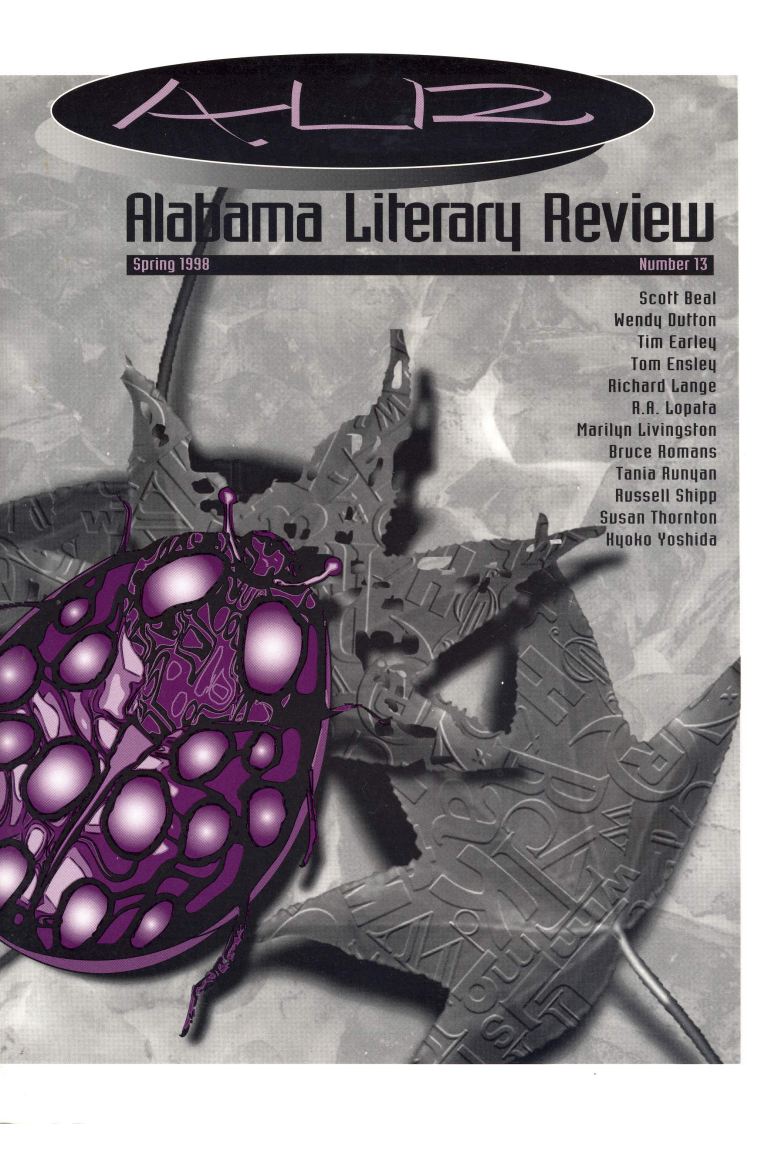
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Alabama Literary Review
Spring 1998
Number 13
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Alabama Literary Review

Spring 1998

Number 13

Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go.

E. L. Doctorow

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The *Staff Honoraria* have made tax deductible contributions to the Troy State University Foundation for support of *Alabama Literary Review*.

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Acknowledgment is made for the Fair Use of E. L. Doctorow's quote, taken from *Good Advice on Writing*, edited by William Safire and Leonard Safire, published by Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Alabama Literary Review is a state literary medium representing local and national submissions, supported by Troy State University and the Troy State University Foundation. Published once a year under the direction of the *Alabama Literary Review* staff, *Alabama Literary Review* is a free service to all public Alabama libraries and all Alabama two and four-year institutions of higher learning. Subscription rates are $10 per year; $5 for back copies. Rates are subject to change without notice.

Alabama Literary Review publishes fiction, poetry, essays and short drama. Essays must follow *MLA Handbook*, third edition. Pays in copies. Pays honorarium when available. First Serial Rights returned to author upon publication. Manuscripts and editorial or business correspondence should be addressed to *Alabama Literary Review*, Smith 253, Troy State University, Troy, Alabama 36082. Submissions will not be returned nor queries answered unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Please allow two or three months for our response. ISSN 0890-1554.

Alabama Literary Review is indexed in *The American Humanities Index* and *The Index of American Periodic Verse.*

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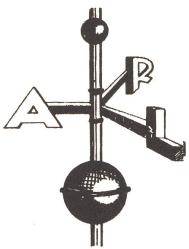
A
P
L

Shark

Tom Ensey

It was night. The damp air held the smell of salt and rotting fish. Mike sat on the dock, drunk, holding a bottle. Across the bay, lights appeared as somebody lit gas lanterns and hung them off a pier. The lights turned into yellow globes as fog rolled down the inlet. People laughed.

Music played loud, distorted in the fog. Mike shivered and took another drink. There was still an inch of booze in the bottle, but Mike was done. He stood and threw the bottle as far as he could. The bottle whistled into the fog, splashed somewhere far out in the bay.

He weaved toward the house. The fog was thick. As he walked, he felt he was disappearing into the fog. He could not be sure if he was walking, or dreaming of walking.

* * *

Mike's father was standing over him, shaking Mike's shoulder and offering a Bloody Mary.

"Come watch something."

Mike got out of bed. He went to the closet and put on a white denim shirt and a pair of jeans. He pulled on his boots and walked out onto the deck. Mike eased himself into the wooden adirondack chair, but his foot slipped and his head hit the back of the chair. The sudden pain closed his eyes. He fought the urge to run to the rail and throw up into the sea oats. He opened his eyes. The morning light hurt his head. He focused on a pair of sunglasses snarled in the rope hammock. Old wraparounds. God knows where they came from. Probably somebody left them from a party last summer.

Mike leaned unsteadily toward the hammock, fumbled the glasses loose, his fingers numb, and put them on. Mike held his head very still and he tipped his chin up, to keep the sun out of his eyes. The glasses and the tilt of his head made him look like Ray Charles, he thought.

His father banged through the screen door and set a tray on the table, under the umbrella. A pitcher of Bloody Marys and two glasses. The umbrella popped in the wind.

"You look like a coyote ate you and shit you over a cliff," said Mike's father.

"It's bad," said Mike. "That's a fact."

Mike drank his bloody mary carefully. His father downed three pretty fast, then went back to the kitchen and came back with a second pitcher and a pair of Nikon binoculars.

"I put more vodka in these."

"What are we waiting for?"

"Patience. Enjoy the morning."

The sky was white and Mike could hear the soft drone of the surf. He drank half his drink then stared at the glass, a tall one with nautical flags. They were supposed to mean things, those flags: hurricane, man overboard, mayday. He didn't have a clue which meant what. The tomato juice left red gritty streaks on the sides of the glass. It looked bad. But he didn't feel sick anymore. His hangover was lifting. He was getting drunk again.

It wouldn't take much after last night. The Christmas Eve party at the country club. Sweet drinks at first. Whiskey sours? Then something brown and thick with whipped cream in it. He wound up on a yacht with the divorced granddaughter of the former Governor of Alabama. They drank tequila.

"How did I get home last night?" Mike asked.

"You called me from a pay phone at the marina and I came and got you in the Lincoln," said Mike's father. "When I got there, you were dozing against a piling and she was sitting on the end of the dock, crying. She had placed several dozen little votive candles around her, and she was throwing the lighted candles in the water, one by one."

"Oh, no," said Mike. "What did I say?"

"I don't know," said Mike's father.

"She seemed okay at the party," said Mike. "What's her name? Denison?"

"Right. Family name. Jacob Denison, her ancestor, was in Jefferson Davis's cabinet. Secretary of . . . something. The treasury?"

"Probably. I bet that's it. The secretary of the Confederate treasury. Eleven dollars, tops."

The wind popped in the umbrella. Mike looked across the bay at a pier. Gas lanterns. He remembered something.

"She was okay before we got to the boat," said Mike. "I was okay before we got to the boat. Then we got in her car and drove to a big boat. She lives on a boat.

"She's pretty. I kissed her at a stoplight. Then we got to this boat and went inside. We sat on a little sofa and kissed some more. Then she got up to get something to drink, and you could feel the boat rock when she walked.

"I didn't like that. I said I didn't like the boat rocking like that. So she said, let's go outside. We sat on the dock. She went in and got all these candles. She lit the candles and set them all around us. She made drinks and we drank them, and we kissed some more.

"I got this real warm feeling, like I maybe trusted her. So I told her about things. The things that are killing me.

"Then she said, 'We're all God. Life is full of miracles,' she said. 'What happens,' she said, 'is because we make it happen.'

"Daddy, I just couldn't take that shit right then. I got ugly. For some reason, I went back inside and she followed me. One thing led to another, and I picked up her coffee table and carried it outside. I don't know why.

"We had this big argument out on the dock, me holding her coffee table and she kept shaking her finger at me. I couldn't stand that. Her shaking her finger at me. So I threw her coffee table into the bay."

"You threw her coffee table into the bay?" Mike's father laughed.

"Yes, I did," said Mike. "That brought our conversation to a close." He filled his glass again.

"Her Daddy doesn't know what to do with her," said Mike's father. "She teaches French at the junior college up in Foley. She lives on his boat, as you say. His yacht.

"She's been married three or four times. After her last divorce, she went to all the bars around here and slept around a lot. She met some little guy at some bar and ended up living with him for a while. He was a shrimper. Real trash. Didn't own the boat or anything. Just some little guy who worked on a shrimp boat. I reckon he thought he had it made. Living on a yacht with the granddaughter of a former governor."

"She's good-looking," said Mike.

"Yeah, she is," said Mike's father. "She brought the poor little bastard to a few parties at the country club. I felt sorry for him. He was a fish out of water."

"So what happened?" Mike asked.

"It went on like that for a while. By and by, he beat her, of course. But just a little, around the eyes. She wore dark glasses all the time." His father reached over and tapped Mike's Ray Charles glasses on the bridge of the nose.

"Sad story, Daddy," said Mike.

"Sad, sad. So now, she's in a spiritual phase. Trying to come to terms with things, I guess."

Mike pressed his fingers into his temples and made circles.

"Well, bless her heart," said Mike. "I'm sorry. Maybe I should call and try to apologize. She read me her poetry."

"Maybe she should apologize to you," said Mike's father. "Last Christmas, she made a tape of herself, reading her poetry, and gave it to people on the island. I think I still have my copy. It had wind chimes and a cello in the background."

The wind popped in the umbrella.

"That was some bad poetry," said Mike's father, pouring another drink. "That tape probably cost a bundle to produce."

"Where'd she get the money?"

"Her family. How do you think she lives on a yacht? It's the family yacht. Her daddy's too old to sail anymore, so he lets her live there."

"How do you know so much about her?" Mike asked.

"They're friends of mine," Mike's father said. "It's a small town."

Mike's father pointed into the white sky, "Look. There it is."

He handed Mike the binoculars. Red, white and blue parachutes drifted out of the sky. The jumpers had devices strapped to their feet that trailed red and green smoke. They weaved back and forth, leaving intertwining smoky trails. They landed in the parking lot of the bar next to the condo across the bay. People were standing in the parking lot.

The jumpers gathered up their chutes. The people scattered when a helicopter landed, an Army Huey, the jet engine whined high and the blades made a *whop, whop, whop* noise. The smoke coiled tight under the blades, then blew away into nothing when the craft touched down. The jumpers unloaded boxes from the chopper and handed them to children in the lot.

"What is this?" said Mike, never taking the binoculars from his eyes.

"It's a Christmas tradition here," said Mike's father. "Christmas morning, the bar there serves free beer in the parking lot and then the presents for the poor children are airdropped in. They send buses out into the county to pick up the kids and their families. The skydivers are dressed as Santa and his helpers. They're soldiers from the Army base, on the mainland."

"Don't alcoholics show up and get blasted on the free beer?" Mike said.

"Sure, but they're the people who paid for the buses and the presents in the first place," said Mike's father. "A few of the parents get a little loopy. But the cops are everywhere. All the cops come and bring their families. It's a family thing."

"My God," said Mike. "An exclusive, help-the-needy, free beer party. This is a decadent little town, Daddy. The poor children probably grow up worshipping helicopters. Little cargo cultists."

"You're a cynic shit." Mike's father blinked his old, gray eyes and tried to smile.

Mike picked up the binoculars and looked across the bay. Gray-haired men in bright sweaters stood in groups. They had big, white styrofoam cups in their hands. The paratrooper playing Santa Claus was young and muscular under his red suit. The poor children jumped up and down. They clapped their hands. Then Mike's eyes burned and it all went blurry.

Mike lowered the binoculars, reached behind the sunglasses with a finger and wiped his eyes.

"What time is it, Daddy?"

His father looked at his watch. "Ten thirty."

"How much vodka do we have left?"

"Merry Christmas, son," said Mike's father. They shook hands.

"I'll go get the vodka," said Mike.

"You're drinking too much, son."

"I know, Daddy."

"I don't guess you feel like going over there?" said Mike's father. "I usually put in an appearance."

"There are children," said Mike.

* * *

Mike's father walked down to the dock and got in the boat. Mike felt bad, watching him go like that. His father still moved with a hurried walk, but his knees were stiff from arthritis, and though he was still a big man, he had actually shrunk — maybe three inches in the last couple of years. Mike's father was dying. He had cancer. He was receiving treatment three times a week that would give him a 50-50 chance of living five more years.

His father's head was big but his neck had gotten thin and stuck out of the bulky green Irish fisherman's sweater he always wore in winter. Mike's mother made it and gave it to Mike's father the last Christmas she was alive. Leaning into the wind, Mike's father looked like any old man at the beach.

Mike felt a sudden fear: breathlessness and a flutter in his chest.

When Mike was a little boy, his father's company had a baseball team that played on Saturdays in Birmingham's corporate league. They were playing another steel mill's team at a crappy old ball field in the back of his father's factory yard. Scrap metal and rusted truck motors in the outfield. The smell of molten metal and orange smoke in the sky.

Mike wasn't paying attention to the game. He was watching some children playing in the bleachers when the batter lined a foul that hit him in the face.

Watching his father clamber over the dock and into the boat, Mike felt exactly as he had when the baseball hit him, in the instant before he lost consciousness. Something bad was happening, but what? What was this pain?

When Mike woke up in the hospital, his father stood over him. There was dried blood on his white Brook's Brothers polo shirt, and on his face. Also, blood was all over Mike.

"You remember getting hit?" said Mike's father.

"Yes, Daddy. You're all bloody."

"I picked you up and ran here."

"Ran here?"

"There was traffic and the car was blocked in the parking lot."

It was over a mile.

The boat pulled away. It was a Stouderbilt. Made in Mobile by Mr. Stouder and his sons specifically for the shallow bays and bayous of South Alabama. It rode on top of the water like a cork, and Mike's father did not look back as he gave it the gas and the boat shot across the water.

Mike's breath came in short gasps, and it was a minute before he realized he was sobbing.

He went inside, dumped the ice in his glass into the sink, and filled the glass with straight vodka. He took off the sunglasses, dropped them on the kitchen floor and ground them slowly under the heel of his boot.

It was the first time he had been alone in the house since he came there after his divorce. Two weeks. It seemed longer.

Mike went into the living room, sat on the sofa. Some of his mother's paperback books were still on the coffee table. Mike's mother had loved any book with a pirate on the cover. A pirate embracing a beautiful girl in a falling-off dress. A pirate stabbing another pirate on the deck of a burning ship. An unfinished sweater was still on the mantle. Yellow and black yarn, two big needles sticking up out of it. Right where she'd left it. She was working on it when she died. How long was it? Two years?

He picked up the portable phone, pulled out the antenna with his teeth and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Steve? That you?"

"Yes."

"This is Mike."

A long pause.

"Merry Christmas, Stever, old man."

"Merry Christmas, Mike."

"Is your lovely sister-in-law and my former spouse, Marilyn there?"

Mike lit a cigarette, then flicked the lighter on and off, closing one eye and watching the flame.

"No, Mike. She's not."

"Where is she?"

Mike held the lighter up to his ear and touched the gas release tab, listening to the hiss of the escaping gas.

"She and Doris have gone to the cemetery."

"Oh?" Mike flicked the lighter on and held the flame close to his eye. "To visit the grave?"

"Mary's grave. Yeah."

"Decorating it, I bet."

"Yes. They bought some flowers. Some Christmas things. You know."

"Yes. She got me to drive out there with her earlier this year. On Halloween. We put a bunch of plastic pumpkins and stuff on the grave. I didn't do very well, Steve. Maybe it was too soon after it happened. I told her I didn't want to go, but she pouted and all, and guilt-tripped me. So I went. Steve, the grave was sinking. All graves sink, the dirt settles and stuff. But little kids' graves sink real badly, because the vault's very small, you understand? There's more room for the dirt to go down . . . to pack down into . . . You follow?"

"Yeah, I follow."

"Well...I lost it a little bit. I left poor old Marilyn there at the cemetery and I drove to the hardware store and bought a shovel. And I came back and started shovelling up half the cemetery to try to fill up the holes over Mary's grave. Marilyn was saying, 'Stop it! stop it!'"

"It was crazy, I know. And I was sober as a judge, man, I swear. But damn it, Steve, what would you do?"

"I don't know, Mike. I don't know what I'd do in a situation like that."

"Well, I guess I fucked that up, too. Like I fuck up everything else." Mike lit another cigarette.

"You there?" Mike said.

"I'm listening," said Steve.

"Well, I just don't understand all that," Mike said. "Rituals of grief. I went with her to put plastic pumpkins on Mary's grave, even though I didn't want to. That ought to count for something. But when we got there, the grave was all fucked up. You'd think she could have cut me some slack when I bought a shovel and started filling up holes. She was trying to deal with it, and I was trying to deal with it. Oh, well. Whatever. I guess I just don't get it."

Mike put his feet on the coffee table and knocked some books and magazines on the floor. He leaned forward and tried to straighten things while he talked. "But it's good what they're doing. If it makes them feel better."

"Mike, are you all right?"

"No, Stever. I'm a long fucking way from all right. I'm not well. Very unwell, as a matter of fact. But I wanted to call and say Merry Christmas... We're at the beach, Daddy and I. The house at the beach?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Yeah, y'all came here once. Right after Mama died and Daddy sold the big house in Birmingham and moved in down here. Summer, a couple of years ago. You and Doris, me and Marilyn. All the way from Philadelphia. We left the kids with Doris and Marilyn's folks? Remember?"

"I remember," said Steve.

"You remember the first night? How you and Daddy and Marilyn got drunk and went to bed, and me and Doris went out on the boat and got lost and didn't make it back until the next day? Jesus, I thought we'd never make it back. How's old Doris and the kids?"

"Doris and the kids are fine."

"That whole trip turned into a fucking nightmare. Another family trauma. Marilyn got all pissy over the boat thing and you and Doris didn't have a real good time. Daddy and I stayed drunk, and that pissed Marilyn off, but I think she never understood that's what we do at the beach. And of course, I said some things that pissed everybody off, as is my habit. We needed Mama here to chill everybody out, our great ambassador, the bridge between reason and unreason. But poor old Mama was dead. She couldn't help being dead. I'm sure she wouldn't have died if she had known all the problems it would cause."

"Mike."

"Right, no use bringing up all that old shit. Doris is good people, Stever boy. So are you. I always liked you, back in college. Nobody else did, but I did. You were this smart, beer drinking, pre-med fucker who never got laid. I liked you."

"Mike, you're fucked up."

