

Ordinary Sins

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The Short Story Collection as Genre: Introductory Essay

Ordinary Sins

Ordinary Sins is a collection of eight connected short stories, following the creation and the demise of a nuclear family. Andrew Howard and Linda Ballard live together for nearly a decade as husband and wife, raising their daughter Emily. Long before Linda takes a job as flight attendant, their domestic life is beginning to unravel at the seams. Linda detests Andy's predictability and seeming blandness, while Andy struggles with his sense of duty that often overwhelms other desires. *Ordinary Sins* is filled with stories of tumultuous childhoods, of the disintegration of a marriage, of efforts to rediscover romantic love, and of the struggle to piece together an unconventional but happy family.

I chose to write *Ordinary Sins* as short stories rather than a novel, but also made the decision to deny the reader any central narration. The opening story introduces readers to the four central characters: Andy, Linda, their daughter Emily, and Andy's new love interest, Debra. These characters all also appear in the last story, but in the middle often have entire stories to themselves, or share the narrative with one or two other central characters. The first and last stories are set in the present day, each told in third-person close. The six intermediate stories are each first-person and move freely throughout time, giving history and context to each of the characters. Tales of Andy, Linda and Debra's childhood are intermixed with stories of Andy and

Linda's early days of marriage and Emily's teenage years. Each story also threads flashbacks and memories through a central narrative. It is important to me to move through time, both in the collection and in each story, in an unorthodox way in order to explore the unstable nature of human memory. The way people remember things is not always chronological or logical, something I want to capture when diving into these characters' past. I also want to explore the traumatic and seemingly insignificant events that contribute to someone's personality and decisions, without moving through back-story in a linear way, which would suggest that the cause-and-effect dynamic of human life is more straightforward than it often is.

Many short story collections are held together by the presence of a protagonist who captures readers' sympathies throughout the narrative. In *Ordinary Sins* I attempted to give each of the four central characters equal attention, as well as an equal number of both mistakes and redeeming qualities. The way readers perceive blame and antagonists in literature is often very uncomplicated, but this seemed an inappropriate viewpoint for a collection striving to capture an accurate sense of human nature and the contemporary nuclear family in America. I do not feel that there was necessarily an antagonist or hero in this story, but rather ordinary people making a series of the decisions they feel are best, or that feel they have no choice but to make.

The ending of the collection's final stories is in many ways ambiguous, because in my mind it is only the ending I have assigned to the collection, not the end of these character's lives and stories. I hope not to tie up all the loose ends and assign each character complete resolution and happiness, but instead to offer a realistic sense of hope that that which has been broken throughout the collection may begin to heal. The entire collection is comprised of stories which focus on a brief moment in a character's life, which offer a fleeting glimpse into the events that have made them who they are. Likewise, this final story is only another simple moment, not a

complete ending but a picture of happiness. The collection follows characters that are not unhappy, but rather lacking healthy, constructive relationships. Each story contains an instance of a character trying to reach out and make a meaningful human connection, but choosing the wrong person or moment. In the opening story Emily replaces her absent mother with a teenage crush, allowing the boy to sneak into her room through the French doors late in the night, but eventually facing disappointment when he loses interest. As a child Debra often feels out of place within her family, and finds the most solace in her young, blind cousin, who ultimately cannot help her in the way she needs. Linda continually rejects the most meaningful relationships in her life, settling on a young, confident pilot who similarly rejects commitment. Seemingly dull and dependable Andy takes the first dangerous step towards violating his marital vows when he asks Amber, the graduate student whose car he rear ends, out for coffee.

Though the stories are not chronologically told, I hope that certain statements about life would begin to emerge as important to the collection. In each of the stories, a character desires loves and human connection, but often assigns their affections to an unfit or inappropriate subject. Familial love, or lack thereof, motivates many of the characters, and in some cases the family a character is born into is not always as good as the family they find for themselves. The conflict that runs through the relationships in all stories of the collection is the search for a balance between independence and commitment. Family, romantic relationships and values often conflict with a character's personal needs or desires. Linda cannot fathom a life defined only by her husband and daughter, cannot find a balance between her family and personal fulfillment, and eventually runs from the strain, as she has been forced into dealing with conflict from childhood. The catalyst of the collection, Linda's inability to form those meaningful relationships hinders her own happiness, and destroys a family in the process. "Beautiful

Disaster” is intended as a story of redemption for Linda, a story that illustrates the various ways in which family has failed Linda, has pushed her to run from her problems and cling to independence.

What began as an accident evolved into something of a motif for the collection. L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* made several appearances in the earliest drafts of this collection, and now appears or is referenced in each of the eight stories. Whether it is an reference to the book or movie, or a more subtle reference to a tornado, pair of silver slippers, or the famous motto “There’s no place like home,” Baum’s magical world makes an appearance in one way or another in each of the stories. As many critics have pointed out in the last century, Baum’s story was more than just a children’s fable. John Funchion makes the argument in his article “When Dorothy Became History,” *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a story of dramatic escape, but ironically enough, at the story’s end Dorothy stays not in the somewhat utopian land of Oz, but returns to Kansas, which is characterized as something of a Hell in the book’s opening (Funchion 429). It is a story of desire, and of the struggle between nostalgia for home and things past, and longing for the improvements of a cosmopolitan life (431-33). In the end, Dorothy returns home, but not to her original house (which of course is still stuck in Oz where the tornado deposited it). Instead, she returns to a new farmhouse, for while “there’s no place like home”, the home people has imagined in their heads is almost never a real and attainable thing (437, 449).

These ideas of longing and searching for home are pertinent to the characters of *Ordinary Sins*, who often come to realize that what they have imagined as ideal or necessary is actually unattainable. Andy and Linda’s home is in many ways the core setting, though the stories move through multiple towns and states. This home is cluttered both with Linda’s presence, and her

absence, and comes to represent their family, both the ideal family they come to realize is unattainable, and the new family they have constructed. Unlike Dorothy, after Andy remarries they do not move to a new home but remain in the same house, though it too will never be like what they have imagined in their heads.

Ultimately, I hope to capture what I think is a central facet of human behavior: For the most part, the world is filled with people doing their best to do the right thing, though no one really knows what the “right thing” actually is. The title *Ordinary Sins* comes from a line in the opening story, “Only he believed that his sins of ordinariness could be undone.” I chose the phrase as the title of the collection to suggest that, while life is full of catastrophic events which can ruin relationships, often when a family disintegrates it is no one’s fault, that the “sins” committed in relationships are often ordinary, commonplace mistakes and miscalculations that no one intends to be destructive. The word “sins” has no religious intentions, but rather illuminates the gravity these characters perceive in their every day actions.

The collections of short fiction I examine below are examples of the short story collection genre I selected specifically for their strengths that I hoped to borrow. The stories in *Dubliners* are the least obviously connected, and I examine Joyce’s skillful use of theme and motif in stringing the stories together. Both *Too Far To Go* and *Unaccustomed Earth* contain stories of family, and of the minor and major events that make up daily lives. Updike’s success lies in his use of subtle symbols to intensify ordinary lives, and Lahiri creates marvelously complex characters with unassuming language and dialogue. The thematic progression from Joyce to Lahiri also creates a stylistic sequence that moves closer to the style I strive for within *Ordinary Sins*. Unlike Joyce, who loads his stories with symbols and philosophical implications, I am much more interested in the psychological motivations of each story. Frank O’Connor calls

Joyce's "a heavily pictorial style; one intended to exclude the reader from the action and instead to present him with a series of images of the events described," while my style is far more interested in precisely presenting the action of a scene, including the reader in the progression of events (O'Conner 305). My writing, unlike Updike's, is not heavily imagistic or poetic, but follows in the footsteps of contemporary fiction writers, those working in the vein of Raymond Carver's unaffected domestic stories, like Amy Hempel and Alice Munroe, and is most similar to Lahiri's writing in this way. Ultimately, my style is meant to suggest that Andy, Linda, Emily and Debra are not people prone to extravagance, and so it is in extravagant situations that they are most in jeopardy.

Dubliners

Easily one of the most well-known and complex examples of the genre, James Joyce's *Dubliners* is an exemplary short story collection. Unlike many collections assembled much later in a writer's life, Joyce always intended to write a book of related stories, all speaking to the theme of "paralysis in Dublin life" (Walzl 161). After a scattered publication history, *Dubliners* was finally published as a collection in June of 1914, and stories within the collection have come to be considered as some of the most notable examples of short fiction in the twentieth century (157). This history lent itself to less systematic connections between the stories, something I found valuable for my own collection. The fragmentary nature of the collection captures in many ways my goal of portraying ordinary life through a series of brief and only marginally interconnected moments. "Beautiful Disaster," the second story in my collection, might at first seem a large departure from the collection's opening story, as it tells the sequence of events that led Linda to abandon her childhood home and become estranged from her parents. It is not until

later, where readers see Linda having an affair and abandoning her family in “In the Air,” that the pregnancy briefly mentioned at the end of “Beautiful Disaster,” Linda’s constant need for escape, come into focus as essential to her character’s narrative and behavior. “Just a Stop,” also early in the collection, similarly dives into a tragedy in Andy’s childhood that begins to amplify Andy’s character, to show him as a hopeful person, clinging to souvenirs of what might have been.

I chose to examine *Dubliners* as an example of the genre of short story collections because of its successful use of subtle theme and motif to tie stories together. Because Joyce so rarely repeats characters in his short stories, it is difficult to tell, at first glance, why the stories belong together at all, other than the shared setting of Dublin. “At first reading, a number of the stories strike readers as not only brief, but as fragmentary and puzzling narratives that leave characters in suspension and actions unresolved,” (Walzl 170). Joyce is a master of capturing a brief episode of a life, and of subtle climaxes that do not seem immediately connected to one another. While I use the same four central characters in my collection, the stories move in and out of different first person narrators, protagonists of different ages, and of periods of time, making it difficult to immediately discern the collection’s format. Joyce is extremely successful in weaving his main themes into each story, so that the stories feel relevant to one another. Brewster Ghiselin calls the collection a “moral drama, an action of the human spirit struggling for survival under peculiar conditions of deprivation,” (Ghiselin 318). While his arguments are more centered on the religious imagery throughout *Dubliners*, Ghiselin’s point that every story contributes to an innately human story of survival is very much what I also imagine for *Ordinary Sins*. Mine are characters who have been in some way deprived of an essential need, of a mother

or lover or parental love, and must find a way to navigate the world despite this deprivation, and to construct their own happiness.

Joyce's concept of the "epiphany," or the "sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" (*Stephen Hero*, 213), is an important feature of each story's end, when a character reaches a surprising realization. The epiphanies in *Dubliners* are stretched from the classical sense of the word, where divine beings appeared before humans, to a broader event where an essential truth appears suddenly to a character.

Had Joyce chosen instead to write *Dubliners* as a novel, he might have compromised the ability to explore human development throughout stages of life from a multitude of points of view. The opening story describes a young boy's first encounter with death, and the next two stories also deal with young boys facing the unreality of their expectations. The following four stories describe young adults who are forced to make a choice by the story's end. The four stories of mature adulthood deal with characters who have in some way failed to achieve something, or who have been passed by life in some way. Interestingly, the three stories between the tale of young adulthood and the final story are accounts of public life, specifically politics, the commerce of the music scene, and public religion. "The Dead" deals with each of these topics in one way or another. As the Morkans' house fills with their guests, readers are given another view of public life, this one in many ways comfortable and jolly. Gabriel and Gretta, the story's central characters, are mature adults, but the issue at the core of the story's climax is very much one of adolescence, and of the events that occur early in life, but color a character for years to come.

Much of what Joyce achieves in *Dubliners*, I also strive to accomplish in *Ordinary Sins*. Joyce's use of a consistent narrative structure throughout each of the stories helps to hold together the diverse plots of the collection. "Structurally they all divide into three parts or scenes...Their settings all develop Joyce's second main theme, Dublin as the 'centre of paralysis'... All have conclusions that, while ambiguous or cryptic, are striking and linger in one's imagination" (Walzl 171). Each of my stories is focused on a central event, but often split up with moments of flashback or memory. I try to end each with a moment in which a character is faced with possibility, but not yet equipped to make a meaningful decision. By the end of "Beautiful Disaster" readers know Linda is pregnant, but are as unsure as she is of the father is, of how she will deal with the surprise. "Go Fish" ends with young Debra contemplating telling her parents the truth about her sister's supposedly perfect behavior, but not yet aware of the repercussions it might have for her family.

While each of Joyce's stories is individual, and illuminates a small fraction of a particular character's life, characters who usually appear only once in the collection, each story is also a piece of a larger narrative that Joyce successfully tells by the end of the collection, "*Dubliners*, in its fifteen narratives, each dealing with a different set of characters, traces the archetypal life pattern of the youth who stays in Dublin and becomes a cog in a paralyzed society" (167). Many of my stories tell of an isolated event long in a character's past, but I hope to piece them together in a way that progresses the main narrative: the disintegration and efforts to rebuild a family. I could have incorporated childhood events into flashbacks within more current and chronological scenes, but I feel it is important to linger over the events that made Linda incapable of forming and sustaining a meaningful relationship, that made Andy so desperate to hold his family together, that made Debra so unable to assert her own desires.

The final story in the collection, “The Dead,” while also being one of the most well known short-stories in the English language, also serves several important functions within the collection it concludes. “The Dead” anchors the many themes Joyce has explored, resolving each in some way. Walzl points out how Joyce’s central theme of paralysis, connects with the title of *Dubliners*’ final story: “The main themes of paralysis, gnomon, and simony he introduces unobtrusively. In keeping with the title of this story, the image of paralysis that is used repetitively is that of the final total immobility of death” (Walzl 213). “The Dead” also speaks to the development from childhood to mature adulthood that Joyce is interested in, for while Gabriel and Greta are grown adults, this story is very much driven by events of Greta’s adolescence. I try to have “Headlong” similarly pull together the themes important to the rest of the collection. In this final story, characters are again faced with the struggle between romantic love and freedom, and I hope that the title captures the central struggle of falling headlong into life without instructions, and striving to make the best decision when there are no clues as to what it is. Allen Tate focuses on the snow that falls at the end of “The Dead”, saying it begins as “the cold and even hostile force of nature” but eventually “reverses its meaning...from naturalistic *coldness* it develops into a symbol of warmth, of expanded consciousness,” (Tate 409). This symbolic reversal is what I intended for the dinner scenes that appear in both the first and last stories of *Ordinary Sins*. In “Meatloaf,” the dinner represents everything that has been lost for the Howards, their mother and wife missing but still very much present at the dinner with Andy’s new love interest. By “Headlong,” the role of the dinner has been very literally reversed. Told from Debra’s, the new wife’s perspective, the ex-wife has drifted into the background. It is a dinner representative not of loss, but of everything that has been gained and repaired.

Though it was added to the collection later, “The Dead” feels like a very purposeful addition, not only because of the thematic similarities, but also because of the parallels between it and the collection’s first story, “The Sisters.” Both stories open with a pair of spinster sisters, and Walzl points out that they represent “contrasting but complementary facets of Irish life,” one pair of sisters being economic shopkeepers, the other artistic music teachers (212). Both are stories of people gathering, though for very different purpose (a wake in “The Sisters,” a party in “The Dead”). As the title of the final story reveals, there is a preoccupation with the dead in each, and the utter paralysis death eventually brings. Both stories tell of young people who have to face death head on for the first time. The first and last stories of *Ordinary Sins* are the only two told in third person, and both are centered around a dinner, in which all four of the primary characters are presents in some way. “The Dead” also recovers what Joyce felt he neglected in the rest of *Dubliners*, “Joyce made amends for what he had admitted was his neglect of Irish ‘hospitality’” (Walzl 214). In “Headlong” I tried not so much to make amends for what I felt had been left out, but rather for what some readers might perceive as pessimism. Many of the stories describe broken families and characters cut off from those who should support them. In “Headlong” I hoped to offer a realistic portrayal of a family rebuilding itself, while still offering an optimistic sense of hope that the characters were well on their way to healing from the events of the stories.

Too Far To Go: The Maple Stories

Too Far to Go is the collection of all of John Updike’s stories about the fictional family the Maples. The stories are held together by the central characters, but were published in a somewhat scattered fraction over twenty years, beginning in 1956; three stories were added by

Updike as he compiled the stories into a collection (Updike 9-10). The seventeen stories progress chronologically, following Joan and Richard Maple through the early days of their marriage, the raising of their four children, their marital disputes and adulterous escapades, and their eventual decision to separate and then divorce. The stories' strengths lie in their ability to capture the subtle ways in which relationships develop, detailing both major life events and the small, seemingly insignificant moments that make up the bulk of the couple's life together.

Beyond the obvious connection of a collection centered on a single family, I was drawn to Updike's *Too Far to Go* for its masterful use of subtle symbols and diction to intensify every day events. In his article "The Trail-of-Bread-Crumbs Motif in John Updike's Maples Stories", Albert Wilhelm focuses on one such motif he feels is important to the entire collection. Wilhelm is concerned with the way that the disappearing trail of bread crumbs forces an early adulthood, similar to the necessity of Richard and Joan Maple, though they are already adults, reaching true maturity or matching "their behavior to their season in life" (Wilhelm 71). Wilhelm asserts that the strongest reference to the old tale of Hansel and Gretel comes in the final story, "Here Come the Maples," in which Joan and Richard have come too far in the process of their divorce to ever turn back. The story is the first instance in which Richard removes blame from Joan, and imagines the two of them walking hand in hand into the forest, while it is the birds behind them that disturb their trail. "Joan and Richard," Wilhelm suggests, "can solve their problems not by retreating but only by walking on into the woods," (73). Wilhelm cites other examples of the fairytale motif throughout the collection, and highlights one of the many ways in which Updike weaves a complex central narrative through the collection.

"Your Lover Just Called" comes nearly midway through the collection, when Richard and Joan have begun the process filing a divorce, but still living under one roof. Though neither

will fully admit it, each is suspicious of the other for having an affair. It ends with husband and wife, now more like strangers to each other, taking a nap, each hearing the phone ring out in the hallway and making assumptions about the lover that must be calling. In this story Updike captures, with great success, a major event and all the emotions it entails, but also the subtle, unexpected realizations it prompts. It is difficult to capture trauma and upheaval without veering towards melodrama but by weaving the story with humor Updike keeps the action moving quickly. The telephone throughout comes to represent the things Joan and Richard Maple do not know about each other, as well as the frustration of those mysteries. For Richard this unknowingness is embodied by the “click” of a caller hanging up, “I hated that *click*. That nasty little I-know-your-wife-better-than-you-do *click*,” (Updike 103). By having such an ordinary object of daily life represent such feelings of betrayal and sadness, Updike highlights the subtlety of the couple’s relationship, the small ways in which their relationship eventually breaks down. I greatly admired Updike’s use of subtle, quotidian symbols, and strove to create a similar affect. The birthday cards that Emily mentions in “Meatloaf,” and which Linda has to rush out and buy in “In the Air” when she realizes she has forgotten Emily’s birthday are meant to stand for the physical objects that come to take the place of a real mother-daughter relationship. For years both Andy and Emily are forced to cling to the pieces of her life Linda left behind, old pieces of jewelry, journals, these cards, in lieu of her actual presence.

