

2002

The Blues in Three Parts: A Collection of Poetry, Short Stories, and a Screenplay

DeSha Tolar Kelly

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, jtolar1@lsu.edu

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THE BLUES IN THREE PARTS:
A COLLECTION OF POETRY, SHORT STORIES, AND A SCREENPLAY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

In

The Department of English

by
DeSha Tolar Kelly
B.A., Rhodes College, 1993
May 2002

The blues is life—with all its ups and downs intact.

Bill Dahl

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to the following people for their gracious help: Rick Blackwood, for his heroic efforts in helping to make this MFA happen; Andrei Codrescu, for being an inspirational advisor, mentor, and friend; Joseph Kronick, for his courageous pen; Lillie, for her cross-country assistance; Moira Crone, for sitting on the committee and for inviting the author to be a part of the writing community at LSU in the first place; her mother and stepfather for all their support and tolerance and the bravery to sit through her poetry readings; her husband, Gene Kelly, who has been known to jump out of bed in the middle of the night, waving his arms in excitement over something she has written; and all her loved ones, who supplied her with praise, constructive criticism, and endless material.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is entitled, "The Blues in Three Parts: A Collection of Poetry, Short Stories, and a Screenplay." The first part, a collection of poetry, contains themes of childhood and adolescence, love and loss, life struggles, writing, and death. The second part, a collection of short stories, contains five stories centered on similar themes. The third and final part, a screenplay entitled "Cow", contains elements of the first two parts as well. The epigraph, which contemplates the idea that the blues is not only music, but all the ups and downs of life, sets the stage for the central thread, blues, which presents itself as music, sadness, and happiness in some form in each of these pieces. All the writing in this thesis reflects tidbits of every day reality, but every piece in this collection is a work of fiction.

THE BLUES, PART I: POETRY

Lament to a Poet

I'd be trapped beneath
my words
piled like green firewood
you warned
your taupe linen singed at the lapel
if I ever followed in your craft
I'd be a student learning backward

dog's life you groaned
stabbed your Winston into the ashtray
I stole from a seedy hostel in Paris near La Gare du Nord
your poems have traveled to countries I can't spell
returned home
the South
humid and sleepy on cane back rockers

we were dreaming
drunk
full of the very stuff we write
I am still reeling from that afternoon's
apple wine my grandfather stored
a secret out by the boat
you had plans for me
you said
misfortune whistled through the rusty swingset
a familiar song

I can't stop chaining together these balmy afternoons
mustard greens with bacon fat
triple crosses white and yellow in the median
flanked by sago palms
you were brutal
honest

that evening at the book signing in Natchitoches
your fans
both of them
cupped the plate glass
presented praline offerings on waxed paper
to Maggie L., to Jake's daughter, to whomever,
you retreated to a stool at St. Bart's next door

where the bartender
his flayed skin tossed absently over his shoulder
served us rickies on the house
clammy from handshakes
you soaked your head
your metaphors

damned the heat and emptiness of fortune

I pass early threes and fours in the morning
trying to explain
myself
on paper traced with outlines of ceiling stains
one an Ultralight
another a rabbit crouching three-legged
you were right about this life
the way its head pops behind your shoulder
reading as you write

you were born an old poet
with beard and sideburns
spectacles
old Forester bottle instead of Similac
refuse to be pacified
you screamed at grown-ups and spat the rubber nipple
lines from the crib
you transcribed sad conversations
the mirror of descent
listed topics on cloud formation
insanity of moon and magnets
magic
I learned everything
from you

I overturn dinner tables
their Belgian lace spreads cabernet-stained
I daydream of fighting with blade and ink
wear out your letters
Poet, you are an angry reminder
that sweet refuge lies
in a synapse
in the brief summer shadow of Mt. Driskill
third shortest in the U.S.

I live tiny moments scared and delighted
sleep between anecdotes
my stories become poetry
nothing at all

My eleventh birthday, brisk Friday October thirteenth,
 When a Halloween costume was my greatest concern,
 Neighborhood chimneys belching burn
 Warmed over the crisp afternoon.
 While our gassy furnace worked overtime,
 Kitchen leaked spiced tea with nutmeg,
 Our Tennessee mountain home shifted its logging pines.
 Mother had called it settling, placed it on her worry list.
 Ruff, chained to a tetherball pole out back,
 Walked a bald round patch in the needle-covered lawn.
 Marooned on a little dirt island.
 He would disappear by Christmas.

I wore a white pinafore, grape juice stains,
 Twin ponytails and saddle oxfords with bobby socks,
 Finished my homework,
 Stubbed a chocolate box cake with candy-striped candles,
 unlit.
 Not a match in the house
 Within arms reach.

Annie, best friend from up the circle, guest of honor,
 Only guest--Brother Joe played soccer that day--
 Brought a Snoopy lunchbox and Woodstock barrettes
 Wrapped in the funny papers. In vibrato
 Sang, *Happy Birthday to you*
You live in a zoo
You look like a monkey
And you act like one, too.

Little girl giggles echoed
 Along cracked frieze
 Trickled down sweet pea vines in the wallpaper
 Trailed over baseboards, somersaulted
 Across hardwood,
 Pine, like their sister trees
 But warped with water-damage
 And worn from scuff paces fraught with worry.
 I worry, therefore I am
 Worried. Mother's daily mantra
 Even now and I will be
 Thirty-two.

Roar in the driveway
 Not a lion, not thunder,
 But the roar of internal combustion
 Sent us bouncing to the windows wondering,
 Was Mother home from wherever bearing gifts?
 No.

These visitors came in a blue
Primer van I'd never seen. Men jumped
Out with hunting guns
As tall as me.
Some emergency or the beginning
Of a crime.

I counted three, swift of foot.
They broke out back like a robbery in the making.
Ruff barked wild abandon, strained on the chain.
Annie grabbed my hand, started a whimper. We crept
Our follow on the birthday bandits,
Uninvited, stealing around in the flowerbed like
Ghost in the Graveyard. *Not it. Not it.*
Two strangers and one man
I knew, thought I would always know.
He'd left

Only weeks before. Tall in wrinkled
Madras button-down, weed of a man, whipped
By the elements. Tie-less. Without
The familiar black thick-framed Clark Kent spectacles,
His once-soft demeanor was a brow folded
Hard and furious.
My father

Banged fists on the French doors,
Pointed an angry digit at me
(As if Annie didn't know
She was only in the way)
Hollered *open it* so loud
The glass rattled between the panes
Like crystal snifters during a tremor.

*Never open the door
For anyone.*
Orders from Mother came strict and punishable
By switch from the backyard.
I was the birthday daughter, coward,
Refusing Daddy's
Orders, then pleas and hands
On his heart.
But when he dropped the gun,
Dropped to his knees,
Found a broken smile and called me *honey*
I opened

That door. One shove and he charged the house,
Called his backup
Who ran at his heels.
(If only Ruff could have broken the chain.)
Look at the Hispanic with the scar above his lip.
I thought it was a pencil mustache at first glance.
He stood guard, rattled his pocketed keys, never looked

At me. Where did Father
Find these men? The other, large and bald,
Ran the stairs with him and
I followed on tiptoe like the mouse
Sneaking from its hole to spy the cats.
It was beginning

To seem like a game.
They rolled the rugs, tied them with cord.
My father couldn't steal from his own house.
They emptied drawers and cabinets into cardboard boxes,
Pushed them tumbling down the stairs.
My father couldn't steal from his own house.
They tore down curtains and paintings,
Bedspreads and shoe racks.
My father couldn't.