"I was born fucked up, doctor. Screw you." Mike lit another cigarette. He took a big swallow of vodka and it made him feel mean.

"Tell me, Steve. Old Doris doesn't look a thing like her sister, my ex, do you think? Doris is better-looking."

"What's that supposed to mean, Mike?"

"Nothing, nothing. Doris isn't as smart as Marilyn, but she's definitely better-looking. Especially in a swimsuit. She has bigger titties, Doris does. Big old titties. And her nose is straighter. And how about that tatoo? You wouldn't think she's the kind of girl who'd get a tatoo there. I knew Doris before I knew Marilyn, you know? I knew her before I knew you. Doris was my fraternity's sweetheart when I introduced you two. I got her elected."

"Mike, for Christ's sake."

"Right! Steve, the weather!" said Mike. "Let me tell you about the weather, Steve. It's brisk but not too cold. Kind of cloudy. But it's nice. The beach is nice in the winter, Steve. The ocean is gray and boily, waves tipped with dirty foam. And the sea birds hardly shit at all."

"Where's your father, Mike? Can I speak to him?"

"No. He's gone to a charity thing across the bay. Some parachutes landed. I'm here alone. I'm doing nothing. I thought I'd call. Is this okay? You aren't saying much."

"You're drunk."

"Right."

"Are you drinking all the time?"

"Pretty much."

"That's why Marilyn left, Mike."

"Wrong! Wrong, Steve! Marilyn left because there was no fucking reason in the world for us to be together after Mary died." Mike snapped his cigarette across the room, missing the fireplace. The cigarette sparked against the wall, smoldered on the rug.

"Mike, you can't believe that. Marilyn doesn't believe that, either. But she doesn't know what she thinks, any more than you know what you think. Get some help, Mike. You both need help. There are ways to get help."

"Brother-in-law," said Mike. "No, excuse me. Ex-brother-in-law. You are so right. You are always right. Physician to the stars. What a wise man you are. What a natural-born healer. We need help. We need your help, Great Healer. Let me tell you what you can do to help, Steve."

Mike took a big swallow of vodka. "Get a hammer. There used to be one in the tool box in the basement. Go down to the basement and get that hammer. When Marilyn comes back from placing ornaments on the grave of our departed child, wait until she has gone to sleep. Then creep into her bedroom and hit her one time, hard, between the eyes, so it won't hurt.

"Then, get on a fucking plane. I will give you my credit card number. Get a fucking ticket, Steve, but bring the hammer. That's important. Promise you'll bring the hammer. Fly here. Rent a car. Use the card number to rent the fucking car. My treat. Drive to the beach house. Remember how to get here? I will wait here for you. When you arrive, take the hammer and hit me between the eyes with everything you've got. One time. That would help, Steve. That would help a lot."

"Mike, I don't know what to say to you, anymore."

"There's nothing more for you to say, Steve. But I have something to say to you. I am a way you'll never be. I'm in a place you will never go, and I have learned something here. So I know something you don't know, and I must tell it to you."

"Mike . . ."

"Steve. Listen. There's a certain freedom that comes only with the knowledge that you are totally fucked. A terrible freedom. Whoa! My drink is empty."

Silence.

"Look, Steve, I'm sorry," Mike said. "I'm okay, now. I'm okay. You're a good guy. I mean it. I miss you and I miss Marilyn. I miss Doris. She's a good girl. I miss your kids . . . I miss Mary."

Mike's voice cracked.

"You probably don't understand, but I miss all of you. I'm sorry . . . I regret the way things turned out...Forgive me."

Silence.

"We're down here at the beach, and I just wanted to call and say Merry Christmas. I'll let you go now. Please tell Marilyn I called and I said hello."

"Mike..."

"Steve. One last favor. Don't tell her any of the other shit I said."

* * *

Mike got up a little too fast and had to stand still until he felt straight again. Then he walked across the hardwood floor, conscious of his boot heels echoing in the empty house, and found his wallet on his bedroom floor. He found his keys. He put his wallet in his hip pocket. He fumbled with the keys until he found the keys to the Lincoln. He put the ignition key in his mouth, so he could find it easily. The key to his father's big, black, fifteen-year-old Lincoln, with the V-8 engine. It was as big as a house, that Lincoln, and it would haul ass. It was like doing 120 miles an hour sitting in your living room. But it had authority. The cops left it alone. The perfect car for DUI.

He found his leather jacket on the back of a chair, put it on. He walked to the kitchen. He put the vodka bottle in his jacket pocket. Soon, he would have to find the marina.

But first, he would need a gift. It was Christmas morning. There would be no stores open. Any gift would have to come from right here. He looked around the room. He got one of his mother's pirate books and put it in his jacket pocket. On the floor by the fireplace, there was a flashlight. A good one. A big, black, metal flashlight. About three feet long. Ideal for hurricanes when the lights went out, but also large and heavy and suitable for swinging as a club. He wedged the flashlight into the back pocket of his jeans.

But this was not enough. This was inadequate recompense for the Christmas pain he had inflicted the night before on a confused but kind young woman who had perhaps at some point in the evening considered fucking him.

The coffee table. Here was a coffee table of great quality. His mother had bought it years ago. His mother knew good furniture. This coffee table was mahogany or cherry or something good and very expensive. His mother never bought cheap furniture. Certainly anyone who had recently had their own

coffee table thrown into the bay would appreciate such a first rate replacement. It was the perfect Christmas gift, coupled with a pirate novel and a flashlight.

So Mike picked up the coffee table and shook it, scattering magazines and ashtrays on the floor. The coffee table weighed a ton. He carried it out the front door to the Lincoln, put it in the back seat.

* * *

The marina wasn't far. Just over the bridge. A long, high bridge. The clouds had cleared, and it was a blue and sparkling Christmas afternoon. He stretched the Lincoln out. It would fly. There was no traffic, so he used all four lanes. As he raced toward the top of the bridge, Mike momentarily considered turning the wheel and soaring into the bay. But there was a concrete abutment that even the Lincoln couldn't have blasted through. And he had a debt to pay.

Mike parked the Lincoln at the marina. There were only a few boats docked at this time of year. He spotted Denison's yacht without much trouble. Hers was the only one with twinkling red Christmas lights draped across the bow.

He rearranged the flashlight and the pirate book into pockets. He wrestled the coffee table out of the back seat, then he stumbled down the dock to her door, carrying the coffee table. He kicked the door.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he said. "Merry Christmas!"

He kicked the door.

A short young man opened the door.

"Well, hello," said Mike. "Is Denison here? Merry Christmas, my friend."

"Who are you?" said the short man.

"I am Mike, bearer of coffee tables and other fine things. Is Denison here? I would like to see her. And what is your name? Merry Christmas, fucker."

Mike leaned in close. He bumped the coffee table against the short man's chest. Denison appeared in the door behind the short man.

"Let him in," she said.

"Thank you," said Mike. He walked carefully, weaving the coffee table through the narrow door. The boat rocked when he stepped inside.

"Y'all catchin' a lotta them shrimp?" Mike pushed the coffee table into the short man's chest. "Please move. I would like to speak to our mutual friend without you between us."

The short man stepped to one side.

"Denison," he said. "I have brought for you on Christmas Day a coffee table."

Mike set the table on the floor.

"This is to replace the one I pitched into the bay last night. I am sure you will agree, this is a far superior coffee table to the one that now sleeps with the fishes. In addition, I have brought other fine things. But first, I must know the name of this fine fellow."

"John," said the short man.

"John," said Mike, shaking John's hand. John's hand was hard and dry and calloused. "Pleased to meet you."

John squeezed Mike's hand as hard as he could. Mike smiled.

"Well, down to business," said Mike. Still holding John's hand and squeezing back, hard. "This coffee table is yours, now, Dension. You will need it. You will certainly need it more than I ever will. When I have left your life forever, Denison, evaluate this coffee table at your leisure and remember me with kindness. I am sure you will conclude that it is a coffee table of surpassing quality," he dropped John's hand. "Merry Christmas, Denison and John. Do you have any booze?"

"You don't need any booze," said Denison.

"That's where you're wrong," said Mike. "Nevertheless, I like you, Denison. I appreciate all you tried to do for me. And because of that, Denison, here is a pirate novel, just for you. It was enjoyed at one time by my dead mother," he took the book out of his pocket and dropped it on the coffee table.

"She liked this sorta shit. There is no accounting for her dubious literary taste. I can't explain it, and refuse to try to do so."

"Mike," said Denison.

"Look, man," said John. "Cut it out."

"John," said Mike. "Don't fuck with me. It's Christmas." Mike put his hand on John's shoulder and squeezed, hard.

"Denison, dear, it's you I'm speaking to," said Mike. He turned loose of John's shoulder. "Please inform John that he is of no consequence in this exchange."

Mike took the flashlight out of his back pocket and held it like a club.

"Finally, Denison, here is a large and very heavy flashlight. A five cell maglight. The best made. You ever seen one of these, John boy?"

John glared at Mike.

"Alabama State Troopers favor this flashlight. Because it's highly functional in two ways very important to their profession and to all of mankind if you ask me. You can use it to see the way, or you can knock fuckers' brains out with it."

Mike turned the flashlight on, shined it in John's face. Then he punched John in the stomach with it. Then he handed the flashlight to John. "Merry Christmas, John," said Mike. "This is for you."

"I think you'd better leave," said John.

"John, you little pussy," said Mike. "Would you like to hit me with that flashlight? Go ahead."

Mike put his hands behind his back and closed his eyes.

"Take your best shot," Mike said.

Five seconds passed . . . ten . . . fifteen. . . . Mike opened his eyes.

"I didn't think so," Mike smiled sadly at John and shook his head. "Denison, pal. I'm sorry to put you through this. It was not my intention when I came here. But I'm all right now. Really, I'm okay. I'm calm. I better leave. Merry Christmas...I gotta go."

Mike took off his leather jacket.

"Here, John, you can have this. You like it?"

Mike held out the jacket. John held the flashlight.

"It's kinda big. But I think it's you." Mike tossed the jacket onto the sofa.

"Forgive me. Enjoy your coffee table, Denison. And remember, baby. We're all God. Everything that happens is because we made it happen.

"Isn't that right, John?"

John held the flashlight. Mike touched his fingers to his lips and blew a kiss.

* * *

Mike roared down the beach road in the Lincoln, drinking the rest of the vodka. The day began to fade. The dotted line rolled under the Lincoln. He rolled down the window. A green road sign. Mike threw the bottle at the sign.

The sky was purple. He parked in front of the public pier. It extended a quarter mile out into the Gulf of Mexico. He stumbled through the shell and sand parking lot. He sat down in the sand and took off his boots. He took off his socks and put them into the tops of his boots. He picked up the boots and socks and carried them down the pier. He stopped and dropped them over the railing, they disappared into the darkness and he heard a splash. He walked down the pier, barefooted, toward a glow.

At the end of the pier, there was a big man. He stood with his back to Mike, fishing. The man had on a plaid shirt, a ball cap and a pair of jeans. He worked a long rod with a reel the size of a ham. There was a white leather belt around his waist and two straps crossed behind his back and went over his shoulders, like suspenders. He looked like a Mexican soldier. Behind him, a fire burned in a 55-gallon drum, throwing red light and dancing shadow on the man's big back. The butt of the rod fitted into a holster on his stomach. He cranked the reel, and it whirred.

"Hello," Mike said. "I saw your fire. What up?"

"Hey," said the man. He worked the reel. "I'm fishing for sharks."

"Well," said Mike. "That's something different to do on Christmas night."

"Ain't it, though?"

"What's the deal?" said Mike. "How's it work? Got any whiskey?"

"Got some beer in the cooler," said the man. "Get you one."

"Thanks," said Mike. He opened the cooler and got a beer. "Nice fire." He warmed himself.

"I like to keep a good fire," the man said. "You never know what might stumble up. Do you?"

"No," said Mike. "So show me the deal with the fishing stuff." He suddenly felt very drunk.

"Here's how it works," said the man. "You tie an empty gallon milk jug onto your line. You put the top on it, and tie the line through the handle. That's like a bobber. You follow?"

"Yeah," said Mike, drinking the man's beer.

"But first," said the man. "You drive around neighborhoods until you catch a cat. Or even better, one of them little dogs. What you call 'em?"

"Dogs?"

"Little bitty dogs," said the man. "Trembling dogs. Skinny. No hair. They bite a lot."

"Chihuahuas?" said Mike.

"That's it," said the man. "Chihuahuas. I got lucky and got one tonight. Look at this."

The man showed his right hand. It was scabbed over with fresh, red scars.

"Damn," said Mike.

"They're some biting little bastards, those Chihuahuas," the man said.

"What you do with 'em?" said Mike.

"Well, I hope you're not squeamish. What's your name?"

"Mike. What's yours?"

"Buddy. Call me Buddy." Buddy's face seemed to be scarred in the red flicker of the fire, like a healed over burn. The left eye pinned Mike while the other wandered off.

"'Kay, Buddy. Whatcha do with the dogs?" Mike finished his beer.

"Have another one," said Buddy. "Well, then you need a number thirty one bronze hook with a barb. Ever seen a number thirty-one bronze hook?"

Mike shook his head.

"It's about yay big." Buddy held his hands a foot apart.

"Big ass hook," said Mike.

"Oh, yeah," said Buddy, working the reel, twitching the rod, cranking the reel, looking out to sea. "Well, you slip that hook real easy through the skin behind the dog's neck."

"Oh, Jesus," said Mike.

"Thought you said you wasn't squeamish."

"I wasn't ready for that."

"Hand me a beer," said Buddy. "Thanks. If you chum up the water good, they don't suffer long. That gallon milk jug helps 'em stay afloat. They paddle like little sonsabitches. like a top-water jig. You ever been bass fishing?"

"Yeah," said Mike.

"Same thing."

The line began to sing out of the reel. Buddy flipped on the drag. The rod bent double.

"Big 'un," said Buddy. "Want to take it?"

Mike put down his beer. "Yeah."

"Get ready," said Buddy. "He'll pull you in."

"I'm ready," said Mike.

Buddy handed Mike the rod and reel. The first jerk almost pulled Mike's shoulders out of the sockets.

"Keep you elbows in," said Buddy. "It's all technique."

Mike pulled his elbows into his sides.

"Turn the crank every chance you get," said Buddy, sitting down next to the cooler. "Let the drag wear him out. But if he gives you the least bit of slack, kick his ass. That's how you do it."

The rod almost jumped out of Mike's hands and the line whirred out of the reel so fast it smoked. But then the line went slack. Mike pulled his elbows in and reeled madly.

"You got it," said Buddy. "That's the way."

The shark made another run and almost pulled Mike off the pier.

"Careful, now," said Buddy. "You fall in, I ain't comin' in after you. All his buddies is down there. They'll eat him first, 'cause he's bleeding from the hook. Then they'll eat you. That's why you need to get him in quick. Once he gets to bleeding, the other ones smell it and eat him. They can't help it. It's instinct."

Buddy cranked the reel.

Mike needed Buddy's help to get the shark up onto the pier. The shark was six or seven feet long. Two hundred pounds. A hammerhead. It thrashed around, the great jaws snapped.

"Careful," said Buddy. "They bite out of the water as good as in. Put your foot on the back of his neck. Put all your weight on him. He's big, but if you pin him just right, it'll paralyze him."

Mike put his bare foot on the back of the shark's neck. The shark's skin was cold and rough, like wet sandpaper. The shark struggled. Mike put all his weight on the shark's neck.

"What now?" said Mike.

"Lemme show you what now," said Buddy.

Buddy pulled a snub nosed .38 calibre revolver out of his jeans' pocket. He handed the gun to Mike. The firelight glinted red off the cylinder and Mike's hand.

"You caught him," Buddy said. "Now shoot him. Right between the eyes. His brain's about the size of a walnut. You got to hit him right there or it'll just piss him off."

Mike looked at the gun, red and heavy in his hand.

"Don't fuck around," said Buddy, firing the empty bottle into the sea, opening the cooler, getting another.

Buddy twisted off the top of the beer, took a drink.

"Kill his ass, Mike."

The shark bucked against Mike's heel.

Mike leaned down quickly and put the barrel of the gun between the shark's eyes. He pulled the trigger. Shark blood exploded everyhere. The shark twitched and lay still.

Mike wiped his face. His eyes were full of shark blood.

"Damn. I forgot to warn you about the splatter factor," said Buddy.

Mike wiped his hair back. His hair was plastered to his head with shark blood. Mike wiped his face with his hand. He couldn't open his eyes, so he unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. He wiped his face and wiped the blood out of his eyes with his shirt. Then put his shirt back on, buttoned it and opened his eyes. He rubbed his eyes.

"Buddy, you bastard." Mike said. "That shit stings."

"Well," said Buddy. "You did good. Want another beer?"

"Yeah," said Mike. He sat down. Buddy opened the cooler and tossed him a beer.

They drank their beer and looked at the dead shark. The blood pooled around the big, broken head, reflecting black and silver. The blood looked terrible and familiar.

"You want him?" said Buddy.

"What the fuck am I going to do with him?" said Mike.

"Eat him?"

"Nah," said Mike. "I don't want him."

"Kay," said Buddy, "Give me a hand."

He stood up and grabbed the shark by the tail.

"Well?"

Mike stood up and grabbed the shark behind the gills. They wrestled him to the end of the pier, threw him into the water. The water began to boil.

"Let's drink all the beer," said Buddy.

"Good idea," said Mike.

* * *

It was morning. Mike woke up on the pier. He opened his eyes and pain lanced through his brain. He tried to swallow but his mouth was sticky and tasted of blood. His wallet and keys were gone. So were the cooler and the fire drum. But there was one hot, unopened beer standing beside his head. He opened it and took a mouthful. He spat black and orange foam onto the dock. Then he threw up into the ocean. He threw up for a long time. He stood and walked unsteadily to the parking lot. The Lincoln was gone.

He stumbled down the beach road toward a yellow sign shaped like a shell. The roadside was covered with broken shells and sharp stones and his feet were bleeding when he walked onto the convenience store parking lot. He saw a blue payphone sign beside the door. Okay, he thought. Okay. His hair and shirt were plastered down with dried, black shark blood and he left red, bloody footprints on the linoleum as he walked up to the cash register and leaned against the counter. The girl at the counter looked on, terrified. She was eighteen, if that.

"Can I borrow a quarter?" Mike said. "I need to get home. I think I'm very sick." ◆

A True Vision

Tim Earley

I walk down the street and everyone is dying.
I realize this is not a true vision--it's remembering.
Every pair of feet will be traded for a headstone
or an anonymous locker in a morgue, or help grace
an urn with ash. Or become lost. Most of us
will be fortunate enough to interrupt or
sadden the lives of a small circle of mourners,
before they form a coal-black train themselves
and chug off, a boy wearing a tie for the first time
zig-zagging behind them, an unconvinced caboose.
On the street I resist the temptation to make
this announcement: *Time is running out, let's retreat to the hills
and lead idyllic lives*. Notice--no exclamation.
Retreat instead of *flee*. I abstain from collapsing,
from rushing to hug everyone I see, hoping that whatever
may constitute a true vision may also constitute grace--
I walk down the street and try again and everyone
is a miracle beautifully unfolding through a body
that cannot hold it. I'll live with that one awhile.
You think of something, too.