One of the last stories in *Too Far to Go*, “Gesturing” is a story in which not much at all happens. Joan and Richard, finally separated and each seeing a new lover, enjoy a very civil and pleasant dinner together. In the car, Joan asks Richard to leave town, claiming his presence is keeping either from moving on with life, and Richard is somewhat shocked to see her use a gesture he has never seen her use before. Much like Joyce’s concept of the epiphany, at the end

of their dinner together Richard comes to the upsetting realization that his relationship with his wife will never again be completely repaired. The entire transaction is silent, "...he saw all its meanings and knew that she would never stop gesturing within him, never; though a decree had come between them, even in death, her gestures would endure," (Updike 231). There is no crying, no dramatic antics, no great display of emotion at all, and yet the author communicates a great deal in this fairly brief story. Updike focuses throughout the story on describing Joan's hand gestures, and the information her husband, who knows her better from anyone, is able to glean from them. The power of the subtle and the unspoken was one of the elements that intrigued me greatly in endeavoring to tell the story of a nuclear family's demise. "Meatloaf" in particular is composed of small gestures. The conversation between Debra and Emily in Andy's bedroom is brief and simple, but loaded with anxieties.

In the collection's final story, "Here Come the Maples," Joan and Richard are set to appear before the judge in the final stages of their divorce. The process of going to the courthouse to get a copy of their marriage license for the lawyers reminds Richard of the day he and Joan were married, and of their honeymoon. The story is one of the most moving in the collection, filled with nostalgia and regret. Even the accurate legal language adds to the story's emotion, as when the judge asks Joan and Richard if they believe their marriage "has suffered an irretrievable break-down" (Updike 256). In so many ways the word "irretrievable" suits the story perfectly by suggesting that something in the Maple's relationship was not broken but rather lost. Richard remembers how he forgot to kiss his new bride the day their marriage vows were completed, but in the final sentences of the collection Updike suggests that even the most "irretrievable" can sometimes be found again: Joan and Richard have been forgotten by the

lawyers, their divorce is complete, and they stand idly in the courtroom until “Richard at last remembered what to do; he kissed her,” (256).

In many ways the ending Updike assigns to the story of the Maples is similar to what I try to capture in the ending of “Headlong.” Updike offers up the simple gesture of the kiss as hope that all will be resolved for the Maples, one way or another. He does not promise that they have fallen back in love, that they will be reunited, and to the contrary provides plenty of evidence that they will not. Still, the ending is hopeful, and feels full of very real, raw human emotion. In “Headlong” I wanted not to suggest that Linda would be absolved of her sin, that she would find complete happiness despite her self-destructive tendencies. I did want to imply, however, that she would continue to be included in this family, to be given chances, and left her in the story’s end laughing with her daughter at a corner table. Likewise, I did not want the reader to imagine that Andy and Debra would ride off into a fairy tale sunset, and that all the previous hurts of their lives would be erased, but to suggest that had an opportunity for real, attainable, happiness. By leaving them dancing even when the song had ended I hoped to conclude the collection with an image of their perseverance, a marker of the idea that with enough effort people eventually get things right.

Unaccustomed Earth: Hema and Kaushik

Jhumpa Lahiri’s Pulitzer Prize winning short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, concludes with a triad of stories about the pair Hema and Kaushik. In many ways, the three stories parallel *Ordinary Sins*; Lahiri is concerned with the nuclear family and also with the development of romantic love, but her style is subtle, understated but powerfully emotional. She builds her incredibly complex characters through gestures and dialogue, compact descriptions,

brief but memorable cinematic details. Hema and Kaushik are each the focus of a first-person story, while the final story is written in third person, focusing on the two as a pair. The stories begin with their childhoods and move into adolescence and adulthood, making the overall structure similar to that of *Ordinary Sins*.

In the opening story, "Once in a Lifetime," Hema is still a young girl, thirteen years old, and has only vague memories of Kaushik from her earlier years, when his entire family comes to stay with Hema's after moving back to the United States. The first person story is riddled with Hema's adolescent anxiety, and culminates in her discovery that Kaushik's mother is dying of breast cancer. Hema cries in the climactic scene, overcome with the fear of living in such close proximity to a dying woman, combined with her confusing attraction to Kaushik. The transition to Kaushik's point of view in the next story, "Year's End," is smooth, though a few years have passed and Kaushik is now a senior at Swarthmore. His mother's illness is still fresh in the reader's mind from the previous story, and "Year's End" opens with Kaushik learning of his father's remarriage, not long after his mother's death. The story follows Kaushik's frustration at adjusting to the new wife and her daughters, and in its climax he loses his temper, shaking the little girls who have stumbled upon hidden photographs of his late mother. Years pass before "Going Ashore," written in the third person, finds Hema and Kaushik, now grown adults, reunited as lovers.

Lahiri skillfully connects the three stories through subtle images that continue to appear. As Bidisha Banerjee points out in her article, "Diaspora's 'Dark Room': Photography and the Vision of Loss in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Hema and Kaushik'," photography is an important element in all three stories, and she successfully links the motif to Lahiri's themes of immigration and loss. In "Once in a Lifetime" Kaushik carries his camera with him everywhere, and at one point

Hema remarks to herself that Kaushik never once asks her to pose as they walk through the woods. In “Year’s End” Kaushik is still taking pictures, but it is the photographs of his late mother, hidden away, that play the most important role in the story. At the story’s conclusion, Kaushik must bury these photographs in order to reach some semblance of emotional resolution. Years later, in “Going Ashore,” Kaushik has become a photojournalist, now capturing moments of pain and suffering in war torn countries. By examining the use of photographs and photography throughout the three stories, Banerjee illuminates the skillful way in which Lahiri creates the paradox between preservation and absence. “Photographs capture and freeze memories, thus preserving them; they arrest the flow of time,” Banerjee summarizes, but also “no matter how life-like a photograph, an apprehension of death always lies beneath it” (Banerjee 444, 449). This contradiction within the medium is then linked to the themes of death, mourning, and cultural roots that are so important to the Hema and Kaushik triad.

Other images motifs remain important in each of the three stories, for example, there is a preoccupation with clothing throughout. In the first story Hema detests Kaushik’s hand-me-down coat that she is forced to wear, and later is both embarrassed and pleased when Kaushik’s mother buys her training bras in the department store. In “Year’s End” Kaushik remembers his mother’s fine clothing, remembers it being donated and given away after her death. He fixates on the un-American sweaters of his new step-sisters, on their red coats that somehow help them blend in. The Johnny Walker, which Hema’s parents secretly feel Kaushik’s parents should be drinking, which represents their new American-ness in “Once in a Lifetime,” becomes a coping mechanism and a signal of all that has changed in “Year’s End.”

Lahiri’s simple but striking style was what drew me to her work, but her descriptions of familial conflict and creation of complex characters was useful in many ways as I considered my

own collection. Lahiri embodies Hema's adolescent voice with complete authority, and captures her somewhat misplaced reaction to Kaushik's dying mother, something I tried to do with "Just a Stop" and "Go Fish" in particular. The scene in which Kaushik first returns home and meets his father's new wife has much of the emotion I try to capture in "Meatloaf", also a story of a mother being replaced within the family. Chitra, the new wife, looks throughout her new home for pictures of her husband's late wife, looks for some hint of her existence, very much reminding me of Debra's desire to know more about the absent mother in "Meatloaf."

Ultimately, Lahiri's stories come closest to the style and tone I was striving for within *Ordinary Sins*. Updike's and Joyce's collections are masterful examples of the short story collection genre, though they try to achieve more through imagery and symbolism, unlike Lahiri who delves into the psychological lives of her characters. Lahiri seems to be, as far as I can tell, interested in the same sorts of ordinary sins that inspired my own collection.

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Meatloaf

It had been seven years, each a little shorter than the previous, since Emily's mother stopped coming to dinner. She stopped coming to their front door at all. Seven years is long enough for a girl to decide to be done with mothers.

Andy answered the door, his daughter right behind. Betty, the new woman, the first woman in seven years, stood on the front porch, holding yellow flowers that drooped like her middle-aged breasts. She was uncomfortable because she had never seen Andy beyond the tequila-tinted bar lights, or the soft glow of mid-priced, family-friendly diners, and had certainly never seen Emily, who was fifteen and particularly predisposed to hate mothers. But Betty still smiled gallantly, squirming while Andy kissed her full on the mouth, batting her eyes over his shoulder, trying to send her pleas through the airwaves.

Emily understood, as Betty seemed to, that they wouldn't be friends, that the orange dress Betty wore was not quite flattering, not quite unflattering, that Emily was required to be standoffish because this wasn't the first time father and daughter had opened the door to welcome a woman to dinner. They moved into the kitchen, passing silently, single file, through the narrow hallway.

Emily didn't like when her father made meatloaf. He couldn't make anything but meatloaf. Once she'd liked it, but as a tiny child, she'd liked most things her parents cooked just as she liked most everything they did; she didn't know any better. Emily was raised on a healthy

diet of vintage, prepackaged families like the Cleavers and the Andersons, families that eventually taught her to be disturbed when her life shifted, and it was suddenly her *father* who opened the door in oven mitts so her *mother* could waltz in. With her mother's new job came an empty fridge, an empty bread box and an empty bed when no one was there to sing her songs and stories to fill her dreams.

"Your mother flies planes," her father said, and this satisfied Emily until she discovered that it was the planes that flew while her mother pushed a clunky beverage cart down a narrow aisle, plastic-smiling at squalling babies and avoiding the gazes of greasy men. Her father never stopped talking about her flying mother and all the places she didn't really fly to, places far away from suburban Los Angeles. Her mother stopped coming to dinner and it was *Emily* who didn't have the heart to tell her father the truth. It was only her father who went on believing the brave flying woman would eventually fly home. Only he believed that his sins of ordinariness could be undone.

So there this new woman stood, firmly grounded, anchored down by her bashful love handles in that orange dress and her oversized, overdressed purse. But she had a nice smile, the same one Emily's mother Linda had smiled before her heart had been stolen by planes and clouds. And she was trying, Betty. She had brought flowers, after all.

Once, the door had opened and Emily had raced to it, she let herself be lifted and spun because she was still young enough to openly yearn for love. Her mother would stand, firmly upright, on the same concrete slab masquerading as a porch, usually in her crisp uniform with slick name tag, *Linda* in falsely cheerful cursive, and jaunty scarf at her neck, one hand resting on a sleek rolling suitcase. She would fling out her arms in a way that said she was certain

they'd be filled. Emily and her father never stopped rushing forward, heaping upon her the kisses they hoped would hold her down.

For this evening Emily had resurrected her least favorite jeans, the itchy jeans without holes or fading grass stains, the jeans she would *never* wear to school, just as seven years ago she had tugged on one of the dresses she was gradually growing too curvy for. And this new woman, Betty, was appreciative. She smiled, Emily thought, because Emily smiled, because she understood she was, and might always be, the intruder. She prickled visibly, almost shivering, because she sensed that at any moment this teenager could send her flying to the curb with a scowl. But when she saw that Andy watched not his daughter's face but his guest's, she relaxed, and moved into the living room. Betty sat, after only a brief pause, on the plaid couch, squeezing close to a red throw pillow so there was plenty of room for Andy on her other side.

Emily didn't mind that her father's face turned numb with his smile, that she faded far behind him, because this is how it was. Once, when the door had opened and her mother had been there, they had both forgotten that neither knew how to clean a bathtub or make macaroni. Andy, saved for a moment from his ineptitude, alighted on this angel he planned to keep as long as possible, and Emily couldn't help but do the same. Andy made his meatloaf and set the table in his diligently sloppy way, chilled the white wine only his wife liked, forgetting it until it was too cold. Emily cleaned her room, condensed weeks into stories she could offer up, mementos of missed childhood. That last time she'd kept a piece of polished quartz in her pocket, a present, because that was the day she'd planned to announce to her mother that as a newly-nine-year-old-adult, this time she was going away with her mother.

Emily's father hated the Deer Run apartment complex. "Blight on the neighborhood," he'd say. Sometimes that was why Emily liked it there, behind the building, because it would disturb him if he knew, though he'd never think to ask. She'd sit on the ugly park benches and look at the squatting, colorless stucco block with its jutting balconies too small for potted plants. There she spent the evening of her fourteenth birthday. Her mother sent her a card, decorated with sappy looking puppies and a stupid poem about A Special Day. That made five cards she could dutifully line her bulletin board with, five ugly cards. If you live with your mother there's no need for birthday cards. If she's flown away, though, she ought to send them, lest you forget her.

Those days, one lengthy year ago, she had still considered the place un-violated and her own. Taylor Morris had smoked there sometimes, without the boys Emily watched him with at school, posing in their jeans that sagged like sappy diapers and their glinting gold chains. They strutted like they were Diablos and Evergreen Boys, then ran home when their mothers had put dinner on the table. They talked about girls they would never touch and never looked at Emily. They pretended they'd grow up to do drive-bys, not go to Ivy Leagues. Taylor would sit behind the few remaining pine trees, just beyond the plastic-looking pool with its deck chairs speckled in bird droppings and abandoned pool toys. From there he watched people come and go, stared up at the balconies where people smoked breathlessly in the cold as he did. Emily liked to imagine he was watching her as she watched him.

Then they began to hang out, to sit on Emily's carpet in her empty house while her father was at work and listened to cassettes, to talk about things you couldn't talk about at school, things like dreams. He would lean back against her white wicker child's chest of drawers, she would pull a pillow from the bed and lie back on the carpet so that the furniture loomed over her

and the wide arcs of sunlight from the French doors warmed her face. Sometimes they made out, leaning across the pile of music magazines until their lips touched all at once, awkwardly moving their tongues back and forth the way they figured you were supposed to. She was certain he knew she was a virgin, nothing like the sluts they talked to at school. But still he seemed curious and antsy when they sat side by side.

Sometimes, at night, he sneaked into her room through the French doors, into her bed and lie next to her. Nothing much ever happened; in the dark he lost his swagger. But pressed side by side in a child-sized bed, huddling under the same faded yellow quilt, they thought about beings adults, thought about all the things they could feel and imagine. Sometimes he stayed, almost until the sun came up, not sleeping, just being.

Andy hummed while he made meatloaf. He hummed now, for this new woman, as he had then, for her mother. Sometimes he'd let out a deep baritone note, swoon his way through old songs. They were alternately Frank Sinatra songs about love and country songs about not needing the wife that left and took the truck and the dog.

Betty thought this was funny, and sang along if she knew the words. She had a watery voice, but it was cheerful, which made up for the awkward way she swayed by the counter, clutching her glass of wine, wishing there was something for her to do, to make her belong. Emily thought she ought to leave them alone before dinner, let them laugh at her father's pitiful mincing skills, let Betty reset the table, tell him the knives went on the right or the left or wherever they went.

Years ago, this was when Emily would rearrange the Barbies or the plastic horses or the carefully polished rocks, arrange them to show her mother and say *Look, this is what I have, this*

is what I like. Now she'd outgrown collecting and the dolls and ponies and pebbles were in plastic bins in the basement, bins her father had labeled out of guilt.

Once she had loved being alone in their house, so like each of the others on dead-end Cheltenham Road, paint not quite peeling, fire-resistant shingled roofs, station wagon Volvos in the driveways. When she was finally old enough to come straight home from school she'd relished the ringing silence, every room hers if she pleased. She made extravagant peanut butter-marshmallow-banana sandwiches and ate them in front of the TV. She played her music as loud as it went. And she slipped into her father's room, where she never dared go if he was home because he never came into her room.

Her father's room was a sad museum to the woman they had lost and that was why she liked it. She would try on the pleated silk dresses that were still hanging neatly in the closet, spray the perfume bottles, half-empty on the bureau, so that the room filled with rose and gardenia like a secret garden. She liked to put on the lone pair of shoes near the back of the closet, silver dancing slippers, a little too large for her, that glinted magically under the light and clicked slightly against the wooden floors. Emily would go into her father's bathroom and open the medicine cabinet, stand on her toes so she could see, above the shiny man's razors and cholesterol medicine, the row of jars and tubes on the top shelf that had mythical sounding names like Veralyze and Revitol. Her mother had kept astrology books under the bed, next to the shoeboxes of Polaroid pictures. Emily liked to pull the books out, read about what it meant to be a Virgo, or a Gemini like her mother. She wondered if it were coded in the stars to be a leaver or a stayer or sad or happy. She half hoped it was.

They had drinks in the living room. Betty complimented the white wine Andy pulled out and pretended not to notice it was almost frozen. Emily had a glass too, because you might as well when you've drunk with your father before. She passed around the plastic coasters with their Roadrunner illustrations, her father's favorite cartoon. When the phone rang Emily answered, because her father was busy being starry-eyed. When she said "Hi Mom," the room grew stiff.

"Yes, school is fine. No, we haven't had much rain. We have company. Love you too." She might as well not have called.

Because Betty was polite and determined to be a friend, she asked questions. "Where does she live? What does she do? Do you miss her?" though she hoped for her own sake this woman wasn't missed at all, that there was still a hole she could fill.

Emily missed her mother in an offhanded way, though she didn't know how to say so. She didn't know how to say that when she visited they laughed and stayed up talking, but when they were apart, Linda's life and the missing-of-Mom might as well have been on pause. She didn't know how to say Linda was basically a borrowed mother. Somehow she sensed her mother could barely stand to have her there at all.

Emily drained her glass, watched the adults get tipsy and giggly. She retreated to her room at the far end of the house, where she couldn't hear anything at all. The room was still pink, left over from the days when she'd begged for princesses. But she'd smothered the pink in violently colored throw pillows and obnoxious posters of shiny boy-bands and taped up Polaroids of friends at the beach, or the movies. She'd swept away her plastic ponies and polished pebbles, and refilled the shelves and ledges with an arsenal of insufferably colored nail

polish and stacks of *Seventeen* magazines, new kinds of collections. She pulled apart the curtains that covered the French doors so she could see the emerging stars.

When she was a little girl her mother had been frightened of the French doors. Every night, at Linda's insistence, Andy had come and checked that they were locked, long after Emily was supposed to be asleep. She had always wondered what they were so worried would get in. The doors had been slowly forgotten, more so when her mother left. And eventually, they did let something in.

The first time Taylor Morris had climbed into her bed those distant seven months ago, she had nearly stopped breathing. She had seen enough movies to be scared to tears that she'd suddenly have to grow up, and she'd nearly choked on her own breaths wanting and fearing it. But he'd held her hand and occasionally kissed her cheek or lips, and she'd come to wait for him with a leaping heart. Sometimes it would be weeks in between visits, she would see him at school, in her room when they studied, but her bed would stay empty.

And then, as abruptly as it had begun, he had stopped coming. And then stopped talking to her at all. At first she'd waited, remembering the other droughts when she'd nearly cried for fear of losing him and his warmth. She'd wake up, cold and sweating, almost as if from a nightmare, to find her bed still empty. Each night as she would lie down in her least embarrassing pajamas, she willed herself to sleep with memories of the relief of waking up to a warm body sliding into bed next to hers when the world was still dark. But more often than not, when she woke it was morning, and she was alone.

She would pass him at school, casually coming up beside him so he had no choice but to say hello. "Soon," he'd say, and she'd cling to these coded, veiled words, tremble even longer that night as she lay in bed, feel a little heavier the next morning when he still hadn't come. She

used the hallways she knew he used, nonchalantly strode along where she knew he could see, hoping he'd see her and remember he couldn't bear to let her go. But he began to avoid her, turn away when he saw her coming.

So she gave up. She avoided the halls and the tables and the sidewalks and her front porch, anywhere he might see her because her throat tightened at the thought. She relearned how to sleep alone, peacefully, night to morning. She listed all the reasons he had grown bored with her, savored them like a mantra, reassuring herself with the inevitability of her flaws. Once Taylor was gone from her life, it seemed more and more natural that he should be. Emily felt that perhaps the point of such things was that they could never last long, that the happiness of having someone there was barely different than the strange sorrow of realizing they were gone. She ought to have known it would happen.

