who had once made a pilgrimage to Lawton to hang around Jade and learn her musical secrets. He had driven Gram crazy that summer, asking him questions and horning in on every dinner, rehearsal, or fight that he could. Fern thought he must be writing a book about Jade, although he said he wasn't.

"Jade wasn't the devil," Fern said flatly, waving a waitress over. "And Gram and I didn't get together just so she would help me with my music. It just all worked out."

"Nobody's calling Jade the devil," Maybelline said. "Of course not, Fern. Didn't mean it that way. Hi Gram. Son, I am so, so sorry for your loss."

Fern spun around to see Gram staring at her, stricken and furious. "What's the matter?" Fern asked, trying to take his hand.

He snatched it away from her. "So that's how it is."

"No, honey. She did try to make me a deal, but I told her no. I never told you about it because I knew it would piss you off to hear she tried using you as a bargaining chip."

"I knew she had me by the balls, I just didn't know you were in on it." Gram turned and strode out of the club.

Fern became aware of all the musicians around her listening. "Fern, honey, I am so goddamned sorry. I didn't know that story was such a big secret. I shouldn't have opened my mouth," Maybelline said.

"Don't worry about it, Fern," Leland said, putting an arm around her. "He knows better than this. He knows you love him. He's just hating everything right now." But Fern was worried. She thought again of the afternoon that Jade had invited her to smoke from the jade green bong with her. She had told Jade she wouldn't screw Gram, hadn't she? She was sure she had been clear. It was just a coincidence that she and Gram ended up together. Jade had given her the gig at the Signal Flare shortly afterwards, but that was just good timing. It was right around that time that she and Gram had started playing together and finally had enough songs for a full show. That's why Jade had given them the job when she did. They had been waiting until they had enough original material to fill their portion of the show, Fern remembered clearly.

She wandered to the table of food, dimly realizing that she hadn't eaten all day and was famished. Gram hadn't eaten either, she knew. That morning they had both

stood at the kitchen counter in front of the coffee pot drinking black coffee in a fog of grief and sleep deprivation and had agreed to skip breakfast. She looked around, tempted to make him a plate, but she didn't see him anywhere. As she was ladling a bowl of buffalo chili for herself, Leland came up and offered to hold the plate for her. "Listen, after the Pinkertons finish we're all going to get onstage and sing 'Rock'n-roll Heaven' before we do the final medley, okay? Jody thought of it, and I can't believe I didn't come up with it myself."

"You mean 'If you believe in forever, then life is just a one-night stand. If there's a rock and roll heaven, well you know they've got a hell of a band, band, band band'?" Fern said, singing her question.

"Yeah. The Righteous Brothers. I forget how young you are sometimes. Me and Jody wrote a lyric for Jade, putting her in between Jimi and Janis."

"I don't know, Leland. Gram and I hate that song. All that cheesy sentimentality about the sixties—it's so self-congratulatory. You guys have absolutely no sense of irony, I swear to God. Can't you hear how sickening that will be? Jade's of the seventies, anyway. You've got new fans here tonight who will love Jade's songs if they hear them straight, but you're going to run them off."

Leland looked at her as if she were speaking Japanese. "We're playing it, Fern. Sure will be a shame if her own son won't join in, but you and Gram do what you want. We got plenty of drummers here tonight."

Fern took the plate of food out of Leland's hands. "Thanks. Listen, I don't mean to be harsh. I'll join in—of course I will. But you see what Gram is today. He won't even speak to me."

Leland nodded. "I've only seen him drink one other time, and that was the night you and he decided to lose your virginity." He smiled. "That was so damn funny."

"Funny, hell. I couldn't believe you and Jade and the rest having a party in the front yard while we're in there trying to get up our nerve. God, I'll never forget looking out the window and seeing Jade swishing around the yard with her tambourine, serenading us with 'Night Moves.' And you kicked back in your lawn chair like you were watching a football game. We had to get drunk. We'd still be virgins if we hadn't."

Leland's face broke into a huge smile, the first she had seen in days, and then it collapsed, turning into a mask of grief. "A lady like her rises once in a thousand years, Fern."

When Fern got back to where Gram had been standing at the bar, he was gone. She set down his plate of food and waited for him to come back, but as the night wore on, she began to realize that he wasn't going to. What would become of them now that Jade was gone? A couple of months before she died, Jade and Fern had been on the floor in Jade's living room, doing yoga, when Jade had said, "Fuck someone long enough—or just love them, any kind of love—and you will eventually see them cry." They were both in the mountain pose, eyes on the floor.

"So the thing to do is make sure it's not you doing the crying?" Fern asked. It was strange to hear Jade talk about having lovers. Whatever eccentricities she was guilty of—her rock-n-roll lifestyle, her drug use—she was strangely abstinent sexually, and had never, so far as Fern knew, had a lover since Gram's father had died. Most people thought that Jade and Leland were together sometimes, although he was married and had four kids, but there was no proof. Gram may have grown up having to shake out the

sandwich baggies he used for his lunch to make sure there was no marijuana residue in them, and may have been raised on Zeppelin and Hendrix the way most kids know Kermit and Big Bird, but he had never had to watch men stream through the house. Of course, the house was full of men—Jody, Leland, Cole, other musicians, people partying and buying dope—but these were all friends, father figures, the committee of mystics and burnouts who tried to help him with his homework.