■

Spring Sleepers

Kyoko Yoshida

The most fearsome part of the sickness of insomnia was not the impossibility of sleeping, for the body did not feel any fatigue at all, but its inexorable evolution toward a more critical manifestation: a loss of memory.
—Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Spring had come. As an eighth century poet from Hubei on Chang Jiang River sang, spring sleepers never see the dawn. Spring is the time to drop off into an endless doze under the gentle brush of the low sunlight through soundless whips and snaps of the cotton gauze curtains. Outside, the cherry blossoms were snowing, carpeting the surface of the ponds, streets, and meadows. The hills blushed powdery pink. The skylines of the mountains were dim, blurred from the dusty Western breeze which brought the powder-fine loess from the Gobi. The smells of ashes, misty rains and shy violets under snappy clover flowers and the Chinese milk vetch blended the spring perfume. A speedwell, a germander, *Veronica didyma, Veronica persica*. The soil was soft, warm, damp and ready to suckle the seeds and the roots.

The garcons in white cotton Mao jackets opened all the windows half way before the club was open. Occasional flurries of pearly pink cherry petals strayed into the smoking room. The wind was still chilly. The last hot *sake* of the year and the warm plum wine were served in Portuguese hand-blown cups. The low whispers of gossip and grief were muffled behind the drapes of the scarlet velvet curtains. The only clear sound was the click of the Portuguese glasses. The purple-gray smoke of cigars and pipe tobacco mingled in the air, swirled up to the balcony, and exposed the paths of the afternoon sunlight.

Up on the balcony were two young men: Yuki was sitting on a cherry-wood chair sipping soda with a blue striped straw, and Haru was sighing and licking the edge of the icy martini glass with the tip of his thin tongue. Then he put the glass away on the Chinese side table and leaned against the rail at his back, twisting his narrow trunk in his violet kimono with a silver-gray sash to listen to what those downstairs were chatting about.

The conversation in the club that evening was about insomnia. The gentlemen were boasting with each other who slept the less. Haru's black straight hair dropped to hide his pale profile. He turned away, then pulled a lattice-worked sandalwood fan out of his kimono sleeve. He gradually spread the fan as he held it in front of his heart. His movement was so flowing that Yuki did not notice the fan until the fresh scent of white sandalwood tickled his nostrils a few seconds after the fan became fully open. Yuki unbuttoned the collar of his dress shirt. The perfumes of Caribbean tobacco and the sandalwood made him do so. Haru started to click-clack the hardwood floor, the parquetry of windmill stars, with his pearl-enameled sandal toe.

"I haven't slept for eleven days. This'll be my twelfth night. I always have a slight nausea around midnight that prevents me from sleeping," Haru grieved.

"Oh well." Yuki shrugged. "Don't worry, I haven't slept for two months and I've been feeling great."

"Two months?" Haru raised his right eyebrow with a disgusted look. His amber ringed hand holding the sandalwood fan dangled. He looked at Yuki: this large-boned, stiff, simple-looking (and also probably simple-minded), rich, boring, young chap hadn't slept for two months?

"I don't care," Yuki said cheerfully, "As long as I feel fine. I am far healthier than ever before."

Haru spread his fan again, this time in front of his soft, long face, sidling away from Yuki.

"Don't you touch me, Yuki." Though his whispering voice was tender. "You'd better see your doctor." Then he left and did not speak another word to Yuki for the rest of the evening.

* * *

"That is genuine insomnia."

At last Dr. Goto spoke, the next morning, after lighting up Yuki's pupils, knocking his chest, searching his belly, hitting his knees, sniffing his urine, et cetera. "It infects by physical contact. Any definite cure has not been discovered yet. All I can do for you is to introduce you to a sanatorium. Go there. Here's a return trip ticket. And remember: do not touch anyone."

The doctor squeezed his hands into a pair of latex gloves and handed a piece of paper to Yuki. It was the air ticket, which had a perforated line in the middle, dividing the "AWAY" side and the "HOME" side. On the back was an advertisement of a sheep counting machine. Yuki thanked Dr. Goto and left the clinic. The doctor saw him off at the door.

If you spend time in a sanatorium, you need some summer clothes, for it must be located in a place of warm climate. Yuki stood gazing down into an empty suitcase spread open on his bed, raking together the scattered fragments of unseen recuperational images. Sunshine but cool under the green shades. Breeze from mountains, zephyr from the sea. Transparent lake water. Stars in the evening blue-crimson spectrum. Loneliness. Exchanges of rubbish words with a retired man. Occasional visits of remote acquaintances. Sunbathing in early morning in his babyblue pin striped cotton night shirt. A walk along a path in pine woods. The hypnotizing laps of waves far from the bottom of the night. He needed a pair of Turkish leather slippers, a pair of linen pants, a panama hat, a pique polo shirt, sun-tan lotion, a long, long sleeping shirt and books to read for one thousands nights and one night to come without sleep.

Yuki carefully lined up the things on the edge of his star-quilt-covered mission bed in order of the colors. Then he walked around in the bedroom for a while until he added a light woollen cardigan as the last item just in case. After a light lunch of toast with butter and marmalade and black tea in his breakfast room, he told his dead grandfather's butler Gen'ichiro that he was going to visit his friend in the South who had just lost his wife and needed company to share her memories.

"I won't be back for a while. Take care, Gen'ichiro." Yuki wanted to pat Gen'ichiro's shoulder, but he refrained.

Yuki walked out of the front door, seen by two housemaids—both had worked so long for his family that they looked like identical twins—and three Borzois, one white, one black and white, and one almost black, and Gen'ichiro. His mind was clearer, his footsteps lighter, and his heart merrier. It was strange to think that he was heading to a sanatorium. He trotted to the airport humming Hawaiian songs, rolling along the skyblue suitcase, grasping his air ticket in the other hand.

It was a weekday. The airport was rather empty. As Yuki checked in, a compact woman in a tight navy suit swiftly slid out from behind the counter. "Mr. Minami? My name is Barbie. Dr. Goto asked me to attend you on board. Please follow me. Oh, don't check in your suitcase, sir. You must carry it with you."

Barbie walked so fast that Yuki had to run to catch up with her once every minute. His suitcase became heavier and heavier. He tripped over it several times before they reached gate Q49. Yuki wiped his forehead gasping for breath. She had never turned back to see him. Barbie opened the gate immediately with a frozen commercial smile, which was perpetually carved on the lower part of her face.

The aircraft was a jumbo jet. There was no one inside. Before Yuki seated himself, Barbie locked the exit, and the aircraft was in smooth motion.

"Aren't there any other passengers on board?"

"No." Barbie replied merrily, "This aircraft is specially chartered for you, sir."

Barbie looked at Yuki, whose face froze at this information.

"Oh my," said the stewardess with a carefully-made cute voice, "Haven't you heard that?"

Yuki said nothing. Soon Barbie disappeared into the cabin galley. As the gravity pressed Yuki into his seat, his skyblue suitcase, which was too bulky to put on the shelf, began to skid. By the time he stood up to hold it, it was rolling, roaring. The plane took off the ground, Yuki lost balance, and he and his suitcase tumbled down the aisle to the stern restroom. Barbie poked her head out of the galley curtain for a second, gave him a cheerleading, but not cheering, smile, and went back to her work. Yuki crawled back to his seat, number 2B, leaving the suitcase behind. Rubbing his limbs and head, he felt caves and spongy nubs on his skull.

Barbie reappeared out of the galley in her white chef outfit with a tall cook hat, freshly powdered. She cat-walked toward Yuki and handed him a menu.

Meal on board is the highlight of flight. Yuki's mouth watered as he opened the menu, which was written, however, in wriggling letters he had never seen before. The structure of the menuscript told him that the meal consisted of six parts. That was all he could guess. Yuki gazed through the strange letters, among which he most admired a flowery letter, a composition of four circles, or rather four balloons tied together at the center, like a rose, or a cross. Barbie came back pushing the drink wagon. Yuki asked for a glass of fresh orange juice. She cut three oranges into six hemispheres and squeezed them in front of him. She served it with a straw, at which Yuki began to stare intensely. He pinched the delicate plastic tube covered with fragile paper out of her hand. "What do you want me to do with this thing?"

Right away, Barbie grabbed the thing and put it back in her pocket, saying, "Never mind." And she went away. Yuki and his orange juice were left behind. He grabbed and drained the glass.

The meal was fine, but did not make him drowsy. Yuki sat upright in the seat, staring at the stars outside the window. Meanwhile, Barbie came back in her dragging pink negligee and curlers, holding a ruffled pillow under her arm.

"Good night, sir." She rubbed her eyes, still keeping her smile. Informing him that she would present him an audiovisual entertainment tomorrow after breakfast, she retired into the cabin.

Yuki wanted to ask her how many hours they would fly, where they were heading, and if it was not a direct flight, where and when they would stop. At least he could ask when the breakfast would be served. But he always had trouble asking for such information casually. Before he calmed down his heart to ask her, the low vibration of her snore trailed down the aisle from the cabin to his seat.

* * *

John Huston's *Moby Dick* was the only movie on board. When the credits appeared on the twelve monitors for the twelfth time, Yuki politely asked Barbie in her movie theater apparel if she could put off the program and she was nice enough to do so. Yuki patiently waited for the moment the sand would get into his wide-open eyes without a blink. The sandman did not come. He rested his head on his arms folded on the tray attached to the back of his front seat. Through the 10 x 8 windows on his right, he saw no light. The aircraft was chasing the night. It was always in the dark hemisphere. The waning moon and glittering stars led the plane. There was no indication of time's passing except the waxing and waning and Barbie's regular disappearances into and reappearances from the cabin. Barbie said three good-nights to Yuki in her three night costumes. By the time he saw the city lights for the first time, after the three days' sitting, every fiber of his muscles was in a state of rigor.

The city was on the water—whether a river, a lake or the sea, he could not tell. Among the dark silhouettes of square buildings crammed by the water, colonies of smokestacks here and there stuck out. Heavy white columns of smoke boiled into the darkness and screwed themselves into the leaden clouds sheltering the city. Yuki felt himself upside down, for the sight reminded him of long-necked bottles pouring a creamy drink into a basin. The amber of the sodium-vapor lamps, which lined highways and streets, glimmered in the smoke and glared in the dark. It was snowing. The trees were naked. The city was brownish over all except the roads which were pale gray and covered with snow, whose cotton surface was absorbing amber lights at regular intervals. As the plane approached the water, there were more tall buildings. Some of them were at least built in the last century. The surface of the water appeared as black and thick as oil. It did not even look like fluid.

Now the plane was low enough for him to examine the details of the town. Among the old, tall stone buildings were clock towers and some pinnacles of churches, or of former churches, whose crosses on the top had been replaced with lightning rods. The plane flew over a large bridge (or viaduct?), over which a square clock tower with four faces stood; there were the only things in the town lit up by the fluorescent lights, that welcomed Yuki. The

clocks told him one to eleven. As the plane landed softly on the cotton-snow-covered runway, he felt he heard the clocks peal out eleven o'clock, forty-four times in total. He knew it was his hallucination. Still he was sure he sensed the silent vibration of the air. Just then he found his skyblue suitcase had slid back to his side.

On descending the ramp, a gust of wind pelted needles of sleet against Yuki, who hugged his luggage, clinging to the rail. The sleet pierced into his soft skin, congealing his cardigan. This was not the place he was supposed to come to, he told himself. This is no place of recuperation. Yuki looked up: farewell-dressed Barbie was smiling as usual only with her lips, waving a lacy handkerchief. He looked down: a small man with a brown knit cap was waiting at the foot of the ramp. He looked like a mole lost in the bright snow. Beside him was a brick-colored Buick. Indeed, Yuki found later, half of the brick color was rust. The man called Yuki's name. Before he said yes to the call, he slipped and his buttocks landed on the snow-covered ground, which turned out not to be as soft as it seemed to be. The mole man held out his hand saying, "Mr. Minami. I will take you to the clinic." Yuki threw off the hand of help. "Thank you, but you shouldn't touch me."

* * *

Before Yuki's hand reached the knob, the door banged open hard in his face. His sight blacked out for seconds. Yuki squatted down on the porch covering his nose with his hands.

"Here you are!" Yuki's restoring senses caught a spanking voice over his head. "What are you doing sitting in such a place! Stand up and come on in! I've been waiting for you, Mr. Minami. I'm your doctor! I am Dr. Springman! Nice to meet you! Oops, we don't shake hands! Dr. Goto set out everything right for you!"

Inside the clinic, which rather appeared like an elementary school library, with all the colorful books on the shelves and posters and cards scattered around on the floor, Yuki found story books by Hugh Lofting and Karel Capek amongst the pictorial books of anatomy and the medical journals. A mobile of papier-mache tropical fish was dangling above the doctor's yellow plastic desk, on which he had been folding paper cranes. The tiny cranes in rainbow shades were staring at Yuki, who had been wondering why the mobile kept swaying even though there was no wind in this room. Soon he noticed vapor steaming up from Dr. Springman's shiny forehead, which radiated the extra heat energy, the by-product of his enthusiastic gestures, and the heat generated an updraft to swing the fish mobile.

While Yuki was absentmindedly observing this thermodynamic phenomenon, Dr. Springman boasted about his splendid career, waving his arms up and down. He drew Yuki's attention by taking out a narrow plastic tube covered with thin paper.

"Now, what is this?"

Yuki suddenly became perplexed. He suffered. He had never seen such a thing before. He started to knock his head. The doctor threw the thing away and told him to forget it, then he solemnly announced that Yuki had genuine insomnia. The doctor was totally bewildered by the patient in front of him. His arms started to swing more wildly. He said that it was a very rare disease and he had seen it only in a novel. He explained the first symptom of the genuine insomnia: after a couple of wakeful months, you forget the word and the meaning of "straw" (at this word, Yuki turned even more restless), then follow chair, suitcase, sanatorium, clip, sunscreen, watch, toothbrush, etc. etc.. He also said that there was nothing he could do to bring back his lost memory like he could with an amnesiac.

"So forget the forgotten." He said, "Think about the remains of the memory which you are capable of losing in the future. Otherwise, the virus just continues to erase your memory until it totally whitens your brain out. Recently, I succeeded in developing a revolutionary method to maintain your memory, which is called 'Printin Mnemonics. . . .'"

While Dr. Springman went on and on, Yuki could not help speaking up. "Doctor. I want to sleep. I came here to sleep."

The doctor stopped talking and waving his arms and stared at this poor client as if he were a strange creature.

"Sleeplessness causes no harm to your health. In fact, the better you are feeling, the longer you've been awake."

Yuki nodded.

"See? Imagine how many people wish to be like you in this world." And he sighed dramatically.

"But I want to sleep. Dr. Goto told me there is a sanatorium where I can sleep."

Dr. Springman was irritated because he was just about to talk about it. The Somnus Sanatorium was in the castle on Mt. Fumin, which was at the north end of the city.

"But it is no use," he said, "Because you will completely forget the word sanatorium before you reach there. So there is no way you can get to the sanatorium. If you want to sleep so badly, you may try the medication I developed. This amazing tablet contains chloroplast as an active ingredient and transforms the Solar energy into the Somnus energy. The brighter the sun, the better you sleep. You'll sleep soundly as long as the sun shines upon you. You must

not forget to put on sunscreen before you fall asleep otherwise you'll be burnt red. It works perfectly until you forget the word 'sunscreen' which comes next to. . . . ."

Yuki said no thank you for the medicine and left the clinic heading north. The mountain lay far away.

* * *

The traffic signal turned green. People started to move forward like a herd of cattle. Yuki missed the start and tripped, being pushed by those behind. A man with sunglasses held Yuki with his arms. He smelt of ash.

"Thank you," said Yuki gasping, "But you'd better not touch me."

"Rose is a rose," the man asserted still holding Yuki's upper arms with his gold ringed slender, but firm hands. Yuki looked up at his face, but the sunglasses were too dark to see through to his eyes. The man was wearing a tuxedo and a ruffly shirt even at this early time of the day.

"Rose-Is-A-Rose" He whispered into Yuki's ears. This time he bent his head down so that Yuki could see his eyes through the space between his nose and sunglasses. Yuki was startled at his turquoise eyes, which turned up at him with a mischievous smile.

"Rose is a rose?" The man patiently repeated.

"Is a rose?" Yuki raised an awkward voice. On hearing that, the stranger's lips spread wide in a flowery smile. Yuki thought that he was a good looking man.

"Yes!" He jerked Yuki up and made a gesture to convey that he should follow him. After walking several steps away, he turned to Yuki and said, "Come on, follow me."

Yuki went after him.

He took him into a candle-lit, exclusive French restaurant. Yuki felt embarrassed wearing a cardigan. A waiter who appeared out of the darkness behind the oak screen seated the man at a reserved table at the darkest corner. By the table, Yuki remained standing.

"Have a seat," the man said, still wearing his sunglasses. Half listening, Yuki looked around in the restaurant with his mouth slightly open. He gazed down at the man in the chair with blank eyes.

"Okay. Never mind." The man shrugged and waved his hand which stopped within reach of Yuki's hand. Yuki looked at the hand and then the man. "Tell me my code name."

Yuki guessed. "Rose?"

"Right!" The man gave a contented smile. "And yours, pal?"

"I'm Yuki."

"You're my partner from South, aren't you?" Rose's right hand was still in the air waiting for a shake.

"What partner?" Yuki's voice sounded almost angry. A moment after, he added. "You don't touch me."

Rose put his hand back into his pocket without a word. "Do you remember this?" He pinched out a small pin between his thumb and index finger from his pocket. It was a miniature crusader shield in ultramarine enamel with a vermilion cross. Under the cross it read, "S.S.". Yuki bent over and drew his face close to the pin.

"It's a Sunday School pin. I remember that. They gave it to me when I was nine."

"No," Rose said, "It's a secret Spy School pin. Don't you remember, pal?"

Yuki was not sure.

"I'm not a spy." That was all he could say.

"Everybody says so at first," was Rose's reply.

"I am an invalid. I came here for medial treatment."

"If you are a genuine spy, you must play sick really well." Rose sipped some red wine the waiter had brought. "You'll do an excellent job if you pair with me."

Yuki felt giddy. "I must go," he said.

"Yes. Good spies know when to leave." Rose raised his hand for the bill. "Remember, we will maneuver separately for the execution of this project. This is the first and the last contact between us. Good luck and watch out for their shadows."

Rose put some money on the table and left the room, giving Yuki a casual salute.

Yuki headed north again.

* * *

A tall man and a small boy were selling drugs on the Mome Bridge on the River. On the yellow rug spread on the ground were various sizes of small glass bottles which, you could tell at a glance, had been gathered from trash cans along alleys.

The tall, tattered man had hip bone length gray hair tied into a horse tail with a red rubber band behind his ears. Over his red shirt, his long white gown's sleeves were too short for his bony limbs. The elbows were threadbare. On the back of his gown was a scribble in red, "CHEMISTORY."

"Born unwise, die wise," he yelled in a ringing, deep voice, like a maestro on stage. "At last! A medicine to cure stupidity! Medicine for fools!"

"Medicine for fools." The boy echoed in an anemic voice, dangling his legs over the parapet. He was dressed more nicely than his leader, in his school boy black with a stand-up collar and a hat. His cheeks were apple red, small mouth silverberry red. He was rubbing his frostbitten hands in his white breath, trembling.

"Master," the boy whimpered, "I'm freezing. I'm hungry. Nobody buys the thing. Let's go home."

The man called Master cast a quick, stern glance at the poor boy before he threw himself in front of a pale man coming down the bridge in his summer clothes.

"Good afternoon, gentleman!" The chemist shouted, "I suppose you are a novelist!"

Yuki froze staring at this lean man who was grinning or rather snarling at Yuki. It took him a moment to say, "No."

"But you are a storyteller, am I right?"