Another roar in the driveway
Not a lion, not thunder,
But the roar of internal combustion
Sent us racing to the windows wondering,
Was Mother home from wherever bearing gifts?
Was Mother screaming outside?

I took the stairs.
Annie cowered in the kitchen
Behind plate glass confusion, beyond fear,
Watched the scene like an after school special,
Like there would be a moral.
Her wet eyes glued
To the birthday party,
She didn't know what.
Her parents were at home having dinner, playing
Bridge, watching Walter Cronkite.
I pushed her into the bathroom under the stairs,
Said, *Bolt the door, hide, and don't come out till I say.*
She said, *you hide, too.*
But, I wanted to hide the cake. Young girl I was,
Worried about a cake in that place.

It felt like a game
Until he pushed her into the china cabinet
And she tore the meat of his left eye
And set fire to the rugs
And someone broke a door
And cracked a chin
And fired a gun.
My father couldn't.

I said *please go* and *please stop*.
I didn't know.
There is this struggle.
There is the He, trying to leave.
There is the She, trying to keep him from leaving.

There is always this struggle.
A broken restraining order, disorder,
Cops on their way. Maybe

It was all about stuff.
I watched

The blue primer van and guns disappear,
Blue shiny cops and more guns appear.
Ruff ran naked
Circles around his pole in the prickly yard
And disappeared.
Whether he broke the chain and ran or was carried to the
pound
Is only conjecture,
For I grew up and ran away myself, left the blue
Dust ruffle and those struggles
For new ones. Sometimes
I leaf through them like dog-eared pages of an album.
I breathe. I store them away.

Where I Have Been

I have been with you to the city by the Bay
and as far as the gates of China Town
and I was talking much too loudly
before the brief joy of your crooked smile
when a spell cast itself over us where the dragons guard.
At Twin Peaks
where the bungalow of Jahudit was offered to us
and turned down
because the Chinese art of placement deemed dangerous
its resting in the split of creek that was road
for energy could run off the mountain and wash us away,
I noticed the gray sadness of your eyes
in moonlight that could turn front yards into outdoor
theatres
and your hands like falling stars gave up,
plummeted into pockets, and stayed, gesture-less.
When I watch you crumble in my living room
under the painting of a thunderstorm
I have trouble getting back
to my little worries, minute dailiness,
have trouble falling asleep most nights
knowing you are somewhere else forever.
Tonight there is no moon on the quiet lawn where calla
lilies bow
and this house is empty and misplaced as well.

If it's a Town, Gray is Monroe

I drive up to visit family,
try not to complain. I'm the only one
sober by ten o'clock.
Sundays, I walk over to Swayze Natatorium,
stand in the shallow end, watch mothers with hairbrushes
smack children's behinds.
Forsythe Park never changes. Teens screech
in souped-up cars, red-lipped,
gulp strawberry Icees melted with One Fifty-One
I try to remember why I'm here.

People I used to know
tore out fast, left for cities in cars
or died in cars. Some died on couches watching
television, others shooting Ketamine
or Ketaset. (I can never remember which.)
A few stayed who run up tabs at Three Bargemen
or crouch in matchbox houses facing the levee.
Even the Ouachita River is silted and bored.
A climbing tree in Grandmother's yard sags
under the paper mill's yawn, which is more like a belch,
pungent with peanuts. The lunch horn makes the sound
of gray, still makes me sleepy. It is Thanksgiving,
after all, sleepest of holidays.

Pap retells stories: My older cousin
drunk behind K&B on her bike. Nana sleepwalking
the neighborhood, legs clawed from camellias,
no alibi for whereabouts. Pap and Max hopping
a coal freight to New Orleans, pal around Al Hirt.
Butterbeans get passed. Decanters of Jack and lemonade
wash down sweet potato pie.

That night, Mother returns from the hospital
and everything is hush, the way they like it.
She's on her back when I bring a plate of turkey, dry,
cranberry sauce from a can. She sags in the mattress
till I leave on Sunday with a picture of her in bed
for the rest of her life.

I was a child here—fighting her in the front yard, waiting
to grow older than she, old enough to board a Greyhound,
leave this town.
Monroe is the color of busted radiators,
smoldering soybean fields, the gray that won't even bother
to break your heart.
Two days fold in like white sheets off the line.
I drive toward the interstate,
swerve to another town in my mind.

For Kimball Who Ended His Life in a Forest

In dark evergreen
Under thrush shadows and lynx shadows
Pine needles
Overgrowth and undergrowth
In mountains somewhere in Colorado
Far away from where we were kids
In a classroom
Will you go with me? Circle answer: yes maybe no
Or side by side in the boring shoot 'em up movie
where we shared our first kiss
But out here—look
In some car or truck or jeep
Or on a fallen tree beside
A creek under afternoon
Sun or evening
Sky dotted with pin lights
Or perfect day-blue morning crisp
When dew dabs leaves and legs
Of ants and grass blades
Sparkles on rocks
There is one sound
A crack through this canyon
Echoes across empty space
Bounces back into safety nets of trees
There, soothed
Muffled like a child's cry
Elk Charge Canyon Roar, Fawn Escape
Mountain Lion Claw and Tooth
Warrior in Tree Shadows, Cloud Shadows
Shadow of the Sun
Rolls away like thunder off a cliff
Like boulder into canyon
And then
Silence

Considering What I Am

I'm songs without words
Hummed at a kitchen sink piled with gilt bone china,
Shredded cucumber skin and Grape Nuts, soggy in a mug.

I'm those No. 2 pencils from last night's dream,
Rubber and unsharp,
Scattered in the study,
One under the bed, dog-chewed.
I'm that dog, bored and ever-scratching,
Chickering baby grand, never bored, just waiting to be
played.

I'm recipes for foie gras, au jus, fin de soir peacock,
Scratched on yellowed index, unattempted.
I'm meat and potatoes underwear,
Pothos ivy,
A losing fern, brittle and scattering the rug,
To-Do lists and errands in a town with 3 PM traffic,
Footed tub with dog-hair rings, mismatched grout,
Rotten pumpkin on the front stoop,
Never carved.

I'm the rent house with chipped azure shutters,
Always needing to be kept,
Sagging sky, dulled hard in the morning,
Sad in its animal skin,
Percolator with broken handle,
Silence brooding thickly on a page,
Dark fissure, back of the house,
Some room in the cranium with beds never made,
Unwashed clothes, unfinished business.

I am words, delicious and salty, or empty and too sweet,
Lingering a bit too long over cracks in a phone line,
Electric bill always days late.
I'm tongue and lips cracked dry from autumn's changes,
That time of year when grass dies to a burnt sienna
And neighbors start to complain.

I'm his Mackinaw on back of the cane chair,
Felt cap on the newel,
Ready at any moment
For departure,
His shoulders, hunched despondently over the Smith-Corona,
Waiting for words, work, an answer.
I'm his chewed cuticle, languid brow,
his tiptoe in this worn-out house,
I'm this man who won't ask,
Afraid I'll say no.