"You'd think so, but I never could. For me, it's easier if I can get them to break up with me. Act up, make them mad, let them believe something terrible about you—that rage propels them forward, it's the best anesthesia in the world. That way they don't suffer as much. You can't just lower the boom while they're still worshipping you. It's cruel." Fern realized Jade was offering some sort of cryptic advice about her marriage, but she didn't understand it at the time. She and Gram were fine. But Jade's advice seemed more relevant now—now that Jade was not holding them there, now that they could both do what they wanted, what would happen? If Gram decided to go to college and Fern went full out with her music, would they survive?

When the Pinkertons finished, Leland took the stage and called all the musicians up. Fern walked outside, making one last check in their van, one last tour of the parking lot in a vain search for Gram, before she returned to the stage, sharing a mic with Maybelline and Jody. "Rock-n-Roll Heaven" was even more sentimental at a wake than it was on the radio, but it seemed appropriate, Fern had to admit. In the face of Jade's death, the question of what happened to all that talent, all that music, now that Jade was gone, begged for the sort of simple and pleasing answer "Rock-n-Roll Heaven" provided. It shone a light even for the younger members of the crowd, due in large part to a

shattering guitar solo by Leland. He was grieving in sound. The medley of Jade's songs lasted for over an hour, turning into a jam session in which almost every musician on the stage took a solo. The audience rose to their feet at the beginning of "Rock-n-Roll Heaven" and stayed on their feet until the end. Somewhere between "Queen of Spades" and "Apache Mountain Stomp" Fern forgave herself for her feeling of freedom at Jade's death. She thought that the one person who would completely understand the feeling and have something useful to say about it would have been Jade herself.

As the crowd cleared out, Angel and Lucinda Perrotta, Jade's accountants, tapped Fern on the shoulder and ushered her to where they had been sitting, in one of the few booths that lined the wall below the stage. There was Gram, passed out on one side of the booth, his feet sticking out into the aisle. "We were talking for most of the night," Lucinda said.

"He talked to you? Really?" Fern asked, leaning over to look at Gram's face, flattened against the red vinyl seat. She glanced up at them. "He's not talking to me."

"Talked and talked. He was drinking like crazy. He was asking us about our business. Where we got our MBA's. I think it's great he's decided to go to college now, Fern. I thought it was a terrible mistake for him to stay here, with all his promise," Angel said. "But at least he got to spend his mother's last years with her."

Fern nodded. So he was going to college now. Deliberately or not, no one would ever know, Jade had followed her own advice about relationships. She had done something horrible enough to propel her son forward in a rage that might save him and put him on the path he had wanted to be on in the first place. Then it occurred to Fern that maybe she should accept Gram's condemnation of her in the same spirit. Let him

believe she had screwed him to get a gig at the Signal Flare. He would be free then to leave behind the rock-n-roll life he had never wanted in the first place. But, looking down at her husband, she thought, *like hell*. It was a good moment to stop taking Jade's advice.

Leland pulled Gram out of the booth by his feet and Cole carried him like another piece of equipment out to their van, loaded him in the back with their guitars and amps, planning to drive him home to the small house he and Fern rented from Jade behind the old mansion. Fred and Leanne sat at the bar and counted the proceeds from the door and from the bar. Everything was to be donated to the children's home where Jade had grown up. "Those little orphans will all get Porsches this year," Fred joked. Fern helped wash glasses and clean off the tables. She gathered all the mics and extension cords from the stage and wrapped them tightly for storage. Then she took down the huge poster of Jade that had hung behind the musicians all night, folding it like a table cloth into smaller and smaller squares, Jade's face disappearing with each smaller square, until finally it was small enough that she could tuck it under her arm and give it to Leanne to store under the bar.

As Fern handed the small square of plastic to Leanne, Leland and Cole came back in looking solemn and purposeful. Leland sat down at the bar next to Fern and took the jade green bong that had been in Jade's casket out of a paper bag. "My friends," he said, looking around reverently. "Let's get high."

Fern was stunned. "Leland, you took the bong out of her casket? She wanted to be buried with it. She said so all the time," The bong seemed lit from within and almost alive, as if the snakes and mermaids that decorated it might writhe away down the bar.

"I couldn't stand it," Leland said. "It's an heirloom. It belongs in the Smithsonian. To me, it's her soul."

"All the more reason it should have stayed in the casket," Fern said.

"Come on, Fern, Cole. Come on over here Fred, Leanne. Let's smoke the great lady's soul."

"You're a damned soft-headed sap, Leland," said a voice from behind them. It was Gram. Fern turned to see him shuffling across the black-and-white tile of the bar towards them. He looked like a corpse himself, still in his suit from the funeral, his tie hanging loose and his shirt wrinkled and untucked. Apparently Leland and Cole had roused him when they carried him to the van. Staring at them, he said simply, "My mother's gone."

Leland's pink face shone with feeling under the bar lights. "Gram, do you remember the story of the great Gram Parsons? You should. You're named after him."

"I know that," Gram said. "She must have really loved his music, because he's about the only musician from that decade she didn't claim to have met. You knew she was reverent if she wouldn't lie about somebody."

Leland was determined to make his point. "His friends bribed the airport guard that was keeping watch over his body, which was to be flown back to his family in Florida. They loaded it into the back of a pickup, drove it out to Joshua Tree National Park and lit it on fire. Because that's what he said he wanted. It may have been illegal, but they knew it was the right thing to do. Me stealing this bong out of her casket is kind of the same thing."

Fern expected more fire from Gram, but to everyone's surprise his face seemed to seal over and he was silent. He laid a hand on Fern's shoulder and she looked up at him. Leland's words had pushed Gram around some kind of corner. Finally he said, "It was exactly the right thing to do. She'd love it. Fire it up, Leland."