"No. I'm..."

"Call me Master." The man shut up Yuki.

"Ma, Master, I am not a..."

"I shall sell you a great secret of novel autoproduction." Master stood upright with his chin in the air. Yuki gave up claiming his identity. The boy sighed on the parapet.

"Time is a father, Place is a mother, and their child is a Story!" Master jumped onto the parapet and started to swing himself. " As Time passes by, Place becomes pregnant. Combinations are infinite. A place of wilderness; a time of betrayal. A place of fraud; a time of river. A place of water; a time of evolution. A place of crocuses; a time of Cinderella. A place of tears; a time of mandarin orange. A place of snow; a time of clouds."

"A place of needles." Yuki murmured.

"Yea! You are getting it. A Time of Manila envelope."

"A place of cat and a time of dog." The boy followed them.

"Marriage of Time and Place. That is the secret." said the man.

"But Master," Yuki interrupted. "Where are the characters? Where are human beings in the story?"

"Human beings?" The man's voice turned harsh suddenly. He jumped off the parapet, bumping on the bridge. "Who cares about them? They are always everywhere, no matter how hard you try to get rid of them. We didn't ask them to be there and then, but here they are to mess up everything. O, they are so helpless, don't you agree? Didn't you learn the first thing at elementary school that they have nothing to do with Time and Place?"

"But Master,"

"Stop but. And quit calling me Master! I ain't no teacher, no employer, no captain, no leader, no father, no heir, no owner, no keeper, no bartender of yours." And the man took deep breaths, heaving. His disciple was giggling behind.

"But Master, I need no novel autoproduction. I just want to cure my insomnia."

"I have a fine medicine for you." The former Master reached into his pocket to pull out a small blue glass bottle. "These amazing tablets contain chloroplast as an active ingredient to transform the Solar energy into the Somnus energy, and..."

Yuki politely said no thank you.

"O, you don't want that?" But he was not disappointed for long. "I can teach you a marvelous method to keep thy memory fresh as long as possible. The method is,"

""The Printin Mnemonics."" The two voices coincided.

"Do you know it?"

"Just the name." Yuki said.

"It is so simple. Remember your teachers made you recite poems when you were little? you learnt not by 'heart'; you learnt by 'mouth'." The chemist raised his forefinger slowly like a symphony conductor to touch his cerise lower lips. Then he pointed to Yuki's plump lips as if to cast a spell on Yuki, who stood still, being mesmerized. He started slowly: "Repeat a word until it becomes your lips' memory, instead of your heart's. Repeat it again and again so that your mercurial memory remains upon your lips, not in your floating mind." He walked on the parapet with a mincing gait.

"Feet, stamp." He waved his arm at the two to repeat after him like a music teacher.

"Feet. Stamp." They repeated in chorus.

"Eyes, look." He rolled his eyes.

"Eyes. Look."

"Ears, listen." He closed his eyes.

"Ears. Listen." The boy began to clap his hands with joy.

"Stars, shine!" He waved to the dusky sky. Venus had appeared.

"Stars. Shine."

"Dog, run." A dog ran across the bridge.

"Dog. Run."

"Shadow, chase."

"Shadow. Chase."

"Snow, freeze." Snow began to fall.

"Snow. Freeze."

"I, repeat."

"I. Repeat."

"Song, sing."

"Song. Sing." A sharp whistle was heard from the farther end of the bridge. Then busy, random footsteps.

"Police!" Someone shouted, "Police!"

"Who's selling drugs here?" The voice in the distant said.

"Police!"

The chemist and his disciple wrapped up the bottles with the yellow rug and rushed away like a whirlwind. When a couple of police officers reached the place, Yuki stood alone repeating the words. He started heading north, reciting and tottering.

Road Lead
Sun Light
Moon Reflect
River Flow
Wind Blow

II

The world had had three dimensions. The World had been crammed with details: shapes, colors, lights, shades, odors, soundwaves, sandwiches, atmospheres, temperatures. When his eyes opened, they had sucked in an orange dog trotting by the ditch hemmed with veronica, patches of infinite grays on an abandoned farm house, anxious whispers of willows swinging in the damp gale, tanned, barefeet of a boy under the tree gazing into a tin bucket, in which water reflected and crawfish scratched, a smile on an old woman through the frosted glass, and all the omens to foreshadow and all the mementoes to flashback. He had been choked up by nouns and adjectives, verbs and adverbs, exclamations and more nouns and even more adjectives. He had needed a blindfold to breathe, earplugs to speak, a nosepeg to swallow. So many flowers' names to remember and so many constellations to chase after.

Being sleepless, it was as if walking through dark woods—like a brother and a sister left in Schwartzwalt—scattering pieces of bread behind, the bread of his life, or dropping torn and crumpled pages of a dictionary, his dictionary of memory. Birds and goats followed him silently helping themselves. There was a constant rustle of sand as he walked. He was shouldering a sandbag. It had an invisible hole. As he walked, the burden became lighter and lighter. He was liberating the past as he walked. Or was the past freeing him as it pushed him through the woods? When he passed through the woods, over the bridge, another world opened up. The liquified world, the disassembled

world of pieces and fragments, all the more vivid than before. Buildings and houses backdropped the paper-cut silhouettes of dogs and people. There was no distance to the stars. They stuck on the hard, black cardboard wall of the night. There was no distance, but they were unreachable stars. The city was now composed of lines and segments, angles and curves. Triangles, circles, squares. The world now turned two dimensional; it was made of a disconnected series of planes hanged vertically from the heavenly ceiling.

During the days, he was nervous. Just a thought of another night coming burned him with anxiety. At night, he was bored. Night was forever. It was so concrete that it would never break into dawn, he thought every night. Counting the nights he walked through and to imagine more sleepless nights ahead—just to imagine thousands of boring nights pathetically bored him.

III

Cheers and chatters of children turned the corner of the flat building. Short papier-mache puppets surged against him onto the bridge. They were paper figures made of circles, triangles, and segments. They were identical. They were stick people. Each of them had a small mouth. It was round and moved busily like a goldfish snapping for food. It screamed, Fireworks! Fireworks! Fireworks in mid-winter! It was still snowing. The wind was gone. Fluffy snow had turned into powder snow. Children came after and after. There must be hundreds of stick children hidden behind the flat building. A spring of stick children. Maybe they were born there. They raced with each other. They surely did not want to miss the fireworks. Meanwhile, they all passed the bridge. Their voices and steps died away.

It was quiet again. When he started to walk again, he heard a sob. He found a circle sticking out from behind the flat building. It was another papier-mache kid. It was sobbing behind the building.

He asked it what the matter was. It said to him that its mother did not let it go to the fireworks because its family was poor and could not afford a coat for it to go out on a freezing night. It thought of bangs and cheers it could never share with its rich stick friends. Crystal marbles dropped out of a pair of its round eyes. It wanted to go to the fireworks so bad.

He told the stick child to take his cardigan. It hesitated. He himself appeared cold in his garment. The child's cheeks shone, but it shook its circle head. He pulled off his cardigan. Underneath was a pique polo shirt. He put the cardigan on the stick child. Its sleeves dangled from the child's hands. He knelt and buttoned up the cardigan for the stick child. Its face brightened. He patted its tummy. It laughed.

The stick child thanked him and ran away. As it passed the bridge, it turned back to him three times before the arch of the bridge hid its figure.

He sat on the shoulder of the street. A black dog came up to him and sniffed his legs. Powder snow melted on his bare arms. He sneezed. The dog was scared away.

The stick child came back. He could tell it was the stick child because it wore his cardigan. The remains of the sleeves swung as the stick child ran. It ran pit-a-pat toward him.It poked out its arms to him. He saw a small red ball on the child's palms. It must be an apple. The ball was not a perfect sphere. It had a dent. The stick child must have had a bite.

The papier-mache child told him that the apple was all it could offer. He took the apple. The child was delighted. It thanked him again and ran away. It turned back to him and waved at him three times before the arch of the bridge hid its figure.

He remained sitting on the street. He held the red ball in his hands. He sniffed. It smelt like spring. He had a bite and threw up. It was a bitter apple. He stared at the ball in his hand. He had another bite. This time he did not vomit. He ate it all. He enjoyed it slowly. He swallowed all the juice and all the crisp flesh. A core remained. He put it in his pocket. He mused for a while. He started to feel like he could sleep. He closed his eyes. Powder snow brushed his cheeks gently. He told himself to sleep but he could not. He felt pathetic. Then he heard thunder. The fireworks had started. He opened his eyes. He saw a distant red dahlia over the bridge.

On the bridge was a figure. It was not a papier-mache figure as the others. It was a three dimensional human being. It held fireworks upon its head like a halo. The brightness of the background turned the figure dark. It was approaching him. Slowly. He looked at it. It gave him a chill. He realized all at once it was him. Himself. The biggest firework bloomed, followed by a bang. It showed the face. It was his face. It was a woman. She was in a summer dress. She was barefoot. Her limbs were all bone and skin. Her eyes were sunk deep in their hollows. They were sharp. They cut straight into his brain and kneaded his encephalon. She did not stop walking toward him. She smelt of end.

Another icy flower flashed and stuck to the blackboard for a moment. She told him that there had been no such thing as sleep from the beginning, from the beginning of the world.

He denied her.

His double sneered at him and said, Then let us assume, as you claim, that there has been such thing as sleep in this world, if it makes you happy. Her voice was a direct voice. A straight voice to his eyes and nose and lips. She reached her arms to his neck. They were ice. She pushed him onto the ground.

The double said, You sleep every night. You sleep so well every night that you would never notice you are sleeping. You never dream of you sleeping. She was heavy. She was a rock. He was flat on the ground. He could not breathe. A rock was on his back. He had to say something. He buried his face in the sleet, grabbling for words. Words. Blah, blah. Many words. Blah, blah, blah. But he could only say, Another firework.

No.

No.

No.

He raised his face shouting. She was gone. The bridge was empty. On the blackboard of the sky remained the rainbow segments of firework particles. He knew there had been sleep in his life. He knew he had been sleeping during certain periods of his life. He knew it had been something nice, something precious. But he did not remember why and how it had been precious. His double must be cheating him. She must be stealing his sleep out of his memory. How did he sleep? He closed his eyes.

A hot bath filled with sweet-flags. The three Borzois' tails tapping on the Danzu carpet. A dark bedroom filled with steam. A cup of mint tea with ram. Flannel pajamas. A down comforter. Piles of silk pillows. An arched window to gaze at stars.

He closed his eyes. He remembered none of those. When he closed his eyes, his eyeballs would turn inside and they would show him a muddy emptiness in his skull, not a complete vacuum, but an emptiness half filled with distorted associations of sounds, letters and meanings. He felt he could sleep if he kept his eyes open. He ran to the airport. He wanted to go home because home was the place to sleep.

* * *

The airport was busy with segments, yields, parallel lines, perpendicular lines, acute angles, obtuse angles, circles bouncing around murmuring a foreign tongue, flamboyant triangles, and shivering squares. Papier-mache dolls were running about.

He approached the nearest counter.

Home. Home. He said the word again and again. It must have sounded like an old woman mourning over a grave. Home. Home. Go. Home. I. Go. Home. I. He said.

I need your ticket, a papier-mache figure said in a female voice.

He searched his pants' pockets for the remaining half of his air ticket. And his shirt's pockets. When he turned his pants' pockets inside out, a chip sound of metal rolled on the floor. It was a small ultramarine piece of metal

with a vermilion cross. A moment after, a yellow piece of paper flatteringly touched down beside the pin. It said HOME.

He stepped forward and bent down.

Somebody yelled at him and knocked him down.

Then the sound, "Crack! Crack! Crack!"

As the crowd dispersed screaming, the world was restored with details again. The furious clatter shook the air terminal. The brutal mass of human feet trampled the slow ones. The violent jostle rumbled the floor like agonized dancers' steps. A howling panic as sirens ruffled their eardrums. A pool of dark, oily liquid was growing underneath a woman in a navy uniform lying prone. Among the frantic crash and shriek, a sinister shadow of a nimble figure clacked its tongue and glided out of the pandemonium. The jolting din of waugh and boom was taken over by the roars and whistles of the police squad, then the mourning of old women came after. Meanwhile the floor was wiped up, the corpse carried out, and the terminal building was deserted, except a young man lying spread-eagled on the cold linoleum floor.

* * *

Through the glass automatic door, came in a man dressed in tuxedo with sunglasses. The transparent walls and high ceiling echoed his swift pacing toward the man on the floor. He stopped at the lying man's feet.

"I told you to watch out for their shadows." Rose spoke to Yuki with the blank voice of a shrewd spy. He slowly circled around Yuki's body, murmuring in a musing manner. "You did a good job, pal. You played sick very well. A fabulous invalid, you are. A genuine spy." Then Rose stopped his dress-shoed steps at Yuki's peaceful face, and slightly poked Yuki's soft cheek with the tip of his shoe. Yuki's head rolled aside.

"Hey. Listen. You're awake, right?" Rose kneeled down to push his ear against Yuki's chest. As he rolled up his bright eyes, his brows gathered. Then pushing the floor with his palm, he stood up. A calm smile stretched his lips and narrowed his eyes.

"Sweet dream, pal. Rest in peace," he whispered and walked away.

Outside, it was snowing. Large fluffs of snow were covering the streets, the runways and the glass ceiling. Yuki remained still, spread-eagled, eyes closed, hands loosely opened, lips slackened.

Soon the snow would whiten out the sight. ◆

Freak Accidents in Los Alamitos, California

Tania Runyan

Dad, first, heard the sputter and groan,
then pointed to a giant exoskeleton
in the sky. The tail tipped
and whirled, vanished in the trees.
The sky flashed gold.
We looked at each other, so strange
to see death in a light. Our power
was out for hours.

The Eyewitness News said, "Miracle.
Angels," as the footage of six perfect people
stepping from the smash and wires
gleamed eerily in our living room.
It's easy to stay alive, I thought.
Forget the seatbelts and life vests,
Mom's scalding soup, the deadly mix
of men and candy. *Those* bodies
flew from clouds to cement, touched wind
and voltage, lit up the town. So I spun crazily
on my roller skates after dark, teased cars
and hung from branches. I could twist
like rubber, survive like steel.

Years later, a local girl bumped her car
into a tree, hopped out and walked
to her boyfriend's house. As he called
the police, she died in a chair.
"It's so easy to go," everyone said,
and for a week or two even Joey Spinelli
stopped pushing drugs. I began to use cross-
walks, but continued for months, adding
broccoli to my diet, updating tetanus,
planning fire escapes in the house.
It's everywhere: gas leaks, loose
library shelves, dogs that pant disease.

I recently met a boy who used a pool sweep
to scoop a parrot from a power line,
electrocuting himself. For a moment,
he saw his skeleton glow—fiery, blue bits
in his hands. "But the best part,"
he said, "was the helicopter ride
to the hospital, so cool and high.
Though my skin was smoking, I got lost
in the blue and noise. You just learn
not to look, you know;
you learn not to look at your body."

■

Without Junior

R.A. Lopata

Mrs. Spinelli says I'm babying myself, which I guess I am, but isn't that what I'm supposed to be doing? Mrs. Spinelli says I should be getting up early, which really means early enough to make her coffee before she drags her butt out of bed. Mrs. Spinelli says I should be going out and getting exercise, which really means me going out to Norristown News and getting her copy of the *Inquirer* so she can have it with her java. And Mrs. Spinelli says I'm not supposed to stop at Carm's for a water ice on the way home because she says it's bad for me, which really means that I'm not supposed to talk to Carm because Carm loves to dish.

Like there's even going to be something that Carm's got to spill on Mrs. Spinelli. Like anybody really cares enough to even talk about Mrs. Spinelli. But there I go with my mouth again, and I should know better by now. I guess Mrs. Spinelli and Pops have been real nice to me. Especially Pops. But Pops, he's great to everybody. Even people just passing by will stop and say, "Hey, Pops, how you doin'?" He always smiles and tells them, "Just as fine as can be expected." Maybe he doesn't even know them, but it seems like the whole world knows Mr. Spinelli, and to the whole world he's always just Pops and he's always just as fine as can be expected. A real nice guy. You know what I'm saying?

And Pops, he never asks me for anything. He just lets me be. He's really nice like that, always looking out for me, but not like so I can see him. Like I'll be sitting on the stoop and some gooner'll come by and sound off wise to me like, "Hey, honey, ain't I seen you servin' drinks down at Caesar's or the Taj?" and all of a sudden out of nowhere there's Pops saying, "You talkin' to my daughter in law, Sport?" and the guy'll make himself scarce real fast. And Pops, he'll just go back inside and he won't say anything, or maybe he'll just give me a wink or say something nice like, "Well, you're almost my daughter in law." Not like Mrs. Spinelli, who's always onto me about something, like when I miss a doctor's appointment and she blows her cork.

"You don't care," Mrs. Spinelli will say, looking at me with her face all scrunched up like she's trying to get that same look Pops flashes at those gooners, but on Mrs. Spinelli it just looks like she's gotta pee real bad or something. "You don't care," she'll say if she catches me lighting up a cig or if she sees me having a beer. "You don't care a thing about what happens to him," Mrs. Spinelli will say, which for Mrs. Spinelli really means I'm not supposed to have any fun.

Not Pops. If he says anything, it comes from the heart. Like he'll look me up and down real slow and say, "You know, Daria, you ain't blowing up all big and fat like most women. You still look real fine." Even if it doesn't come out just right, I know Pops means it nice. Like when he brought me this TV, a really nice 28-inch Sony, with stereo sound and everything, for my room. He's got these two gooners from the gravel company hefting it up the stoop and he yells out, "Hey, Daria, could you use something like this?"

And I can't believe my eyes and I say, "Yo, Pops, where'd you get something like this?"

And Pops, he just shrugs and gives me that little wink and says, "Oh, I dunno. It fell offa back of a truck or something." And okay, so I don't know where this Sony comes from, but Pops, he's got these two gooners carrying it up those twisty stairs to my room and the whole time they're setting it up, he's just smiling and saying stuff like, "Don't that look nice?" and "Ain't that swell?" So I don't ask Pops any more about it. And having the Sony in my room means I don't have to sit with Mrs. Spinelli in the living room if I want to watch television, and that's real nice. But that's just the way Pops is.

Pops was the only one who didn't have a cow when Junior and I said we were getting married. Pops, he just clapped his hands together and said, "Ain't that swell?" Not Mrs. Spinelli. Junior told me she wore a path in the sidewalk going back and forth to Saint Anthony's, going to mass, going to confession, and going to pray, but probably mostly just going to talk with all the other old guinea hens about her rotten life. Junior told me that for a while she even stopped eating. But that's just the way she is.

It's because I'm not Italian and I don't live on their side of the river. See, all the Italians have lived on the north side of the river in Norristown ever since anybody can remember, while me and everybody else whose families came from Russia, Romania, Czechoslovakia, or Bulgaria or any of those other "ia" countries live on the south side in Bridgeport. And the two sides of the river, they don't mix it up much. That's just the way it's always been.