Thirteen Lines Before Bed

The house my grandfather built leans lonely here.
At the top of this hill girls were burned and died
For worshipping the moon and the stars, the sky.
April, the sun barrels in mornings, makes us
Weary, angry with ourselves—each other, too.
Grandpa told me, a killer is a tired man.
I never knew what he meant, but hop to bed
Early, catnap, keep the door locked in the spring.
If you listen closely to the dead of night
You'll hear singing *sotto voce*, midnight songs
Of praise—*La Luna, Il Dio*—or sorrow.
But keep your head to the pillow, get your sleep.
The sun will flame through the windows come morning.

The Embrace

imbracchiare

in arm

he gathering she

like armfuls of Venetian glass globes

or a bundle of cracked sparrow's eggs

some boy tried to save

not two slubberen half-pecks

not handshakes bumbling past the commuter line

ferocious pumping

sure-fire and cocksure

but two bodies solid and locked

grasping wrap-around shoulders

fingers tight in the pull

bending neck into neck

swan lust

nape sweat sweet on my tongue

your cock firm push on my navel

twenty-six days

nine hours and thirteen minutes

of waiting

and you arrived by way of Charles de Gaulle

you were

ten hours and fourteen minutes in the air

pasty from coffee

rubbery lasagna

boarding

and pre-boarding: "to get on before you get on?"

oh, I want to rip your pants off in this airport

A Time Capsule

I stumbled over a memory last night
you were there in your terry cloth robe
raking leaves from the driveway
shaking your head
angry with me
your daughter
a drunk
born of drunks
said
"Names are frozen curses."
kept raking and shaking

put that rake in the ground
with your robe
panties
cover it with earth
and they will know
who we were
just folks
struggling
sadly

All the Dead Pipers

"is that me who accepts betrayal
in the abstract as if it were insight?"
-from "Death" by Frank O'Hara

I see these Thursdays
through a corpse once mucous
membranes lie
hollow emptied dry
like seedless cores of Japanese pear apples
chilled hard on the ledge
of my *hasook* window
snow folded over Seoul
that winter '94

Did Pound ever shop
Namdaemun market nights
3 am
when families awoke
to buy socks and plastic *kimchi* buckets
under holiday lanterns?
Did he stroll *Song-dae-mun-gu*
Selecting young, lithe *mae-chun-bu*
to tickle at the video bong?

Or was he always poised
pencilling A Retrospect
a how-to
analysis on corpse-detail
showing the say
telling nothing
only that spleens are extraneous
can be removed along
with tonsils, appendix, adenoids?

corpse needs no vitals
could go on living his dead life
with nothing
he could
(it is a he--
I made out withered testicles resting
like hollow sparrow's eggs
between his legs)
rise from the shelf of dead men
waltz into the kitchen
pour high balls of embalmer, neat
sing: only the essential is beautiful

the corpse stares
with scooped brow
dollops of flesh and eyes in parfaits for later

his chest is a cavity
ribs cage nothing
filter of a man
a reading light that shows and never tells
promises a hawk is always
a hawk
land is never of promise or beauty
never of peace

Hugo is there
leaning on the Formica
hearing this song and never listening
fondles knobs of a "crap detector"
hey, "vines of my promise" worked for Frank

Hugo, father,
only thing that's certain
is skeletal
debris of epidermis falls away
rots into soil or essay
bone rhythm
a delicate melody tapped on a lard tin
with clavicle sticks
its easy wrist flicks
with pause and hammer
all the tempo we have

a master talks
truth and triviality
into taking the back door to the street
the dead lie hard boned
on dining room tables
flanked with silverware and pepper mills
napkin rings
proof that lessons are for schoolteachers
painting's for the canvas

a poet begins and ends with death
the living just lie

murder on my roof
crouches
over a new nest of hungry young
I try not to call him
the cat of death

dead birds and men
never finger quality
debate the value
of Bavarian cream iced coffees at Kaldi's
with pierced-lip boys

the dead smoke clove cigarettes

through parotid ducts
puffs escape optic cups
frame music and unpainted landscapes
language and line
breaks
cradle the essential

the dead damn the screens of stupid happy
a singer who courts bucolic drumsticks and mountains
tumbling into crystal seas
is the champagne flute of envy

poet, set no flowers at your desk
close drawers on the red recorder of your youth
a good pied piper
is a dead pied piper
his song knows no lyrics

ring necessity with garland and she becomes an over-painted
mistress
whose flesh someday will fall
to a brilliant bleach of bones
and dead
like Eliot's Yorkshire
she will lie unnamed

Excelsior

Today I am sitting again at the cracked oak table where I
corn flaked as a child.
I am between two windows, which mirror the neighbor's
windows.
If I lifted the wavy ancient glass and stuck out my arm, I
could caress
The forehead of their newborn in his crib.
He is crying, now.
Two adults in another room are screaming in Filipino. I
can hear them
Through many walls.
Sometimes this neighborhood feels like a dark spot on the
sun. Everywhere else—
Even the Lower Mission with its heavy fish stalls and
prostitutes and oily bars—
Is burning hot light, bright enough to tan your skin.
But, this place can be a crusty scab ready to dry up and
fall off the face.
Cold cinders whirl in the gutter, ash stains the sidewalk
black.
I live here
And I can walk up Paris Street past the concrete houses
with their broken picket fences,
Past the misplaced liquor store wedged between two homes,
the coin laundry
Where the Korean owner manages a wave, the hunched Mexican
woman
Balancing a box of torn vegetables on her head. This Babel
for me
With my singular English, with my pale skin, is home.
There is a mural freshly painted
on the side of the donut shop. It shows a Latino family
picnicking, some Chinese
children jumping rope, a pair of dogs that are not my Grace
and little Lily. I am like
A visitor here, only I know these sidewalk cracks—each is a
tiny flowerbed for clover
That can never be weeded and killed at the roots. It is
too strong
And sometimes it flowers into pretty and purple.
I can fall asleep at this scarred brown table and wake to
darkness in the windows.
The baby is sleeping. The neighbor's baby. It is not mine.
There is a glass of wine where my coffee cup sat.
There are two cut poppies, their stems seared with a
lighter
As the *Sunset Western Garden Book* preaches.
There is the white noise of the TV set in another room.
The little dog is snoring.
My husband is snoring under his newspaper. I remember the
map of his face,
His rough hands, every lovely glance at eighty-year old

wrinkled roses
Unfolding in the side garden under the light of a lonely
moon.
I sharpen my pencils and break the lead. I go on.

Pearl Tea

My grandmother and I lazed about many afternoons
In the chipped front porch swing sipping
From bone china demitasse.
The same shrike, dirty-white and too bold for any ordinary
bird,
Posted itself in the magnolia, the favored climbing tree,
Like a waiter or guardian angel.
Eavesdropped, I pretended.

We peeled Idaho potatoes (why not Louisiana potatoes, I
didn't know)
Or snapped beans into large hammered copper pots.
She was always faster—arthritis aside. I sat silent,
Concentrated on the pop of beans or rough brown
Peeling away to firm, virgin-white potato flesh
While she spun tales.

A man in California with hair white blonde
Courtied her on the sand under an azure umbrella
The color of her eyes and the sea. He later proposed
That they have a child together and name it Julia
Because it sounded like "jewel."

She waltzed to big band and Bing Crosby,
Couldn't take her eyes off the trumpeter.
Hair the color of ebony shoe polish and just as shiny.
He bought her a godfather—scotch and amaretto—and they
danced.
Made plans for Palm Springs. He pinned lavender to her
lapel.