Gram sat down next to Fern and accepted the bong when Leland passed it to him. As far as Fern knew, it was the first time he'd ever gotten high. He coughed after he inhaled the smoke into his lungs, pounding his chest. Everyone laughed as he gagged and choked. "Somebody's got to write a song about this," he managed to say. "About Leland stealing the bong. Fern, you should do it. I'll start you out like this," He passed the bong to her and then played a drum intro on the top of the bar. "Then you come in with a line about how she wanted to be buried with the bong."

Fern nodded at him. "David Bowie gave it to her the night he wrote 'Queen Bitch.'" She sang the lyrics, watching Gram's face, which didn't look like the face of an accountant, at least not to her.

Writ in Water

Oh, the streets of Rome are filled with rubble,
Ancient footprints are everywhere.
You can almost think that you're seein' double
On a cold, dark night on the Spanish Stairs.
Bob Dylan

Emerging from an all-night flight into the sultry mid-morning, Alex and I instruct the cab driver to drive straight to the catacombs from the Rome airport without even checking into our hotel room first. Alex's sudden passion for the catacombs surprises me and I get another of several recent inklings that I have been too ready to take his dumb rock star persona as the whole show, rather than as what it may be, a playful interpretation. But I should be forgiven for this mistake. Alex seems at times to have no intellectual curiosity. For example, I tried on the plane to get him excited about Keats, explaining that Keats died in Rome, how he died, what he wrote, how much Alex looks

like him. Alex just patted me on the leg and ordered another Jack and Coke from the stewardess. But when I told him about Saint Cecelia, patron saint of music, whose statue lies in one of the oldest catacombs outside Rome, he pressed me for details, insisting that we "go see that little chick" straightaway. For the remainder of the connecting flight from London he left his headphones in his lap, the demo track of a song he recorded last week silent, and stared out the window as the plane flew over the Alps.

Now, as we descend the narrow stone steps into the catacombs behind our tour guide, a retired priest who had been restocking the catacombs' refrigerator magnets in the gift shop when we showed up, I find myself wanting to see Alex gripped with awe. He, with no sense of history beyond Led Zeppelin's first album, he, so capable of producing awe in thousands of others, with both his voice and his image; I want him to get a sense of perspective on his ephemeral rock-n-roll career. I want him to be dumbstruck by something larger than himself. I don't know if he is. But I am.

The priest narrates as we walk: "We stop in this space which you will notice is a widening. A place of worship where the early Christians met in secret. In the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Roman soldiers followed to here—on the spot where you stand, young man." The priest points at Alex's chain enwreathed jack boots. "On that spot the third pope was killed, and all of his followers, here in this space, their bodies shoved into empty tombs within the walls."

Alex, who is stooped to avoid hitting his head on the low ceilings, looks down apologetically at the priest. He says, "I'm sorry, man." He really is sorry, too, and the tour guide can tell.

He smiles back at Alex. "It is not your fault." We walk down another passageway, past row after row of empty slots in the stone where bodies once rested, until we round another corner and find in one of those slots on the floor, the life-sized, pure-white, prone, marble effigy of Saint Cecilia. Alex yells, "Oh!" and spins around as if to run away. He grabs the leather lapels of his jacket and gasps. "Shit!" He plants one enormous hand on my shoulder and half sobs, "Oh my God, Paula, look at her."

I am looking. She is truly unnerving, a white stone sprawl amidst the brown stone, a permanent rendering of someone long dead, absolutely life-like, her face turned down and away along the line where her neck was severed from her body. "Her coffin was discovered here in 817," the tour guide explains in solemn, accented tones that recall every Italian gangster film I have ever seen. "It was opened in 1599, and her body had been unaffected by time. Perfectly preserved. She looked exactly as she looks here. An artist sketched her before she began to deteriorate once the coffin was opened."

Alex has recovered somewhat and is leaning close to her. "How come she's lying on her side?" he asks, running his hand over her hips and thigh the way he sometimes does mine.

"Don't touch!" hisses the tour guide. "She was buried alive. They could not kill her. They tried to behead her and failed, left her half-beheaded and she survived for three more days, preaching the gospel and singing."

"With her head half off?" Alex laughs. "Come on, now."

The tour guide looks at him patiently. "She is a saint. It was a miracle."

"Or a really good story," Alex says, assimilating his initial wonder. Despite the tour guide's admonition he puts his hand in Saint Cecilia's hand, which is folded with

three fingers—father, son, holy ghost—making a final defiant gesture, like a kid at a rock concert.

~*~

The first time I ever spoke to Alex was five months ago when he telephoned to berate me for my review of his latest CD, *Merciless*. In a piece for *Rolling Stone* I had called his band, the Seminal Fluids, "cynical manipulators of noise" and said of their CD, "I would call it form without content, except that there's no form either. Only the strange, angelic voice of Alex Glimmer saves this CD from absolute incoherence."

"Is this Paula Stern, the rock critic?"

"That's me."

"You're wrong about the Seminal Fluids. You just don't understand what they're trying to do. They're operating on sound. They're turning it inside out and showing you its guts."

"Who is this?" I asked. I was often accosted by angry fans defending their favorite bands, but this was the first time one of them had obtained my home phone number. I consider myself the uncompromising voice of rock criticism, reminding everybody of the high road. Rock is art. I believe that, and I take pleasure in running off poseurs and dilettantes. The late Hunter S. Thompson told me once that I am what would have happened if Dorothy Parker and Lester Bangs had had a love child. "Listen," I said, about to hang up, "write your own damn column if you don't like what I have to say."

"This is Alex Glimmer."