So when my folks found out that I got all jammed up with a guy from Norristown, they were just as bad as Mrs. Spinelli, my mom dragging me down to Saint John the Baptist to talk to Father Michael and my dad, who's never had a nice word for me anyway, going out of his way to tell me stories about how

Italians never amount to anything, and the both of them bringing the whole family over for dinners every Sunday, and I mean the whole family, not just my sisters, but Uncle Stephen and Aunt Theresa, Uncle Stan and Aunt Bella, and cousins out the wazoo, all of them sitting around the table going on about the importance of family, like I didn't know it wasn't some big set up my mom and dad had put them up to. And every day, them telling me not even to set foot in Norristown, not even to walk down by the river. And my dad saying he'd give it to me good, which wouldn't be anything new anyway. And my mom grilling me about whether I have to get married. And I don't tell her anything. And maybe she doesn't find out. But one night I come home and there's a bunch of paper bags from the Super Fresh sitting on the stoop with all my clothes in them and nobody's answering the door no matter how long I knock, and when I start yelling for my mom to open up, nobody comes. And all the neighbors, they just ignore it, even Mrs. Svoboda across the street who always throws open her window and starts screeching like an alley cat in heat whenever you even so much as have a conversation out on the sidewalk, so I know they've all agreed, and that I'd better be looking for a new place to hang my hat. And just about then Pops and Junior come tooling up in Pops' old Caddy, and they're joking around like nothing's happened, asking me if I need a lift, and the next thing I know me and the Super Fresh bags are in the back of the Caddy zooming across the bridge headed for the Spinellis' in Norristown. Of course, Mrs. Spinelli wasn't too happy about me moving in. She made them put me up on the third floor that was Junior's Grandma's old room and is more like an attic. At first she didn't even want me coming downstairs, but I think Pops settled her down so pretty soon she was letting me come into the kitchen and sit in the living room, and that's the way it was, and that's the way I thought it would stay, which, of course, isn't the way it went at all.

But that's what's so funny about the way things always turn out. Whatever you expect, no matter if you start thinking about the absolute worst thing in the world or you're dreaming about a really happy ending, none of that'll happen because it's always the things you don't think about that end up happening. That's the way it was with me and Junior to start out with, and me and and the Spinellis later on. I never expected any of that stuff to happen. It's not like I wanted to get jammed up with Junior, but I guess I just wasn't thinking about it. And there it is. But it wasn't so bad, I guess, because me and Junior really were in love.

Even before I really knew him, Junior was always a sweetie. He used to always call me if I'd be passing him on the sidewalk down by Carm's where he'd be hanging. "Hey, Daria," he'd say. "You're sure looking fine today." And that was okay because Junior, he was no low rent Guido. He'd buy me a water ice, and we'd sit and talk. And he always acted right, not grabbing at me, treat-

ing me with respect, asking me about what I was doing, about my family and junk, so I could tell he was really interested in me. And Junior, he had a lot going for him, not just his looks either. He was smart. He could have gone to college if he'd wanted. But he just wanted to work at the gravel company with Pops. He always said he was just waiting for an opening, and in the meantime, he'd just try to stay in shape. He was in such great shape, too. In high school, Junior lettered in football and basketball and wrestling and track. They let him play two sports in winter just because he was so good. I mean, all you had to do was see Junior run and you could tell.

Running, Junior barely touched the ground, slipping by so fast and light, taking these big leaps, looking like he'd just bounce off his next step and keep going, flying up into the air like in a dream or something. And he'd always be grinning, as if it was nothing at all, this big, kid smile, all innocent and sweet, like those paintings of baby angels. I used to love to watch him, especially playing basketball, him wearing just shorts and a tee shirt. He had this black hair, all straight, but not limp, still with lots of body. It would drop down over his forehead while he was dribbling the ball and, real casual like, he'd just take his free hand and brush it away and he'd give that smile, like he knew you were watching him and the smile was just for you, and then he'd just lift up into the air like there were strings attached to him and float for the longest time. And when he'd let go the ball, he'd never miss, making it all look so easy. I loved to watch him play ball. Not wrestling, though. There was no running there. There was no place to run to. I hated seeing him out there on the mat, all sweaty, pale from dieting so he could make weight, wrapped around some other guy tighter and closer even than he'd wrap around me. The two of them would strain and grunt, and there'd be these long waits where it looked like nothing was happening, except Junior told me that's when everything happened, and then all of a sudden, they'd start grabbing, trying to flip each other over, and you'd hear the squealy sound of their sweaty skin on the mat, and Junior'd have this look on his face like it hurt real bad inside, like when you've got cramps or something, making me wonder why someone would like something that hurt so much. But I never asked Junior why he wrestled because he liked it so much that if I asked him, he might get really pissed at me. Besides, I never really thought about it that much because all guys love sports.

So there's something else I never thought about, the way Junior loved sports, and that probably had as much to do as anything with how things turned out, because if Junior hadn't loved sports so much, he never even would have been there in the park in the first place and nothing would have happened. But even if I'd thought about sports, I probably never would have thought about why he always had to go over to the north side every afternoon

to play. I know you're probably thinking a person'd have to be off his nut to even be on the north side of Norristown without riding inside an armored car or something, but Junior said that the brothers on the north side were the best players and that pick-up games really kept him sharp. He said he loved the action over there. See, it didn't matter to Junior that those guys were black. That's just the way Junior was. I guess that's another one of those things I didn't think about, that Junior just loved everybody, whoever they were, and so he trusted them. And that had a lot to do with how things turned out, because if he hadn't loved everybody so much, and trusted them, he never would've been over there. It was pretty obvious he loved me, too, if you know what I mean. But I guess I was pretty wasted at the time, so I wasn't thinking too good, and I guess Junior was trusting that I was, and that's what got us into our jam, too. But not thinking was pretty much a full-time thing sometimes for Junior. I mean, he did love to goof. Not that it jammed him up, though, because he was young and in such great shape that it really didn't get to him. He could come home for dinner at six or seven all messed up, and he'd just give Mrs. Spinelli one of those big, slurpy kisses on the neck and say, "Aw, Ma, who loves you more than me?" and she'd just like melt down right there in the kitchen and forget all about how she'd been bitching at me all afternoon about where he was and how worried she was. Even if he'd just sort of sit there all through dinner like he was ready to nod, as soon as I'd done the dishes, she'd be telling me go to the Super Fresh to get all this stuff so she could make sauce for Junior the next night. That's just the way Junior was, loving everybody so much that they just had to love him back. That's why I know it must've been an accident, because nobody would've done anything to Junior on purpose.

Junior's friend Ricky tells me that Pops drives to the north side every night now. Everybody knows about it, Ricky says, that Pops just cruises real slow around the park, driving his Caddy around the block again and again and again with the windows down, and if anybody even comes close to the curb, Ricky says, Pops'll pull over in case they want to talk to him, but nobody ever does, Ricky says, because they're not about to talk to some scary old Guido in a Caddy, but I don't get Pops as scary. He's always wearing a big smile when he comes walking up the street at night and sees me. "Hey Daria," he'll always yell. "How you doin?"

"As fine as can be expected," I'll tell him, and he likes that because it's like I'm saying what he always says and it's like a joke between us, not like it is with Mrs. Spinelli, who's always acting like a cop or something these days. She's started walking with me to the pre-natal clinic at Sacred Heart Hospital just because she thinks I'll try and blow off the classes if she's not there. Like she had to go to any classes before she had Junior? "This is going to be different," Mrs. Spinelli says. "He's going to have everything." He? Like Mrs.

Spinelli's already got it figured that it's going to be a boy? She wishes. Like everything else, Mrs. Spinelli doesn't know anything, even if she thinks she does, like when she caught me having a beer and went totally ballistic, like a single beer is going to make a difference, but she goes on this incredible tear, screaming about how bad it is and how booze and drugs are messing up kids, and pretty soon she's crying and sobbing, and shaking all over, and she looks up at me and says it again, "You don't care. You don't care a thing about what happens to him."

She's just getting nuttier all the time. I mean, she got out all Junior's baby clothes, like I couldn't believe she'd even kept them, and she put them in the drawers in Junior's room. She says that I won't need to buy any because they'll be just perfect. She tells me how well they fit Junior when he was a baby, going on and on about how he was such a beautiful baby and how she's going to take such good care of her new baby. Her baby? And she's all the time pulling even more baby junk out of the basement. She made Pops get rid of Junior's bed and haul up this old wooden baby bed, the kind with the bars on the sides, and set it where Junior's bed used to be. So, the baby's going to sleep in Junior's room while I'm in the attic? Yeah, Mrs. Spinelli says, because he'll get all my germs or something, and it's not even like I have anything. It's like she doesn't want me to get near my own baby. So Junior's room just keeps getting freakier. All Junior's old stuff is still hanging on the walls and everything, but with all this baby junk in the drawers and closet.

Mrs. Spinelli is already telling me that Junior went to pre-school at Saint Anthony's and that's where the baby's got to go because of how perfect Junior was when he was a baby. I'm not going to get into it with her, but it's not like that Junior was perfect, I mean, he was no saint, okay? For instance, if he was so perfect like Mrs. Spinelli says, why wasn't he going to Boys Catholic? Because they threw his butt out of there in the seventh grade, that's why. And I don't want to see my baby getting beat up by the sisters like Junior always said he was. Not that going to public school is any bargain because I went there and still the only job I could get was clerking at the Day 'n Night which pays hardly anything at all and is why I still had to stay with the Spinellis in the first place but then I had to quit anyway when my feet started swelling up so much from standing up all the time.

I guess staying here isn't so bad as long as I've got Pops sticking up for me, telling her she should lay off. Now that it's summer, I sit out on the stoop at night and wait for Pops to come back from the north side. It's cooler than upstairs in Grandma's old room, so I'll sit there and pick at the paint that's peeling off the rail coming up the steps or toss pebbles into the storm drain at the curb, waiting for him to come up the walk and he'll always yell, "Hey Daria, how you doin?"

"As fine as can be expected," I'll tell him, and he'll come and tell me how great I still look and stroke my belly and tell me how great it feels that there's life cooking up inside me. Some nights we'll just sit there on the stoop together, me and Pops, me with my back up against his knees and him with his hands resting on my belly, sometimes moving them up and down, real soft and gentle, and I'll look at the stars, even though you can't really see too many because of the street lights. But when it gets real still, I can almost pretend I see stars gleaming up there, millions of them, and I try to imagine that heaven's up there, the way they used to tell us it was, and that Junior's up there. And sometimes Pops'll tell me about what it was like when he was a kid, how his parents leaned on him to finish high school so he wouldn't have to work with his dad at the gravel company, but Pops says that's all he ever really wanted to do. "You can't tell nobody what to do when they're that age," Pops says. So Pops ended up at the gravel company, and he says Junior would've done the same thing, and Pops says that it's too bad because Junior could've done better. "He was a smart kid," Pops'll say. "With what he was doing, he might've turned out to have a head for business, too." Which I don't get because it didn't look to me like Junior was doing anything, but Pops'll just pat my belly and hum a tune, usually something by the Chairman of the Board. That's what he calls Frank Sinatra. And he'll sing a few bars of "High Hopes" or "September of My Years" and tell me that nobody sings like the Chairman, nobody. And we'll just sit there together and I'll lay my head back against his knees and close my eyes while he hums and takes his big hands and strokes me real gentle, and I just let my mind wander and pretend that it's Junior who's holding me and that they're his hands stroking me like that in the hot, damp summer night.

Oh, I tried going back to see my folks, maybe patch things up and ditch Mrs. Spinelli, but you can guess how that went. It being Monday morning, everybody's garbage was lined up on the curb, and the stoops of the rowhouses were all still white because everybody had scrubbed them on Sunday and, they hadn't had a chance to get sooty yet. I guess my Mom wasn't expecting me because she actually opened the door until she saw who it was. "Hi Ma," I said, trying to be real casual, as if nothing had happened or anything.

She was already closing the door, but left a little crack open, and looked me up and down. "I guess nobody's got any questions anymore about why you were getting married," she said, and she slammed the door.

I didn't even get a chance to tell her about Junior. And it's not like I'm a big crier, but I started getting all tight in my chest. I really didn't want to start bawling right there on the stoop, but since I've been pregnant, I cry a lot and never know why. Next thing I know, I'm sitting on the steps jerking up and down and snorting with the tears pouring out, and I don't know if it's because my mom and dad threw me out, or on account of Junior dying like he did,

which sometimes sounds to me like something you'd hear about on TV except that this happened to me so it was a lot more real, but I just couldn't stop crying. I remember hearing it echo off the walls on the other side of the street and that just made me cry some more, and I was so all alone there. Mrs. Svoboda didn't even open a window to yell at me. I was feeling pretty sick. The baby was moving around and I remember thinking to myself that this just wasn't the way I thought things would turn out, which of course is the way they always do.

Like the day the police came to the Spinellis. I remember we were keeping dinner for Junior and I sure wasn't expecting any cop to come to the door, so of course that's when this cop comes to the door and asks if he can talk to Pops, and he and Pops go out on the stoop, and I didn't think there was anything too weird about that because people are always coming around to talk to Pops, but Pops comes back inside and tells Mrs. Spinelli to go upstairs, which he never does, and then he says to me, "Daria, we gotta talk," and I knew right then that something I hadn't thought about was going to happen.

Pops took me real gentle by the arm and sort of guided me into the living room. I remember he sat me down on the sofa right so I was looking at the picture of the Blessed Virgin on the wall. "A real bad thing has happened, Daria," he said. He sat down next to me, real slow. I remember he wouldn't look me in the eyes, but kept staring away, out the front window to the street. "A real bad thing has happened to Junior," he said.

I still miss Junior a lot, almost all the time. I don't really have anybody to do stuff or hang with because most of the time, I used to hang and do stuff with Junior. Before I was pregnant, we'd hang at Carm's and he'd buy me water ices and take all his phone calls from his friends there because he said Mrs. Spinelli always got steamed if he tied up the phone at home. Sometimes he'd get us a couple of quarts of beer, and we might do a blunt and wander down to the river where we could make out, but usually by about four he'd have to go to the north side, and he'd take off, and I'd usually go to work at the Day 'n Night because I never did get put on any day shifts. But that was okay because that way I could hang with Junior. I always tried not to get too wasted so I could still go to work, and Junior, he was in such good shape, he could just handle it or else do a little flake, which he always seemed to have, and that would snap him right back up.

Without Junior and especially since I quit my job, mostly all I have to do is listen to Mrs. Spinelli yell at me about how I don't care and how wonderful Junior was and how I'm dishonoring him by going out of the house and how I shouldn't even talk to some guy on the street and how I'm wrecking my baby's life. And the hotter it gets this summer, the more her voice just drives me crazy. It's so hot I can hardly stand it up there in Grandma's room. There's

air conditioners in the windows on the first and second floor, but none of that gets upstairs. So some nights, if it's really hot, I'll sneak down to Junior's room, pull the little mattress out of the baby bed and put it on the floor and sleep on that just because it's cooler and because being in there makes me think of Junior. When I first moved in and I wasn't so pregnant and I was still horny all the time, I'd creep down to fool around, always real late, after I was sure the Spinellis had gone to bed. I guess Junior wasn't as hot for me as before, but I could play with him and make him get real big and then he'd usually want me.

And because it's so hot and because Mrs. Spinelli is driving me so crazy, I just go down and hang at Carm's. Carm, she's got a theory. First, she says, all men just think with their dicks. And second, most women deserve what they get. Carm says women never see what's going on for one reason, on account of they really don't want to. "Just like you with that Junior Spinelli," she says.

And I say, "Like there was something going on with Junior?" and Carm just rolls her eyes, pats my belly, scoops me up a free water ice. So I tell her my theory, about how things never work out the way you think they will. And then I wonder if that means you might as well not think about stuff at all. ◆

Bring Your Own Lampshade

Scott Beal

Look here, I'm handier than a Swiss army knife
and twice as reasonable
as a Taiwanese potato peeler. Here's my card--
we aim to please,
as they say, the "we" being me

and my alligator skin
bag o' tricks (spit-polished the zippers myself),
I'll be your barkeep,
vintner, tapster, over-the-counter fluid pharmacologist
and certified mixologist,

here's my blender, my icepick, my corkscrew,
my PhD in chemistry,
I'll whip up the wildest slow-screw-against-the-wall-
with-grandma you ever had,
headhunters to die for, and plenty, Bub,

you never heard of,
since I'm inventing new ones all the time.
Why I've got
this concoction that'll make your brain glow
like hell's soup kitchen,

put garnets in your eyes, and it tastes
sweeter than honey
from the Greek goddess of orgasm's personal beehive--
and I can do you up
a dozen in a blink with one hand

on the turntable,
hooking up the sizzlin'est cuts ever
beheld by human ears.
That's right, I've got enough vinyl literally
to fill a trailer

park, dating back to the invention of the phonograph,
stuff the record tycoons
don't know exists: Peter, Paul, and Mary's rare jams
with Herbie Hancock,
Johnny Cash crooning a duet with Sid Vicious,

God rest his soul,
and I'm just getting warmed up. I'll give you
grooves so contagious
they'll hoist the ass out of every folding chair
and swing it into next week

on a 2000-watt wave of rafter-bowing sonic supernova
through this here state-of-the-art
solid-state 64-channel switchboard lined through six six-
foot Crate cabinets,
12-inch tweeters, 30-inch woofers, specially rewired for extra juice.

And speaking of next week,
I ain't wearing this rhinestone turban for nothing,
I'm a walking geiger counter
for psychic energy, I'll check your pulse and tell
your blood pressure

twelve lives ago. Right now I'm foreseeing
your big shindig,
faces gathered around a pulsing crystal ball (I'll need
some double-A batteries)
having their sweaty little palms read, communing with their dead

Aunt Vicky, picking up tips
on a better bean dip, and leggy blondes afterward
saying "Thanks Harry"—
can I call you Harry?—"Thanks Harry, great
Halloween, sure beats

bobbing for apples" as they slip you their motel room keys.
But what really nabs them
is the hypnosis, folks are dying to go into a trance.
Check this out. The chain's
authentic Peruvian pyrite and the ticker's

Belgian, 1880-something,
just look at how the swirling vines are etched
into the bronze,
see how it radiates in the glare from the
Bud on Tap lamp.

That's craftsmanship, that's what you'd call
an arabesque design,
and you swing it back and forth, just like that,
back and forth, back
and forth. I see you're impressed, you're thinking

why not flat-out
replace the butler with a pedigreed pleasure-center
stimulation specialist
and I'm here to tell you I can take over immediately,
and as soon as I count back from three

I'll start by fixing you up with an exotic little something
in a crystal goblet,
it's more explosive than nitro-glycerin and twice as good
for your heart,
I swear there's not a swizzle-stick

HoJo hack
on the continent can give it just the right twist,
just the right kick,
and I call it, after the great master himself,
a Stradivarius.

■

Two Fingers of Bourbon

Susan Thornton

It's as near as her hand and she can smell it. Two fingers of amber fluid catch the light on the tray table to her left. Her seatmate, a man in his early sixties, is asleep, breathing through his mouth, thick lips slightly parted. Thirty thousand feet above the Great Plains, cruising between clouds and stars, and the man sitting next to her hasn't even finished his drink.

Elizabeth stares at the dark oval window to her left and sees a narrow, tense face, deeply furrowed and pushed forward like a fist. This face has served her to good advantage in committee meetings at the west coast university where she is Dr. Sedgewick, full professor of anthropology, with two books and more than one hundred articles to her credit.

The laptop she holds, closed as tightly as a vault, contains a file with rough drafts for her latest article on leadership among the warring Maori tribes of New Zealand, promised to her publisher in two weeks. With her long slender hand, so like her mother's, she strokes the ridged plastic surface. The smell grows stronger—sugar, the promise of oblivion, one swift swallow of the golden liquid. . . . She shifts in her seat, dabs at her temples with the embroidered handkerchief she took from the drawer of the nightstand at her mother's room at the nursing home. She leans forward, feels the pull of the seatbelt at her waist, sinks back into her seat.