Once, I almost asked for details,
If the blonde were somehow my grandfather,
If the trumpeter had died after one final trill, or even,
If the opposite were true—if ashes of the blonde
Were scattered from a Point Reyes pier,
If the trumpeter's hair is the same jet black
As my mother's.

I watched her long harpist fingers snap the beans,
Flick their strings, salted and wet against the copper rim,
Shiny like a mirror. I sang "Little Teapot," tapped
The kick-ball-change, stayed silent and wondered
Who I came from and wouldn't my mother come soon
To take me over the levee home?
My mother, Julia, dancing to big band,
Lover of white sandy beaches.

I Would Rather Be Remembered

The first President of Senegal died yesterday in Normandy.
He was a small man
who towered over Africa for decades.
On his deathbed he said,
I would rather be remembered as a poet
than as a politician.
I listened to *The Girl From Ipanema* on repeat all night
while hunched over a warm plate of fear.
I talked like I knew what I was saying. I danced and I
knew
You were watching. I slept forty minutes,
then caught the train to work.
I saw a thug in dungarees with a chained wallet get off
at 16th and Mission. I spent the night with him last autumn.
He had a circle of hair on his chest
and a red tattoo of a dragon.
He recited Baudelaire in perfect French.
Je ne peux pas me souvenir de son nom.
I rode the up escalator at Embarcadero Station
To my daily grind at the bank in the big black building.
(I would rather be remembered as a poet.)
A black man played a shiny dented trumpet at the turnstiles.
He played *The Girl From Ipanema* and shot a chill through my
chest.
When I nodded at him, he kissed me through the mouthpiece.
Once, I lived two years below a family of Korean
construction workers.
The youngest one played the recorder.
He stood at his window at dawn
And played Rossini's *William Tell Overture*.
He placed roses on my steps and a note that said,
I am love you.
I live in a tiny house on a narrow street
south of the Mission. I married
a man I met at a rock concert.
He is not a poet. He is half a musician.
He has a circle of hair on his chest and no tattoo.
He tells stories about juke joints in Mississippi
and laughs me. Mornings, he brings me
strong black coffee with chicory.
His red dog is called Grace.

Embarrassment

Janet, I called you Sue the fourth time we met,
Said I'd heard so much about you I felt like
We were friends. That night my friends deposited
Me, too drunk to stand, on my grandfather's stoop.
He carried me to bed, laughs about that night
In front of my boss at the Christmas party.
It's everywhere people are, feeling that comes
From creating a disaster of yourself
In front of anyone who matters to you.
Why do we care? How do we dissolve the face
Of shame and turn away from that which unmask
Us, leaving behind torment, the desire to
Relive the cursory moment, make it right?
I am asking you this question, Sue. Janet?

Revelchance

in Revelchance lived Ellen Stars
near a lake in dividing woods
where clocks sit silent
mantle decorations
and rains gently cover the crops

no paper's sent walking here
fires are for cooks
lifting scents of creamed squash, rutabagas
brown rice sweet with soy
and Death, her chair is propped at this table
weathered oak
set with dahlias, Queen Anne's lace
a fire engine poppy

red-brown men dive in the spring
flanked by spruce and naked children
one man's phallus dangles free
over pools he doesn't touch
he knows
he doesn't exist anywhere else

Ellen Stars paraded the gardens
with naked gypsy hips
the color of embers
she basketed turnips for table salad
brushed coy lashes
toward the tomato man
an invitation to wait
for the hollow of evening
to disappear
at her bedside

tomato man loved her well
between sun-kissed sheets
and golden thighs
wrapped in her walnut canopy
he held her into slumber
dreamt of radish girls and cucumber boys
waxed stiff and knobby
green

Ellen Stars awake
lay listening
to Julie of spinach
with Mario, pecan man
thunder
wrestling in the creek-creek
of a neighbor's divan

a gasp to the ceiling
Ellen removed her lover's grasp

padded to a bay window
opened on Revelchance blanketed
purple in the dawn

she heard 200 miles away in the city
a door slammed
on a quarrel apartment
cigar burns
scotch-in-the-face
an angry car screeched
in a traffic stew

its driver wasted
from city battles
jealous stereos and scoreboard nights
searched out lights
for an empty field
middles of night
where despair lifts naturally
like a cloud that breaks and rains
down a well
is scooped and heated
served with a ball of tea leaves at breakfast

Ellen Stars
robed and stole
from her room
lay darkly in turnips
perfect and un-evil
waited for this driver
clouded in the dust

welcome to Revelchance
she chanted and danced in his headlights
opened her arms to his city-mad scowl
now soft, now open in her hands

stranger, here suns never burn
grass or girl-cheeks
and woods never rot in the un-shade
armors fall where paved roads end
and life
is but a dream
among vegetables

Lines to H

if I could just wake up
I'd slap your face
and be done with it

guy behind me in a velvet busby
noodle thin
punched my belly
hard
five times
laughed
knocked the breath ou-

swollen pregnant in Amsterdam
stoned and pregnant
I searched the queues outside Derokery
for a phone that worked

you were there
across the sea in your living room
legs thrown over the red overstuffed chair
watching three disfigured musicians
shades tight
drawn middle of the day
you were there
scrambling eggs on my new turntable
lighting encyclopedia bonfires

you were as unreachable there
as here on earth

I tried the call and didn't have the guilders
knew you'd be hermiting
ringer off
refusing to turn down the white noise
long enough to hear what
I must say

trying to fight back
in sleep
is like running in neck-deep water
swimming through school glue in the Prinsengracht

slicing air thick as cheesecake
with rubber palms that couldn't hurt a fly
or noodle man
I gave up
benched myself outside the Anne Frankhuis
and cried
frustrated and whale-large

Moving

At home
Is where I feel at home.
Not in the glass houses of Mother
Or Grandmother,
Nor in the cabins of my fathers,
But here among the boxes, newspaper,
Packaging tape
Stuck end on end,
Glued to itself.

I am an expert
At wrapping sconces,
Lifting with the legs,
Backing Penske thirty-foots
Into compact car spaces,
Or maneuvering the drive-through
Without taking the roof off.
Don't need to peruse
Rental agreements,
Loading instructions.
I know the hand truck,
The mattress Visqueen,
Liquor store boxes,
Braided twine. I know
The distance between
Your state and mine.
I know how many minutes
It takes to say goodbye,
How many years it takes to forget.

Today, on my fortieth move,
I am going back
To someplace
I have been before
And will leave again.
Moving is my habit,
Is living.