"Oh, come on. Really?" Really. He insisted we meet for dinner. He wanted to convince me that I was wrong about him and his band. "I said you have an angelic voice," I reminded him.

"I'm more than just a pretty voice," he insisted. *Yeah, you're a pretty face, too*, I thought, *and one hell of a body*. He asked me to meet him at some hole in the wall pizza parlor in Brooklyn.

I showed up, and he showed up, and now I am involved, deeply involved, with a twenty-five year old rock god who looks in the face astonishingly like John Keats looks in the few extant sketches of him. I know this because before I became a rock critic I was sort of a Keats groupie. A wannabe. John Keats made me want to be a poet. Beauty is truth, truth beauty. I say that line to myself a lot, even though it never really makes sense to me unless I've read the whole poem first. And even then it only comes clear for a moment, a heartbeat or two, and then I'm past it again, and back on the outside. But it was that ability of Keats's to turn things inside out in the flash of a single line—that was what got me. I wanted to do that. And I worked and worked at it, through college, through a Master's Degree and a pile of derivative poems that I produced as a thesis. I wanted to be able to come up with a line that would stop people cold.

I haven't done it yet. I don't stop them cold. But I sometimes slow them down. An article I wrote, just for fun, about talking to Kim Gordon all night long on the balcony at a party caught the attention of a writer at *Spin*, and my career spun out from there. It's true I've put poetry on the back burner. But not John Keats. That line—beauty is truth, truth beauty. It's my talisman, my compass. Every time I listen to a new band or a new album by an old one, I take that line from poor old Keats, hold it up on a long chain, and

watch as it points a direction for the review that I'll write. In the presence of art, I've seen it glow. It glowed when I heard Alex Glimmer's voice for the first time.

Our cab driver has brought us from the catacombs, outside the city off the Via Appia, to the very heart of Rome where we are staying, at the Hotel Hassler at the top of the Spanish Stairs, just above the house where Keats died. "Merciless," despite my review, has become huge among eleven-to-seventeen-year-old boys, the largest music-buying demographic, and the Seminal Fluids begin a world tour next month, so Alex and I thought we'd get away together for a while first. I'm a little nervous about how we're going to do away from all the usual social distractions of New York. We don't have a lot in common, though sometimes I think Alex is having a little fun with me about our cultural discrepancies. For example, the first time I mentioned my interest in poetry he told me he never reads. He said the last book he opened was *Valley of the Dolls,* his junior year in high school. "Why *Valley of the Dolls*?" I asked.

"The dolls," he said, pausing to prepare me for the revelation to follow, "are drugs." He nodded at me as if that explained everything, and then, just as I had concluded that Alex really was the big, dumb kid he seemed to be, he winked—or did he? It was so slight, a seemingly thoughtless reflex, but over time I noticed he would sometimes repeat that wink right after he had said something that *could* have led me down a wrong path in my attempts to get to know him better. I began to wonder if that wink was an invitation for me to look back over our last exchange, to discover what I'd missed in it.

But I may be reading more into him than is there. It does not flatter my sense of self to think that I could be so drawn to a simpleton, so maybe I am building him up.

There's plenty of evidence that Alex is no master ironist, but is in fact the pure rock icon his growing army of young fans think he is. It's true, for example, that just three years ago he was working at a Tyson chicken factory in Fort Smith, Arkansas, disemboweling fowl on an assembly line while he tried to get his band started. Although I now know the whole story, which is that he was working at the chicken factory part time while he was a college student, I hate the image of him in a bloody white smock and hair net, thrusting his hands inside plucked body after plucked body as they pass him on the assembly line.

And he told me recently that he consciously models his stage persona on some of the personalities of the World Wrestling Federation. "Because they call up archetypal figures of strength and vengeance and potency?" I offered, hoping for a self-conscious or ironic element to his WWF admiration.

He shook his head. "It's cool the way they run around the edge of the ring and roar. The crowd loves it." Then there was that wink, a gesture that seemed to say, *don't patronize me, sweetie, of course I'm kidding*. But was he? When Alex is giving a concert he does, indeed, run the perimeter of the stage, roaring and flexing and spinning his head so that his hair whips around like a sword, the very image of strength and vengeance and potency.

Our suite overlooks the Piazza Spagna. The Spanish Stairs unfold from beneath us like rippling fabric, ending before the Barcaccia fountain and a street lined with the storefronts of Prada, Gucci, Bulgari, and Dior. The ceiling of our suite bells like a cathedral, and dancing cherubs that the Italians call putti rollick above us with full-grown angels in attendance, playing medieval looking instruments—lute, lyre, harp—against a sapphire blue background. As soon as the bellboy gets the last of our luggage into the

room and closes the door, Alex flops onto the bed and becomes transfixed by the celestial concert on our ceiling. After a few minutes, while I'm hanging my clothes in the closet, he says, "The little naked babies are the fans. The angels are the band. I like the one with the horn—he's rocking, you can tell." I think he's dropped acid without telling me.

"What?" I stand over him, with my hands on my hips, then I put my hands down. I feel maternal in that pose, a feeling I try hard to avoid when I'm with him.

He points at the ceiling. "The babies," he says.

I look up. "Oh. They're called putti. You know, those babies are nearly three hundred years old. This hotel used to host all the royalty of Europe. All the glitteratti."

"We're glitteratti," he says, swinging himself upright and heading toward the shower. We are not glitteratti. Alex would be mobbed at most high schools in America, but adults don't know who he is, especially Roman adults. Italians love beauty—they find the harder versions of American rock to be simply ugly. No, we are just tourists.