When she saw him, across the cafeteria at school, or down the street when he got the mail, she reminded herself of his utter unremarkableness, wondered why she had ever let him into her bed at all, wondered why she still missed him.

“Is there a bathroom I can use?”

“I'll show you.” The house was awkwardly designed, the only two bathrooms each attached to one of the bedrooms. For some reason Emily led Betty through her father's room. She forgot to walk away, and stood staring at the framed pictures on the walls, wedding pictures. She started when Betty spoke behind her.

“So, whose is all this?” She was fingering the pearls casually coiled on the bureau.

Emily tried to see the room with foreign eyes, the leftover clothes, unwanted books and perfumes and pictures and jewelry that someone had to keep. “They were my mother's.” Betty

just kept staring, even though she'd already heard about the flight attendant in a lonely apartment somewhere near Napa valley. Emily tried to make a joke of her wide eyes. "She's not *dead* or anything, just gone."

"She didn't take her stuff?" Betty wasn't sure if this was funny.

"No, I guess she didn't want it. She has more stuff now." They ought to rejoin Andy.

"Are you wierded out? That he kept it all?"

"It's...it's sweet. You must miss her."

"Not really."

"I like your dad."

"I know."

"A lot. Do you think...?"

"He'll ask you out again. Don't worry, he likes you."

"No, I mean... well anyhow, I hope you don't mind."

"Mind what?"

"Me coming to dinner."

"I don't think it's weird."

"No, it's not really weird, is it?"

They nodded silently, reassuring themselves. She led Betty back down the hall because the meatloaf was done, and Emily's father crashed about in the kitchen the way only a man meant to nurse a beer bottle and push a lawn mower can. Emily didn't say anything, and wouldn't say anything. She knew there wasn't a way to make him understand that Betty had seen the relics on his crumbling altar and balked, because as he clashed pot against pan, those

objects in the bedroom were his, of him and for him and only his. She had once thought she understood, because we must understand what we hate, but she no longer did. She was deflated.

Betty arranged her flowers in a vase, put them on a table to be womanly in a house still filled with the memories of another woman. Emily stepped into the kitchen to bring the meatloaf to the table but smelled, beyond the thick scent of slightly burnt meat, a sweetness. Andy beamed over an apple pie that had somehow risen on one side and not the other. He had attempted to pattern the golden crust with the prongs of a fork, pressing them down into what became more like haphazard wounds than an actual design. The buttery color of the apples in their syrup pressed up against the slits, the thick filling bubbling down the side of the pie plate on one side. But it was a pie all the same, and not a box of cookies dug out from the pantry. Betty kissed Andy and smiled at Emily in a sorry way, but Emily, for once, was no longer sorry. Tonight her Daddy was smiling and there was a meatloaf on the table and she had hours before she had to fall asleep in her empty bed. Tonight her Daddy was there with her, in that moment, and for one night the past had been left to rot behind a closed door.

So she poured Betty another glass of wine and tried to match her father's smile.

Beautiful Disaster

Silicone stretched taut, dimpled with a squeaky clean, protruding belly button, it almost looked real, felt real.

“Ninety-nine ninety-five.” She was proud, beaming, pushing her strapped –on belly out for me to feel. That was three week’s wages working the McDonald’s drive-thru part time.

“I used to have one of those stuffed ones, ten bucks at a costume shop, but it didn’t feel so real. You wouldn’t believe it Lindy, you know I get *twice* as much food sometimes?” she cackled happily, petted down her wiry, greasy curls. “Twice as much food.” She pulled her shirt back over the bump, sat back, rubbed it dreamily as if there really were something in there.

“Absolutely delicious, as always Mrs. Ballard.”

“Well thank you, Troy sweetie.” My mother smiled as if it had been her idea to do blue-cheese-stuffed chicken, as if she’d been the one to stand, hand thrust into the clammy dead flesh, stuffing those chickens herself. Somewhere in the kitchen Fanny was washing the blood from her hands, the counters.

I’d been home, graduated for only six months, applying to thinly veiled secretarial positions, despite Troy and my mother’s double insistence that there was no need to work. Troy slid one hand up my thigh beneath the starched tablecloth, smiled at my father. I shivered

through my marinated asparagus, that cold hand perfectly clamped over the blossoming bruise not even a day old. Troy turned to smile at me, one curl sliding down his forehead in a way I used to find adorable in a time when he had been new and bashful and only mine. His hand pressed harder, cold finger nails threatening to push through my thin skirt.

“Did you kids have a nice time last night?”

“Just lovely sir. Didn’t we Lindy?”

“Just lovely,” I nodded. Just lovely until Troy had one beer too many, until Troy pinched Susan Carraway’s behind when only I could see, until Troy pinned me against the rough planks of the barn’s back wall and shoved a hand up my skirt, clawed my shoulder until it bled. Lovely until I cried to Alice, my best friend, and she told me to give my fiancé a break, lovely until I remembered this was the third time this month I’d been left with angry scratches on my neck, quickly covered with thick makeup the next morning.

They were laughing now, the three of them. My father cut in, chuckling harder than the rest of them. “And then there was the time she clear forgot to wear underpants! She couldn’t have been more than seven. She called us from school just crying and crying and Fanny had to take the car and bring her a pair. Ah, that was too funny.” They laughed together, smiling on me.

My mother pressed her lips together in a long, thin smile. “Yes; Well, Lindy’s always been absentminded, but she certainly was a darling little girl.”

“Well, we may have one of our own before you know it!” Troy boomed as he released my thigh, reached for my hand on the table, squeezed it gently. My parents melted.

Her name was Mimi, the not-so-pregnant girl. She was my age, maybe older, with crazy hair and an uncontrollable smile. She'd been at the shelter the longest so she was mostly in charge. No one knew how long she'd been there and she wouldn't say where she'd come from. She sat at a plastic folding table from 7PM on, playing solitaire with a ripped deck missing a four and two kings, and rubbing her plastic belly.

The shelter volunteers turned the lights out at ten every night, locked the doors and left us with the Night Woman. No one knew the Night Woman's name because she didn't care to tell us. No one knew what she did behind the front desk, enclosed by the plastic counter just higher than her stiff graying hair, tinged with the white-blue of the computer screen. Maybe she played cards with Mimi because Mimi never came to bed when the lights went out.

The rest of us snuck with the darkness to the back room and the rows of beds, and everyone slept in the same bed they had slept in the night before. The new women whose presence was not yet a certainty, slept closest to the door, so if they left, they would not be missed. I slept there, closest to the door, surrounded by a halo of empty and gaping beds until Tonny told me I could sleep next to her and made a woman named Amber and everyone else move one bed over. Tonny was a large, soft, brown sugar, call-you-honey kind of woman with two little girls always glued to her sides who clung urgently to her doughy thighs like babies to a bottle. We slept together, breathing almost in unison, women sometimes talking in hushed voices somewhere in the darkness, reaching whispers across the spaces between beds. Even when it was silent in the dipped valley of the night I was aware of other women in other beds, fifteen to my right, four above my head, in precise lines of brown wool blankets.

At six in the morning the Night Woman threw on the fluorescent strip lights without warning, stomping quietly back to her desk before we had even opened our eyes. For one hour

we formed ourselves in rows behind the three sinks and four silver coffee pots and haphazard bagel trays. The Night Woman smiled for the first time that night and unlocked the doors, and we were out by seven. Mimi was always first to have her coffee and two bagels, was always stationed at the plastic picnic table with her deck of cards before anyone else had even made their bed.

“She crazy,” said Tonny, eyeing Mimi and her two bagels. “If a girl says she *likes* being homeless, she *crazy*. Homeless ain’t a place to be, it’s a place to pass through.” She petted the heads of her two girls who seemed nameless and voiceless, all fading dresses and hard, swinging pigtails.

Tonny was Carson’s mother. Carson worked almost full-time at a dollar store and was clean enough that it would have been hard to guess he spent his nights at the men’s shelter seven blocks away. He bought his mother and sisters dinner every night, walked them to the shelter. They came in smiling. He was outside every morning, walked with them to a park or a library until he left them with five dollars each and walked to work. He never missed a day. There weren’t many families in the shelters.

“That’s my boy, the only one with a head on his shoulders,” Tonny’d say dreamily. “He’s the one who’s gonna get us outta here. He’s my angel.”

His dark, warm eyes, wrapped me up over his stout mother’s head, and I thought he’d be mine too.

I was raised by three nannies who spoke two languages, I had a degree in Art History from Ole Miss, and I debuted in Jackson in a white silk dress with a beaded bodice my freshman summer, but none of that prepares a girl to be on the run.

My first mistake was driving to Memphis and checking into a Marriott with my credit card. Two days later I found my parents in the lobby.

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, Daddy saw this little charge on the credit card bill online and we just thought we’d drive on up and check on you.” My father didn’t look up from his newspaper and my mother didn’t rise from her chair. She just smiled her icy crooked smile and folded her hands over her little stomach in its pastel sweater set.

“No. I can’t come home.”

“All right. I’ve told Troy you just needed a little time away to calm your nerves, but we’ll expect you home in August for your *wedding* as planned. We still haven’t heard which linens you prefer for the reception. Troy and I are leaning towards the ivory.”

“I’m not coming.”

“We’ll see you soon, sweetie.” They rose. My father folded the paper seamlessly, laid it back on the table. They pressed their arms tight to their sides and smiled broad, cruel smiles. They turned to the door and it was my mother who turned back. “Oh, and sweetheart, Daddy needs that credit card back.”

My father still hadn’t spoken.

My second mistake was driving to Charlotte to stay with a sorority sister, Mary, who had known my family from birth. Eight days later my parents were sitting on her couch sipping tea. That *sister* had called them the moment she’d known I had no intention of ever going home.

“You’ve got cold feet,” she said.

“It’s time to come home,” my mother said. “You are coming home with us or Daddy’s driving your car back on down to Mississippi and you can do whatever you please.”

She moved in to the kitchen with her cup of tea and my father and her young accomplice and whispered.

“Lindy just gets unsure of herself, she’ll be better in a few days,” Mary said.

“I can’t imagine what else she’d *do*,” my mother said.

I watched them in a mirror in the hall. I could only see two bony, pastel, conspiring shoulders, and my father.

“Troy takes *care* of her. She’ll be sick of the real world within the week,” Mary said with a what-I-wouldn’t-give-sigh. “There’s no place like home, right? She knows that deep down.”

“The baby girl *we* raised *knows* what she means to us. To *Troy*. We’ll just let her come back on her own,” my mother said.

Then my father smiled.

I didn’t say goodbye to anyone, took a cab to a bank, withdrew everything in my personal savings, and bought a train ticket to DC. Then I was alone.

...

“You’re not very good at this.”

He said this with the chocolaty grin that always shook me up. I *wasn’t* very good at it, but I liked it. I probably could have gotten a job a million other places. I was blonde, I was friendly, I had a *degree*. But I jumped at Carson’s offer for help, I wanted to work with him. Somehow everything would be justified if I could just share his life.

I bagged canned spaghetti and thin socks and plastic forks at the dollar store a few hours every day. When I forgot the careful order in which to coax the register’s buttons and it angrily chewed through acres of thin receipt paper, Carson fixed it before the manager could see. I ate

with Carson, his mother, his sisters, sometimes followed them through the city, sometimes sat alone on a bench. These moments alone, I imagined the street before me to be a new city; sometimes it was Paris, sometimes New York or London. In my head I made a list of all the things to do; go shopping on Broadway or ride to the top of the Eiffel Tower or tour Buckingham Palace. On and on I catalogued landmarks to see or foods to try until I felt the familiar swell of commotion in my chest. That was the hardest thing, finding ways to fill hours.

“You off at five?” I nodded. “Good, I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Carson was everything unfamiliar. Thin and wiry, dark and closed off, quiet and shining all at once. I was fascinated, determined to stay near him, because with him I could have been anywhere, anyone.

I followed him that night to a park, to a blanket he’d found somewhere and spread in the grass, to cheap red wine he’d bought just for me.

“This is amazing!”

“Look, I remember how hard the first few weeks are; shelters are rough. I just wanted to make sure you know there are good times too.” And it was good, better than anything I could remember, because my mind, for once, was just empty. We sat together like puzzle pieces; I nestled against his warm, solid chest, he leaned forward and wrapped himself around me. He spoke into my ear, his gravelly cheek pressed to my neck, his voice the deep plaintive notes of a clarinet, velvet.

“Two years ago my father started disappearing. He’d come in later and later and he stopped bringing home so much money and my sister had a tooth ache, no one could think how to fix it without money. And then we heard that he had this woman, a white one – not that that means anything – that he’d been running around with, and he was *so* sorry, but my mama

wouldn't have any of it. She picked up every little thing he'd ever owned or touched and piled it on the sidewalk, then poured the five Budweisers left in the fridge over all that stuff 'till it "stunk like he did" she said and she lit it on fire. But most of the stuff didn't burn well so there was a lot of beer-stinking, smoky junk outside our house for awhile. And then before I knew it we were here and so I got a job."

"I'm sorry." I hadn't asked. But I didn't want him to stop, wanted that silken voice to go on tickling my ear.

"And so now I work all day and go to the bank every Friday and when there's enough in there I'll get us all a house and my mother will never walk a day in her life again." He was forceful. I thought of Tonny, out there, walking somewhere with her magnet baby girls, groaning like she did when her feet swelled in their clogs. "So what's your story little miss? Who do you belong to?"

He was teasing a little, nuzzling my neck and pulling me tighter. "No one."

"No family?"

"No, no one who can really do anything."

"But you're smart, I can tell. You'll go somewhere."

"I went here didn't I?"

"Sure did."

He let that be all. He kissed me, and I thought of nothing by those grape stained, cracked lips parting mine and breathing me in. He pressed one warm hand to my rib cage but nothing more, for where would we go? The men's shelter, the woman's shelter, a public toilet? No, not right. So we floated our separate ways.

I remember the day I knew I had to leave.

“I was a Jackson, Mississippi debutante in the Golden Age, 1965.” My mother tugged at the miniscule buttons of my wedding dress, convinced, though the seamstress disagreed, that it would fit. “Size 0, twenty-four inch waist, they had to special order my tiny little dancing shoes. But, that’s just how girls were then.”

The seamstress withdrew to make some notes or replenish her pins, and my mother leaned forward, pressing her powdered cheek to mine, whispered silkily into my ear. “I did tell you you’d do well to leave the sweets alone. You may be beautiful, but sometimes you are quite a disaster, my dear.” Her pearls clicked softly as she retreated.

She squeezed the satin closer, the seams digging troughs in my skin. I couldn’t breathe, the bones of dress swooping into my stomach, the early summer air sweaty and stagnant from the open window, the purr of Troy’s truck on the gravel drive, the smiling face of my younger, blonder mother, tiny and frozen in her white dresses, glaring down from the walls.

“Oh, that must be Troy!” she was giddy with pleasure. “We must get you out of this, he mustn’t see you!” she quietly allowed that the poor mousy seamstress might add a few inches, then shoved the mountains of tulle into her hands. “Make yourself decent, I’ll serve tea on the porch,” she hissed at me.

I climbed the back stairs, slowly, aching. I pulled off my t-shirt and jeans, dropping them on the floor of my room like a trail of dark stains across the white carpet. I stood in my underwear watching Troy Marion climb out of his truck and look up at the house with swelling satisfaction, hand shading his eyes. I opened the window, prayed for a breeze. I laughed because I stood there, vulnerable, nearly naked, the way he wanted me and could never have me, but he couldn’t see me, his view blocked at that angle by a bay window. He could take, steal,

possess for a fleeting instant of dead ecstasy, but never would I stand before him this way and *give*.

I didn't want to see him, to let him touch me, to let my mother beam with pride. I packed in an instant, stole into the garage and sped away before they knew what I'd done. But I knew. I was certain.

"You white girls are all the same, we let you in and you go screwing us over!" She was livid, face streaked with the crimson and ebony of her fury. Two sets of pigtails bobbed from behind her thighs, her fists had disappeared into the deep wrinkles of her sides. I didn't say anything. "You think you can go around kissing my boy behind bushes, you think I was born yesterday? Well I wasn't, and I ain't gonna let some blondie lead my son into temptation and ruin his future. No siree. You don't own my son." She was so angry, so full and coiled and I only wanted her to feel what I did when Carson held my hand and somehow a pale little palm matched a strapping, dark one.

Still, I didn't say anything, didn't tell her that I'd peed on a little plastic stick and it had told me that something was brewing in my abdomen, something probably his, something thrust hurriedly inside of me against a concrete wall in a way that neither Carson nor I had wanted. In a way that had made us both blink back the nostalgia of how it hadn't but could have been. Or maybe it was a something of Troy's, a something stolen and sneaked where it didn't belong. I didn't know if it was a shadowy, stolen, dark-honey-sweet-something, or a blinding-white, simmered-in-tradition-and-terror something. So I didn't say a word.

"So from now on you stay *away* from my family! And if you do not I will make you sorry you ever dragged your skinny white ass into this shelter."

I sat down on a plastic chair and waited until she left, dragging her scrawny ducklings behind her.

“She’s crazy,” I heard behind me. Mimi was knitting with pink yarn spiraling out in all directions around her.

“What is it?” I gestured to her tangle.

“Hat. For the baby. I’m certain it’s a girl.” I scrutinized her belly. “You wanna feel her kick?” She pulled up her shirt and offered me her plastic belly, held firmly in place with graying elastic bands. I placed a tentative hand over it. She laughed softly and pulled the shirt back down. She maybe winked, maybe blinked.

“You and me are just alike,” she said. “We’re the only ones in this whole damned lot who are here because we *want* to be. This place is what I’ve got all figured out. This place, everyone’s a little crazy, which is the only thing that makes any sense. So.” She leaned back happily, patted the bench beside her, rubbed her hands over her bulging stomach.

I moved to the bench. “Have you picked out a name?” I asked.

“Nope.”

I glanced down at my own stomach, loose skin, shriveled belly button withdrawn somewhere beneath my blouse, spread my hands over it gently.

“It’s better to be pregnant than a mother,” Mimi said cheerfully. “Less can go wrong.” My belly was smooth and anonymous beneath my palms, and it didn’t matter. It was neither Caron’s nor Troy’s, and not yet even mine, not yet anything, still nothing. I let my hands fall away and closed my eyes.

Just A Stop

“Well if it isn’t little Andy Howard.”

I was busily perusing the muffin selection in an off handed way that I hoped suggested my presence was accidental and coincidental. Of course, if I only wanted coffee on my college boy’s budget, I would have endured the salt and pepper Formica counters of my mother’s kitchen and allowed her to fuss over me. I would have sipped bland, syrupy coffee out of a chipped mug instead of a five dollar latte from a 100% recycled material paper cup. As I stood in the organic, fair-trade, peace-loving coffee shop that had blossomed on the corner of Main Street it was neither accident nor coincidence. This shop was headquarters to everything which people like my parents and I, “Originals” as we affectionately referred to ourselves, claimed to hate about the ever-changing area. I would never have stood before its counter if I had not heard by chance that Abigail Waters was back and working the espresso machine for the summer.

No one else had ever called me Andrew and I bristled even now under the pet name and her womanly gaze and the smile that had melted my pubescent convictions ten years ago. She didn’t hug me or shriek with surprise but signaled for me to wait, and I fumed slightly at a corner table for ten minutes until she took her break. There were no cozy, squeaking plastic booths, only sanded down tables and mismatched wicker chairs. The shop was overly warm, the air conditioner was perhaps a little broken, laboriously bubbling behind me in a familiar way. I sipped my over-priced coffee and watched her smiling at the customers, laughing with a co-worker. I wish I had known sooner she was coming back.