* * *

As she followed the stooped shoulders of the priest, her heels clicked on the marble floor, echoing through the nearly empty chapel. She remembered Father Bill's arrival in the parish thirty years before—a wide, square, self-important figure, with a booming voice. Now he has the surgical survivor's careful walk. Flakes of dandruff dotted his stole. In the second pew sat Helen, her mother's friend, who waved her hand in a crocheted glove. And there, was that Steve Wrighter, the museum director, hunched in a wheelchair? The attendant hadn't even pushed him into the body of the chapel; he sat squinting against the glare from the door. Surprised and relieved, she found Jane's flushed face,

bright with a pair of quite ridiculous hornrims. Next to her, in a dove gray suit, sat Katherine, every glossy hair in place. Elizabeth nodded, attempted a smile. Father Bill shuffled forward and she slipped into the first pew, gathered her skirt beneath her, and sat. Jane leaned forward to touch her shoulder. At once Elizabeth's eyes flooded with tears.

After the service she stood in the hall with Jane and Katherine. "It's funny that your mother's funeral is today," Jane said. "I mean, it's not funny, it's—" She ran her fingers along her lapel. "It's just. . . ironic."

Elizabeth looked at her.

Kat sighed. "There's another funeral right after this one—Pete Maris's mother."

"Pete Maris."

"She was eighty-three," put in Jane. "She died on Monday. They don't know what to do here at the church. She was on the Meals on Wheels committee and scheduled to drive this week."

"She still drove?"

"And organized all the volunteers. It was very sudden."

"And he's here?"

"Pete? He's staying at her house. He flew in from Texas."

"He didn't stay in Rochester?"

"Oh, no, he moved on ages ago." Jane adjusted her challis scarf.

"And what's he doing in Texas?"

"Who knows. Cutting a wide swath."

Kat flashed Jane a look.

"Sorry. But you remember Pete. Listen, can we take you to lunch?"

"No." Elizabeth tugged at her pearl earring. "I made a tight plane connection, and I still have to pick up some things at the motel. . . ."

And so she was standing in the red-carpeted hallway of the church when Pete pushed open the door. He was turned away from her as he spoke to someone outside. Then he strode in with that familiar loose-jointed stride. In the instant she saw him changed and unchanged, twenty-one and nearly fifty, how could it have been so many years? His dark curly hair was touched with gray; his face deeply lined, but as familiar as if her fingers had just left it, the high cheekbones and jutting nose, the narrow lips. She didn't know where to look, what to do with her hands. She knew herself stupid, unattractive, and then he hugged her. His arms went around her middle aged bulk and she rested her head against his bony shoulder. How she wished she hadn't worn her worsted suit; it added so many inches. "I'm sorry," he said in her ear. "I'm so sorry."

"It's tough," she heard herself telling him. "It's so tough."

"And it gets tougher as we get older, baby."

"I'm sorry about your loss too, Pete." They stood slightly apart and all at once she was awkward. Should she take her hand away? She wanted to cling to his arm.

"Skipper." A new voice. A fragile, older man in a banker's suit that hung off his frame.

"Ralph." Pete released her, took a step. "Ralph, you remember Liz Sedgewick, don't you? Liz, this is Ralph Harter."

Ralph Harter? That wasn't Ralph. Ralph Harter was robust, strong, even running to fat—her date at their junior prom. At Miss Skillin's the girls always had to chose their escorts. Geoff was the nice brother, but she asked Ralph. How they had struggled in his parked car under the country club lights, his rubbery lips wet on her face and neck, his hands moist on her organdy dress as he fought to get under her slip. Once home she vomited into the sink.

Pete's voice, "You remember Liz Sedgewick, don't you?"

And the stooped, gray old banker said, "Vaguely."

* * *

The smell of bourbon fills her senses, recalling whole worlds: hot noisy clubs bright with flashing light and moving bodies, bar floors sprinkled with sawdust, rain against a window, the wheaty smell of hops in late afternoons. Her seatmate ordered his drink with ice; she recalls the clink of ice against her upper lip, the oily flow of liquor on her tongue, the cool delicious taste.

What would mother have done? She allows herself a small smile which vanishes into the clenched hand that squeezes the embroidered linen. R.P.S. Regina Pearson Sedgewick.

She could have stayed at the nursing home. The director offered her a guest room directly under the room where her mother—her mother Regina, the *cum laude* graduate of Wellesley college, who had presided confidently over so many glittering dinner tables, who had led the fund drive that saved the Philharmonic twenty-five years ago, who could recite many of Browning's dramatic monologues and knew Matthew Arnold's Sohrab and Rustum by heart—had lain for three years in a fetal position, wearing an adult diaper, felled first by Edward's lingering death from cancer, then by a series of strokes.

"It's a blessing, dear," Helen said at the service, clutching her wrist with the scratchy crocheted glove. Elizabeth wanted to strike her.

She dedicated her first book to her mother. Her mother had encouraged her just when Elizabeth was ready to give up, to leave the academy. That crucial weekend her mother called, suggested that she visit. Elizabeth flew to Rochester and arrived to find a fire crackling in the fireplace, her favorite red wine on the sideboard, a roast in the oven. While she slept all Saturday afternoon, Regina took her typescript and note cards—coffee-stained, dog-eared, a jumble of scrib-

ble and misnumbered pages—and hired a typist.

"What you need is a week off." Her mother was firm. "Look at you. You haven't been eating or sleeping or taking proper care of yourself at all. And as for this book, you're too close to it, you can't see it. Stay with us for a week, then go back to work."

Elizabeth acquiesced, sank into the upholstered couch, accepted the concert tickets, attended the neighborhood cocktail parties. She returned to the museum she had loved so as a child, and strolled again along the exhibits of the Seneca long house and Iroquois women pounding their maize. These three dimensional panoramas had sparked her imagination, had sent her more than halfway around the globe to find people, real people who looked like those quiet figures caught in mid-gesture.

Her mother was right. Elizabeth needed a week off. When the manuscript came back from the typist—her mother paid—she saw that it wasn't hopeless after all, that only one chapter was weak, that the body was solid, that it would do. She made her revisions and the finished manuscript was not only published, but became a documentary film which catapulted her career.

After she began her lecture tours, she accepted a speaking engagement at the University of Rochester and her mother called her in California, giddy as a girl. "You've no idea what a splash your talk is making. You should see the publicity."

Elizabeth knew pretty well how her agent marketed the talk, with a photo from her book jacket and some racy quotes.

"I've saved you all the cuttings."

"Don't bother, mother."

"What?"

"That's nice, mom, thanks." Elizabeth twisted the phone cord in her hand, looked out over the beach volleyball game. When she arrived in Rochester her parents met her at the airport. Edward, hale and hearty, insisted on getting her bag. "Why this isn't much luggage. To come all the way from California." He winked and she smiled.

"Do get in, dear," her mother craned her neck, peering out of the passenger side of the big Chrysler Imperial. "We're so glad to see you." In the first row of the auditorium Regina wore her best blue shantung and the long string of pearls. Her smile was incandescent with pride.

* * *

Elizabeth looks to her left, then at her trembling hand. Such a small motion would capture the plastic cup. Even if her sleeping seatmate wakes and complains she can charm her way out of it, buy him another, and one for her-

self, they can talk, drink, keep each other company—company over Kansas—at thirty thousand feet.

Her hand clenches the handkerchief. Twelve years sober now and never a slip. Serenity comes and goes. The main thing is never to drink. At parties she always declines. "Doctor's orders." No one presses her.

She was always an alcoholic, she came later to believe, from that first vodka and orange juice as she sat crosslegged in the center of her narrow little bed at Wellesley. That night she had sent Pete away; rejected his proposal, said words ugly enough that he would believe. She knew she was right; marriage would only distract her; she wanted something more out of life. When she looked through the glass of the vodka bottle the Ferret Pain which crouched at the edge of the room bared his teeth but kept his distance. Vodka became her new companion on Saturday nights. After she opened a bottle, determined to stay in her room, she came to herself halfway across campus, searching for a friend. She was well-read enough to know that this was an alcoholic blackout. But how could she be an alcoholic? She only drank on Saturday. And in graduate school, when she was busy on her dissertation, and kept a bottle and a glass by the typewriter, she still completed her revisions on time. How could she be an alcoholic if she was a fellow at Harvard?

After she made tenure, in that eighth year, that miserable eighth year, teaching the same courses for the eighth time—when she began to lose weight she was pleased. Always stout, she was pleased to drop four sizes, then six. With one part of her mind she knew the reason—she fixed a meal and threw half of it away, preferring a third vodka and orange juice. Then her periods stopped. Her gums bled. Handfuls of hair clumped in her hairbrush; she took to a comb. She shrugged off even the incident in the student bar, when the bouncer asked her table to leave and she went home with one of the graduate students. She, Dr. Sedgewick.

Fortunately he was not a graduate student from her department. Fortunately she held her head high and looked through him when he smirked at her. Fortunately he accepted a fellowship elsewhere. Fortunately.

One day she awakened at noon and found an angry slash of red paint and a dent the size of a child's head in the fender of her car. Could she have? She hadn't had the car out. She hadn't driven at all. Or had she? She ran back into the house, dropped her keys twice as she tried to unlock the door. On the kitchen counter lay a crumpled paper bag from Liquor Square. She shook it—out fell a receipt dated the night before. The overhead lights blazed, a buzzing started in her ears. There was no one she could trust—no one. With shaking hands she lifted the telephone and called a taxi. At the hospital she demanded to be checked into rehab.

Crying so hard she could hardly breathe, she told her story to the coun-

selor, who nodded, grim, and called the police. No hit and run accidents had been reported. "You sideswiped someone's car," the counselor said. "Probably in your neighborhood. Are there hydrants on your street?"

"There's one in front of my house."

"Any skid marks?"

"I didn't notice."

* * *

Since those first thirty days she has not had a drink. Maybe it's all right as long as she doesn't drive. How much damage can she do, imprisoned in her seat in tourist class? At the airport she can buy a bottle, check into the hotel, drink until the bottle's empty, then call room service for more. She knows it will take away this ache in her throat. She presses her fingers to her eyes.

If only she hadn't seen Pete. As they stood on the red carpet, nearly embracing, Elizabeth looked over his shoulder and blinked.

"This is Pete Junior," he said. "Come here, son, say hello to an old friend of your father's."

Elizabeth held out her hand. She had her breathing under control by the time the tall, slender woman in the dark blue suit came up. It was she who gave the boy his eyes.

"Honey, this is Liz Sedgewick; Liz, this is my wife, Sue."

Sue had a narrow hand and a cool, firm grip.

Elizabeth clutched the handkerchief to her chest. Her eyes filled with tears.

"I know you lost your mother, also," Sue said. Her voice was soft and melodious. "I'm so sorry."

Elizabeth shook her head and let the tears fall onto the worsted suit that added the inches to her waist.

* * *

The bourbon on the tray table continues its soft whisper. Elizabeth knows that one swift swallow and the tightness in her throat will ease, that these memories will lose their power. She won't mind so much that her mother died without waiting for her, that she had seen Pete for the first time since she sent him away, that Ralph Harter looked like death itself. She has forgotten years of her vivid, brilliantly colored life: years. Most of all she has forgotten Pete—now she remembers how he looked as he sat up on the broad couch in her parents' basement rec room, still wearing all his clothes, stretching out his arms to her.

It was her mother who remarked, off-hand, when Elizabeth returned

from Wellesley after breaking off with Pete: "Pete Maris is a very nice young man, but not really suitable for you, is he, Liz dear?"

Elizabeth was setting the table. Instead of answering she asked, "Would you like to use your silver tonight, Mom, or great-grandmother's?"

"Let's use Gramm's," her mother answered. "The dinner service. It's so nice to set a special table when you're home, dear."

She might have married Pete. They might have had a child, children. Then she wouldn't be where she is now, Dr. Sedgewick, full professor of anthropology, with two books and more than a hundred articles to her credit.

When she met Elliott there was still time for children. She was thirty-six then, but Elliott had had the surgery and was adamant. Tom, his son from his first marriage, was HIV positive. He followed a strict macrobiotic diet, drank nothing but green tea, and professed to find his illness a "gift" that gave him "focus." He was tall, lean, played beach volleyball every Thursday, rollerbladed on Sunday afternoons.

Rebecca, Elliott's daughter from his second marriage, was a schizophrenic. She lived on the streets in Pasadena, obeying voices in her head, eating out of cans in dumpsters. "I'm clearly not meant to have children," Elliott said. "I've endured enough pain in my life." Part of his pain came from marriage, too, he asserted, therefore he wouldn't marry her. "Why ruin a good thing?" he asked, half-joking. "Look what a record of failure I have. Who'd want legal entanglements with me?" But Elizabeth wanted a marriage, wanted it badly.

Elizabeth rubs her forehead; the handkerchief comes away damp. Maybe it's not too late. If she could find a sperm bank and an obstetrician who would encourage a first pregnancy at forty-six what would Elliott do? Probably leave her. And at her age to bring a child into the world. A child who would be twenty-one when she was nearing seventy.

We have a good life, she thinks. They keep separate residences; from her deck she can watch the blazing sun sink into the Pacific. On weekends they drive to Baja. When she went to New Zealand he met her and they hiked in the mountains under the cerulean sky. It's a good life.

The bourbon winks at her from the tray table. "If it's such a good life," says the soft whisper, "why do you want me so much?"

"But I don't, I don't." Shocked, she realizes she has spoken aloud. Her cheeks flush; sweat trickles between her shoulder blades. She thinks again of Pete, of his hot, wet mouth, of the look on his face as he extended his arms to her.

A shadow comes across the light—a woman carrying a sleeping infant. The child's mouth is a perfect O, its chubby hands closed up in fists. Elizabeth stares—the woman's hair is shot with silver, crow's feet at her eyes give away her age.

"Mommy, go potty!" Silence is split by the shrill demand. Elizabeth's

companion stirs but does not wake. The man behind her chuckles; Elizabeth cranes her neck to see the sturdy toddler pulling her mother's free hand. This unknown woman with silver in her hair has two children.

"Yes, yes," says the woman. "At the end of the aisle. Go on." She smiles at Elizabeth, a weary, "please excuse me" smile. Elizabeth turns to the window.

The choice is hers. She can ring the stewardess. She can buy a drink. She can get a bottle at the airport. Maybe two bottles. She can check into the airport hotel, get more bottles from room service.

Or she can change seats. There is a telephone on the plane. In her purse is a list of names and phone numbers. She can use her telephone credit card and arrange to have someone meet her, take her to a meeting, or to a restaurant where she can spill her story over coffee and a formica table.

With sudden resolve she pushes the call button, wipes her palms with the embroidered handkerchief. The stewardess arrives, a blonde, bland face. Elizabeth opens her mouth to speak, and as she does so she has no idea what she will say. ◆

Tough Luck

Russell E. Shipp

Seated in my direction
at a mall foodmart table,
was a nondescript whitehaired
gentleman gazing in reverie
while sipping a slow soup,
oblivious to my helpless stare.
Here, generally, indifference
gratefully rules—strangers
mill with strangers
in easy restful numbness . . .
as with me, had not chance
dumped me where I was.

After sipping, his lips seemed
to set in a serious thought.
Now and then--and here's my problem--
he'd squint and wipe his eyes
with the back of his hand.
Old eyes tend to water sometimes,
I thought. With that I exerted
my attention elsewhere
for a small charming something.
I watched for several moments
several pockets of possible humanity--
a shallow ruse, which didn't fool
my compelling morose curiosity,
so my eyes riveted back on the old gent.

And, good Lord, nobody else
seemed to be taking it in,
and had they been sitting
where I was, for sure they'd
not likely be such a sap.
Maybe his wife was dying
or he just sent his son to jail
or who knows what, but
it was none of my damn business.

I should have gotten up
and walked away
instead of invading his privacy,
of walking by him and stopping.
I didn't say anything, at least--
thank God for that--
but I looked at him,
and he could see how his grief
had affected me.

And, as though I opened
some horrible door he had
been trying to keep closed,
he began to sob quietly.
Nor did I have the courage--
and maybe, who knows, good sense--
to finish what I started
but only patted him on the shoulder
and walked on straight into
this gnawing memory.

■

An Introduction to Modern Music

Richard Lange

I was sitting under my window, listening. I'd been there for two hours. A dog was barking a few houses away and a homeless man in the park across the street was bellowing like a pirate. The porchlight was on outside my window and the moths were plinking into the bulb cover and hitting the window screen. My father's Honda pulled into the parking lot. It sounded like a vacuum cleaner with a pebble caught in the rollers. My father got out and put his keys into his pocket. I listened for footsteps on the wooden stairway. When I didn't hear them, I knew he was stopping to take off his shoes. He came up the stairs and turned the doorhandle like a thief.

I was at the window again a few nights later. The dog up the street wasn't barking, and the park was empty because the police had come by an hour earlier to kick everybody out. There were no moths because my mother had turned off the porchlight. I picked up the phone to call the Time Lady. The line was already open, but no one was talking. I could hear music playing and people conversing in the background. Then a man picked up the phone. "I don't see him. Did you call over to Margaritaville?" I heard a click. I held my breath. The man said, "You still there?"

I woke up when a door slammed somewhere in the apartment. I heard my mother crying. I could tell from the echo that she was in the bathroom. Then I heard my father's voice. "I was having a drink with the other waiters," he said.

"Stop," my mother said. "I called the restaurant."

I'd called the restaurant too. The woman who answered the phone said my father had left at four, as usual.

"We were out in back. On the patio," my father said. "Who answered the phone?"

"Oh, Christ!" my mother screamed. She pulled the bathroom door open so hard it hit the toilet and made water slosh onto the floor. "I'm not a rag, you asshole. I'll find the bitch and slice her goddam lips off. I'll slit her throat."

The neighbor on my side of the apartment began pounding the walls. But my mother kept yelling. I didn't hear my father for a long time and I thought he'd slipped out somehow. I imagined my mother standing in there alone, ranting to an empty room. Then I heard the refrigerator door being opened and the timer being set on the microwave.

I lay there thinking we were going to move again. I was eleven years old and I'd already lived in five different cities. Before Santa Cruz we'd lived in San Diego, Riverside, Fontana, and Bakersfield. And in each of those cities we'd lived in two or three places, usually apartments, but a few houses too. I was in the fifth grade and I'd been to eight schools. My father had worked at a dozen different restaurants that I could remember. My mother had worked at only three different jobs, but she'd also gone a few years without working at all. I hated all these moves and changes, but the good thing was that if we ended up somewhere I didn't like I knew we'd move again before long.

The next night my father didn't come home at all. In the morning I heard my mother taking her suitcases down from the shelf in her closet. She came into my bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed. She was wearing one of the skirt suits she usually wore to her receptionist job at Dr. Leavitt's Dentistry, but she didn't have any make-up on and her hair wasn't sprayed. She looked at everything in the room except me.

"I'm going away for a little while, Sweetie. But I'll be in touch in a few days. This is nothing against you."

A man was waiting in a car down in the parking lot. My mother went out and told him to pull up closer to the stairs. She made a few trips up and down the stairs and then I heard her going through the cabinets in the kitchen.