I've been to Rome before, on a graduate research grant fifteen years ago. I was Alex's age, then. Twenty-five. The age of Keats when he died, just right down the Spanish Stairs. From our window I can see the pink stucco wall of the building where he spent his last feverish, consumptive days, tortured that he would never write all that he could, and that he would never have the woman he loved.

Standing at the window, I feel a wonderful pain, the pure grief of literature, mixed with something not so wonderful, my own grief. My grief is indeterminate, unresolved and unredeemed. It has never been the impetus for a body of timeless words. It just hurts. My rock criticism, which provides a good living and gives me a certain amount of cultural presence, not to mention drawing to me the cover boy of most rock magazines in

the last year, is not really important. Most of the music I write about won't even be remembered five years from now, much less my writing *about* the music. I save copies of everything I publish, knowing my little archive to be a futile effort, a paper wall against the flood of time. Here in Rome amongst the permanent presence of the past, the insignificance of my work is more galling than ever. I want to place some permanent stamp on my feelings, I crave some epic thrust; if not to be the poet, at least to be the "still unravish'd bride of quietness."

"So, baby," Alex says, bounding out of the bathroom, shirtless, in a towel, his wavy, auburn hair falling down his back. "I heard this is where pizza originated. I'll bet they've got great pie—I mean, shit, they invented it, right? Let's check it out!" He slaps his hands together so that the face of the satanic creature tattooed across his pectorals contorts as if it, too, were ravenous for good pie. I've had to make Alex start wearing a shirt when we're having sex so I don't have that evil face moving over me, or under me. I have found myself watching its features for reactions, staring deep into its red eyes, which are in fact Alex's nipples. Very inhibiting, this tattoo, and not what I mean when I say I long for artistic permanence.

Turning from the window, I say, "Okay. Pizza it is. Get dressed." It's hard to square the pizza comment with the part of him that's sharp, a natural businessman, a savvy spin doctor of his own public persona. His band's image is part serial killer, part porn star—I think it's base and unimaginative—but the truth is, Alex Glimmer is positive in an elemental way free of any moral charge. He is up, up, up, and go, go, go, the Horatio Alger story of the twenty-first century, rising from nowhere on force of will, charisma, and one genuine talent—that voice, which can sound like the ethereal sopranos

of the castrati in medieval Rome, begotten without the harsh sacrifice of his manhood, I am happy to report. Alex's goals, the terms in which he conceives of his "success," are as conventional as if he were a car salesman and not a sonic metal maniac. Out of context, some of his quotations sound like something out of a Dale Carnegie seminar. "When the world hands you a lemon, make lemonade!" "When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" He says stuff like that, sometimes without the wink.

We hit the streets and have a surprisingly difficult time finding any pizza. Wandering through the maze of narrow alleys teeming with shops that surround and lead into the Piazza Navona, we finally grab a couple of slices of pizza from a street vendor and keep walking—I am too excited to sit down, and he's ready to do what I want to do.

We round a corner, and there, at the confluence of several streets, is the Trevi Fountain. I feel that feeling again—grief, humility in the face of artistic permanence. Everything in Rome reminds me that I am going to die. The linear notion of time that keeps everything flowing like a river, in Rome, turns in on itself. Here, time is a circle, and the past is with you as you walk by ruins that were ruins when Christ was born, inches away from a balcony where Mussolini spoke, past an obelisk brought from Egypt, a gift from Cleopatra twenty-three centuries ago. Taking the yearnings of my own ego too seriously in this environment is impossible, and maybe that's why I'm so uncomfortable.

Alex grabs my hand and pulls me towards the fountain where pagan Neptune languishes in the sunshine, bare-chested amongst his admirers, cut out of the same white marble as poor, Christian Saint Cecilia in the dark and damp of the catacombs. Alex and I are nearly run over by a scooter, but we make it to the edge. "Throw in some change,"

he says, digging a handful of coins out of the front pocket of his jeans and handing some to me. He leans back like a pitcher aiming a fastball and hurls a handful of change into the fountain, which hits the water like a spray of buckshot. A family of Japanese tourists about to have their picture taken all wince as Alex's coins make their hard wishes. They will have to take that picture again. I lean against the rail and laugh as he drives in another handful of change, in every small action the spirit of rock-n-roll excess. "Did you make a wish?" he asks, throwing an arm around me and holding my hipbone like a rudder that he can use to steer me.

"Yes, did you?" He kisses me, as if to say that his wish had something to do with me. Maybe it did. Is he in love with me? This thought makes me nervous; it is a power I don't want, don't trust myself with.

My own wish is less concrete, and only indirectly about him. "I wished for a sign, a portent, a guiding star."

"Oh," he says, "Why didn't you say so? Here's your sign." He loosens his belt and turns around, lifting his shirt to show me the small black star, which I have seen plenty of times, that sits on the base of his spine as if marking a terminus. He grins. "Follow this, okay?"

I think about Keats and his notion of negative capability—the place "where an artist must be" comes to me *verbatim* after all these years: "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." I don't think I have negative capability. But does Alex? I look at him and I feel myself irritably reaching to know what will happen.

He is smiling like a dangerous rake—it's the look he saves for his fans—and sure enough, I realize that we have become surrounded by a small gathering of American teenage boys and girls who are star struck and giddy.