The summer before I turned twelve two things happened. The first was that a new boy moved to town, the sort of boy the rest of us were absolutely forbidden to befriend and so automatically did. He and his mother moved into the house at the end of the cul-de-sac that had been empty since before I was born because it seemed ready to disintegrate from shingles to foundation with the next rain storm. “It is not right having that woman alone in a house, working like she’s a man,” my mother, who had not yet caught up with the changing of the times, said. New people so rarely invaded our provincial town that they were met with unease and distrust. Behind our closed doors hid the all of the worst vices, yet still we worried that a newcomer could corrupt and collapse us all. Clark had a good boy’s name and a well-meaning mother but he played hooky and smoked Winston cigarettes and cat called older girls like he was bent on giving the town a collective heart attack.

At the time Kirk, Bill and I – a band of homely boys determined to make something of ourselves – thought the infamous Clark must have seen something special in us if he chose us as his accomplices, but we were probably only the most desperate, the most willing to follow his every move. Clark was the one who introduced us to the train track game, on a stifling summer day when even the water hole had lost its shimmering allure.

“Come on, everyone does this up in New York.” He watched with satisfaction as we lay side by side across the train track, squirming nervously and refusing to look each other in the eye. He joined us and crossed his hands behind his head, whistling that catchy jingle from the Rice Crispy commercial. We lay with the knobby tracks pressing into our backs, staring at the cloudless sky, and I felt Bill’s hand brush mine before he yanked it away. At first we could hear nothing but the white crowned sparrows in the trees, and the tang of the soft earth beneath me filled my head. The moment we heard the train whistle in the distance we leapt to our feet and

scrambled up the embankment, watching in horror and slight admiration as Clark laughed and laughed, finally swinging to his feet and strolling away, turning to watch the train streak by what seemed to be only seconds later.

“You’ve got to wait or else it’s no fun. You’ve got to *feel* the train coming, that’s the whole point. Wait until you feel it rumbling in your *soul*, and then you can get up. It’s the danger that makes it all worth it.” He was impassioned, mesmerizing, waving an unlit cigarette in front of our faces like a baton.

The other important thing that happened that summer is my mother, who was forever seeking acts of charity to dedicate herself to, brought home a foster girl, thirteen years old, and installed her in the guest bedroom. Abigail Waters was the most beautiful person I had ever seen.

“I’ve always felt badly, you know, about what happened.” It bubbled out of me, this thing that I carried with me, that tainted my memories of her.

Abigail had come to join me at my corner table, clutching a mug between her bony hands with their shiny black finger nail polish and chunky silver rings. Her hair was darker, perhaps a natural product of aging, perhaps the product of a plastic drugstore bottle. Her features were sharper than I had remembered, nose steely and pointed, eyes direct and a deeper, muddier green.

“Oh, you shouldn’t. I’ve barely even thought of it.”

I couldn’t think how to tell her that I had thought of it, more than once, especially in those early morning moments when some nameless girl was softly snoring beside me in a slender dorm bed and I was wondering what became of the first woman to ever steal my heart. “Well, I do feel bad. I liked, we *all* liked having you in the house, I think. It’s too bad you couldn’t

stay.” Sometimes, in the evenings, Abigail had allowed my mother to braid her hair, wet from the shower, an act of quiet tenderness, uncharacteristic of my mother.

“I never expected too. I always knew this was just another stop on my way to wherever I’m headed.”

“So, why did you come back?”

“I don’t know, I just sort of thought of it one day. I’m just working, for the summer, I’m starting art school in the Fall you know.” But no matter how casually she ran a hand over her smooth hair, this town was the place we had shared.

She had come back for *me*, I couldn’t help thinking.

I was fascinated by this girl. It wasn’t just that there were two training bras in her suitcase and a slender plastic razor that she kept by her fruity shampoos in the shower, but the sense of overwhelming mystery that followed her as both a girl, no *young woman*, and an outsider. She was everything that my small-town childhood was not, and I wanted more than anything to *know* her, to be let into her world.

I stood in the doorway and watched her unpack that first day. She had clothes, though not many, that filled one and a half drawers of the guest room dresser, three ragged paperback books, one of which I recognized as the same edition of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* I owned, a framed photo showing a tired woman and several young children, and a postcard she tacked up on the wall opposite her bed. A postcard from Omaha, Nebraska, that was her most precious possession. She used to talk about going there like it was Disneyland, and I let her talk.

It was that postcard she forgot the day she left, which I never understood. Her drawer was cleaned out, her bed made, but there it was, tacked up on the wall. Of course, she did leave

in an awful hurry, and because it was mostly my fault, I took the postcard before my mother could see it and throw it out, and I tucked it between the pages of a book to keep it safe, thinking one day I'd give it back to her. One day, my freshman year of college, the slight auburn sheen of some girl's hair made me think of her and I realized I didn't know where the card had gone.

I would have been happy to admire Abigail from a distance, to embrace the shiver in my spine when I saw her red hair circling the shower drain, to catch a glimpse of her thin frame through my bedroom window, pedaling off on a borrowed bike. But instead I found myself sharing the kitchen table with her in the afternoon far more than I would have liked. I would spread my homework in front of me on the blue gingham table cloth and pretend to scrutinize it. Abigail would sit up very straight, sometimes carefully painting her nails a delicate pink, sometimes reading. She was petite, much shorter than I, and had hair that glowed like a sunset where it fell painfully straight down her back, like Marcia Brady's. She mostly looked down, sometimes asked polite questions, but I could never think of answers so we stopped talking at all.

Clark liked Bill better than either Kirk or me. It was probably because Bill was tallest, and a little less gangly and pimply. He'd kissed a girl already, behind the playground shed at school, and didn't look half bad with a cigarette clenched between his teeth. Suddenly it was the two of them, Clark and Bill, bound up in some secret of boyish mischief, forgetting to tell Kirk and me to meet them at the tracks or the diner after school. Kirk didn't seem to mind, he was just as happy to read his book and push his wire-framed glasses up his oily nose in the quiet of his own room, but I minded terribly. I minded sitting at the kitchen table with Abigail, beautiful as she was, as she silently flipped through magazines; I minded having my mother bake cookies in a way that suggested she pitied my lonesome self; I minded the way Bill smiled apologetically

and said nothing. I minded everyone's silence, I wanted to be someone worthy of words. "I don't care," I shouted once at Bill as he began to walk towards the tracks. "I don't care about you or Clark or your stupid games."

"So how about it, dinner tonight?" She was quiet. "For old time's sake," I added, to remind her of the accidental coincidence of my appearance.

"I don't think so Andy."

"You got a boyfriend?"

"Yah, well, sort of." She was half hunched, her shoulder blades pushing against her t-shirt like clipped wings.

"Ah."

"But it's good to see you, really good. You look like you're doing well. A lot happened that summer, it's weird looking back on it, isn't it? Like it was a dream." She slowly twisted each ring around, pulling it slightly down her finger, pushing it back into place, spinning it until the stone faced back towards her, moving on to the next ring.

"I guess so. It's weird being back here, like nothing's changed. I can't really come back here without thinking about that summer." I pressed my thumb into a knot in the table, looked at it, not at her.

"That's right, you guys moved not long after."

"Yeah, only to Oxnard, but still. It's been a while."

"You're a college man now aren't you?" She said it with an edge that cut through the warm, muffin-sweet air.

"Yeah, graduating this year, believe it or not."

“Time flies and all that.” She was staring out the bubbled window panewindow, watching a woman push a stroller down the sidewalk. Three boys were shouting, tossing a ball, and scrambling around the occasional car. Teachers were still on strike, across the country, and Summer was stretching into Fall.

“Yeah. Good to be here though. I saw Kirk last night.”

“Oh good, how is he?”

“Great, going to medical school next year. It’s too bad, we sort of fell out of touch, you know?”

“Well, who could blame you.”

I was at Kirk’s house that afternoon, the first day of August, an unusually cold one. We were in his living room, listening to Simon & Garfunkle and flipping through a romance novel of his mother’s for the bits that mentioned breasts. When we heard her feet slapping on the front porch, he flung the thing under the couch and grabbed the remote, tried to casually flip through the channels with burning cheeks until Mrs. Wilson came and stood before the screen, tears streaming down her face.

“Andy, you better run on home.”

Kirk and I looked at each other, looked at his mother, wondering what in our quiet suburban lives had caused this grown woman to cry without pause in front of two children. “Really, Andy, go see your mother. There’s been a terrible accident with Bill.” We didn’t move, the room was quiet but for Mrs. Wilson’s faint whimpers.

“Is he all right?” I asked.

“No,” she wailed.

“A car accident?” Kirk ventured, but his mother shook her head.

“Well, what sort of accident? Is he in the hospital?” I imagined my mother would probably make me write a card, deliver it to Bill.

“The boys were playing and, and...”

“The train?” Kirk whispered.

Mrs. Wilson hiccupped her way through a half-hearted tragedy of fate, but Kirk and I knew better, knew even then that Bill had lost his life rather than lose his pride, playing at what Kirk and I had already failed.

I ran home, ran past the kitchen where my mother cried, forehead pressed into a white cabinet door, ran into Abigail’s room where she sat on her bed in its tight alcove, just staring out the window. I sat across from her, without invitation.

“Are you all right? I’m awfully sorry.”

“I don’t...know.”

“It’s a horrible, horrible accident.”

“It shouldn’t have been him. It should’ve been Clark. It could have been Clark and then everything would have gone back to normal.” I was chewing my thumb, savagely ripping at bits of skin.

“Andrew! You can’t say that. It shouldn’t have been anyone. It’s just horrible.” I think I may have almost cried then, more at the burn of being admonished by this perfect girl than the shame of wishing Clark Bender a grisly death. I wondered briefly what it had felt like, if it had been horrible for Bill. Probably. My threatening tears prompted Abigail to lean over and pat my knee, over and over, letting her small, soft hand brush my faded blue jeans.

“Abigail. I love you.” She looked up with wide eyes. “And you’re beautiful, like an angel,” I added for good measure. Before she could respond I closed the gulf of faded quilt between us and planted what I hoped was a firm, confident kiss on her small mouth. I pulled away only a moment later, only because a small shriek from the doorway revealed my water-logged, red-faced mother, wringing her hands, mouth hanging open.

“Andrew Thomas Howard, you get out of this room. *Now.*” I leapt from the bed and brushed past her, cowered in the hall bathroom and listened to my mother slam the guest room door. She marched to the kitchen and yanked the phone from its cradle. I listened with a sinking stomach, not knowing why or how I had managed to make everything go so wrong.

“Yes Fred, I saw it with my own eyes...no I am *not*, this is a perfectly reasonable reaction, one any parent would have if they’d just had the day I’ve had...what I am saying is this girl, that I took in as an act of *charity* mind you, has been seducing and corrupting our son behind closed doors while we put food in her mouth! Already we’ve got boys like Clark Bender planting dangerous ideas in the minds of our children to worry about...poor, *poor* Billy.” Then there was nothing but crying to hear, so I crept down the hall to my own room and shut the door.

The next morning a wide black woman came in a noisy red car and took Abigail and her single suitcase back wherever they had come from. I hoped for her sake it was in Nebraska. Three weeks later Clark and his mother were gone from the end of the cul-de-sac. The next summer we were gone as well.

The day of the funeral people were wilting in their seats, fanning themselves with the color photograph of a little Bill, holding a baseball mitt over his head. The funeral home air conditioner made only a half-hearted slurping sound over our heads and I watched the sweat

dripping down the necks of Bill's parents, forming a dark ripple at their black collars. Clark and his mother didn't even come, which made my mother alternately burn red at the tips of her ears and cry noisy tears.

Of course, Abigail wasn't there either, which I thought wasn't fair because she'd known Bill just as well as any of the girls from school sitting in the back row and squirming in their best dresses. Abigail might have been sad, not because she knew Bill all that well, but because a young death is always something to mourn. And I might have reached over and held her hand for a brief moment, for comfort.

It was only as I was aimlessly packing in preparation for my impending graduation, six months after our encounter in the coffee shop, that I found it. Stuck into the binding of Great Expectations, a gift from my mother I had not once tried to read, was poor Abigail's postcard. It was a silly image, a bright red tractor lugging a giant corn cob through emerald fields under loopy cursive spelling out Omaha. I flipped over the fraying card and read the message that had once given me so much trouble. "Dearest Abs, It's hot as a skillet here but I think you would like it. There's a cow down the road named Muffin that I think you'd get on swell with. I'm hoping I can come home soon, Love, Dad." I hadn't known Abigail to be a girl who liked cows or dreamed of corn, and maybe she hadn't been. In the end I hadn't known much about her at all, only that I'd loved her when I needed someone to love, and had never quite stopped. I picked a different book, a better one, and stuck the card between its pages, so that someday it'd be safe and sound when I got to give it back to her.

Go Fish

People in my family were not prone to shouting. They preferred to whisper and imply and glare. My mother and father stood in the kitchen speaking especially quietly, which was never a good sign. My sister Karen was nowhere to be found, but that was quite normal. Robert, the oldest cousin, sat glumly at the kitchen table, unusual considering he liked to avoid the house at all costs, except for meals. Uncle Todd reclined on the sofa bed, not yet folded up though it was three in the afternoon, watching the television, but that was how it always was these days. I didn't know where Simon, the youngest cousin was, but he never moved too far away. He was blind, after all.

It was pointless to go into the kitchen. My parents liked to keep things to themselves and pretend like nothing was wrong. "What happened?" I asked Robert. He was always nice to me, I assumed because I left him alone most days.

"I got busted smoking a blunt behind the school." He kicked the table leg, hard, so that the wood grunted softly and the salt shaker on the table fell onto its side..

"Just you?"

"Yup. Just my luck."

"What's going to happen?"

"I don't know. My parents are supposed to go in for a conference tomorrow. If I get expelled they're gonna kick the shit out of me."

In a lot of ways Robert was shocking to a quiet, unpopular fourteen-year-old girl like me. His language and music and clothes made me cringe, but every now and then I couldn't help but imagine myself as one of them, one of the girls he sat with at school. I knew enough to

dream about what they did on the weekends when their parents were out of town and I liked, every so often, to imagine myself so dangerous and powerful.

“I’m sorry Robbie.” I touched his arm.

He attempted a smile. “Don’t worry about it, it’ll work out.” He ruffled my hair a little, doing the frizzy curls no favors. “And hey, you stay in school kid!” He clicked his thumb and forefinger at me. He was always doing that with me, smiling in a way that made me feel far younger than I was.

No one was terribly pleased about the cousins moving in. The whole thing made my parents fight for the first time in a long while, retreat into the kitchen or their bedroom after dinner and talk so they were just barely loud enough to be heard as a soft rumbling. My mother liked to help people, but she more than anything liked to defend what was hers, and it seemed that the more adamantly my father argued against bringing these people into our home, the more she felt it her duty to do so. All of this I gathered from the one conversation we had as a family, at dinner the night before they moved in.

“Girls, we’re going to need your help for the next few weeks. My brother Todd is down on his luck so he and Susan and the boys are moving in here. It’ll be tight quarters, I know, but they need our help.” That was my mother’s introduction; she seemed ready to cry over the whole affair.

“Uncle Todd lost his job, which shouldn’t come as a surprise to any of us.” That was my father, savagely stabbing at his chicken and not looking at my mother.

“It is a *horrible* economy, girls. Your father and I are *lucky* to have our jobs.”

“Of course, your mother and I went to college. Definitely go to college, girls.”

“Todd and Susan and the boys are our family, and family is so important, I think we all agree.”

Karen couldn't have cared less about any of it, but for the fact that she'd be forced to share her room with me for however long the cousins would be staying. I had to pack my entire room into boxes and watch my father assemble the old bunk-beds. I hated to think of Robert and Isaac putting their things on my shelves, walking across my carpet with their bare sweaty feet. I hated even more to cram my things into the drawer Karen had been forced to clear out, to watch her primping silently in the morning, rifling through powder cases and nail polish bottles I was never allowed to touch. Simon, only seven, got the whole guest room to himself, and though it wasn't large at all, barely a closet really, it seemed unfair in a way no one dared to say anything about. He was blind, not dying of the bubonic plague. But my mother went to great effort to arrange all the furniture just the way he'd had it in his room at home, so he'd find his way around, she said.

Uncle Todd and Aunt Susan made a big fuss of being generous and taking the sleeper sofa in the den. It was not generous at all I decided, but horribly inconvenient. After the first few weeks Uncle Todd did nothing but sit on the pulled-out sofa bed and watch TV in his boxers, so none of us really wanted to go in there. There was a chart my father had made, held to the refrigerator door by a yellow magnet, with a square for each person's favorite show marked out with a highlighter so everyone got a turn with the television once a week. Now the chart had been mostly abandoned.

The den was directly beneath Karen's room, and at night we could hear them shouting through the air vent, Aunt Susan yelling that he should be trying harder, Uncle Todd shouting

back that there were no jobs to be found, one of them inevitably shushing the other because they'd wake the whole house, and they didn't want to outstay their welcome.

With everyone crammed into the wrong room it wasn't anything like the way I remembered. Before they'd moved, we'd all played together after school, Aunt Susan or my mother making a snack of peanut butter sandwiches with the crusts cut off. We'd have dinner together sometimes on Sundays, in the backyard, Uncle Todd kicking a soccer ball with us while my father hovered over the grill. I hadn't then sensed any of the tension, this chaos.

I'd been excited to see my cousins. For the past four years they'd lived an hour away, and I liked the idea that I was older, wiser, better now. Because our parents were at work when they arrived, Karen took charge, which she loved. She directed the movements throughout the house without lifting a box or suitcase. She cooed over Simon and how big he'd grown. "This is little Debbie, except much bigger now, can you believe it?" She enjoyed introducing me as if she were my mother. I bristled at the word "bigger"; I was always conscious of my doughy middle next to Karen's lean lines.

"Debra," I said. I hated Debbie.

"Oh Debbie, you are all grown up! Beautiful!" Aunt Susan squashed me into a hug.

Despite all the turmoil I didn't half mind the ways our household began to change. Things that were usually quiet and simple evolved into a circus of shouts and crowded bodies. At the dinner table the three boys grabbed at rolls and pieces of pie like they never expected to see food again. People talked over each other until all attempts at conversation were lost to a growing din of chatter. Usually I was torn at meals, torn between having to hear Karen go on and on about something brilliant she'd done, and having to think of something to say myself and

bear the blistering gazes of my parents, my father warning me not to interrupt my sister. Now, no one listened to anyone.

“Debbie, we need you to watch Simon.” I’d never done any babysitting before. Parents had never asked me like they’d asked Karen, and I had the sinking feeling that children probably didn’t like me all that much. But someone needed to go to the school for Robert’s conference, and everyone but Uncle Todd had work that afternoon. And of course Karen was at the age where she couldn’t bear the thought of spending a Friday afternoon anywhere but the mall or the football game. My mother saw my face. “All we need you to do is wait here until the school bus drops him off. Give him a snack and entertain him. It’ll be an hour or two, at the most. Thank you, sweetie.”

I spent an anxious hour in the quiet house, hovering by the living room bay window. This was the kind of thing Karen should do, Karen was used to being responsible for things. I’d never even had my own gerbil. The bus pulled up to the curb and let out a trickle of bouncing Kindergarteners. Simon was last, walking slowly and deliberately down the steps and across the sidewalk, swinging his thin white cane before him. I realized too late I should go to the front door and open it; Simon knocked politely.