On Seeing Footwear in the Road on 1-55

new boot in the highway
right foot ankle-high
once-yellow laces
burnt brown from exhaust
soaks asphalt
bakes in a 350 degree sun
heel upturned on the yellow line

barely tread-worn from campus treks perhaps
gloss black scuffed on the toe
long lost
its mate overlooked by the coroner
still wraps the stiff left
white-socked in drawer N7R32-V

that blue van tore screaming up 55
took her broadside in the Chevette at 92 mph
rammed her in the median
took the door off

look at her behind the wheel
fingernails stabbing the dash
head snapped sidelong
just a glance
opaque
an open-eyed nap
like Rodin's *La Pensee* bored pale on a rock
dead or waiting for something

four boys with a grocery list of games
master plans for a free fuck maybe
tailgated on PCP
at a rest area with all-night security and no restrooms

there she was
fresh from a Winnsboro weekend plump
with armfuls of her long-distance boyfriend
Italian take-out and Chianti in styrofoam back at the
Travelodge
(see that cork in the glovebox?)

crotch-sore from the tryst
she'd see him next weekend
but stopped at the phone booth
stood twisting her hair
coy in broad daylight
can still smell you on my clothes

have to admire
severe perseverance
one shot out the tires
and she
heavy on the pedal at 92
raced on rims
was cold when they cut the belt loose
dragged her ditchward

you might have passed LA 402 XIJ
blue Starcraft fishtailed on the shoulder
door rolled open to a party on wheels

This Settling House

We wore each other out
Like tires on a truck braving the Al-Can.
One day you said: *that's it.*
Eighteen hours later you drove away
In a burned rubber cloud, tread threadbare.
I watched, folded in the drapes.

Two of your socks were forgotten in the dryer.
Razor stubble dotted the sink.
I've been meaning to ask,
Why is next Friday circled red on the calendar?
What's in the Tupperware, fridge second shelf?

The mahogany bureau we stumbled on in Salem for song
Leans pitiful by the front door
As if you might walk back in, toss it your hat,
We were meant for something.
You'd click your old key in the lock, ready to explain—
Clutch cable snapped, ice storm.
I forgot my rod and reel.

I take coffee in the garden where the rotted limb finally
fell,
Watch squirrels invade the finch feeder. I can't
Keep them out.
Make mental notes to sweep gutters,
Fix the roof hole, plant Narcissus bulbs in winter.
You were here.

I'm not alone. Every creak in this settling house
Is a nagging aunt calling out:
Here if you need me. Here if you don't.
I wake in the night, sweat beneath the sheets,
Wrap and unwrap. Pad the trail
From here to the fridge, from here to the toilet, the bay
window, your chair
I decided to throw out so I can sleep.
My dreams are littered with winged numbers wild
Flapping in the trees, an underwater wedding
Where no one can breathe.

Tomorrow I will cross the street, duffel in hand,
Practice leaving this house and its peeling paint.
Some day there will be an empty lot with two camellias
Where this house once stood.
I will forget you.

Teach the Children

They stole along the river
That night in rain.
My father and his wife,
Weighted by plunder,
Lost their way
When the moon sank
Between cypress knees
And disappeared.

Next morning, police called,
Walked the front porch in pairs,
Singled me out for questioning—
The oldest boy.
When they left with the dogs,

I wondered,
(Pocketed my pistol,
Nursed a thermos of Old Forrester),
How many nights did we wait
To be found out by the law?
For two weeks, I'd sat
Under the bridge counting
Suitcases and twenties,
Weighing Ms. K's silver candlesticks,
Inspecting Mr. R's saddle,
My family's loot.

Seven years passed—
Almost a decade to forget
That past,
To wonder,
What's a lawless man do
For his family?

I work in the A&P—I bag,
Wait for the bus with my token
Each night, each morning,
Teach my children
About the tempo of a gavel
When it sounds in a courtroom,
About debt and dues,
The joy of one red cent.

On Thinking of Sleep

I'm tired
of wasted mistakes
haunted battles
optical pessimism
is a rainy field
where I told you
I hate bagging groceries

the minor league reason we fight
is the toe I broke
on the broken dishwasher
stumbling drunk after a series
of rotten beers
on your mother's veranda

it could be the perfect spot
with ideal light
to read your future
receive your calls
"I got fired today."

but that veranda
it's not ideal
your mother is there

perhaps in the perfect place
nothing is just a job
clocks stop on time
so writers can write
and everyday it rains on Pirate's Alley
or the Champs Elysee
where lovers do what lovers do

in the perfect winters of Civita di Bagneregio
no one ever dies
they laugh,
"La dolce far niente!"
in the sweetness of doing nothing
everyone still gets fed
and they sleep a lot

tonight
the lights of somebody's window next door
flicker
translate a dream
into darkness
a childhood of mind
where band-aids cover small pain
a knee rubbed scarcely
almost gently
by the pavement
of Sherrouse Avenue

where I was a training-wheeled tomboy
proud of scars

the kitchen timer in my head
is a reminder
to go to sleep
and sleeping I can forget
why images of ideal
are impassible canyons
loaded with backwater
bridged with a traffic jam backed up to Hammond

Just Fine

How are you? he said
Then glanced away
At a Wheaton Terrier chasing a 1972 Nova with original
 paint
And a slender, strawberry blonde fourteen-year old in her
 plaid school uniform riding a pink, ten-speed Raleigh
And a split-tail swallow with a dislocated shoulder doing
 back flips on the neutral ground
And something else that was not me that was not standing in
 front of him
About to speak

Fine, I said
Though I knew he was not listening
Work is not fine
School is not fine
I drank the Cherryblock and the '98 Opus and the Cakebread
 you got for your retirement,
Used your new skill saw to make another window in the
 bathroom
Flushed your autographed nude photo of Paulina
Crapped in your sock drawer, puked on your pillow
Parked your Porsche on a hill without emergency brake
Read all your mail, then answered it
Your mother called and I told her you were gay
Your father called and I told him you bought Kmart stock
The bank called
The kids got married to each other and moved to Vegas with
 their art teacher
The house burned down
The bank called again
I am dying of some strange Mongolian hunting disease
And have no insurance

When he turned to look me in the eye
I said, And how are you?
Oh, fine, he said, just fine
And you?

House For Sale

This is the powder-blue house
The Victorian
Where Old Puente,
Dorothea, woman,
Lived with seven boarders
All elderly
With hands like tree branches
And faces like weathered canvas
Quilted with memories
Too dense to unravel by the fire
Where knitting took on new meaning
Where a pair of socks, a toboggan is all
One had
In the World

Except soccer ball tomatoes
And sunburst squash
Rutabagas like fists bursting from the soil
In the side yard garden under a window
Sunlight baked the soil into a golden brown casserole
Puente the gardener
Puente the grandmother
Cook, caretaker, lady of the house

Baked polenta bread studded with garlic
Harvest muffins
And roast stuffed with pearl onions and sage
To fill their bellies and soothe their fears
For dessert, pumpkin dumplings with nutmeg, and hand-
whipped cream
Laced with Dalmane
A poison

They passed one by one
Easy at their well-worn places at the table
Heads plopped into plates
Hands unfolded and dropped from laps
Puente grabbed a shovel
To do a little gardening in the side yard
Buried those bodies three deep
In the rich soil

She cashed their social security checks
And lived a queen's life for a while
On crème brulee and diamonds and fine lace doilies imported
from Belgium
She bought beveled mirrors and Persian rugs, Morano
chandeliers from Venice
Until one wrong day it all came to a head
When a girl came looking for a tenant, her grandfather
Who wasn't anything more
Than fertilizer

Now, Puente crafts earrings and potholders
In Chowchilla Women's State Pen
Weaves stories to inmates about gardening and grandchildren
Passes recipes to the guards, winks hopefully
And dreams of cucumbers the size of your arm

Her Victorian leans with a sign in front
Tomatoes are gone with squash, roots and bodies
Soil in the side yard is lumpy
Well fertilized
And ready for planting
Ready for you to move inside
Ready for you to make a move
Won't you stop by and have a look?