"You're Alex Glimmer, dude. Aren't you?" One skinny fourteen-year old boy steps up and then falls back deferentially like a mean-spirited small dog who suddenly finds himself in the presence of a much calmer, much bigger dog. The whole scenario looks so much like Neptune and his sycophants in the fountain in front of us that I find myself falling in with the teenagers, as if by some aesthetic imperative, looking to Alex to see what he'll say. He doesn't say much, just signs their T-shirts, city guide books, arms, foreheads and backpacks and tells them that a thing of beauty is a joy forever. Keats? Where did he get that? They nod their heads, trying to remember it. They will go home and use it to get laid for years to come. *Yeah, like Alex Glimmer once told me—yeah, I met him. We hung out in Rome. Cool guy, yeah. Told me a thing of beauty is a joy forever. Looking at you, who can argue? The man's a poet.* Alex poses for some pictures, which I take. Standing behind the various cameras that the teenagers hand me to snap their pictures with Alex, I look at Alex through the lenses and realize that I am standing in the same relation to him as I have always stood, the recording mechanism beholding the worthy object, camera to smiling Alex, critic to artist.

~*~

The Protestant Cemetery, where Keats is buried, stretches out beyond the Aurelian wall, the original wall of the city. It is easy to spot because of an enormous pyramid, the grave of Caius Cestius, built in 12 BC. "He must have thought a lot of himself," Alex says, giving the pyramid a kick as he looks up at it.

"I guess so," I said. "He wasn't really very important, though. Some petty bureaucrat. Unlike Keats, who has turned out to be the real thing, and he's just got this sad little stone. I remember the grave being over here," I say, leading him a short way through the headstones.

Suddenly from behind me he tosses off a line. "He never is crowned with immortality, who fears to follow where airy voices lead: so through the hollow, the silent mysteries of earth, descend!"

I spin around. "You've been reading Keats?"

"I'm following your airy voice through the silent mysteries, baby. Just wanted you to know."

"I thought you were ignoring me when I was trying to get you interested in him."

"Nah. I wanted to check him out—thought maybe they'd give me some ideas for lyrics." He's smiling at me, and there's the wink, the invitation to uncover another layer of irony, another persona, this one constructed for me. To have memorized those lines—not just opening lines, either. Lines twenty or thirty pages into "Endymion."

"Well," I say, stopping in front of Keats's grave, which I find as if I have visited it a thousand times, instead of once, "Here's a bit more of his writing. His epitaph. It's kind of hard to read, though. You'd think they'd keep this grave a little cleaner."

Alex kneels down and runs his black-polished nails into the grooves of the stone's lettering and reads: "Here Lies One Whose Name was Writ in Water."

"Sad," I say, awash in regret.

"Evaporated," Alex says finally. I hear appreciation in his voice.

"Yes. I'm sure that's what he meant," I say, "Writ in Water—the lack of permanence."

Alex rises to his feet, still looking at the stone. "But also, water never goes away. It *is* permanent. It just takes different forms at different times. We're drinking the same water today that ol' Keats was drinking, and ol' Caius way before him. It might mean that his name won't last, but it might mean that he's never gone, just turning from water to vapor to ice and on back, you know."

"Do you think he meant it that way?" I ask. I can't believe I am asking Alex for his insight into Keats, but I'm happy to cede the lonely high ground of knowing what he doesn't for the unexpected pleasure of hearing a true insight.

The sun is going down behind us, silhouetting the traffic circle and the lines of the ancient wall, undulating like an animal curled in sleep. Alex takes giant steps around the graveyard, like a little kid trying not to step on any cracks in the sidewalk. "Sure," he says, "I know I always try to have double meanings in my lyrics."

I have read his lyrics. They're terrible. "What do you mean? I never noticed any double meanings."

"Yeah, well, I try not to be too obvious about it. Like in 'Driving You Home.' I'm talking about actually driving this chick home to her house, but I'm also talking about *driving her home,* like sexually." He makes a grinding motion with his hips to illustrate his point.

I want to pummel him with rocks. "Oh, well, yeah. I recognized *those* double meanings."

"Keats was probably trying for something like that when he said his name was written in water. That's all I'm saying."

His insight of the last moment gives way, like the sun disappearing behind a cloud, to a revolting stupidity. Suddenly it's not enough for me to believe that he means all this jokingly. Before I can stop myself, I say, "We have to break up."

He looks down suddenly, his face blanching. "Really?"

"Well, I don't know. We don't have much in common, you know?"

He stares at me, his huge green eyes holding depths of pain I didn't know were in him. But then I realize that it's not entirely my announcement that's causing his expression. "Baby?" he says, wrapping his arms around his middle. "I'm feeling really sick all of a sudden. I'm freezing. Can we go back to the hotel?"

~*~

By the time we get back to the Hassler, Alex is hot to the touch. I put my arms around him in the cab and he is trembling, his teeth chattering, although the temperature outside is in the seventies. In the room, I find myself doing things I didn't know I knew how to do, like shaking down a thermometer that room service has brought up, and putting cold, wet towels across his forehead. He lies inside the white sheets, his hair spread over the pillows, looking like the sketch Severin made of Keats on his death bed. I retracted my break up speech in the taxi. What was I thinking? He is the voice of the future, the face of the past, the only man I know who would run his hands down the thighs of Saint Cecilia. What's good enough for Saint Cecilia is good enough for me, right? He watches me as I bustle around the room.

"Paula," he says, motioning me over to the bed. "Sorry I acted like a baby back at the cemetery." He smiles weakly. "I meant to act like a baby earlier."

I pull the towel from his forehead and kiss him between the eyebrows. "That's okay. You can act like a baby now. Just get better or rock music will never be the same. I don't want to go through the rest of my life looking at your face on T-shirts with your dates of birth and death on them, like tombstones."

He sits up a little. "Do you really think that would happen? Like Kurt Cobain, or Jim Morrison? Or Hendrix."