He wanted peanut butter and banana for a snack. I sliced the fruit for him, put a glob of peanut butter on the plate. I added a fork and knife. How you were supposed to eat such a mess of food, I didn’t know. While I rummaged in the kitchen Simon said, “I like your house. Everything is always in the same place.” I glanced at the pantry, each shelf lined with my father’s careful handwritten labels, NUTS, FLOUR, SOUP. It was true. Simon fell silent and went on sitting quietly, even after I’d put the plate in front of him.

“So? Where is everything?” He pointed his nose right at me, as if he were really looking into my eyes.

“What?”

“You have to tell me where everything is on the plate, so I can find it. Please.”

“Oh, okay. Um, there’s banana slices on the right, no left, side of the plate, and a big glob of peanut butter on the right. And there’s a fork, and a knife, by your right hand.”

“I’m left handed, you know. The only one in my family!”

“Oh, do you want me to move the fork and knife?”

“I can do it.” He grabbed a slice of banana, and after several tries dunked and dragged it through the peanut butter.

I sat across from him, desperately trying to think of things to say to a blind seven-year-old. “Karen’s left handed too; Did you know that?” He nodded.

“Sometimes she helps me with my homework.” I hadn’t known that. “You don’t like Karen very much, do you?”

The question surprised me. Simon was still dunking his banana slices, chewing thoughtfully. “I love Karen.”

“But you don’t like her very much.”

I didn’t know what to say, was worried it was a little bit true. “Do you ever fight with your brothers?”

“Not really. They get in more trouble if they fight with me. They fight with each other. Robbie calls Isaac a twit, sometimes they punch each other and wrestle and stuff. But they are definitely *not* allowed to punch me.” He sounded forlorn about the whole thing.

I could see how he might wish he *was* allowed to be punched. Simon heard everything, probably better than anyone else, but wasn't allowed to *do* much of anything. I wondered what made him think I didn't like Karen, if he thought Karen liked me. It didn't seem the sort of thing I could ask him.

Soon he was finished, pushing the plate away and swinging his tongue in wide circles around his lips, catching the last wisps of peanut butter that clung there. He was clumsy in a familiar way; I wanted to bring him a napkin but didn't. "Do you want to play cards?"

"What?"

"Yah, Go Fish; Isaac just taught me. I'm great at it!"

"Ok." I felt certain there was some joke, some trick I hadn't understood, but he pulled a deck from his backpack, started clumsily shuffling.

"This is great! No one ever wants to play at recess. It's my favorite game now."

It wasn't until he'd laboriously dealt two hands that I noticed the small bumps in the corner of each card. Simon was good. He pondered each move carefully, remembered almost everything I'd said. I realized suddenly that I was babysitting and nothing remotely terrible had happened yet. Simon even seemed happy, seemed to like me, and I rather liked him. We played four rounds before his mother came home, looking worn and sad. Simon ran to the door then, wrapped his arms around his mother's middle and hugged her tightly for a long while. She leaned down to hug him back, rocked slightly.

That evening the house was quieter than it had been all week. I crept towards the kitchen, stood pressed against the wall, listening to my parents whisper.

“God, Helen. He was smoking marijuana. A *drug*. I told you having them here was a bad idea and I want them out.”

“We can’t send them out onto the streets! They’re family!”

“We can’t keep them here forever, either. And it’s not looking like Todd’s ever getting a job, not the way he sits on his ass all day.”

“It’s a rough economy, it isn’t his fault.”

“Not that bad. If he stopped being so damn picky he’d get something. Sure they’d have to put up with some crappy apartment for awhile, but that’s what people do.”

“It’s complicated for them. They’ve got Simon, and Robbie’s clearly going through a rough time.”

“I don’t care what he’s going through! Who knows what he’s doing under our roof! We shouldn’t be dealing with their screwed up kids. Karen’s going to college in six months. We should be helping her with her applications, going to her tennis matches. Not dealing with this.”

It sounded then like my mother was crying. I left before my father could come storming out. He could be mean when he was angry, deathly quiet with a glare that cut through you and made you never want to do anything wrong ever again.

The door to my room was open, Robert was lying on the bottom bunk, not moving, staring straight up at the crooked rungs of the top bunk. I crept past. I wished I was brave enough to help him, I wanted to be on his side. Karen was in our room, a cassette playing loudly. She sat cross-legged on the bed doing homework, twirling one strand of blonde hair around her finger. She didn’t look any different than the day before.

She’d been there too I knew, behind the school. I watched them all stroll off together, laughing.

I'd gone to her lunch table, something I was mostly forbidden to do, to tell her I'd take the bus home instead of waiting for her to drive me after her tennis practice.

"Ok Deb, whatever."

It was only luck that Robert had come up with his friends then. Otherwise I would never have been allowed to hear what they were saying.

"I've got it. You ready Karen?"

"Where are you going?" I'd asked, thinking maybe it was a family thing, a cousins thing, that I'd be invited.

"To go hang out, OK?"

"Right now? You'll miss fourth period!"

"Oh boo hoo. You won't run tell, will you little Debbie?" Karen had already turned her back, was laughing with one of Robert's new friends. "It's good stuff, you'll like it," he was telling her. Robert smiled somewhat apologetically at me.

Of course I wouldn't tell, not after she'd baited me with the horrible possibility of becoming the baby, the tattletale. Being allowed to keep the secret was almost as valuable as being allowed to follow them out of the school.

But now my father was cursing at my mother and threatening to send the cousins out on the street. And Karen was sitting idly on her bed, smacking a piece of bubble gum.

"You have to say something, Karen." I said it again, louder, until she looked up, turned down the music.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not stupid. I know you were out there with Robbie. You were probably even smoking the marijuana, too."

“I’m not stupid either, Debbie. That’s why I got the Hell out of there before Principal Dreschler could reach us. It’s not my fault Robert’s slow.”

“But it isn’t fair! You have to tell Mom and Dad so they know it wasn’t *all* his fault.” I thought somehow the entire house would be a little more normal again if Karen would only admit to everyone she was wrong for once.

“Well it wasn’t my fault at all, if that’s what you’re suggesting. *I* didn’t buy the weed. *I* didn’t roll the joint. *I* just thought I was heading to the baseball field to hang out with my friends and goof around. How was I supposed to know there’d be drugs?” She made her eyes wide, batted them.

“Did you do it? Smoke it?”

For some reason that made her laugh. “You know this is all going to blow over right? Dad hasn’t wanted them in the house from the beginning. There was bound to be something before long that set him off.”

“Okay, well you still have to tell the truth. And if you don’t, I will.”

“And what would that accomplish? I’d just tell Mom and Dad what I told you; I didn’t know what was going on. There’s no point in riling things up even further.”

“It’s not fair to Robbie!” I didn’t seem right that Robbie, who was always nice to me, who was quiet and mostly out of everybody’s way, should have to be in so much trouble and Karen in none. I knew it wouldn’t fix anything, but I felt so sure that Karen’s confession would make everyone *feel* better. “It’s not fair that-” Karen didn’t let me finish.

“And life’s not fair. Some people get in trouble, some don’t. We move on. End of story. You’re doing everyone a favor by saying nothing Debbie. I know I can count on you.” She smiled in a way that reminded me of when we were younger, and I left the room silently.

For once Uncle Todd and Aunt Susan were missing from the den, probably down to discipline their child or argue with my father. Simon was partially hidden in the shadow of the couch, sitting on the floor watching Judy Garland dance across the television screen, singing about the Wizard. I went to sit next to him on the carpet, watched the movie in silence for a moment.

“I feel sorry for the Wicked Witch,” Simon said suddenly.

I laughed. “Why’s that?”

“Because her sister got smooshed. And the Good Witch gets a much prettier dress. And she has green skin.”

“I guess that’s true.” From somewhere in the house we heard the strained decibels of a raised voice, but not the words. I stared at the shelf where my father had alphabetized the videos. How they were out of order, stacks of movies teetering on the floor. “Karen should be in trouble too, she was with Robby you know, she just didn’t get caught.” I breathed my last words into the air. “And I’m going to tell Mom and Dad.” I felt lighter.

Simon said nothing for a long time, on the screen the Lion petted his mane and launched a plaintive ballad about courage. “Robert gets in trouble all the time,” he said finally, “I don’t think Karen gets in trouble that much.”

“She *never* does, that’s the problem. It isn’t fair.”

“I guess not. But Karen is pretty nice, over all, you know.”

I wondered how Karen could be so nice to everyone but me.

Dinner was subdued, my father pushing peas around his plate with a vengeance, refusing to make eye contact, Aunt Judy and Uncle Todd looking dazed and tired. Robbie hadn't come down, whether by choice I didn't know.

"How was your day, Debbie?" my mother asked.

I paused. "It was all right, nothing new." I could always talk to them after dinner, when not everyone was watching me. Karen smiled at me across the table. I tried to smile back.

Karen spoke for awhile, telling everyone about the school play, the part she hoped to win. Simon sat at my side, quiet for most of the dinner.

"I hope you can watch me again, after school," he said suddenly, so softly that no one else looked up.

"Me too."

"We can play more Go Fish and you can get better at it." He giggled to himself.

"Definitely."

"Except we're probably moving soon, aren't we?" He was suddenly terribly glum, head slumped so far down I could no longer see his eyes.

"I guess you probably are. But maybe you'll move somewhere close!"

"Maybe." I felt horrible for him, hearing everything fall apart and not being able to do a thing about it. I held his hand under the table for a little while.

Small Stones

When I was sixteen I saw for the first time the place where my mother had grown up and met the people who had raised her. I did not want to leave my father alone for Christmas and I certainly did not want to spend an entire week alone with my mother. But she said her father was dying and wanted to meet me, which was difficult to argue with.

“But I’m always here for Christmas.” Here meant my father’s house, the only home I’d ever had.

“What? You and I spend Christmas together sometimes.” It wasn’t true and she knew it. She meant that sometimes I went to visit her the day after Christmas and watch *It’s A Wonderful Life* and eat stale cookies. Or perhaps she meant that once, years ago, we’d all lived in this house together and she’d helped my father play Santa and bake pumpkin pies. That didn’t count either, because I knew a few missing years were enough to erase all the others.

“It’s not fair to leave Dad alone.” I knew it’d make my mother huffy to say it, my mother who was always alone. But she, unlike my father, had chosen such lonesomeness.

“Your father isn’t going to be alone, he has what’s-her-name.” One year is long enough to learn that what’s-her-name is Debra, but I don’t believe my mother wanted to care all that much.

“What if I don’t want to go away for a whole week?” She kept waving that dying grandfather in front of my face until I had no choice but to shut my mouth and get on the plane to Mississippi with her.

My mother wasn’t nervous at all. She flew every day and she was happy to sit wedged into the coach seats, close her eyes. She slept through the entire flight. I counted the purple

slashes in their neat rows on the navy blue headrest before me, counted again to see if I'd counted right. I couldn't sleep, could only watch the white wing where it extended from the body of the plane at the corner of my window. I jumped at every thick, unnatural sounding clunk of the taxi wheels or accelerating engine.

We had to drive an hour and a half from Memphis. We pulled off the road once, right alongside the highway, so she could consult the directions she'd scrawled on the back of an envelope and hadn't asked me to read to her. We circled the courthouse square twice while she muttered under her breath and glanced at the directions she'd clamped against the steering wheel.

Finally we rattled down a dirt driveway and swerved to stop where it rounded a white fountain in front of the porch. She parked and pulled the keys from the ignition and sat breathing heavily. I didn't dare get out of the car first. I stared up at the pale, even bricks, the double white columns dominating the porch, obscuring the front door. Hedges trimmed into straight edges lined the driveway, shaded the yellow flowers. It was sunny, probably warm outside the car. The strands of icicle lights, draped over the porch railing, looked lost.

A black woman, all elbows and knees, came barreling out of the door, down the porch steps. She leaned heavily to one side but moved as quickly as the bushy squirrels that dashed in front of the car. My mother whipped her head to the side, watched the woman clunk down the stairs in nurse's shoes. Then the two women were storming towards each other, colliding in a swirl of dust and swinging ponytails, clutching each other and swaying. I couldn't be sure but it looked like my mother might be crying. They hugged like that for a long time and I felt as if I shouldn't be there. When they headed towards the house I tumbled out of the car to follow and the automatic car alarm blared to life but I didn't know how to shut it off. I gathered both the suitcases from the trunk and carried them into the house myself.

My grandmother was in every way a small person. She was short and slender, had clearly tried to tease and curl her limp hair a little larger. Her voice was quiet, her eyes slim and catlike. She shook my hand like we were at a cocktail party, or like she was afraid I might crush her if she were forced to hug me.

My grandfather was the sick one and occupied a soft Lazy-Boy chair on rockers in the back den. “Elizabeth would never allow this thing in the parlor,” he told me, rocking slowly. Even though his tissue paper skin hung loose on his bones and his bare scalp was mottled with dark patches like a bruised apple, he’d put on a blue seersucker shirt with short sleeves and pressed slacks. Whether it was only on my mother’s account I didn’t know.

We had sweet tea in the den, everyone perched on hard wing chairs, the dark velvet upholstery scratching against our elbows. The floral valances cast heavy shadows, thick bars of charcoal striping the sunny room. The tall glasses were brought in on a tray by the black woman from before, who looked at my mother with a panicked and joyful look. She returned with cookies arranged on a plate, old-fashioned looking with its faded flower pattern. I wondered if they could ever use the parlor now, if this grandfather could even sit in one of its straight-backed chairs, or if all entertaining had been banished to the back of the house.

Nobody spoke much and everyone seemed more interested in staring at one another. All I knew was it had been more than a decade since my mother had sat in this house. Everything else, including who loved or hated whom, was unclear to me. The cookies were passed around three times over the hour, the glasses drained only once. While the adults stared at one another and spoke slowly and deliberately I pulled the hair tie off my wrist and picked at the seams until I could unravel it.

The black woman carried our suitcases upstairs and everyone but the grandfather followed. “This was my room growing up, Em. You’ll love it, I swear it has the best view in the house, so much sun too. You’re going to love it, don’t you think she’ll love it Mother!” My mother chirped behind me as we stood in the doorway of my assigned, cotton candy pink room. Her mother only nodded and pointed out the bathrooms in a soft voice, the black woman followed my mother down the hallway, and then I was alone.

That night it poured, raindrops hammered on the tin roof, thunder shook the windows, wind howled along the gutters and shutters, the wailing like an empty dirge. We ate and my grandfather had been moved to a chair at the head of the table, a gingham cushion from some other room propped behind his back. As far as I could tell, I was meant to call them Elizabeth and Richard, and no one offered any alternatives.

Fanny - that was the black woman - served dinner. She hovered next to each place setting then leaned down so that I could smell her, cinnamon and lemon dish soap and something else, could see the gray filigree creeping into her braids. We ate salad first, everyone all at once, all the same portion. I watched my mother to see which fork to use because it was the sort of thing my father would never have thought to teach me, the sort of thing Betty probably didn’t even know was possible.

They talked more now, about people I didn’t know, offhanded things about births and deaths and new cars. “So, Mother, I thought that if the Kings are having their Boxing Day Party this year, I mean, they *must* still do that, right? Well, I thought that it might be nice if we all went. I thought you might like to introduce Emily to all the old friends.”

I had not seen my mother smiling so hard, leaning forward so eagerly, since the very first days I had been allowed to visit her in her apartment, and she had nearly broken her back trying to be sure I enjoyed myself. She looked different too, perhaps it was the clothes she had put on for dinner, a silky, forest green blouse and lean, pleated pants I had never seen before. In the dim dining room light I could see the ways in which she resembled her mother, the way the rise of her cheekbones and the pout of her lips mirrored the older version. I wondered who I resembled.

I thought for a moment that Elizabeth would say nothing at all she looked so pleased. Finally, she dabbed her napkin about her mouth and smiled, lips closed. “What a wonderful idea. I’ll let everyone know we’re coming.” She allowed her smile to show her small teeth for a brief moment.

I went to bed when desert had been served. Richard and Elizabeth slunk off. My mother talked to Fanny in the kitchen, where I couldn’t quite make out what they were saying. Every once in a while my mother laughed.

My mother’s old room was nothing by pink and lace and white eyelet, punctuated here and there with faded mementos. I wondered why she wasn’t sleeping in it herself. I walked slowly along each wall. The shelves were mostly bare, but in one large photo, framed, my mother leaned against a man I didn’t recognize, a boat’s sails behind them. A thin tree branch slapped against the window, over and over, making the room sound hollow.

Under the bed and the white dust ruffle were shoeboxes, some full of high-heeled shoes but some full of photographs and letters and thin journals. It felt natural to pull them out and read them though they weren’t mine. Always I had learned about my mother through the souvenirs she left for no one to find, frantically saved by the people she left behind.

In the journals were girlish entries of angst, but drafted as poems, not the usual plaintive letters to an unknown Diary. Some had been copied there in a neat hand, were titled with names I recognized: Dickinson and Byron and Longfellow. But some must have been hers, dreamt up and put to paper. I flipped through them, faster, catching words and phrases that hung in the air like poems of their own; “Blossomed” and “darkness” and “never sleeping”.

Christmas morning began just before noon. We put on dark clothes, dresses of noisy forest green fabric, a heavy velvet blazer, and perched on damask couches. Fanny served mimosas and moist fruit cake. Richard gave Elizabeth a necklace set with fat emeralds; Elizabeth gave Richard a heavy silver watch. Someone had wrapped small, pearl earrings for my mother, a cheerfully illustrated, hard back copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* for me. Everyone stood to kiss everyone else on the cheek; one by one we circled to Richard’s chair and kissed him as well.

There were voices in the kitchen, the occasional clash of pans and cupboard doors. Somehow everyone disappeared, the halls were quiet when I crept back upstairs.

Elizabeth appeared in my doorway noiselessly. I’d lost track of time, staring at the birds tucked into the branches beyond the window. “Are you enjoying your room?”

“Yes, thank you.” Elizabeth seemed to glide, the noise of her padding feet swallowed by the plush carpet, a slight smile playing on her mouth.

“We are all quite glad to meet you, you know.”

“I’m glad to meet you too.” It didn’t seem that anyone was glad at all, least of all Elizabeth. “I’m sorry Richard is so sick. How is he doing?”

“Oh, he’s just fine.” I began to realize how my mother sometimes sounded just like her, breathy, in another world far from my own. She went to the closet in the corner, opened it, and stood motionless for a moment. I hadn’t bothered unpacking, my suitcase stood open, dripping crumpled garments. She reached suddenly deep into the back of the closet, emerged.

On the bed she laid three white dresses in crinkly, transparent bags. She ran her fingers over the bags, making them crackle and catch the sunlight. I didn’t know if I was meant to leave the room or stay to observe some strange ritual.

“I suppose you don’t really have debutantes in California.”

I shook my head. “No, but a lot of my friends had bat mitzvahs.”

She laughed once, a sharp sound. “This was the dress I wore. This one was your mother’s.” They looked like wedding dresses, long pleats of satin, bows and tiny buttons. I realized in a panic that there was a third dress, that I was the one cornered with this snow-like woman in a too-pink room. Still she didn’t speak and I wondered if I could politely excuse myself.

“Did you know your mother was almost married once?”

“What?”

“Almost. Before your father, I suppose.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Troy Montgomery. His parents are dear friends of ours.”

“Wait, when was this?”

“Oh, many years ago.” Elizabeth unzipped the bag of the last dress down the middle, the zipper a soft crescendo of clicks. Now I began to understand, that this was nothing but another forgotten artifact, saved by another sad person. “This is the dress she would have worn.” She

was touching the lace with a single finger, running it along one sleeve, brushing it across the silk sash.

“Well, she never told me.”

“Of course not, why should she?”

“Why not get rid of it?”

“It was my dress too. I hated it.”

“So get rid of it.”