I wanted to scream, but I just lay there, quiet. I thought of the time my mother decided we should start going to church. This was back in San Diego. My father didn't want to go. He said church was for old people. "Fine," my mother told him. "I'll pray for you." She bought me a yellow dress with puffy sleeves and a white bow at the neck, and a pair of black patent leather shoes. The next Sunday we left the apartment while my father was still sleeping and drove to the Lutheran church on Clairemont Drive. The pews were uncomfortable, and I couldn't see over the heads of the people in front of me. By the end of the sermon I was asleep with my head on my mother's lap. We went back the next Sunday, and the next, and then we skipped a week, but went the next. Then we never went again. This was the pattern with my mother. She always tried things like diets and exercise machines and self-hypnosis, and then stopped doing them after a couple weeks. I hoped staying away from the family was something she was going to try for a while and then quit, but it occurred to me that the family could be the temporary thing she was giving up.

The television was on and my father was asleep on the couch when I got home from school. His white shirt and black bowtie were lying on the floor, and he still had his wingtips on. He was sleeping on his hand, and when I woke him up his cheek had an imprint from his fingers. There was a deep groove from his wedding ring. He started rubbing his face and when he felt the groove he cringed. "Where's your mother?" he asked.

I told him about the suitcases, and about the man waiting in the car downstairs. He reached down and took his cigarettes from the pocket of his shirt. "Don't blame yourself, Sweetie," he said. "Your mother is very confused right now. Things will work out here real soon." He collected his shirt and his bowtie and went into his room. When I walked past the door, he was stacking the pictures of his and my mother's wedding on a shelf in his closet.

When I came home from school the next day, there was a note written on stationary from Dr. Leavitt's office lying on my pillow. I thought maybe my mother had moved back home, and I went into her room to check. But she wasn't there. "Hi Sweetie," the note began.

> I miss you so much. I'm thinking about you all the time. I hope you're all right. I'm living in Dr. Leavitt's house in Saratoga for now, but I'll be looking for another place soon. Please understand that this arrangement is only temporary. When I get settled we'll be together again.
>
> Love, Mom
>
> P.S. Don't mention this note to your father.

When I tried to picture Dr. Leavitt's house, I imagined walls covered with the same newsprint wallpaper that he had in his waiting room, and Dr. Leavitt himself walking around in a blue smock with a lot of pens and sugar-free lollipops in his pocket. I knew things probably weren't like this, but picturing them this way made my mother seem real again.

Even though he stayed out until one or two in the morning, my father came home every night for the next week. His shift didn't begin until 10:00am, but every day he got up early and looked over the personal ads in the *Good Times* while I ate my cereal.

"You look tired," I said.

"You think so?"

I nodded. I watched him for a second, waiting to see if he would look at me. "Do you know when mom's coming back?"

"Not yet."

"Do you think she'll come back in a month?"

"Probably. We'll have to wait and see."

By then I was thinking of my mother as a kind of promise, something like summer vacation. But every day that I didn't hear her running the

blowdryer, or calling from the kitchen, or coming home from work with her keys jangling and her shoes clicking on the kitchen floor, I thought of that promise less and less. But I didn't get depressed. I tried to be mature. I spent a lot of time arranging and rearranging my room. I moved my bed against one wall and then the other. I sorted and resorted my clothes in different ways, first by color, then by which things I liked best, and then by function—school clothes on the left, play clothes on the right. I cut out pictures from *Vogue* and *Seventeen* and taped them to the wall next to my mirror. I kept my room vacuumed and dusted and did all my homework. I sometimes thought I might end up an orphan, but I didn't cry. I thought being brave like that made me special. Other kids started doing drugs and stealing when their parents split up, but I was just going to work harder and be the best kid I could be, better even than kids from happy homes.

My father came out of his room one morning looking more tired than usual. His hair needed washing and he was still wearing his work clothes. On his way into the kitchen he stopped at the rattan bookcase in the living room where he had a turntable and some albums. Nobody ever used the turntable, except once at Christmas when my mother made us listen to holiday music every night during dinner. To me the turntable and the albums just seemed like useless things leftover from sometime before I was born. My father stood there studying the albums for a minute, and then he put one on.

"What's this?" I asked.

"I just thought we'd have some music this morning."

I watched him for a second, then I spooned up some cereal.

"You know, I used to listen to music all the time," he said. "There were a few years there after high school, before I met your mother, when I was kind of lonely. Music was about the only thing I could always count on for company."

I stopped eating again.

"Most of what I listened to was kind of sad, but it lifted me up a little to hear it. I was glad to know other people were in the same shoes."

My father had never said anything to me like this before, and hearing it made me nervous. I thought he was trying to show me something. I didn't know if I wanted to see it.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging off those memories. "I guess I was kind of mixed up back then."

After that day we listened to music every morning. My father had albums by Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Johnny Lee Hooker, and Al Green. At first I didn't really like any of the albums. I didn't understand the lyrics, and the music was slow and boring. Then I started listening to the words more closely, and the songs began to make sense. I hummed them on the way to school, or

just sitting in my room. After a few weeks I gave up the Top 40 station I usually listened to and found a station that played my father's kind of music.

I was lying on the couch one afternoon, listening to Johnny Lee Hooker, when the door opened. My father came in with a woman I didn't know. The woman stood just inside the entryway and waited for my father to close the door. My father's key was stuck, and when the woman got tired of waiting for him to get it out, she stepped over and shook my hand. "Hello, Sugar," she said.

I felt myself blush. "Hi," I said. I tried to look the woman in the face, but she was staring at me so sweetly, I had to turn away.

"Sweetheart, this is my friend, Theresa," my father said.

I said "Hi" again.

"What a lovely young woman," Theresa said.

I moved over to the corner of the couch and turned down the stereo. Theresa sat down next to me and smiled again. She was pretty thin from the waist up, but heavy in the hips and thighs. I kept thinking about what she'd called me. Woman. It seemed weird. I said the word over and over in my head. I started to like it. It supported the idea that I was being mature and strong about everything.

"We'd have the spotlight on us, that's for sure," my father said. He and Theresa were laughing off the thought of going to eat at the restaurant where he worked.

"I really don't have a preference," Theresa said.

"How about lobster?" my father suggested.

"You can't afford that."

"What the hell? Let's go crazy for a change."

I folded my legs up onto the couch. "Will you bring me home leftovers?" I asked.

My father smiled. "Did I mention she has a sense of humor?" he said to Theresa.

Theresa looked away and adjusted one of her earrings.

"Get some shoes on, Sweetie," my father said. "You're coming with us."

At the restaurant Theresa spent almost the whole time talking to me. She wanted to know about my grades and hobbies and boyfriends, and what I wanted to be when I grew up. I made up a few things about some boys at school who had crushes on me. I looked at my father to see if he could tell I was lying. He wasn't paying attention. He was leaning back in his chair as though he were listening to a different conversation.

A couple of weeks later Theresa took me to the beauty saloon where she worked part-time. When we came through the door, a brass bell chimed against

the glass. The two other women who worked there and the old ladies who were sitting in the chairs all turned and looked at us. "Anyway...," one of the stylists said. All the women turned back again to face the mirrors.

"This is Erica," Theresa said. The women all turned in our direction again. They tried to look surprised to see us. "She's getting the full treatment today."

The women said, "Wonderful. Lovely. How precious."

Theresa was standing behind me with her hands on my shoulders. I saw in one of the mirrors that she was giving the women a dirty look. "Let's take the last chair," she said.

The salon smelled of perm chemicals and perfume, and the walls were decorated with faded pictures of women wearing heavy make-up and old hairstyles. On the mirror in front of Theresa's chair was a picture of my father and me standing by the roller coaster at the Boardwalk. My mother had been standing with us that day, but her part of the picture was torn away. Theresa draped a plastic sheet around my neck and took me to the sinks at the far end of the salon. "Who's been cutting your hair, Honey?" she asked.

I brought a hand from under the sheet and pointed to myself.

"Wow," Theresa said. "So efficient. When was the last time you had it cut professionally?"

I shrugged. I couldn't remember.

Theresa smiled and kept scrubbing my scalp. Her curly hair and heavy earrings dangled down near my eyes. She started to hum.

"That's Joni Mitchell," I said.

"You know Joni Mitchell? That's amazing."

I smiled.

"You know," Theresa said. "You've got a very pretty smile. It would be nice if we saw more of it."

I smiled some more, but my mouth began to ache. Theresa took me back to the chair. After pumping it up a few times she combed my hair down in front of my eyes. "So tell me about your father."

I tried to think of something to say. It suddenly seemed as though I didn't know much about him. "He's nice."

"He's bottled up. Has he always been that way?"

I considered this description. It seemed pretty accurate. "He doesn't talk much. My mom usually does the talking, when she's around."

"Your mother sounds like an interesting one," Theresa said. She started humming her song again, then she stopped. "What do you think made her run off with that twenty-seven year old kid?"

"Dr. Leavitt's older than twenty-seven," I said. "He's an old man."

"Sweetie, she doesn't live with Dr. Leavitt. She lives with his son, Marvin. He's some kind of janitor for his father."

The other women in the salon had gotten quiet. I suddenly hated them.

* * *

At breakfast a few days later my father told me that he and Theresa had broken up. "She's a little too much," he said. "She had her tubes tied when she was younger and now she's kid-happy. I'm looking for a wife, not a replacement for your mother. Besides, you're at the age now where you don't really need a mother."

"She called," I said.

"Your mother?"

"No. Theresa."

"What did she say?"

"She said I could come back to the salon anytime I wanted."

"Well, I wouldn't. It's a nice offer, but I think you should just forget about her."

I stared down at my bowl of cereal. I spooned up a bite and then let the spoon fall. "Why, Dad?" I said.

"Why what?"

"Why everything? Why don't you want Mom to come back?"

"Who said I didn't want her to come back? She left, not me."

"But why?"

"I don't know. I don't want to get into it. It's 7:30 in the damn morning. I know you're not happy with the Theresa thing, but I'll make it up."

"How?"

"See all those records in there, and that stereo? They're yours."

"To keep?"

"To keep. Take them in your room if you want. But lay off about your mother and Theresa. Okay?"

I looked down at my spoon and nodded.

I played the records every day. *Rubber Soul* and *Blood On the Tracks* were my favorites. I listened to the records in the morning when I got dressed, after school when I did my homework, and late at night as I fell asleep. The songs were like stories, and the people in them started to seem real to me, like people I wanted to be friends with. Sometimes I imagined the songs were about me, especially songs like "My Michelle" and "You're A Big Girl Now." Occasionally the songs would seem more real than my own life. But I didn't like it when this happened. When I'd get too lost in a song, I'd turn down the volume and stare at myself in the mirror. It made me sad to do this, but with everything that was happening, I didn't want to get too spaced out. I thought it was better to be sad than crazy.

One night my father took me out to a bar called the Catalyst, where we met up with his new girlfriend, Justine. The bar was an enormous room with a tiled floor and potted ferns hanging from the ceiling. It didn't look anything like the bars I'd seen in movies.

"Is she going to drink something?" Justine asked my father.

"Get her a 7-up."

Justine came back to our table with a 7-Up and two beers. She was very skinny, with arms that stuck out of her tanktop like a pair of handles on a water pump. Her fingers were about as thick as the cigarettes she smoked. She had high cheekbones and a long chin and bright green eyes, like one of the women whose pictures I had taped to my wall. But the different parts of her face didn't go with one another as well. She looked like she'd been broken and glued back together.

"Is it all right for her to be out this late?" Justine asked.

"Oh yeah," my father said. "She's a latenighter."

Justine used one of her skinny fingers to swirl the foam in her beer. She tilted her head way back and blew cigarette smoke straight up.

"I like that position," my father said.

Justine pulled her head back down and licked her lips as she smiled. "Are we going somewhere tonight?"

"I know a place," my father said.

"I know you do."

"Erica, finish your soda. We're going to leave soon."

I took a sip of my drink and set it back down.

My father watched me. "You done?" he asked.

Justine leaned herself against my father and fingered his hair. "I don't think she's thirsty."

Justine moved into the apartment about a month later. She covered the walls of the living room with Nagel posters framed with plexiglass and red aluminum. She replaced the portable black and white television that had been my mother's with her new twenty-inch color with remote control. Her hearing had been damaged from too many years of waiting tables while bands played, so she kept the volume extremely high. One time I tried to drown out the sound of the television with a Bob Dylan album, and she came into my room and unplugged the stereo. "I put up with too much noise at work," she said. "I don't need to have it at home too."

Justine was often sick. She always had a box of Kleenex around, or a bottle of aspirin. She'd leave this stuff in the bathroom or on the kitchen counter, and then yell from the couch in the living room for someone to bring it to her.

"How come Justine's always sick?" I asked my father, one morning at breakfast.

"She's seen a lot of tragedy in her life. Her mother died young. And her dad is a drinker. He's in jail for throwing a beer bottle at a cop, or something like that."

"But why is she sick?"

"Well, people react to things different ways."

"So she's sick because her dad's in jail?"

"Not exactly. It's more complicated than that. Just be thankful you're not growing up the way she did."

I arrived home from school one day to the sound of the television crashing against the walls and making the Nagel posters buzz. Justine was on the couch. "This came today," she said, holding out an envelope.

It was a letter from my mother. I could see from the return address that she was in Boston.

"What are you watching?" I asked.

"Laverne and Shirley."

I watched the television for a minute. Laverne was in the brewery lunch room trying to break out of Shirley's hold and beat up one of the other workers.

"How do you feel today?" I asked.

"Like hell."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. Just don't make too much noise."

"Should I turn the TV down?"

Justine looked up at me and squinted. I stared down at the carpet until she looked back at the television.

"Do you ever like to play crazy eights or speed?" I asked.

She didn't answer. I didn't know if she was ignoring me, or if she just hadn't heard what I said. A commercial came on and she stretched forward and got her cigarettes off the coffee table. She lit one and threw the pack down again. "You need something?"

I shook my head. "Are you and my dad in love?" I asked.

Justine blew smoke out of the corner of her mouth. "Of course. We're getting married soon."

"Wow. I didn't know."

"This fall. Didn't your father tell you?"

I shook my head again.

"It's going to be small, but you're invited of course. You're going to be the flower girl."

I tried to look happy. Laverne and Shirley came on again.

"Are you humming?" Justine asked.

"Sorry."

"That's all right. It's just that I kind of wanted to watch this show. Maybe you could go into your room if you're going to sing."

I did what she suggested. I closed my door and braced it with the chair from my desk. Then I opened the letter from my mother.

> Hello from Boston. I'm in the T-shirt business now. Marvin got an advance from his father and we're opening a little sidewalk place next week, just in time for summer. Marvin's entrepreneur magazines say Boston is one of the best cities in the country for sidewalk vending, so I'm sure we're going to make a lot of money. We've got a new apartment in a little area called Jamaica Plain. There's a little garden in back and an old fashioned kitchen. The whole thing reminds me of the house I grew up in. I love it. You haven't heard from me in a long time but I hope you're not angry with me and that you understand why I needed to do this. This may sound horrible to you, but I've come to the conclusion over the past few months that I was not cut out to be a mother. I mean, I am a mother, of course, but I truly believe that I was not meant to be. I'm not good at it, I suppose is what I'm trying to say, and it wasn't really fair to you or me that I kept on faking things. I'm sorry, of course, but to me this seems like the truth. It doesn't mean I don't still love you—I do, of course. How could I not? I just think it would be better if we could stop thinking of our relationship as one between a mother and a daughter, and start thinking of it as one between two friends. This little change in outlook might not make sense right now, but I know it will, someday. Just remember that I love you, and that even though I'm 3,000 miles away, I'm always thinking of you and hoping you're well.
>
> Love, Mom

I took the letter over to my desk and cut it into pieces. I emptied my trash can. I got a book of matches from Justine's drawer in the bathroom and burned each piece and then dropped it into the can. I took the picture of the woman who looked like Justine and burned it whole. Then I carried the ashes into the bathroom and flushed them down the toilet.

I went back to my room and sat on my bed and listened. The sound of the television was vibrating against the wall. Every time the audience laughed, my window shook. Some teenagers in the park across the street were arguing about a basketball game, and this got the dog barking. My dad came home from work in his noisy car, and when he came up from the parking lot his wingtips pounded the stairs. I looked at my albums leaning against the turntable. I put one on to play and turned up the volume until all I could hear was music. ◆

Five Minutes

Bruce Marshall Romans

Characters:

Homeless Man, Any age
Passer-by, Any age
Woman, Any age (This play was originally written without the character of Woman. She may easily be removed, for the sake of production , if necessary.)

Place:

The set should be sparse and perhaps even unclear; nevertheless, it should be ultimately defined by the actors.

Time:

Probably early evening.

Sounds:

Soft winds, Distant dogs barking, Occasional traffic. Salvation Army bells.

"O call back yesterday, bid time return"
William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, III.ii.69

Homeless Man: I need a quarter. Gotta have a quarter. Gotta git a quarter. A Kwotta. A quota. A Kwa-tair. I need twenty five cents, twenta fie pennies, two dimes and a nickel. Three nickels and a dime. One quatray. One fourth of one dollar. Twenty five percent of one hundred cents. Yessir. Fifty percent of fifty cents. One quarter. I really only need thirty five cents—minus a dime. Twenta fie sint. Lookin for a triple nickel plus two more--don't need no more! Yessir,

yes sir. I need a quarter, kawotta, kawota, kwotair. . . . (*Woman enters passing by*) Got a quarter, I mean, need a quarter.

Woman: No, I don't.

Homeless Man: Don't need one or don't got one?

Woman : I'm sorry, I'm in hurry. I have to work for my money. (*She hurries off*)

Homeless Man: Five cents twenty need I. Quarters four looking for am I. Have quarter a gotta. Q-U-A-R-ter. Quar-T-E-R. Pennies five and twenty. Kwotters need a plenty. (*Passer-by: enters*)
How many quarters you got in your pocket?

Passer-by: Excuse me?

Homeless Man: You're excused.

Passer-by: I'm sorry, I thought you were talking to me.

Homeless Man: I'm sorry, I thought you were talking to me.

Passer-by: I thought you were asking me something. I'm sorry.

Homeless Man: I would say, if I had to, three or seven. But, probably twenty five, no that's not right. Two hundred and twenty five.

Passer-by: What, quarters?

Homeless Man: Five.

Passer-by: Are you asking me if I have five quarters in my pocket?

Homeless Man: No sir. No sir, I am absolutely not asking you if you have five quarters in your pocket. I would not ask anyone any kind of questions like that. I'm sorry sir, for giving you that impression. I do not want to be misunderstood. I was telling you that you have five quarters in your pocket.

Passer-by: Do you need some change? I think I have....(*Passer-by looks at Homeless Man*) Hey, do I know you? You look like...Do you know me?

Homeless Man: Well my friend, I do believe that that is completely possible. Did you sail on the H.M.S. Beagle with Darwin?

Passer-by: No.

Homeless Man: No, I don't guess that was you. Your nose is too small anyway. Perhaps you were in Crete when I was helping Daedalus and Icarus with their wings?

Passer-by: No, I'm afraid that wasn't me either. Maybe, I'm mistaken.

Homeless Man: Did I mis-take you?

Passer-by: I mean maybe I don't know you. You probably just look like someone I know or something.

Homeless Man: Maybe you do know me.

Passer-by: Who knows...Well I have enjoyed talking to you, but--

Homeless Man: Oh, I know ya have and I've enjoyed talkin to you, but you know what?

Passer-by: What?

Homeless Man: I would like it, if you don't mind, if you could just hang out with me for just a little longer. You see, I got a little problem that I'm trying to remedy.

Passer-by: I understand, and I'm sorry, but I have problems too, we all have problems. I don't think I can really be of any help.