I laugh. "I think you've got a couple more albums to go before that happens. You need to get rid of that idiot band you're in and go solo. I hope you feel better in the morning," I say, and turn off the lamp at his side. When I come out of the bathroom in my nightgown a few minutes later, he is asleep. As quietly as I can, I search my carry-on bag for the old Modern Library edition of Keats's collected poems that I have had since I was an undergraduate. I take it to bed, turning on the lamp on my end table and throwing a red T-shirt over it to dim the light. I read for about an hour, almost as enthralled by my own earnest marginalia as I am by Keats's words. The girl who scribbled, "love is fatal—he understood that," and "loss of the ego—possible through love or through literature," is a person I dimly recall from those years, like maybe someone I had a class with, but not me, myself. She was a poet, I realize, and she didn't survive. I look at Alex, who looks older and more troubled in sleep than he does awake. Having Alex around these last months has shown me the contrast between my wan, vaporous hopes that I might be an artist, and the bright imperative of the real thing. It isn't fair, but it is

the truth, and truth is beauty. Somehow. I make note of a few poems to read to Alex in the morning.

When I wake up, he is propped on one elbow, looking at me warily. "Hi," I say, a little disgruntled. I am not used to seeing someone staring at me when I first open my eyes, and I am not too sure I look beautiful when I'm sleeping. "What? You look like you have pressing issues to discuss."

He smiles and sits up, cross-legged. "I'm trying to figure out how to tell you what I have to tell you."

He's leaving, I think. Well, okay. I tried to break up with him; he knows things are shaky, so he's going to get it over with. I shouldn't have taken his temperature—I reminded him of his mother. "Just tell me," I say, sitting up, too. We both lean back against our pillows like John and Yoko, ready for the press.

He begins, "Last night. . ."

"Are you feeling better?" I interrupt. That horrible, personal grief is creeping into me like a paralysis. I don't have negative capability; I just don't.

"Not really. I still feel like shit. I'm sorry, babe. Sucks to be on vacation with someone sick. We can still get around, though. I'm tough. I remember working twelve-hour shifts at the chicken factory so hungover I was seeing double chickens, but I did it. When the going gets tough, the tough get going, right? I won't let you down."

So, he's not dumping me? "That's okay! You don't have to entertain me," I say, full of relief and gratitude even as I cringe at that hated image of him plunging his hand into the body cavity of naked chickens on a conveyor belt. "What were you saying? About last night?"

"Yeah. Here's the thing. Last night, while you were sleeping, close to a hundred people came through our room."

"What do you mean?"

"I know, I know—crazy. But I swear to you Paula, all these guys came and went. They were very orderly. They lined up, and one by one, came and stood next to the bed and pressed my hand, touched my arm. I couldn't hear anything they said, but they all wanted to warn me about something. It was like I was very important to them all. Men, all of them very pale, very sad—they *loved* me. I could feel it. It reminded me a little of when kids line up to get my autograph, but much quieter, and much more personal."

"What a weird dream, Alex."

He frowns. "No, it wasn't a dream."

"Of course it was."

"No," he says firmly, "it wasn't. I was wide awake, and you were beside me sleeping the whole time. I was amazed that you didn't wake up."

"You see, that should tell you that it was a dream. I'm a light sleeper. I think I'd have noticed a hundred people passing through our room. How did they get in? Did they just pass through the walls?"

Alex begins twisting his hair nervously. "Yup."

"They passed through the walls?" He nods. "Well, what were they warning you about, could you tell?"

He stops twisting his hair and looks at me. "I could be wrong. Maybe. But I think they were warning me about, well, about you."

"About me? What about me?" I stand up and put my hands on my hips. I put them down, but they return to my hips like homing pigeons, and I just leave them there.

"I don't know. They definitely wanted me to get away from you, though."

"Fuck them! Fucking ghosts! I think it's *them* you need to get away from!"

"I thought you didn't believe me."

"I don't. It's ridiculous, Alex. You were running a fever, remember. Fever dreams can be very vivid. What did they do to make you think they didn't like me? Were they pointing at me?"

"There was some pointing."

This dream of his is no good. But my mind switches tracks, recognizing in his dream a familiar narrative, a map that I have often traced. "God, Alex, do you know what this reminds me of?" I say, sitting on the edge of the bed and grabbing my copy of Keats from the end table. " '*La Belle Dame Sans Merci'*—I read it last night."

"Yeah, I read that. It's about this guy who gets captivated by a woman who isn't really a woman—she's a sort of fairie or demon, or something. They spend an amazing day together, then they fall asleep. He has a dream and all these people warn him about her—they warn him that she will leave him, and when she does, he'll wither and die from longing. Yeah, that's a lot like what happened last night. What's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci'* mean?" he asks.

"The beautiful lady without mercy."

He begins whistling lines from the title track of *Merciless*.

"Uh-huh. Just a minute; I'll find it. It almost seems to describe what eventually happened to Keats—a lot of his friends thought his illness was psychosomatic, because of

being separated from Fannie—the woman he was in love with. Here it is. Okay, listen. This is where they warn him: 'I saw pale kings, and princes too, Pale warriors, death-pale were they all; Who cry'd—"La belle Dame sans merci Hath thee in thrall!"'"

"Hey, now! That's you, baby."

"Don't be silly. That woman was a demon." Alex just narrows his eyes at me and doesn't retract his assertion. "But doesn't that sound like your dream," I continue "the pale men, all different kinds, warning you." I lean over and feel his forehead. He is still burning with fever, his skin waxy, clammy. He may even be worse. I call down to the front desk and quickly explain Alex's condition to the concierge who promises to send a doctor. While I am on the phone Alex lifts the book out of my lap and begins reading the poem, rereading it. When I hang up he looks up from the book. I am looking for that wink, that layer of play that I have come to expect from him, but what I see on his face is unvarnished fear, pain, a wild surmise.