“We don’t get to toss things out just because we don’t like them.”

“Is that him?” I gestured to the photograph on the shelf.

She nodded. “Such a handsome fellow.”

“It’s weird she never said anything.”

“She always has gotten the things she wanted and forgotten the things she didn’t.” She zipped the bag hastily, grabbed the bags that were together almost wider than she. Hanging in the closet they disappeared into the shadows. She shut the door forcefully. “Dinner will be served at six.”

My mother was in the garden, laying back in an Adirondack chair with chipped paint, smiling up at the December Mississippi sun. I sat on the grass next to her, ran my fingers through the clipped blades. The back of the house loomed above us, looking cheerful in the sunlight, softer.

“I know my parents are sure glad to meet you. Thank you for coming Emily.”

“What’s wrong with Richard?”

“Oh, nothing really.”

“You said he was dying.”

“Yes, well, my father’s old. He will die eventually.”

“You made it sound like he had cancer or something.”

“Do you want your grandfather to have cancer?”

“No. I’m saying you made him sound really sick.”

“He’s not *well*.”

“So, what does he have?”

“He’s old! All right, Emily?” She was growing frustrated. I was frustrated for Richard, who no one would talk to or even talk about. My mother seemed suddenly anxious, not glad to be back in her home at all.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about that guy you almost married, before Dad?”

She sat up then, turned to look at me. For a moment she didn’t seem to know what to say. “Did my mother say something to you?”

“Yes, she mentioned it. But his picture’s in there, in your room. And the wedding dress is still in your closet! It seems like you should have told me.” I was seventeen, mothers and daughters should begin to tell each other things.

“That was a very long time ago.”

“Does Dad know?”

“The gist of it, yes.”

“So what happened? Did he break up with you or did you break up with him?”

“It’s not important.”

“I’m just wondering. You never talk to me!”

“There’s nothing to talk about! It wasn’t my mother’s business to tell you and it’s not your business either!” She’d raised her voice now.

I thought of things I could throw back in her face. She was a bad mother, an abandoning mother. She didn’t tell me things and she didn’t want to know anything about me. She lied about her father dying and dragged me to see her parents she didn’t even seem to like all that much. But she probably knew those things and I wondered if I wouldn’t hurt her more by saying nothing. I stormed back into the house

Christmas dinner was quiet. Someone had put tall, white candles on the table, surrounded each by a small pine and holly garland. Glass vases of peppermint balls anchored the sideboard, the china was edged with a delicate mistletoe print. And yet no one seemed to feel the slightest bit festive. Fanny and a man I hadn’t seen before, both dressed in crisp black and white, carried platters of ham and pheasant and shrimp to the table, bowls of green beans and candied yams. I missed the instant stuffing my father always made out of a box.

“I don’t think I feel up to the Kings’s tomorrow,” my mother said quietly.

“Well, they’re expecting us Lindy. It’s be rude not to go.”

“I can’t go Mother, I can’t go see all those people.”

“If you intend to sulk like a child that’s fine. I’ll go on ahead with Emily.”

“You’re not taking her either.”

“And why ever not?”

“Because I’ll decide who my daughter gets to meet, not you.” There was an unexpected edge to my mother’s voice now. She looked at no one but I could feel her heat, raging and smoldering.

Elizabeth looked at my mother with such a combination of hatred and utter desolation in her eyes, I was certain I had seen wrong. When I looked back she stared at her place, cut her food with slow, deliberate motions.

No one spoke again until the pie had been served. Fanny carried the glass dish with both hands, a pale blue potholder protecting her palms. The crust was perfectly crisped, rising in an even dome over the garnet filling, the crimson syrup and bits of cherry seeping through the symmetrical diamonds cut into the dough.

In the morning I found myself alone with Richard. I had woken dazed, the room bright but the house silent. Even the birds outside the window seemed cautious and muted. The house seemed to demand quiet, the carpeting absorbing footsteps, voices losing their way in the maze of rooms. I might not have noticed him if had not spoken. Someone had turned Richard's chair to face the window, the cushions of his headrest hiding his small head. I'd stopped to look out the window, my mother and Elizabeth were barely visible, white blurs against the vivid green of the long lawn. They seemed painted there, unmoving and splotted.

"Emily, would you please get me a glass of water?"

Still I could not see him, his voice seeping up out of the tan padding of his Lazy-Boy chair. I managed to croak a response and slipped out to the kitchen. In the dining room a round Hispanic woman sat at the table, laboriously polishing silverware, her hands passing over each piece again and again, the silver glinting beneath the silent swaying of the white cloth.

Through the kitchen's swinging door I hoped to find Fanny, someone who would speak and know where the water was. But the kitchen was empty and blindingly bright. Gone were the dark wood and somber oriental rugs and jewel-toned curtains. The white tiles caught the sun,

held it, warmed the room. I wished we could have eaten here, at the small table by the window, with copper pots hanging from hooks looking down on us instead of the wan faces of dark, painted portraits.

I hunted through stacks of China and measuring cups for a glass, peered into the fridge but found no water among the bottles of French “l’eau pettiante” and white wine and pomegranate juice. I settled on water from the tap in a coffee mug and hoped Richard would not be offended.

“Thank you. Sometimes I worry no one will pass through this room ever again and I’ll be forgotten completely.” He seemed cheerful about it.

“How are you feeling?”

“Oh fine, just fine.”

“Can I bring you something? A book or something?”

“Oh no, I’m very happy.” I sat down, off to the side, so that I could see only his profile. Again he was neatly dressed, but with the chair leaned back, his feet propped up, I could see he wore no shoes, only lumpy gray socks. “It’s very important to be able to just sit in quiet. Someone said that, a poet I think. Do you know who said that?”

“No, sorry.”

“I’m sure it was a poet.” The white figures were moving towards us now, growing larger and clearer, framed by the rows of rose bush skeletons. “I used to travel a lot, for my job, but now I’m just happy to sit here and be quiet.” Then my mother and Elizabeth came in and both said hello to Richard, but then no one said much of anything to him.

Three days passed in this way, with the morning arriving slowly and quietly, the evening coming just as timidly, everyone seeming relieved when they could run to their own room.

It seemed that no one cared at all anymore that I was there. My mother only wanted to sit holding her father's hand, or talk to her mother without looking at her, their soft, hard voices cutting through the air, or sneak into the kitchen to whisper with Fanny. Eventually, on Wednesday, Elizabeth seemed to notice that I hadn't moved from the den's corner armchair, or looked up from my book. Without asking she came over and gave me quiet, precise directions to Faulkner's house, "just down the road".

For twenty minutes I walked, passing houses that looked like the one I'd just left. Mostly they were set back from the road, hiding behind trees and shrubs. Mostly there were no people. I saw a woman pushing a baby in a stroller, a man with a dog.

Rowan Oak stood at the end of a long drive, shaded by the trees lining both sides. I was asked to wait for the tour. Elderly people waited with me, clutching their foam visors and water bottles. The furniture wasn't so different than that in Elizabeth's house, stiff. The guide pointed out the typewriter in its glass case, the very same typewriter Faulkner had used to write his Hollywood scripts. He let us stand before the wall where Faulkner had scribbled the notes for some novel that would win the Pulitzer Prize. The guide seemed almost giddy with pride, as if he'd been there, held the pen. "Faulkner broke boundaries," he exclaimed, rocking slightly from the ball of one foot to the other. "He was the *first* to write about the *modern* American South, to *reject* the Antebellum." He chewed over his words, spit some out like watermelon seeds in his excitement. "He wrote about *disintegrating* Southern families, of tradition *colliding* with modernity!" I imagined whole families turning to dust around Faulkner's desk. We were allowed to stand briefly outside the house and from there I thought it didn't look grand at all, but peeling and leaning and sad.

"Did you enjoy Rowan Oak? Lovely house, isn't it?"

I nodded. "I mean, I've never read any of his books."

"I can't say that I have either. Your mother did, at Ole Miss. I remember her telling me about him, reading me bits and pieces. I didn't understand it but it was beautiful."

"It's cool he lived here."

"They sure do love him here, Bill. My father met him you know. He used to play with a little boy, maybe a nephew, of Faulkner's. They'd go there sometimes and listen to him talk, tell stories. There was something he said once, must have stuck with my father because he told me about it two dozen times. Something like, to remove a mountain you must begin by carrying away small stones. I always liked the sound of that."

I couldn't picture Elizabeth carrying away anything at all.

It was spring when I saw Mississippi again. I was in college and dating a slightly rugged, literary type who was sick of still-cold Boston. He wanted to spend Spring Break not on an alcohol-soaked beach but driving through the American South, and I wanted to spend it on the move. He yearned more than anything to see Oxford, to stand in the courthouse square and imagine he was in a novel, to stand in Faulkner's house and imagine he was a genius. I wanted to be uncomplicated and didn't mention my grandfather buried in some churchyard there, my grandmother living in an enormous empty house with loyal Fanny.

We bickered in the car because he was a horrible driver and I was horrible at giving directions. Rowan Oak was closed and he sulked because neither of us had thought to check the schedule. I sulked because I regretted more and more coming on the trip at all, and began to feel certain I didn't want the rambling intellectual boyfriend around much longer. Being in Oxford, driving through the narrow streets, I felt the familiar feeling of sour anger, of tension and

confusion. I remembered how relieved I had been to go home after that Christmas, to trade silent, plastic grandparents for my father and Debra who, while awkward, at least saved me cookies, decorated the tree with kitschy ornaments, held the other's hand with pleasure they couldn't easily hide. Finally we drove instead to the graveyard where Faulkner was buried. There were no signs or markers, no tombstones more obviously important than the rest. We wandered, sometimes tripping over the stubby stones marking scattered, nameless graves.

Finally we found him, halfway down the hill, endless green space and white stones stretching below us. Two flowered wreaths leaned against the short, stone columns. I don't remember now who he had been buried with, family of course, three other plots clustered around his, long, flat markers spelling their names in block letters. We were glad to have found it, we took our pictures.

Then I remembered the guide from several years ago, who had been giddy with Faulkner's genius. Now I'd finally read the brilliant works, though not particularly understood them. It seemed to me that all the man had done was point out the dead and dying and ugly things no one else would. For a man so supposedly brave and intelligent, his grave seemed unfinished. There were far grander ones up the hill but no one went to stand before them. Perhaps in another hundred years everyone would have forgotten Faulkner completely. It was possible his house would fall down, his books would start to disintegrate on abandoned libraries' shelves, college students would drive to the better graves of better writers. It was possible, though the boy on his knees before me, practically praying, would never have believed it.

I sat alone for a moment beneath a tree, remembering the flight where my mother had slept, unapologetically, against the greasy airplane window. I had wanted then to ask her why she'd bothered bringing me, what was wrong with her father and why no one would say a thing

about it. I wanted to ask her about Fanny, the sad pink bedroom of things she'd never bothered to take, to ask her if she'd ever go back. I had still been angry then, boiling over with the mystery of it all. No matter how much we said, we'd never fill those silent moments. I began to think that was how it was with mothers.

That morning the town and the courthouse square were as quiet as the empty graveyard. We drove slowly and craned our necks to see the courthouse clock. It was leaning out the windows that we missed the right street and had to make our way around the square another time, until finally we were released onto the anonymous highway. Maybe when the trip was over I would call my mother.

In the Air

“I have to go get something.” I was sitting up in bed, rigid, clutching a slippery hotel sheet to my chest. Chris groaned softly, reminding me I’d spoken out loud at all.

I’d slept restlessly for hours, then awoken with a start, as if from a nightmare, what seemed only hours after I’d fallen asleep, cold and reaching for the spare, polyester quilt at the foot of the bed. We’d opened the window the night before, stifled by body heat, but wispy clouds had crept over the city and my joints ached like rusty door hinges. The fan whirred, the room seemed to glow with the greenish light from the VCR and the alarm clock and the smoke detector. I tossed and turned on the too-soft mattress, unused both to the expanse of space and the hulking man who had somehow edged into the middle of it. It was always the same lumpy cottage-cheese ceilings, geometric bed spreads, straight-edged, dark wood furniture, almost like that I’d had in college.

I drifted in and out of uncomfortable sleep and finally turned to my side to gaze at the source of the gravelly snores drifting out of the pile of pillows. He was now not snoring but looking at me through half-shut eyes. “Get what?”

In the early morning gray light I’d watched Chris snore with a strange curiosity and amazement. He had one arm flung out and one hand spread flat on his fuzzy chest, his face smooth and slack, almost anonymous in sleep, a face like any man’s. Andy had never snored, in fact, slept in a rigid way that suggested he had never quit left consciousness at all, and indeed he could be shaken awake with nothing more than a softly uttered word. There was a decade between the two men; one slept in flannel pajamas, tops and bottoms that matched, the other, naked. I stared at Chris, and tried to imagine what he might look like at Andy’s age. It was then, thinking of years and wrinkles that I’d remembered it was Emily’s birthday and jerked up.

“Get *what*, babe?” Chris repeated.

I was already out of bed, hopping on one leg into my jeans, rifling with one hand through my suitcase for a sweater. “Cough drops,” I said, because it was something and I couldn’t think of anything else.

“Are you sick?”

I let the door bang shut behind me.

We had a rare break on a job due to inclement weather.. The crew had finally slunk into the hotel after two in the morning, when it was established that a tornado moving across the West of the state would keep all planes on the ground for the time being. Now the morning in Wichita was our own, until Air Traffic Control deemed the airways safe.. Margaret, who’d been at the airline for years, said they had once been strict about the hotels, putting pilots in one and flight attendants in another. I guess they figured no one cared so much anymore, but hurrying down to the lobby I began to wish I was in another hotel, on the other side of the highway, far away from all men.

It had taken all of two miniature Gray Goose bottles from the hotel mini bar to convince me I’d be happier where I was and not in my own room down the hall. So now I had the faint buzz of a hangover at the back of my head, besides the spinning feeling of disorientation I felt after a rare morning of sleeping late. I was shocked to see that it was light outside, that the street was full of cars.

The shop in the hotel lobby offered two rows of greeting cards, mostly Birthdays, a few for Condolences and Thanks. I tapped my foot anxiously and grabbed at the brightly colored ones I thought an eight-year-old might like. I found one with a kitten, Emily loved kittens now (or perhaps it was puppies).

I was angry as I waited for the gangly, almost adolescent man at the counter to scan the card and count my change. The card would be late, by three days at least. I'd never missed Emily's birthday.

I'd lied on my résumé. I hadn't written one in ten years, and sitting at Andy's work computer it didn't seem like such a bad thing to do. In the end it may not have mattered if I spoke French, but it felt like something in the midst of very little. It wasn't a very big lie, I'd had two semesters of it in college and a girls' trip to Paris one Spring Break. It wasn't fluency, but it was something.

Andy let me come to the office after hours and use the computer. I printed and packaged fifty-three letters and résumés, one for just about every airline at the Los Angeles International Airport. Andy sat across from me at the desk, sitting very straight as he worked, occasionally looking up to smile in a way I'm sure he felt was encouraging but was mostly weak. He wrote in neat, sharp columns, numbers marching one after another, his ballpoint pen never slipping or smudging. Emily played at our feet, humming to herself as she often did at that age.

It was complicated, in those early days, to manage the unpredictability. When the assignment calls came, I was too giddy to pause as I adjusted the suitcase that already lay packed. It frustrated me to stop and call Andy, to be sure Connie Anderson would bring Emily home from ballet, to be sure there was something frozen or instant for dinner.

"Emily needs jazz shoes but I don't know where to buy them. Or what her size is. The school called about the Jog-A-Thon; do we want to volunteer? I think it's on a Thursday. It seems like the rose bushes in the back are dying and I tried to give them some fertilizer but they aren't looking any better. I couldn't find that low-fat butter you always buy, is it near the milk?"

It seemed that the moment I walked in the door Andy would smother me, try to tether me to him with these domestic chains.

One day I came home and he was still in his ugly mustard shirt and checked tie, floral oven mitts over his hands, pleased because he'd managed to slop together some sort of dinner for us. Driving up to the house, I'd had to circle the block, then to suppress the urge to never stop driving at all. Suddenly the rows of Volvo station wagons, the scattered tricycles and plastic slides felt not anonymous but aggressive, like they might reach out and strangle me if I didn't run away. Then to stand on the concrete porch and be hugged by Andy, oven mitts flapping against my back like seal flippers, was enough to make me want to cry. Instead of growing angry, asking me to give up my foolishness and come home, Andy had purchased a cookbook.

Back in the bedroom I paced, rummaged under the bed for the large suitcase, ripped dresses from hangers and scooped torn underwear out of drawers in a meaningless way. If only I could get out and get out now, I thought, I would never return to this room, or this bed of which the left side was mine, or those hideous lamps from Andy's mother's house. Andy sat on the edge of the bed and watched me fly across the room, wide-eyed.

"None of this has ever been me, and I'm only now discovering that. I need to figure myself out, and I can't do that here, not in this house, not taking care of you and Emily. I feel like I haven't been doing things, nothing at all until I took this job. And now I see places, meet people!"

Quietly Andy began to bite the very edge of his thumb, nibbling at the skin around his nail. I couldn't allow myself to slow down, to stop until the suitcase was full and zipped tight. "For how long? You'll come back, right?"

“Maybe,” I said, knowing that maybes had always been enough for Andy to live off of. “I’ll still come to dinner when I’m here, for Emily’s sake of course.” It was perhaps that which hurt Andy most of all, that daughter had taken the place of husband and lover in my heart.

We went to the dining room and ate, and Emily talked about the class hamster that had suddenly died. I thought it best to tell her that Mommy would be living in her own house now. If I hadn’t said anything perhaps she would not even have noticed, not for another year, or maybe two. But I told her and watched her face and maybe underestimated what a person so little could feel.

She grew quiet and played with a small pebble on the table. I had created her; Andy and I had somehow produced her pigtails and upturned nose and hazel eyes. For her, maybe I could have stayed, but there would have come a time when she would turn on me the way all daughters turned on their mothers, and it would have broken my heart more than anything.

Emily looked down for a minute then pushed her chair back from the table with such a vengeance that it clattered to the floor. She was already gone, disappearing into her room and slamming the door. Andy and I looked at each other with nothing to say. I was afraid I might cry, so I left without offering to help with the dishes.

I mailed the sappy card at the hotel’s front desk and slid into the elevator, suddenly starving. I wanted to crawl into my own room, my own bed, and sleep until noon, but I’d forgotten my things in Chris’s room. I didn’t have the key card either, so I knocked impatiently until he came to the door.

“Did you get your cough drops?” He turned to let me pass.

“No.”

His dark slacks and clean, white shirt lay neatly over a chair back, the morning sun catching the gold cord on the epaulets. He'd taken the time to hang his coat in the closet, but his hat was on the floor, laying half under the desk, the shiny black bill disappearing into the shadows. My own uniform was crumpled, cast aside making me feel suddenly old, pent up like the coiled muscles of a runner at the start of a race. Chris's cigarettes lay on the desk; I took one and slid out onto the sliver of balcony. For awhile I watched the cars whizzing by on the one dark ribbon of road traversing the endless green. Behind the hotel, I knew, the solemn shapes of Wichita rose into the air, but here there was nothing. I wondered briefly if the tornado might actually find us here, though everyone who knew anything at all about it seemed to think we were well out of harm's way. Standing in the cool, thin morning air, I liked the idea that I could stand on the edge of the balcony, raise my arms, and be lifted by a tangle of violent winds, carried away to a different place where no one knew my face.

I turned to look at Chris, who had turned on the television, and was sitting on the edge of the bed. He pushed a hand over his forehead and back through his cropped-close hair. I'd always found that funny; there was nothing to push back from his eyes, no out of place lock to rearrange, and still he raked his fingers over his head.