Homeless Man: (*After taking a long silent look at Passer-by*) My space craft has crash landed in the desert in New Mexico and before I was able to initiate a distress signal, all of my communication equipment became inoperative. I can see that you understand my plight. Now, I am faced with the task of raising enough money to buy the sub-standard Earthen hardware to repair my craft enough for flight. Now, I'm willing to make a deal here. If you are willing to lend a helping hand, I, in turn will rid your planet of Saddam Hussein. Is that a good deal, or am I lying? You know he's crazy.

Passer-by: (*A bit amused*) A flying saucer?

Homeless Man: More cigar-shaped really.

Passer-by: Cigar -shaped?

Homeless Man: Yeah, Cuban. (*Winks*) Hey, do you know how to hot-wire a car?

Passer-by: No.

Homeless Man: A nuclear submarine?

Passer-by: I'm afraid not.

Homeless Man: Mmmm. Well, how 'bout a moped?

Passer-by: Look, I don't know how to hot-wire a toaster, much less a car or submarine and I don't know anything about the mechanics of a flying saucer.

Homeless Man: Cigar.

Passer-by: Flying cigar.

Homeless Man: Thank you. (*Passer-by starts to leave*) Hey, where are ya goin?

Passer-by: "Hey," I'm going home.

Homeless Man: Why?

Passer-by: I've got things to do, I've got to go.

Homeless Man: Okay, okay, all right. Hey, wait one second. I got a deal for you. I bet you five more minutes of your time, that I can tell you where you got those shoes. If I can do that, you stay and talk to me for five more minutes. If I can't, then I'll give you back five minutes of your life. Now, that, to me sounds like a deal. If it ain't then I'm lyin. I know that there are a lot of people on your planet that would love to have five minutes back.

Passer-by: (*Now a bit amused and interested*) You mean to tell me that you think you can guess where I got these shoes, and if you can't you will give me five minutes of my life back?

Homeless Man: I guess you ain't deaf.

Passer-by: (*Playing along*) I guess I ain't, I'm not.

Homeless Man: Granted, five minutes ain't that long sometimes, but other times it can seem like forever. It ain't very long to talk to someone you just met. But what about those last five minutes that you got to see your grandmother, when you didn't know it was going to be the last five minutes you'd ever see her? That's a lot of time. Or what about the first five minutes that you knew you were in love, and she was in love with you? Or even better, the last five, when you still had time to take back what you said to that special someone from Boston, but you didn't. You see it's all a matter of perspective.

Passer-by: (*Amazed*) How did you know about those things?

Woman: (*Re-enters carrying packages, notices Homeless Man again*) Can't you just leave people alone and stop wasting our time? My God. (*Woman hurries off*)

Passer-by: (*Watches woman exit and turns back to Homeless Man*) How do you know those things?

Homeless Man: What things?

Passer-by: Those things about my grandmother and Kimberly. How did you know?

Homeless Man: I guess I'm good at guessing.

Passer-by: No you're not, you know things about me. How do you know these things? I want you to tell me.

Homeless Man: Is it a deal? Are you willing to let me guess where you got those shoes? (*The Passer-by looks at him speechless for a moment unable to answer*) If you let me guess, just cause I like you, I'll even throw in Saddam Hussein. Goin once, goin twice--

Passer-by: Yes, yes , of course I'll let you guess. Go ahead.

Homeless Man: You drive a hard bargain monkey man. (*Homeless Man circles Passer-by, apparently deep in thought looking at his shoes*) I would say, if I had to, and I do because you and I have entered into this agreement with one another,

that you got those shoes, no, yes, I bet you think I can't do this. . . I think. . . that you got those shoes. . . on your feet right now as we are speaking. Am I right?

Passer-by: What?

Homeless Man: I'm sayin that you got those shoes on your feet. Am I right?

Passer-by: No, you're wrong, you're a fraud, a fake. I don't GOT these shoes on my feet, I HAVE them on my feet.

Homeless Man: Oh, well, if you're gonna boil it down to just a simple matter of semantics and be a sore loser, then I'm sorry I chose you to help. You lost and you know it, fair and square. And if you turn and leave then this will just be another one of those "five minutes" that keep adding up, that keep passing you by. Do you want that?

Passer-by: You chose me to help? Did you want to help me, or did you want me to help you? (*Homeless Man looks at Passer-by in silence and doesn't answer*) What do you want? What is it that you want with me?

Homeless Man: See, that's not it. What do you want?

Passer-by: What do I want?

Homeless Man: Did I stutter? I don't think I'm stuttering.

Passer-by: I want to know how you know those things about me? I want to know who you are and why you're bothering me? (*No answer*) What is it that you want from me, I want to know?

Homeless Man: I want to know why you ask so many questions?

Passer-by: Stop it! Answer me.

Homeless Man: I could stand here and answer all these questions and more, but is that what you really want? I don't think so. I'm a person who happened to cross paths with you one night. I'm someone whose space craft is downed in New Mexico. I'm a bad dresser. I am someone you lost five minutes to. But, what does this matter? If I bother you then leave.

Passer-by: (*Looks at Homeless Man for a moment then starts to leave. He is almost gone then turns and slowly walks back*) I can't.

Homeless Man: Why?

Passer-by: I made a deal with you. (*He looks at his watch*) You still have about two and a half minutes.

Homeless Man: You can go. Nobody's goin to make you stay and talk to me.

Passer-by: I can't. I can't do that any more.

Homeless Man: Why?

Passer-by: I don't know. I just can't. I don't want to do that anymore.

Homeless Man: I need a quarter. You got a quarter I can have? (*Passer-by reaches into his pocket and pulls out a hand full of change*) Hey, wait a minute. Five quarters, two dimes, four pennies, and a wheat penny. And some lint.

Passer-by: (*Passer-by looks at the change in his hand and then at Homeless Man and then again at the change*) How did you know that?

Homeless Man: Any of them quarters in your sweaty hand for me or are you gonna stop at a few Coke machines on the way home?

Passer-by: (*Passer-by hands Homeless Man a quarter*) How do you know these things?

Homeless Man: Don't ask me that. What is it that you really want to know?

Passer-by: I don't know.

Homeless Man: Yes you do. What do really want?

Passer-by: (*Something has come over Passer-by*) I'm not sure. I don't even know who I'm talking to.

Homeless Man: That's right, you don't, you never know who you're talking to.

Passer-by: But, how do you know. . .

Homeless Man: How could I not know? Even more important how could you not know? How could anybody not know? But, the funny thing is nobody

seems to know. That's what gets me. I wanted a quarter and got it. I wanted five more minutes and got them. If you had won, and you didn't, what would you have wanted those five minutes for? Do you know? Now, think about it. Do you really know?

Passer-by: Yes, I do know.

Homeless Man: Then tell me. Why did you want your five minutes back?

Passer-by: I. . . I. . . would have changed things. I wanted to change things.

Homeless Man: (*Homeless Man holds out the quarter*) You ready? Call it in the air. Heads you win, tails I lose.

(*Homeless Man flips the quarter and Passer-by watches and says nothing. Homeless Man: catches the quarter and holds it in his hand without looking at the outcome*) How much time do I have left?

Passer-by: (*Passer-by looks at his watch*) You don't.

Homeless Man: Ain't that a bitch. I didn't think so. But you know what?

Passer-by: What?

Homeless Man: (*Homeless Man puts quarter in his pocket without looking at it*) You do.

(*Passer-by turns and starts to leave*)

Dale, we both won. Do you know that?

(*Passer-by, not surprised that Homeless Man knows his name nods yes and exits. After a few moments of silence, Homeless Man starts again*)

I need a quarter. Lookin for twenty five cents. One fourth of one dollar. A Kwota...

(FADE TO BLACK)

Kiss the Babies Goodbye

Marilyn Livingston

Characters:

Walt, middle forties
Nancy, early forties

Setting:

A suburban kitchen. The set can be as minimal as a table and refrigerator.

Time:

Present

(As lights go up Walt is seated at the table. He is wearing a dress shirt and slacks. His sports coat and tie are draped over the back of a chair. Nancy is cooking dinner.)

Nancy: We have to go to the funeral.

Walt: I don't see why.

Nancy: He's dead.

Walt: I know he's dead. So's Janis Joplin. And I didn't go to her funeral. And at least she could sing.

Nancy: This is no time for jokes, Walt. Kevin grew up with him. They were friends since before kindergarten.

Walt: Then tell Kevin to go to his funeral. I don't like to go to funerals.

Nancy: I can't tell Kevin anything.

Walt: So you didn't tell him?

Nancy: You know I didn't tell him. How can I tell him? I don't have his phone number. I don't even have his address. He's in San Francisco someplace. Practicing alternative lifestyles.

(*A beat.*)

And I'm stuck in Ottumwa.

Walt: And I'm struggling to keep his tuition paid. (*Sighs deeply.*) Yeah, kids have to go find themselves. But I wish they'd look. . .well, I wish they'd in look in places that are a little more comfortable for me.

Nancy: What do you mean?

Walt: I can't go to the funeral.

Nancy: We have to. We just have to, you know. The Donavans are Catholic. Catholics believe suicide is a mortal sin.

Walt: Baptists believe that homosexuality is a mortal sin. I hope that we don't have to have a funeral for Kevin.

Nancy: We're not Baptist. We've never been Baptist.

Walt: But there's only two churches in town. One of them is Baptist. Half the people in this town are Baptist.

Nancy: Don't be ridiculous. There's more churches than that. Besides what do churches have to do with anything?

Walt: The religious people in this town belong to those two churches, don't they? Did you ever see a funeral at a bowling alley? Or on a golf course? Or how about—

Nancy: Shut up. Just shut up, Walt. Our friends don't have to know anything at all about Kevin. There's none of them that we could talk to about this anyway.

Walt: So. We don't know anything about Jeff either. Except that when he ran away, he did it permanently.

Nancy: What are you saying?

Walt: Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Isn't that the clever quote they gave us? Remember that meeting we went to when Kevin was in high school?

Nancy: Oh. Yes. I remember.

Walt: I remember thinking if life is a journey, is suicide a shortcut?

Nancy: That isn't funny.

Walt: I know. It just popped into my head. I tried to push it out, but it stuck. For no good reason.

Nancy: I'd forgotten. Almost.

Walt: I never figured that meeting out. Other than that clever quote they never told us anything except to watch our kids. Good God!
(Laughs and paces.)
We were supposed to watch them for drugs. Watch them for suicide. I felt more like the CIA than a father.

Nancy: Oh, come on. It wasn't that bad.

Walt: I don't go to funerals.

Nancy: Walt. You can't be serious. It's Wednesday. At eleven o'clock. St. Ann's on Oliver. Visiting hours start tonight.

Walt: How do they know it was a suicide? Did he leave a note?

Nancy: No, he left without a word.
(A beat.)
Well, I don't think so. But maybe. His family probably wouldn't tell anyone. . . Would they?

Walt: I doubt it.

Nancy: It's not something you can ask. How could I say, did Jeff leave a note? Do you know why he did this?

Walt: There's damn little you can ask. What happened?

Nancy: He hung himself.

Walt: How? Where?

Nancy: In the garage. He threw the rope over a rafter and jumped off Joe's work bench. What does it matter?

Walt: I guess it doesn't really matter. I just thought if I talked about something else you would forget about me going to the funeral.

Nancy: So do you want to eat? I made this incredible eggplant stew.

Walt: Does it have cheese in it? I love stuff with cheese in it.

Nancy: It has tomato sauce. And I'll add some feta. Does that count as cheese?

Walt: Feta's fine. Why do you suppose he did it?

Nancy: I don't know. I just don't know. Does anyone ever know. My cousin, Jim, committed suicide. He seemed okay one minute and then the next he was dead. Except that—Well, once we were at this Christmas party and he said to me, "Help me. I just can't do it anymore." But all of us had been drinking.

Walt: Except you.

Nancy: Yeah, except me. And to me it just seemed like another crying jag. You know how some people feel sorry for themselves when they've been drinking for a while?

(*A beat.*)

So I patted his head and said, "It'll be better in the morning." And then he blew his head off a few weeks later with a shotgun. It wasn't exactly better.

Walt: It wasn't your fault. You couldn't know. Every day people say I can't do it anymore. And they get up the next day and they go on. That's life.

Nancy: No. It was my fault. I should have listened harder. I should have paid more attention. The Ratatouille. It's almost done. Do you think we need a salad?

Walt: People always say it's their fault when someone dies. I'll make a salad.

Nancy: We have some Bibb lettuce. Maybe some Romaine.

Walt: Romaine is so much greener than Iceberg. What else do we have?

Nancy: Well, I picked some swiss chard from the garden. That might be good. Did you ever personally know a suicide before? Like my cousin, I mean?

Walt: Swiss chard? Good idea.

Nancy: I can turn the kettle on. Do you want some tea? Or a beer? Before dinner.

Walt: Nah. This will make a great salad.

Nancy: What makes a great suicide?

Walt: I guess I never knew anybody. Not close. Only a couple of guys I was in the service with. They committed suicide a few years later. After we were all discharged.

Nancy: I have some green onions.

Walt: So saute them. You know I hate onions in a salad.

Nancy: Onions are good for you. They prevent cancer. They are on the list ...

Walt: Okay. Give them to me. I'll put them in.

Nancy: You can always pick them out. So how did you feel about those guys?

Walt: I felt bad for them. I remember them being like me. Eager to get home. And having hopes and dreams. I've always wondered what made them do it.

Nancy: I have some cucumbers. I always wondered that about my cousin. But now. This is. . .

Walt: I guess it's a shame. About Jeff. He had his whole life ahead of him. Same age as Kevin. Only twenty years old.

Nancy: Kevin turned twenty one in October. Remember?

Walt: Oh. Yeah. That's right. It's a shame. A real shame.

Nancy: Oh, lord. It's worse than that. Remember them playing together. As kids? They both had such marvelous imaginations. Always inventing their own games.

Walt: Hmm. Have anything else for the salad?

Nancy: They were so cute. I remember one day standing out there on the porch watching all the neighborhood kids playing some game. Watching those babies, and I thought if the statistics are right then one day some of you will go wrong. They were just little bitty kids.

Walt: What do you mean by wrong? Winding up in jail? Not making lots of money? Not being part of corporate America?

Nancy: I don't know. I don't know, but that day looking at two and three year olds—I suddenly felt sad. Now with Jeff. I can't even tell you what I feel. I just can't. It seems so worthless. So out of control.

Walt: Well. Jeff. And Kevin. And everybody else in the world. . . We all have demons. And we face them in our own way. Or we don't. What about Endive?

Nancy: Check the fridge. I'll set the table. What demons?

Walt: Oh, you know. Not having the right job, not driving the right car, not having the nicest house. All the things that society expects of you. Being normal. Whatever that is.

(*A beat. Holds up Endive.*)

Kind of limp. I won't use very much. I still don't want to go.

Nancy: And it's expected of you?

Walt: What?

Nancy: Being normal?

Walt: Shit yes. Being normal. Having demons. It's all part of the American way. And you too. It's expected of you too.

Nancy: And Kevin? And oh my God, Jeff?
(*A beat.*)
We'll never know will we?

Walt: Do we want to? Could we stand the consequences? There must be consequences for truly knowing who other people are. What they feel? How they think? What gives them pain so deep they can't breathe?
(*A beat.*)
How's Cecile taking this?

Nancy: Hard. I took her a fruit salad earlier. The house was filled with people, but Cecile wasn't there.

Walt: Where was she?

Nancy: Oh, she was there physically. But. Well, I'm not sure she even recognized me. And she kept crying, "Jeff didn't do this. Jeff couldn't do this." Joe just sat in his chair rocking back and forth with his head in his hands.

Walt: Do you think it's harder because they're Catholic?

Nancy: I think it's harder because he was their child. We always want our children to have it easier. To have a better life than we did. We don't ever expect to bury our children.

Walt: Especially not like this. Grab the French dressing will you?
(*Walt serves the salad. Both sit down, but neither do more than pick at the food.*)
It's a good salad.

Nancy: Yes. It's a good salad. You always make a good salad.

Walt: But I don't go to funerals.

Nancy: Does that mean you won't go?
(*A beat.*)
I'll have to go alone then.

Walt: You don't have to go either.

Nancy: I have to go. Cecile and Joe need us. They need people around them. They need the support.

Walt: Nancy, they need Jeff. He's dead. None of the rest of us matter. They won't even know who's there.

Nancy: Pass the salt.

Walt: I thought you gave up eating salt. Your high blood pressure?

Nancy: Tonight, I eat salt. If I was a drinking person, I'd get drunk. I'd drink a whole fifth of something. Then maybe I would be numb. Or I wouldn't remember.

Walt: (*Laughs.*) You'd probably just throw up and have a headache in the morning.

(*A beat.*)

I feel numb now. I don't know if people can feel any more numb.

Nancy: Damn it! I'm so angry! I don't think I've ever been this angry. Or this helpless.

(*A beat.*)

Do you think that we did anything? Do you think that we could have done anything that—that would have changed it?

Walt: Changed what?

Nancy: Changed anything. Changed life? For Jeff?

Walt: Are we involved? Are you asking me if we're involved in this? Of course, we are. We're involved in this in the same way we're involved in Kevin's decision. In the same obscure way that all parents are involved in their kids' decisions.

Nancy: But how? What did we do? What did we do wrong?

Walt: I don't know. Maybe we didn't do anything wrong. Maybe they both needed something different. Something none of us knew how to give.

Nancy: Kevin's decision to—to. . . It isn't the same as Jeff.

Walt: I know it's not.

Nancy: Jeff is dead.

Walt: I know it's not. But we may have lost him all the same. We don't understand his choices or his lifestyle. And. Well, if we aren't careful. If we don't try hard.

(*A beat.*)

And maybe even if we do all that. Kevin may be just as lost to us.

Nancy: But we love him. We love him no matter what.

Walt: Love isn't always enough. Or maybe sometimes it's too much.

Nancy: I wish I knew. If I only knew. Why would Jeff do such a thing? Did he seem different to you?

Walt: No, I talked to him Thursday night. Just about his classes at State. He seemed very pleased with computer technology. Said it was the perfect field for him.

Nancy: Maybe he didn't do it. Maybe someone else did it. Maybe he was really murdered.

Walt: Someone else hung him?

Nancy: How could he do it?

Walt: You have to kiss your babies good bye. Some go to California, some commit suicide, others just move across town. They're still gone.

Nancy: What?

Walt: We don't own our children. They're given to us as gifts. We can't protect them from life. We can't save them from death. We have to let them go. They have to become their own people.

Nancy: I miss Kevin.

Walt: I know, honey. It's a loss. Life is about loss. Sometimes.

(*Walt rises, picks up sports coat and tie.*)

Nancy: Where are you going?

Walt: To a funeral parlour. Didn't you say they have visiting hours tonight? Come on, ole girl. We've all got our own demons. Come help me fight mine tonight.

Nancy: (*Hugs him.*) Does that mean you'll go to the funeral?

Walt: (*Grins.*) Don't push it.

(*Lights down.*)

THE END

Contributors

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The Alabama Writers' Forum is supported by funding from the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

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--Z Miscelleanous

*Invited to the Paris Book Show, 1996.

*Selected to Writer's Digests "Top Fifty in Fiction" Survey 1993, 1996, 1998.

* Selected to the Long Ridge Writer's Group's "Best of the Magazine Markets," 1993.

*Listed in American Humanities Index, Novel & Short Story Writer's Market, Poetry Writer's Market, Dustbooks, Directory of Literary Magazines, Dramatist Sourcebook, and the Standard Periodical Directory.

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ISSN 0890-1554