I can't stand it. I stand up and start getting dressed. "Alex, why don't you stay in bed today? The doctor will be here soon. I'm just going to sightsee a little. I'll go to the Keats house today—I know you're not really interested in seeing a bunch of old knick-knacks and letters, anyway. I'll check on you at lunch." I bring him a handful of aspirin and a glass of water. He says he's not hungry, and neither am I. I am thinking about his dream, and what he said about water and Keats, too, somehow, taking different forms.

One of the things that make me such a good rock critic is my ability to see the future of a band in the seeds of their present. It's easy—I don't understand why everyone can't do it. I can tell by listening to the music, reading the lyrics, talking to the band members, who is genuinely talented, who is just a high school buddy who will be

working in a body shop three years on. I can tell when an album is a peak album, like reading a fever. I can tell, most of all, who is the spirit of the band, the one who will go on when this band breaks up and do something better, something permanent. That's Alex. Sometimes I hate this ability. I wish I could be like everyone else, and not see what's coming. I feel claustrophobic in this cluttered little museum and I want to vanish into thin air. I don't want to go back to the hotel room, either. I love Alex, but I will have to go; I am already gone. As I walk along next to the glass cases in the Keats house, looking at his quills, his sketches, his sad little gloves, I am thinking again about negative capability, imagining Alex breaking his fever alone and realizing on his own what I can already see about us.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Nancy. "Some Call It Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity." *The Other Perspective in Gender and Culture: Rewriting Women and the Symbolic*. Ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell. New York: Columbia UP, 1990. Rpt. in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. 2nd ed. Ed. David H. Richter. Boston: Bedford, 1998. 1317-31.

Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.

Bellow, Saul. *Henderson the Rain King*. 1959. New York: Penguin, 1976.

Bloom, Harold. Introduction. Bloom, *Iris Murdoch* 1-7.

--. Ed. *Iris Murdoch*. Mod. Critical Views. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983.

Brennan, Karen. "Dreams, Memory, and the Recovery of Narrative." *Bringing the Devil to His Knees: The Craft of Fiction and the Writing Life.* Ed. Charles Baxter and Peter Turchi. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001. 121-32.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. Preface. *The House of the Seven Gables*. 1851. Rpt. in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Novels*. Ed. Millicent Bell. New York: Library of America, 1983. 351-53.

James, Henry. "Anthony Trollope." *Century Magazine* July1883: 384-95. Rpt. in *Henry James: Literary Criticism—Essays on Literature* 1330-54.

---. "The Art of Fiction." *Longman's Magazine* Sept.1884: 502-21. Rpt. in *Henry James: Literary Criticism—Essays on Literature* 44-65.

---. *Henry James: Literary Criticism—Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*. Ed. Leon Edel. New York: Library of America, 1984.

---. *Henry James: Literary Criticism—French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*. Ed. Leon Edel. New York: Library of America, 1984.

---. Preface. *The Portrait of a Lady*. The New York Edition. 1908. Rpt. in *Henry James: Literary Criticism—French Writers* 1070-85.

---. Preface. *Roderick Hudson*. The New York Edition. 1907. Rpt. in *Henry James: Literary Criticism—French Writers* 1039-52.

Keightley, Keir. "Reconsidering Rock." *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*. Ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 109-42.

May, Charles E. "Metaphoric Motivation in Short Fiction: 'In the Beginning Was the Story.'" *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. Ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. 62-73.

O'Connor, Flannery. "The Nature and Aim of Fiction." *Mystery and Manners* 63-86.

---. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000.

---. "On Her Own Work." *Mystery and Manners* 107-18.

O'Connor, Frank. *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*. 1963. Melville House Classics. Hoboken, NJ: Melville House, 2004.

Ryan, David. "The Art of Fiction CLXVI: Rick Moody." *Paris Review* 158 (2001): 210-228.

Stevens, Wallace. "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad." *Stevens: Collected Poetry And Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997. 81.

VITA

Constance Elizabeth Squires

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy or Other

Dissertation: AMERICAN THIGHS: A SHORT STORY MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Education: BA, University of Oklahoma, English, 1993. MA, University of Central Oklahoma, English, 1999. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree with a major in English at Oklahoma State University in December, 2005.

Experience: Graduate Teaching Assistant, Oklahoma State University, 2001-2005; Lecturer, Oklahoma State University, 2000-2001; Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Central Oklahoma, 1998-1999.

Professional Memberships: Associated Writing Programs, Modern Language Association. Name: Constance E. Squires Date of Degree: December 2005

Institution: Oklahoma State University Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: AMERICAN THIGHS: A SHORT STORY MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Pages in Study: 219 Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: English

Scope and Method of Study: *American Thighs*, consists of short stories written over a four year period (2001-2005). The majority of the stories were written for fiction workshops with Toni Graham and Andrea Koenig. Operating within the genre of the literary short story, the stories feature a range of point of view techniques: first-person, second-person, close-third person, and limited omniscience. They are influenced by numerous authors, from Plato to J.D. Salinger.

Findings and Conclusions: The collection shows allegiance both to the conventions of literary realism, with certain reservations about the definition of the term realism, and an awareness of the requirements and ordering principles of deep story structure. The collection features three specialized areas: the American military family in Europe, alcoholism, music and musicians. Themes of the collection are loneliness, self-definition, the search for home, and the artistic life.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Jeffrey Walker