May Lightning Strike the Rabbit Ears
Or
Curse on TV

I hate
you idiot boob
you tube box
thief of time
imagination

simulated wood grain
watched sleek in black
color-safe bleached sunlight white
sets for all races
(do they make yellow televisions?)
coming soon
NEW IMPROVED!

noise
a show that's just talking
bombarding in bars
no secret's here
they even name it TRIVIA

mindless dumptruck of snow
horizontal hold
they eat to you
drink to you
worship and bathe to you
my grandmother sleeps to you
bless her TV-watching granny heart
she loves that Barney Miller

black hole
black eye
negative *chi* sucking parlor energy
ORDER NOW!

glow-in-the-dark remote accompanies me to toilet
kitchen
I close you in antique armoire
but you loom on the wall mount
invading neighborhood get-togethers
sucking

ubiquitous cube
you are coupled with sauce of roasted VCR
laser disc flambé
satellite side salads bagged ready to eat
low-fat partners in crime with Richard Simmons
aiding and abetting
forgiving themselves
JUST THREE EASY PAYMENTS!

your knobs turn school children to slit throats of homework
box ears of Dominoes and finger-painting
burn nursery rhymes
childhoods

your flat scoreboards steal husbands
fathers
fat and couched
lazy surfing away from wives
mothers engrossed in sick affairs
with Jerry, Sally, Days and Oprah
(you know she was born "Orpah?")
Emeril sautes two-dimensional stovetops
my mother's pots are cold

shoot away, Elvis
drop crash from tall buildings, Letterman
or steamroll smash flat
give us a break—
not "Gimme. . ."
not commercial
deliver me god of the uplink
Discovery this! you channel
Go die a documentary death

The Gathering

We humans separate,
Deliberate,
Wait outside on the stoop
Under the gaslight's flicker
Until invited back in to consort
With the crowd,
To toast, exchange
Glances. A stray ant wanders
Your sleeve,

Aspires to relocate the state.
Why does it not strike out alone
And stay?
Mound a single hill
Between roots of the strangler fig
And capture crumbs solo?
It would never have to share, never
Fight another ant.
Only, it would wait for the beetle to die,
For the cockroach to spill his spoil
On the edge of a leaf.

Would not the independent ant
Amass few troubles?
Self-sustain?
Does the solitary female need anything
But the sperm of a solitary male?

Before long, she divides,
Multiplies into
We who hop into our coats,
Put on our cars,
And gather
Like a troubling of goldfish
Hovering expectantly behind glass.

Words to Ted Berrigan

Dear Berrigan, where are you? It is 4:02 a.m.
Some Tuesday in Baton Rouge
Where nothing is open except
Your mouth, words
Popping it out.
I don't know Margie
But I know the Tiny Man. The one in back
Of your head.
I too weep too much
My tiny man takes care of the rhyming
Makes coffee, installs things

Dear Ted, you and I could
Get together with Frank
12 something
Lunch at MOMA drink pepsis
Fuck lazily until he has to go back to work
Like the reds and yellows graying busily behind Levelors

It's early. You are a large leprechaun
Hiding treasures in my bed
Not heavy and boring. Just you are dead.
And Guillaume, Frank and Gus.
Not half-asleep not dreaming
Anymore
You had a great beard
Never gave it up
Like Dick. Dead Dick.
Dead us.

You like to beat people up
Fire guns in your poems
I like to show them up. But I got too much
Sleep last night
In a variety of real beds
Ted, your words are better banjos
Let reds and yellows make their way
Blindly to the office
For that much money beat each other up

Sometimes even I don't know what I'm talking about
I sit corrected smoke
Drink café au lait heavy with chicory
Practice writing down what is not
Drawing a line through it all
And it is
I don't say rainbow don't say cancer or Smothers Brothers
I steal from you because

I have nothing to show
A head full of gravy
Today is the birthday of St. Jude

Patron saint of hopeless causes
And the anniversary of Prohibition
Life is a coincidence
I just need to bathe and get on with it

What I Did Today

Cried myself awake
Went to work in a skyscraper in the financial district
Called New York
To tell them it was a bad dream
Impossible
What happens only when we aren't paying attention
They hung up after "it was"

Ambled down to the Cala
To avoid TV, electronic forwards, my neighbor's music
Ignored the newsstand, bought a loaf of Wonder
Looked directly at the sun
Burned microscopic holes in my corneas

Walked the hounds in McLaren Park
Which felt important and meaningless
At the same time
Like baking nine-grain bread on a lazy afternoon
When your house is on fire

Put my son on my knee
Told him the story of a brave man in a stars and stripes
bandana
Who climbed under a mountain
To save a little girl
And when he found she was just a rag doll
Climbed underneath again and again
Just in case

Took my family in my arms
Told them I am capable of loving them forever and will
Knocked the wall with a broomstick
To say, you too, guy-next-door with the loud stereo

THE BLUES, PART II: SHORT STORIES

A Song We Could Dance To

I had trouble getting out of bed most days. But, it was my birthday and I wanted to get up early, wash my hair, and smooth my corns with the pumice stone. Gerald was taking me to lunch at Tacqueria Willie's. It had been surprisingly hot and crusty for February in Jasper County and I knew I'd want to change out of my orange rubber overalls into sandals and a sundress before Gerald picked me up. Mr. McWashington had agreed to a forty-three minute lunch break instead of my usual thirty-six minutes. The sign in the J.O.W. Miles break room reads: TIME WAISTED IS CORN WAISTED. Almost all the signs at the cannery have misspelled words in them. There's one in the women's restroom that says: DID YOU REMBER TO WASH? Corn wasting, by the way, is a serious offense at J.O.W. Miles. "Every kernel counts," Mr. McWashington says, though he is probably thinking "colonel."

It takes eight minutes to get to the J.O.W. Miles corn cannery from my apartment. And Mr. McWashington will not tolerate tardiness. I have to be at work at 7:30. If I hit the snooze button at 7:00, five more minutes of shuteye, no hair washing. Snooze at 7:10: no shower. 7:15: cold breakfast in the car, no shower, no hair washing. 7:20: no washed hair, no shower, no breakfast and clothed for work in the digs I've slept in. I can calculate it in my sleep. I

know when that buzzer is going to sound. And it's always the buzzer. Once, I tried tuning the clock radio to an easy listening station and awoke at 8:43, dizzy with sleep, to Sinatra cooing, *Don't you know you fool, you never can win.* I had to go back to the wah-wah of the buzzer.

So, I set the alarm for 6:50. But I didn't get a chance to see if I would really roll out of bed at the buzz and resist calculating higher math to configure time loss in my sleep. Instead, an even more annoying sound awoke me—the telephone.

"Delores," a meek voice whined over the line, "It's your mother."

That usually means one of two things, or a combination of both things: (1) She is calling to complain about something, or (2) She needs a favor. Today was a combo.

"Delores, are you there?"

"Mom," I said. "It's 6:46."

"Delores, he did it again."

"Who did *what* again?"

"Horace."

"*Whore-Ass?*" My pet name for her ex-boyfriend drove her nuts. Then again, she was already nuts. "You said you sent him packing, Mom. After the Final Big Fight."

The Final Big Fight happened when she overheard him making a 1-900 phone call in her bedroom during a dinner party. She knew he frequented the 1-900 services, but never from her house, where phone bills were Important Business.