I watched him like this for awhile, quiet.

"You're too pretty to be a flight attendant." I was on my hands and knees, reaching under the seats for crumpled plastic cups and sticky napkins. I felt frumpy and self conscious as I struggled to my feet, trash bag in one hand. Chris was on the short side, but athletic and clearly confident. He stood with one arm draped across the muddy upholstery of a head rest. I'd flown with him once before, also the Los Angeles-Denver route, but we'd never spoken directly. The

crew liked him. He was chatty, lingering over his brief before the flight, playfully talking to the flight attendants as they cleaned afterwards. I had been wary, just observing, but now the others were in the galley, busy with the meal trays, and I was alone.

I didn't say anything, squeezed past him up that aisle. "Oh, come on. Linda, right? We've got an hour, are you going to get lunch?"

"Sure."

"Then eat with me."

I looked at him again. "I could be your mother Chris." It wasn't strictly true, but his attention made me uncomfortable, his scrutiny made me feel bare, found-out.

"With that little waist? You can't be anybody's mother." I smiled and didn't answer. If only he could see the translucent scars running across my miraculously thin belly, or the cellulite puckering the skin of my thighs. "Linda, I'm just a bored pilot with time to kill, looking for a little company."

We chose the greasy Chinese food, the sort that hugged the corner of every airport food court, the slimy chicken and yellowing vegetables oddly comforting.

"So what's your deal Linda?"

"My deal?"

"Sure. What's got you up in the air?"

"I don't know. I've done a lot of things. Desk jobs. I wanted a change."

"And this is the best job in the whole world right?"

"I guess."

"Don't worry, it gets better once they take you off reserve. It's nice to know where you're going and when you'll be there."

“No, I don’t even mind that. It’s not like I’ve got a whole lot at home for this job to interrupt.”

“Not married?”

“No.” I thought of the wedding band, the small engagement ring zipped into my toiletry pack, clinking against my toothbrush. I couldn’t bring myself to just leave them at home, in a drawer somewhere, nor I could bear putting them back on.

“Were you ever married? Kids?” I didn’t say anything. I imagined that this young pilot was sitting there feeling sorry for me, wondering why I was old and alone, feeling sure that there was some sadness to my story. “I’m sorry, I’m being nosy.”

“It’s OK. No and no.” This was the big lie, but I wanted, even if only for a day, to be somebody blank, to let the day’s story be the only one I carried with me.

“Oh.”

“I was almost married once. High school sweetheart sort of thing.” That, at least, was true.

“And it didn’t work out?”

“No, I was too young. I didn’t want stability. I guess I like movement. That’s why I like this.” I swept my hand out over the airport swirling around us.

“I actually married my college girlfriend. Big mistake.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep. She was crazy. We have a three-year-old son, lives with his mom.”

“You must miss him.”

“Sure, but I can’t help feeling like he’s not really mine. I bet he’s glad I’m not there.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“But it is. With little kids you leave for a day and they forget all about you.”

“That’s sad.”

“I actually have a theory. I think you have the right idea; humans are nomads at heart, we’re meant to keep moving. Humans cross paths and then their paths diverge again. We’re wired to deal with solitude, with people coming and going. I’m sure the earth worked a whole lot better with all of us just wandering around.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I’m sure I am. It’s a scientific breakthrough. It’ll win prizes.”

We laughed. We were just two people, anybodies, sitting with thousands of others, all of crossing paths for a single minute.

I finished my cigarette. I knew I should call Andy, let him put Emily on the phone so I could tell her happy birthday. But then I knew that Andy would take the phone back, want to talk to me, want to hear me talk. He would strain painfully hard to be supportive, ask where I’d flown, how the weather was, if the crew was nice.

I was sure poor Andy didn’t understand my spontaneity, he thought of the world in numbers and patterns and expectable, measured kindnesses. But he never let on that he was hurt or confused, never raised his voice or sulked. I decided I would stop in one of the overpriced stores in the airport and find Emily something really nice.

It had been decided that she was too young to stay the night with me in my apartment, it would only confuse her. I agreed with Andy only because I knew he was the more practical one, but I was disappointed. I wanted to have Emily to myself, if only for a night. Without that promise of company I left my apartment spare, let boxes of books serve as bedside tables and

plastic Tupperware as dishes. My evenings home I sat in the dark and quiet and watched the second-hand TV. Lately my mother had been calling. "Come home, we miss you! Your father isn't getting any younger you know."

I hadn't been back to Mississippi in eleven years, hadn't even spoken to my parents for three years after I'd left. My mother had never forgiven me for breaking off my engagement, had never quite forgiven me for growing up really. And my father didn't seem to have an opinion one way or another. But somehow, almost naturally, we'd started to exchange Christmas cards and phone calls every other month. I sent them my wedding invitation, knowing they'd never come to California, and Emily's birth announcement, knowing the same thing.

I told them when I moved, gave them my new phone number and address. The calls became more frequent. My mother wanted to know if it was a separation or a divorce. She felt strongly that I should have custody of Emily. She felt strongly that I shouldn't get divorced at all. My father never got on the phone. She began begging for me to visit. She described in detail the new flower bed, the color they'd painted the guest bedrooms, the new neighbors with the seven dogs. I pretended to look at my calendar and consider it. I stopped answering the phone.

"Lindy, honey, we're worried. It isn't right for you to be all alone like that. You shouldn't be flying around the country, you should be with your daughter. We want to meet her. We want to see her. Please come home."

The night before I had let myself be wooed, because no one in so long had tried in such a quiet way to make me like them. It made me want to be likeable. He did not grovel or sweetly compliment and so I liked him. I let myself be undressed and enjoyed in a dance that seemed

ancient and also tired, that made me feel that I was not really there at all. When Chris fell back on the bed exhausted and pleased, I naturally reached for the sheet to cover myself, self-conscious now because he could really see me, if he wanted.

We lay there and looked at the ceiling fan that clicked every four or five seconds like a sleepy cicada and I worried that he would fall asleep and leave me alone. “Was she pretty? The crazy ex-wife?”

Chris turned to look at me, eyelids heavy. “I don’t know. Let’s not talk about her. You’re pretty.” He tugged a strand of hair across the pillow, wrapped it around his finger lazily.

“I’m just curious. What did she look like?”

“Not like anything, really. Like water, like she could disappear. Like any girl.”

“Why did you marry her?”

“Because she was there and she wanted it and I used to like making people happy.”

“You don’t anymore?”

“Not just for the sake of pleasing. There’s something sad about that.” He sounded sad when he said it.

“And was she pregnant, when you got married?”

“No, nothing like that. Luke was later. I think we both had this idea that a baby would save everything, that it was the point. But it only made things worse. We both wanted that baby to love us best, and of course he couldn’t.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

He fell silent, breathed softly and languidly until I was sure he had fallen asleep. “Let’s not talk about silly stuff like this. Let’s enjoy being in a hotel room and sleeping in and maybe

each other in the morning.” He pinched my thigh under the sheets, so quick and cold it was almost imagined, and rolled in one swift movement onto his side and didn’t speak again.

For a long time I watched the crimson car tail lights seep through the slit of gauzy curtain, still visible behind the ugly splotched drapes.

Chris slid the glass door open and poked his head out onto the balcony. “You hungry? We can get breakfast. I just got the call, looks like the danger’s past, so we’ve got about an hour before check-in.”

He wanted room service in bed, but I needed to be out, breathing air, seeing other people. We donned fresh uniforms, dressing awkwardly, turning away in a moment of forced intimacy. Across the highway was a Denny’s, beyond that, nothing for miles, it seemed. We ordered heaping plates of meat and bread and eggs in different combinations. He described his worst-ever layover in Michigan, walking five blocks to a hotel in a foot of snow. I laughed and forgot for a little while about the card I’d mailed.

I told him about the toddler on the flight the night before who’d refused to wear pants, running half-naked up and down the aisle, shrieking as her mother chased after her. “My son does that. I don’t blame him. What’s so great about wearing clothes?” He showed me a picture he kept in his wallet. “Have you ever wanted kids?”

I thought carefully about what to say. I couldn’t think of anything so I told a story. “When I had just graduated college I was floundering a little bit. I was working in DC, volunteering really, and this guy kind of took me under his wing when I needed a friend. I got pregnant, but I didn’t keep it. I didn’t even think about it really, it didn’t even seem like mine to keep.”

“Would your parents have been angry? Are they, like, traditional I guess?”

“It wasn’t that. I bet he’d have married me if he knew, but I didn’t want to ask that of him. I just didn’t think I wanted it.”

“Well, as someone who has a child, you aren’t missing anything.”

I was missing Emily’s birthday. I was missing whatever else she did between school and bed and baths and ballet. She didn’t even exist to Chris, and so long as I was in the air she barely existed to me. Maybe Chris was right and I had ceased to exist for Emily. I started to cry into my sour orange juice.

“A joke, it was a joke Linda! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it,” Chris was saying. “Look, it’s all right, I’m sure you’ll have kids if you want them.”

Poor Emily, poor Andy. Not existing for anyone but each other.

I always liked the moments of gliding through the airport, gate numbers and fast food signs blurring past, the people parting to let our rolling black suitcases through. Then time seemed unimportant, like I could walk through one, long, endless airport forever. In a flash it was over, and everything spun into a blur of checklists and locks, plastic food trays and stacks of soda cans. Again and again, one million times, I locked metal trays into place, served stale pretzels in their shiny packets, leaned over slender aisles and asked, “Anything to drink?” and then, when we’d herded every last person off of the plane, there was the rhythmic scuttle up and down the aisles, wiping the sticky trays and straightening airline issued magazines. I did it all, waiting only for the short moments where I had no instructions, no commands, just minutes staring into clouds or star-speckled skies where my thoughts were just my own. I thought perhaps I would call my mother back, perhaps would tell her I would come for

Christmas. Or perhaps I would wait another year, would wait until Emily was old enough to come with me and protect me.

The takeoff was smooth, the sky cloudless. I sat strapped into my jumpseat, staring out the tiny window in the emergency exit. The airline had offered me a job based in Fresno, a lineholder job this time. I thought I might take it. In the air, it all looked the same anyway.

Rear Ended

“Andy, come home, Emily is missing.” It wasn’t unusual for Linda to call me in tears. Lately everything from a flat tire to a ripped blouse moved her to inconsolable grief.

“What do you mean?”

“Missing, Andy! I can’t find her anywhere!” Emily was three. I wondered what on Earth Linda was doing that she hadn’t noticed her toddle off.

“Where are you Andy?”

I glanced at the woman across the faux-granite table, looking politely away. “I’ll be right there, honey.”

I had told Linda the brakes on my car had been squeaking. I did not tell her that the hood was mostly crumpled, because being distracted enough at a stoplight to rear end a car was the sort of thing *she* would do, not me. I also didn’t tell her because the woman in front of me was rather attractive. I didn’t mean not to tell Linda, but when the moment came to tell her, I was suddenly overwhelmed with things I wanted to keep to myself.

I had never so much as scratched a car before, and had only one ticket, somewhat unearned in college. But that Monday more than one unexpected thing had happened. As I had stood in the kitchen washing out my cereal bowl, my sixty-year-old mother called to tell me that after thirty-eight lovely years she and my father were divorcing, and she was hoping I’d help them sell the house. I explained that I was not a real estate agent, at which she grew huffy. “I don’t expect you to be Andy, just to be a nice son and help us do whatever it is people do to sell houses these days, because your father isn’t being the least bit helpful.” I promised to help and tried to ask why they would possibly want to split up after so many years, but she pretended to hear the tea kettle and hung up.

Rattled, I forgot the lid to my travel coffee mug. I was distracted and fiddled with the radio instead of watching the potholes on Alameda. And when my car flew over a kink in the road and my coffee doused my thigh, I was frantically patting the burn and didn't slow when the light turned yellow. One quick jolt and crunch later I was staring, stunned, at the airbag that had blossomed before me, surrounding the fingers of my left hand, still gripping the steering wheel. My thigh had stopped throbbing. I pulled to the side of the road and ran to greet the curving and fluid woman who was not hurt and surprisingly friendly and who didn't mention the wet brown stain creeping down my pant leg.

It was a horrible place to have to pull over, but we wedged our cars between the twisting road and brown rock. Amber was young, not large but full in a limber way. She wore strands of beads and silver bangles that made her sound like a wind chime. Her car was big, and new looking, barely dented but for a long metal piece along the bumper that now hung precariously. She didn't seem concerned.

"Help me with this," she cheerfully demanded.

Between the two of us we pulled the metal piece free and she opened the trunk to fling it unceremoniously in. She had tool boxes, and stacks of books, and what looked like a pillow spread across the gray carpeting in the back of her car. She dusted her hands against her thighs. I offered to go back to the car for the insurance information.

"Don't worry, I'll take it in, get a quote, then I'll call you." We stood on the side of the road just looking at each other, the cars speeding by kicking dirt and leaves into the air. "So, can I have your phone number?"

I gave it to her and then she was gone.

“I’m afraid I have to go. My daughter is missing.”

“Oh my goodness! Of course, go. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, no. It’s good to see you, I mean, call if you have trouble with the insurance. Did I give you my number?” It was all in my hand, written on a crumpled receipt. I gave it to her. I stood for a moment uncertain, like I’d forgotten the next thing to do. Emily missing? It seemed impossible. I’d just seen her, destroying Lego buildings. I laid five dollars on the table, shrugged on my jacket, collected my briefcase. I thought if only I could move slowly and purposefully I would solve the puzzle, find my way through the maze to see Emily sitting peacefully in the living room.

“Wait! Let me drive you at least.”

“Oh, that’s right. I took the bus.” I remembered my car was in the shop because my parents were getting divorced and had spilled hot coffee on my leg and my daughter had gone missing while I was busy sharing unspilled coffee with the rear-end-ee who had a too-big car, barely scratched. It wasn’t fair.

By the time I drove my clunking car to the shop and walked the half mile to the office I was two hours late and sweating rivers down my back. At lunch I called my father.

“It wasn’t my idea, son.”

“What? You mean it was all Mom?”

“I mean, I discussed it with her and I tried to be pleasant enough about it because I like her to be happy, but no, it wasn’t my idea. And maybe it’s only one of those ideas she gets in her head. Maybe it’ll be temporary.”

“A divorce isn’t temporary Dad. Has she actually filed or is she just threatening?”

“Well, I don’t know. I’ve never been divorced before, I don’t know the steps. Right now she’s going on about selling the house so we can get our own apartments and do whatever we like. I don’t know how to sell a house either. And I don’t particularly want to, I like the house. Maybe *I’ll* buy it!”

“You already own it Dad.” He sounded fairly cheerful, considering. Something occurred to me, something unsettling about the ‘whatever we like’. “You don’t think she’s, well, seeing someone, do you Dad?”

“Oh, no. She talks about travelling, things like that. I think she just wants a change.”

“She could do that with you!”

“Yes, but I’m too old to argue.” It seemed to me that the older you got the more important it was to argue.

I went home and Linda was sitting sullenly on the couch, Emily plopped in front of her favorite movie of the week, loudly humming along with “Somewhere over the Rainbow”. I should have said then, as I walked in the door, that I’d rear ended a woman, that my car was in the shop. But Linda wanted to talk about a friend who was getting married, and she sounded like she might cry, so I said nothing and found myself with a secret. The secretiveness made Amber’s attractiveness seem more important. When after dinner Linda noticed my car was not in the driveway I said the thing about the brakes, which she accepted. It didn’t seem the time to tell the truth.

Linda was standing on the front porch in her red bathrobe, the one that was always unintentionally asymmetrical as it hung from her shoulders, crying and talking to a policeman.

“Ma’am, please tell me start to finish what happened, when you last saw Emily.” Garbled speech squawked from the radio at his shoulder. He held a small pad of paper, tapped a pen against his chin, his fingernails bitten down so that his fingers looked like fat, pink sausages.

“Oh, you’re here! Oh Andy, it’s awful.”

“It’ll be all right. Tell the officer what happened, Linda.” I wanted this all to be Linda’s fault and felt guilty for wanting that.

“It was 1:30PM exactly, I remember because Emily’s show had just ended, *Mr. Rogers*, that’s what started it.”

“Started what, ma’am?”

“She wanted to watch another show. But I told her she’d had enough television and she threw a fit. I put her in time out.” Here she broke into a fresh sob. I placed a hand on her shoulder, felt I should do more but wanted the end of the story.

“And where did you put Emily for time out, Mrs. Howard?”

“In her room, like I always do. I told her to sit still for five minutes and calm down. And I went into the kitchen. She was gone when I came back. I looked everywhere!” It wasn’t a big house. Really it was a tiny house, somewhat lopsided due to the ineffective 1970s concrete foundation. There were only a handful of closets, never enough, and not many places for a three-year-old to hide. It was impossible that little Emily had disappeared into thin air. I looked at my watch, nearly two o’clock, it hadn’t been long at all. Emily was shy, usually happiest playing quietly in her room. It was unlikely she’d think to go out by herself. I thought maybe I’d check the garden, Emily loved the plastic swing I’d hung from a tree last week.

“And were the doors locked?”

“Yes. I mean, I think so. I always lock them.”

“Are there any homes in the neighborhood you visit frequently?”

“No, she wouldn’t even have gone out on her own, I don’t think. We rarely walk. The road is so busy.” Two cars whizzed by and punctuated her wet hiccups.

“Well ma’am, we have officers across the neighborhood, luckily it’s only been twenty-five minutes.” He had more questions for both of us. Linda had found a small photograph, a portrait taken at Macy’s last Christmas, Emily leaned over a red-velvet-covered block, plastic pine branches hovering behind her head. I wanted to tell the officer how much Emily had grown since then. I had questions too. What had Linda done to make Emily want to leave us? What if I’d been home on this sleepy Sunday afternoon? That thought made my heart feel tight and heavy, and I stopped holding Linda’s hand.

When I met Linda people called her Lindy. It was a girlish nickname and she looked young for twenty-five, something about her frail features both innocent and intensely alluring. She was the new secretary, and as the office grew increasingly drunker on company wine, she became the hit of the Christmas party. The first-year analysts and the upper level executives vied for her attention, brought her cups of spiked eggnog and chocolate Santas wrapped in colorful foil. They pressed in around her like it was a college fraternity house and she grew quieter and quieter, shying away from every hand laid on her arm.

I was never good with parties, with allowing alcohol to sweep over my mind and dull my nervousness. Somehow, I found nervousness to be a far more comforting shield than the uncertainty of an induced freedom. I didn’t like loudly bantering with the other accountants who most days were more awkward than I was, thick eye glasses pushed tight against the thicket of their eyebrows, who had chosen, for some unknown reason, to unleash themselves for the annual

Christmas party. Watching Linda edge away from the men, I thought she looked beautiful, yes, but more than anything, sad. I offered her a ride home and she accepted, and I felt for the first time what it was to help someone who needed me, to want someone who wanted me back.

I loved her quietly for many weeks, happy to make slow laps past the receptionist's desk, bring her coffee, sit with her at lunch, until one day she announced that she wanted to go to dinner with me and so I was forced to do something or lose her forever. I was almost disappointed. So long as we could sit platonically across the lunch table, flirting quietly over our peanut butter sandwiches (mine) and tossed salads (hers), I could imagine us as anything, could imagine the moment I'd first kiss her or imagine what she might think of me and it could be perfect. From the moment I held her hand on the way to the car and opened the passenger door for her and kissed her softly goodnight under the porch light, it was all moving faster than any of us would ever be able to control. From that moment on I was afraid I would ruin things.