"The phone is your lifeline to the rest of the world," she always said. "Not something to beat off to," she told Horace during the Final Big Fight. Besides, Pat and Jillian were waiting on them to start the mayonnaise and pineapple salad course.

"I know," she whined. "I'm a weak person. I couldn't help myself. He brought Gerber Daisies. Just like the ones at your grandfather's funeral. I was just in from the phone company. The bill was late. I thought they were going to turn off the phone. What if they had turned off the phone? How would I have called you?"

I really had to practice restraint on that one.

"Mom, what did he do after he gave you the flowers?"

"We talked."

6:48. This was taking too long.

"And then, Mom?"

"Well, we made whoopie." One of Mom's favorite words.

"How was it?"

"Oh, fine."

6:49.

"Mom, what did you want to tell me?"

"Horace urinated on me," she said. And she used the word "urinated," which was really highbrow and clinical for my mother. She always said "take a leak" or "piss." She's even been known to say "drain the radiator."

"This happened before?" I asked.

"Just one other time a few months ago at his apartment after we watched a movie where the male actor peed on the female actor." And I thought, actor?

The alarm started to go off. I held the receiver up to the little speakers on the clock radio.

"Delores? FIRE ALARM?"

"Corn to can, Mom. Gotta go."

"Will you come over tonight, Delores?"

"Do you pee on Horace?"

"Please," She said. "I need you."

I was late for work. I showered and painted my fingernails cheap slut pink, which is against J.O.W. Miles company policy. Even though we always wear gloves on the line, we have to have sterile hands. No polish. "Chemicals can affect the delicate taste of canned corn," Mr. McWashington reminds us. And although I hate Mr. McWashington and have thought about how nice it would be if he died, I wonder if a replacement foreman would be any less of a stickler and, to be honest, I enjoy pondering the scientific complications involved in canning delicious golden nuggets of corn.

It was 89 degrees according to Miss Pensky's Mother Goose thermometer on the carport wall at my complex. I wore rubber gloves to hide my nails. I folded my sundress neatly on top of my Dr. Scholl's sandals and was on the road at 7:33. I would be 11 minutes late for work, I calculated, but Mr. McWashington knew it was my birthday and might

overlook it. Then again, he might not. Consequently, Gerald might feel sorry for me and ask me to dinner. Mom would have to sit in front of "Dance USA" alone. I calculated this in the car while steering with my knees and struggled to separate the plastic from the Velveeta slices that would have to be breakfast. The rubber gloves were clammy.

Gerald was a maintenance man for Brothers Apartments. Our first encounter took place in front of my stove. It was just the pilot light. I knew nothing about appliances, so I didn't know a pilot light from a pilot's license. He just came in, squatted in front of the stove, lifted the top, said, "Yep," lit the burner, and asked me for a pen.

"What you gonna do with a pen?" I asked stupidly.

"I gotta fill out your maintenance report and I gotta have you sign it," he said matter-of-factly.

I watched him fill out the report. He had the most beautiful handwriting and the most beautiful hands I'd ever seen. A maintenance man with beautiful hands. I loved him from the minute he crossed the first "t."

I phoned in numerous other random repair orders within the next two weeks, hoping it would be Gerald who came to my rescue. I phoned in a hall light bulb replacement, moth infestation, a buzzing refrigerator, and a leaky faucet. Unfortunately, the leaky faucet was the only fabrication and the only call Gerald answered. This scrawny little guy

named Willie who spat tobacco and kept missing the sink answered all the other calls. By the time the buzzing fridge was fixed, my counter tops were caramel colored.

When Gerald came to fix the faucet, he wore a red baseball cap turned around backward and was much more talkative.

"Hey," he said, "What happened to your counter tops?"

"There's a maintenance man named Willie," I said. "He chews tobacco and spits without aim. I kept asking him to use this, but I'm not sure he speaks English." I held up an old coffee can full of cigarette butts. Gerald wrinkled his nose. "I kept hoping he would be you one of these days."

I smiled and Gerald took off his tool belt and placed it on the counter. I could've wrapped that belt twice around my own waist. Gerald was like a big bear. He paused as if he might take something else off. He looked at me.

"Yep," he said. "Willie."

He turned to the faucet, which I had turned on slightly to give the appearance of leakiness. He turned it off with a single twist and we both stood there in silence and watched it not leak. The refrigerator was still making noise, but it was more like a steady hum instead of a buzz. It was kind of soothing, like the bass line of a song, and I became aware that I had begun to hum softly to myself and sway back and forth to the make-believe music. Gerald looked me in the eyes. He had big green eyes the color of the Gulf of Mexico. Then, his left eyelid squinted shut for

a second and popped wide open again. It was a little twitch, like a nervous thing, but more possibly a wink.

He opened his mouth and smiled and let it hang open like that before he said, "Yep. You got a pen?"

"It wasn't really leaking," I said and handed him a pen.

"Nope," he said and started writing.

"What are you writing on that form?" I said.

"Leaky faucet," he said. "Would you like to go out sometime?"

We went to The Pizza Shack that Friday and shared a pitcher. Gerald played Buddy Holly on the jukebox and another couple got up and danced. We watched them holding each other and swaying as if they were the only people in the room. I wished that Gerald would ask me to dance, but instead he asked me about my parents.

"My dad works construction someplace in Idaho. I haven't seen him since I was two. My mom hates him. Calls him The Escape Artist."

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. I did know. "I guess because he left." It was a circle. He hated her, so he left. She hated him because he left. I didn't want to talk about it. "My mom drinks a lot, too," I added and was sorry I had.

"Oh," he said.

Gerald held my hand under the table. He rubbed my fingers with his big soft hands and I never wanted to leave the Pizza Shack.

I was twelve minutes late for work on my birthday and Mr. McWashington did the unthinkable. He demanded I remove the rubber gloves, saw my cheap slut nails, which were ruined anyway from the heat and humidity in those gloves, and made me work through lunch. I called Gerald during my bathroom break and told him to forget it. I thought I might cry, but he said we could go eat supper after I got off. That gave me something to look forward to all day. I changed outfits in my head six times before the end of the day was announced by the factory horn. It's a nasty blast, but music to your ears.

That night, Gerald and I went to The Horseshoe Diner and ate fried catfish and hush puppies. We sat up high in the thick plastic booths under the neon beer signs and this time we talked about his parents. His dad was a bartender in Columbus, he said. I asked him where, but he said he couldn't remember the name of the place. They rarely talked. His mom was dead.

"How'd she die?" I asked and wondered if I were prying too much.

"She killed herself," he said plainly and it was as if he was reading aloud the grocery list. I figured he had answered that question a hundred times since it just fell so

easily off his lips. I thought about asking how she did it—gun, razor, pills, jump from a bridge, train tracks, drowning? I was scared to ask him, though. Maybe I didn't want to know. Maybe it was something really gruesome, like she threw herself into the polar bear's cage at the zoo or something.

"Happy Birthday," he said and that was as good as changing the subject.

"It is," I said. "Thanks."

After supper, we made out in his truck in front of my apartment and Gerald played a Buddy Holly tape. Hearing Buddy Holly made me feel like we were back in the fifties—eating at diners, necking in the backseat and Gerald's fingers slipping around under my poodle skirt. I liked the way he kissed my eyelids. I liked that he was a maintenance man and that he didn't care if I worked in a stinky corn factory. I liked how his hands felt wrapped around my head, pulling my mouth into his. He said he had to work early and walked me to the door and kissed me again under the orange bug light. Moths swarmed around our heads, but we didn't even bother swatting them. When I got inside, the phone was ringing.