"I'm going to look around the house."

"I've already looked everywhere, Andy." I ignored her. Inside, Becky, a slow-witted, round teenager from up the street who sometimes watched Emily, was doing the same.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Howard, I know they'll find her." She was opening cupboards in the kitchen, silly places a child would never hide.

I walked slowly down the too-narrow hallway, lined on either side with family photos in their pine frames; our wedding photos, birthdays and Christmases, all seemed to scream something lost. Emily could be gone and never coming back and then Linda and I wouldn't have a daughter anymore. We would have each other, which had once been enough, but now would not be. I wanted to kick something, to hold something in my hands and tear it to pieces, but the

only thing in the hallway was an oversized doll with a hypnotic stare that Emily loved; I felt I couldn't touch it, just in case she came back for it. I turned to look out the open front door where Linda was still standing on the tiny, gray concrete stoop. The policeman had disappeared and she stood alone, motionless, surrounded by fuzzy sunlight.

I wasn't sure what inspired me to ask Amber to coffee. She called for the insurance information, and perhaps I felt too badly about banging into her bumper. Perhaps it was Linda, going on again about the college friend getting married and whose fiancé was beneath her, and the Sunday afternoon stretching indefinitely, silently, before me. Or perhaps it was my mother's insanity, prompting me to madness of my own.

I had made up my mind to leave my parents, adults that they were, to their own business, and I might have succeeded if my mother hadn't insisted on involving me.

"Andy, what if your father came to live with you for a little while?"

"With us? Why would he want to do that?"

"Well, it's my idea, not his, and I don't know if he'd even agree to it, so you'll have to convince him."

"Why would I want to convince Dad to come live here?"

"Well, I think he might end up lonely in an apartment all on his own."

"And why wouldn't you be lonely Mom?"

"I don't expect you to understand dear, but I've been yearning for a little freedom all my life. Your father, on the other hand, has had all the freedom he's ever wanted. But he's unaccustomed to caring for himself. Which is why he ought to go live with you."

"And what will you do with all this freedom that you can't do with Dad around?"

“I don’t know. Sleep until noon, go to Paris, get a cat, knit things, learn Chinese.”

I didn’t really want to fight with her. I was exhausted at the thought of cramming my father somewhere into our lopsided house, but also at the thought of he and my mother living in separate apartments, taking up eccentric hobbies. “All right, I’ll think about talking to Dad.”

“Oh, thank you Andy. You’re a very good son.” We said our goodbyes and almost as an afterthought she confided in me. “You know, you must never tell your father this but, I’m doing this simply because I love the man so darn much, and I’d liked to die with him, but not until I’ve had the chance to get out all my bitterness. It eats up all the love, and I’d like to die in love, not bitter, that’s all. Do you understand?”

I didn’t at all, which made me feel restless and somehow guilty, pacing the thin strip between our bed and the wall. When the phone rang again and it was Amber, I felt so horribly about everything that had happened that I insisted on buying her a cup of coffee to apologize. She was conveniently already installed in a coffee shop downtown, and while she probably wasn’t thrilled at the thought of seeing me again, I was persistent, and giddy at the thought of getting out of the house.

The first lie forced me to lie to Linda again and tell her I was going to meet a client. For good measure, I took my briefcase. I didn’t want to ask for Linda’s keys and watch her hunt through the house for them, so I took the bus. I also wanted the fresh air and to sit silently among strangers for a few minutes.

I bought Amber the frothy caramel concoction she requested and let her do most of the talking. She was getting a Masters in Anthropology and spoke passionately about things that had once belonged to people who were now dead. I told her I did accounting for a large consulting firm in town, and she pretended to find it interesting. I wondered what she thought of this

middle-aged man who did math for a living, carried a worn portrait of his toddler in his wallet, wore polo shirts in muted colors on the weekend and spilled coffee on them. She probably wondered why I had bothered to come, had not given her the information over the phone. I tried to remember why I had wanted this in the first place and realized I had probably never known at all. How could I know when it was not the sort of thing I did? I didn't lie, didn't do things other than those I was supposed to do. If I had told Linda I was off to have coffee with a twenty-seven-year-old student of Anthropology after rear-ending her car on my way to work, she wouldn't have believed any of it, she didn't believe me capable of spontaneity or unpredictability, and I believed her to be mostly right.

I sensed the lull in the conversation, watched Amber playing with the end of her braid absentmindedly, and started to write the insurance information on the back of my receipt. Then Linda called, and of course I had to go.

“She's here, I found her!” Becky's voice echoed down the hall as Linda and I raced through the rooms to the afterthought of a laundry room, tacked sloppily on to Emily's room. The policeman trailed behind, taking great care not to step on the stuffed duck and one-armed Barbie doll, Legos and crayons scattered across his path. Becky held Emily who was pale but smiling, smiling until her parents swooped in to hug and kiss and admonish her, which made her cry.

“She was in the clothes' dryer,” Becky kept saying, “right in there and somehow she shut the door. I thought it was a silly place to look but I opened the door and there she was, right in the clothes' dryer!” I thought that for once it was a lucky thing that Becky was dumb as a door nail, looking in all the places only a child would think of.

“I hided ‘cause I didn’t want a time out!” Emily was wailing. Her mother was kissing her pudgy cheeks and silky pigtails over and over, promising her it didn’t matter, that she’d never have another time out again so long as she kept on being our sweet little girl.

Suddenly Linda and I were holding each other, as well as Emily, and laughing at the ridiculousness of Emily in the dryer and Becky yammering about it behind us, and the three policeman who had come in during all the commotion. I laughed for the pleasure of not being childless, for the silliness of taking a woman to coffee only because I’d hit her car, which happened every day in every town, of hearing her talk about artifacts and keeping it from Linda, of taking the bus on a Sunday afternoon instead of making pancakes with my daughter and wife. All day, all week, I’d been out of sorts, worrying about the world sneaking up on me, waiting for this moment when I was reminded how much I was needed.

“I love you, Lindy,” I said, which made her smile. I realized we would make room for my father, one way or another, that it might even be nice to have the house a little fuller with the four of us for awhile. It seemed suddenly important to keep everyone I loved as near as possible. I worried again about my mother.

Then Emily reached for me and I took her from her mother. The policemen stomped back outside to call off the search, probably disgruntled by the too-soon-solved mystery.

“Who was that who dropped you off?” Linda asked.

“The client.”

“Oh. They’re taking an awful long time with your brakes, aren’t they?”

“I guess. He did say it was a busy week.” I wondered how many untruths a single lie could generate, if it was endless. I wanted to be done deceiving Linda but also wanted to always

have a single Sunday afternoon that she would never suspect me of, that would always be mine and unspoken.

“Do you want pancakes, Emmy?” I asked her. She stopped crying and clapped her hands. She liked to hold the egg beater, my hands pressed firmly over her tiny ones, rumbling slightly as it whirred to life. She also liked to fill the batter with food coloring and sprinkles and watch as Linda and I feigned disgust at the blue or green pancakes.

“Now? It’s almost dinner time Andy.”

“Come on Linda, pancakes for dinner! What do you say Munchkin?” I bounced Emily on my hip, making her giggle.

I could see Linda considering arguing, going to lie on the couch. But instead we all shooed the policemen away and she sat on the kitchen counter to watch me crack each egg with a precise tap to the edge of the bowl, the way she always had when we were still young and people still called her Lindy.

Headlong

Debra ought to have told Andy he couldn't invite his ex-wife. It was Debra's wedding, after all. Now when she looked at Linda across the table, she felt sweaty and queasy, which wasn't fair, because it was her special day. Linda still, twenty years later, looked very much like the wedding picture that still hung in the hall outside of Andy's bedroom. *Their bedroom now*, Debra thought, she should take down the photo, put up one of her own. In the days leading up to the wedding Debra had imagined that Linda would appear in the same form-fitting, white lace dress, and had felt feverish about the whole thing, but hadn't said a word to Andy.

Not only was Linda at the wedding, but now she was sitting right across the table from Debra for dinner, because Linda's daughter Emily was one of the few people she knew, and Emily was Andy's daughter too. Debra thought about the fact that she was probably too old to ever have children, that she'd never have anything more than inherited Emily, who was a child no longer. At least Andy was holding her hand tightly under the table cloth, and would go on holding it forever if she'd let him.

Debra's sister Karen had come, and the wrapping on the gift she'd brought looked expensive, shiny. She sat with her husband Max at another table, surrounded by their three children. They looked happy.

The summer Debra graduated from college she, for the first time, fell truly in love. She was generally critical and cynical, and didn't bother herself with boys in high school or college. Of course, no boy ever approached her either, but she didn't let that worry her, because she'd uncovered their flaws before they even knew her name. But when she graduated she was forced

to move back into her childhood home until she secured a job and so she found herself feeling strange and vulnerable.

The first thing Debra liked about Max was the fact that he volunteered at the public library, a place she'd always liked. She spent three weeks observing him from the typewriter as she wrote her cover letters. He was slender, with olive skin and dark hair that curled ever so slightly at the tops of his ears. He moved in a way that was both strong and fluid, that made Debra want to dance a waltz with him, let herself be drawn against his chest and swayed in his wiry arms. That first day Debra watched him help an old woman at the card catalog, lift a towering stack of brightly illustrated tales of lions and tigers and bears from a small girl, carry them over to the front desk and check them out one by one, the date stamp clicking solidly into each front cover; Debra could find nothing to dislike about him. He was always friendly when she came in and one day even asked what she was doing. They talked for ten minutes about the job market and eventually discovered they had gone to the same elementary school, at which point they laughed for a moment about Mrs. Bird, the old school librarian. The moment Debra opened herself up to the possibility of falling in love, she tumbled headlong into the idea of it and found herself completely consumed.

The problem was that she had little real knowledge of what to do with this new emotion. Her understanding of love came wholly from romance novels, movies, snippets of friendly gossip, and so she often fantasized about a number of highly unlikely scenarios where unusual circumstances drove her and Max together. She applied for nearly one hundred jobs simply for the excuse to go to the library and read through the newspapers and use the typewriter. Sometimes they spoke briefly, like when Debra needed to borrow a pen or when Max pushed the book cart past her chair.

Mostly nothing at all happened, but Debra was absolutely miserable with passion and what to do about it.

Andy had wanted to be involved in every step of the planning, but Debra was embarrassed to have anyone observing her at all. She couldn't stop herself from wanting a full-white dress, a cake of many tiers, pink flowers. But sitting in the waiting rooms of bridal salons and bakeries, she felt as if everyone was looking at her with curiosity, assuming it was a second or third marriage, or that she had a daughter or younger sister tucked into the dressing room. It wasn't as if she hadn't had relationships. She'd had more than half a dozen, three of which she, at least, had considered to be serious. The problem was always the men she chose, men who seemed to care very little for marriage or settling down. Always there would come a point when Debra would want something more, and the wanting would make her wretched until before she knew it, the boyfriend had grown uncomfortable and moved quietly on. She wasn't all that old, Debra knew, and there were other women like her, career types maybe, who had waited years to be married. But years of practicality and level-headedness had made the entire affair feel overly frivolous, ridiculous for a woman her age.

Andy was persistent and managed to see that Debra eventually had everything she liked best, even when there were simpler, less expensive options. They were paying for the wedding together, which made the whole thing seem even less like a fairytale. Andy's attentiveness both gladdened and annoyed Debra. Of course, it was the first year that Emily was away at college, which left Andy feeling unoccupied and changed everything, in a way.

For several years Emily had been always at the center of their lives, in one way or another. Debra and Andy were always constructing their time together based on whether or not

Emily would be home, or whether Emily had soccer practice, or would be in the school play that evening. There were weekend trips and holidays that had to be carefully negotiated with Linda, who more often than not got just what she wanted, for the sake of peace. Most obviously there was the never-ending ordeal of becoming Emily's friend, or at least someone Emily found not half bad.

At first Debra thought it might be an easy task. That first night that Andy brought her into his home for dinner Emily was quiet, subdued, easy going, it seemed. The more Debra looked around the house, saw the wedding photos, abandoned cocktail rings and red sandals, the more it seemed it was Linda who was the one to be reckoned with, the one who had never quite left. Emily didn't seem particularly attached or defensive of her mother, which was better, as she'd be less likely to be antagonistic towards the threatened replacement. But Debra began to worry that Emily's silence wasn't a good thing, and didn't have the slightest idea what to do about it. It didn't stop her from trying, from spending hours selecting what she hoped would be the perfect birthday gift and watching silly television shows and baking favorite dishes.

Emily was a bridesmaid, along with Karen and a college roommate Debra had managed to keep up with. Emily was now deep in conversation with her mother, picking at the chicken picatta. Debra couldn't tell if they were happy or not. She looked up at the small group she and Andy had assembled for this joyous occasion and felt totally invisible, as if the people laughing and talking around her were on a screen she watched. They were in Debra's parents' garden, and now that the sun had gone down the strands of Christmas lights threaded through the trees made the scene look fuzzy, out of focus. She was momentarily glad that her family was at another table, so that she didn't have to watch Karen kiss her husband and listen to her discuss the linen

napkins and pomegranate centerpieces with their mother. Karen made homes beautiful for a living, and Debra could never stop feeling that nothing she did would ever be as beautiful.

She was sure that Karen knew the place cards were homemade, pretty as Debra thought they were, as much as the cardstock had cost them. Debra had liked the idea of doing things herself, things she copied from glossy wedding magazines. She wanted to busy herself with this marker of a brand-new life, let it consume her. Now Debra worried that her lard work looked cheap or gaudy, that Karen was eyeing it all and thinking of a thousand things she would have done better.

Debra knew she ought not to let anything bother her that night. She thought perhaps when the music started and they went to dance she would feel better.

Karen had never shared much about her life, not even when she and Debra had been children. Karen was always quick to correct or advise her sister, but it wasn't often that Debra heard anything of substance about her sister's personal life. Even in the first year after her graduation when Debra was still in her parent's home and the entire family was in the same town, they met only on Sunday nights for dinner and pleasantries. In those early days Karen would spend the majority of her breath on job advice, always prefaced with, "Now Debbie, what *I* did...." So when Debra's mother announced one Sunday afternoon who the fifth table setting was for, Debra's surprise was only to be expected.

"Karen's bringing her new boyfriend to dinner, Max. Have you met any nice men here Debbie? Maybe Karen has a friend to suggest for you."

"Max who Mom?"

“I’m not sure. He was in her class in high school. Last name started with a B. Bauer, or something? Maybe you should call some old high school friends, go out!”

“Baum? Max Baum?”

“Yes, that’s it. I can’t wait to meet him.”

It seemed like an inevitable blow, like watching Karen accept the gymnastics trophy when Debra was too young to compete, or watching Karen unwrap the Barbie Dream House Debra had wanted. She didn’t say anything then, or at dinner when they came in and Max asked Debra how the job search was coming. Their mother went so far as to ask Max if he had any friends Debbie might like, to tell him she’d been a bit lonely since she’d been home.

In three weeks it would be Thanksgiving, and Debra had had the idea that she might fix dinner, the whole thing, turkey and stuffing and cranberry sauce, yams and pumpkin pie. She liked the idea of using the silver napkin rings and candle sticks, wedding gifts, to set a nice table for herself and Andy and Emily. But Linda wanted Emily this year, wanted her to fly North instead of South and spend her few days of reprieve from school with her mother. It bothered Debra horribly, though it shouldn’t have, Emily being Linda’s daughter after all. Karen had invited the pair to spend Thanksgiving with her family, but that too felt like a failure, like a blurry replica of dozens of holidays past. Her parents were old now and would have to be coaxed to go anywhere at all.

She and Andy rose to dance. The music was lively, people laughed and clapped with great abandon. The strands of lights continued into the open tent that housed the dance floor, casting a murky, seductive light onto the band, and eventually the floor filled with couples. Debra hadn’t been to a wedding since her sister’s, fifteen years earlier. She hated them, hated

going alone, hated the feeling that with each old friend who found herself attached, Debra herself grew more stale and unimportant. But this wedding was hers, and as much as Debra wanted to dislike things about the evening, she realized she was happy, happy in an uncomplicated way that had eluded her for years.

It would have been one thing if Max and Karen had dated briefly and gone their separate ways. Debra could have forgotten that Max ever existed, could have accepted the implicit rejection and moved on with her life. But it was quite another thing to be asked to be the Maid of Honor for their wedding, to be asked to wear a tangerine dress Karen should have known would do no favors for her sister's complexion. To ask all of this of Debra when she was still only twenty-four, and holding out hope that things might one day turn out in her favor, was too much.

Debra thought perhaps it would all pass and she might manage it, but she'd been wrong. Sharing a hotel room with her sister the night before the wedding, listening to her sigh and giggle with happiness as she brushed her hair, Debra had been struck with the overwhelming feeling that a great injustice had occurred, that the world was an injustice that could never be righted. The two sisters moved finally to their beds, turning down, with effort, the luxuriously thick hotel duvets.

"How could you, Karen?" she finally blurted out, just as Karen was reaching over to snap off the lamp.

"What?"

"How could you? How could you date him, marry him?"

"Who, Max?"

“Yes, Max. Of course Max!”

“You’re not making any sense Deb. What’s wrong?”

“Of course you haven’t noticed. You’ve never cared how I felt about anything. But you knew I *loved* him. That you just had to take from me. Anything else, fine. But I *love* him!” she could feel her voice rising, her throat burning and tightening, and knew she should stop, should let her sister have her happiness, on this of all nights. But she was too angry.

“Max?”

Debra shouted before she knew what she had done, and more importantly, she realized she had never shouted at her sister before. It made her cry, the fury and futility of it all. “Max. Max, Max, Max. It isn’t fair!”

Debra expected that Karen would yell back at her, would be enraged that her sister dared threaten her impending marriage. Instead, Karen rose slowly, walked a few steps and paused before settling on the soft stool before the vanity. She smiled, her gaze filled with pity and perhaps even triumph. “Debbie, you poor thing. You know, you never *said* a thing about Max. I’m sure he never had the slightest idea how you felt.” Of course it was true, Debra had never said anything. “It’s a crush, and I’m awfully sorry you feel this way. You *will* find someone Debbie.” She was still smiling and Debra became aware of the tears and mucus streaming down her face and collecting at her chin, the way she must look. Karen said nothing else and went into the bathroom, didn’t emerge until Debra had fallen asleep.

It struck Debra now, as she danced with her husband, that if she’d been selfish enough to claim her first love, her sister might not now be married, might not have her children. It wasn’t true, Karen would certainly have found someone, would certainly have made sure to have the

things she wanted, but she and Max looked happy, dancing at the edge of the room. Perhaps they were two people perfectly right for each other, and Debra had been lucky enough not to interfere. And perhaps Debra and Andy were equally right for each other, and only fate had kept Debra from becoming sidetracked. Debra wasn't sure she even believed in fate, in the idea that for every person there was only one other perfectly correct match. If such a thing did exist, it would have been only fair to make human beings better equipped to sort through the imperfect and perfect. Instead, it seemed far more likely that they were all floating through life, sometimes chancing to collide with things that made them very happy, other times missing them completely. She was aware that Linda was not dancing, still sitting and talking with Emily, laughing now and then, but Andy did not look in her direction. He looked only at Debra, who was suddenly filled with the familiar feeling of possibility, of falling headlong into it.

She decided she would cook Thanksgiving dinner, every dish she wanted, and use her wedding gifts and buy some nice wine. She would encourage Emily to come, she would invite her parents, she'd invite everyone. If no one came there would still be Andy. The song ended and their guests stopped to clap for the band. In the midst of it all Andy and Debra danced still, Debra pressed to his chest, the two of them swaying in circles without any rhythm.