"Delores?" Mom.

"I just walked in from my date," I said.

"Happy Birthday, baby." She was drunk. "I remember the day you were born and you just didn't want to come out of my belly. How long was I in labor?"

"I don't know. A long time. Everybody's in labor a long time, right?"

"I was in labor for ninety-six hours, young lady," she lied. Last year it was eighty-three hours.

"What are you doing up?" I asked, impatient.

"I think Horace is going to propose." Happy Birthday, Delores.

"Propose? Why?"

"What am I, an old spinster? A hag unfit for any man including Horace?"

"I didn't mean that he wouldn't want to marry you, it's just that—"

"Just that what?" Then, the phone cut out briefly. ". . . would be a good wife to him? Because he does strange sexual things? What?"

Then, it happened again. "What was that?"

"Hold on," she said. "That's the other line."

"When did you get—"

She cut me off. I sat and waited for a minute, but she didn't return. So, I hung up. I put on a t-shirt and slipped into bed. The phone rang.

"Mom," I answered. "Did you really get another line on your phone?"

"I decided that, as much time as I spend on the phone, I would hate to miss a call from you. Or Horace."

"Who was on the other line?"

"Horace."

"So, you hung up on me to talk to *Whore-Ass*?"

"I didn't hang up on you. Please don't get so angry with me."

"But, you say you're getting married to him."

"What's wrong with my being happy? The Escape Artist is never coming back, Delores."

I knew Dad wasn't coming back, but I didn't want to talk about how Horace couldn't make my mom happy. I just knew it was impossible. He was a Golden Shower Goon. He was a 1-900-WACK-OFF. He was pathetic and my mom deserved to be happy. She deserved being alone more than being with *Whore-Ass*.

"Are you there?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Can you come over tomorrow night to celebrate your birthday with your mother since you refused to spend tonight with her?"

"Maybe. I gotta go to bed."

"Wait—you could bring that handsome young fella you're seeing. What's his name? Barry? No, Harold."

"We'll see. Goodnight." I hung up.

I grabbed Poopie's tail off my nightstand and smoothed its shiny black fur, careful not to touch the dried blood. Poopie was a coal black kitten I had started feeding outside my apartment last year. He got bigger and friendlier after a couple of months and started sleeping inside at night curled at the foot of my bed. I would tell him about my day

and sometimes he would let me brush him. I fed him tuna fish when we ran out of Tender Vittles. When he meowed, he made this funny sound like a baby crying. Then, one night, I came home from work and he was gone. I roamed the neighborhood calling for him. I knocked on doors and looked under cars. When finally I decided to go inside, I noticed his tail, just his tail, lying there in front of my door. It was hard and had dried blood on the end that was once attached to his body. I had picked it up, taken it inside, and saved it on my bedside table in a flower vase. Sometimes I liked to close my eyes and rub on it and it made me feel like Poopie was sitting in my lap.

I pulled the covers up around my neck and watched a moth flit around the light fixture until he couldn't move his little dust-colored wings anymore. He lit on the globe and I watched him until I fell asleep with the light on.

The next morning, when the alarm *wah-wahed*, I took the three-snooze option—7:15—and got dressed quickly without the shower. I removed the remains of my nail polish and when I went to turn off the light, I noticed the moth still perched, wings folded, on the glass globe. I stood on the bed and flicked it onto the bedspread where it lay, unmoving. They don't live very long. Animals and insects. They run or fly around and eat and shit and land on lights and die. That's about it. I turned off the light. I grabbed a handful of chocolate chip cookies on the way out the door and ate them in the car on the way to J.O.W. Miles.

Sometimes Mr. McWashington moves me around on the line. One day I'll work the Lid Machine; the next day I'm on Labels; the next day I might be Filler, which is the worst. Corn juice splatters all over your face and drips off your shower cap into your eyes. The best job is Sorting because you don't have to touch any machinery. The cans move down a wide chute and you just move creamed corn to the right and kernel corn to the left. Large bins behind you catch the cans and other workers come and unload them into cardboard trays, wrap them in plastic, and off they go to the distribution warehouse where they get loaded onto trucks and taken to grocery stores and bought by folks who go home and open the lids you worked so hard to put on that sometimes you bloodied your fingers through your thick rubber gloves. I'm sure they never think a thing about it, just pour the contents into a bowl, slap it in the microwave and voila! The best side dish you could ask for. No shucking, no creaming, no flossing.

I guess Mr. McWashington felt sorry for me since he ruined my birthday lunch the day before. Probably not. But, he put me on Sorting right next to Alice LaJeune and I was glad to be there. Alice is the coolest lady in the cannery. She's in her seventies and has false teeth that she takes out while she's on the line. Once, when she was Filler, she kept popping them in and out of place and they fell into a can of creamed and got sent down the line. We wasted fifteen cans dumping them out looking for her teeth.

Motee, who looks like James Brown, found them and demanded a monetary reward, which I thought was tacky. Mr. McWashington told Motee to give the teeth back to Alice, but said she was forbidden to wear them on the line ever again. Alice looks out for me. She's like the grandmother I never had.

"Ha ya birpthay?" Alice asked.

"Gerald took me to eat catfish. He's the one, Alice."

"Yo awas saw he bwon."

"I know I fall in love easily, but I really like him. He's different than the others."

"Yo pad bap bou da lap puhn and da puhn bo pa."

"I know I've said that about a lot of guys, but this time is different. He's sweet and he doesn't talk all the time and he's like a big soft bear."

"Jus' wan' see you wip nipe man."

"I know. I want me to be with a nice guy, too. Just wait till you meet him."

"He bi Mokey bea?"

"Quit being a smart-ass, Alice."

After work, Gerald called and asked me to a movie. I told him about the phone call from my mom.

"Let's go," he said as if I had asked him to a normal party at my normal mother's house.

"You've never met Horace," I said, wanting things to stay that way.

"You don't think they should get married?"

"No way. You don't know the whole story."

"I'd like to meet your mom," he said and he was so sweet, I envisioned the whole evening turning out like a Disney movie.

When Gerald came to pick me up, he was wearing brown Carhart pants with the little side screwdriver pocket and the hammer loop. He wore a t-shirt with "Graceland" on the front and a picture of Elvis in his white jumpsuit on the back.

"You like Elvis?" I asked.

"Yep. But I like Young Elvis better than Old Elvis. My mom bought me this shirt." I pictured his mom giving him the Elvis shirt and how he might have hugged her. Then, I pictured her screaming in the polar bear cage.

"How was work?" I asked, shaking off the image.

"I had two stoves, a dryer, gutters." He opened the truck door for me like a gentleman from the fifties. "And one dog."

"You do animals?" I asked.

"I was unloading two years' worth of lint from the guts of this dryer and this lady came running in screaming about a couch spring. There was a dog under her couch with his eyelid hooked on one of the coils. I had to twist it out. He's okay, I think."

The man is a hero, I thought. He's a hard-working, polite, honest hero. As we drove to my mom's, all I could

think was that *Whore-Ass* is not a hero. *Whore-Ass* is not a hero.

My mom was in house slippers and curlers when we got there. Leftover red and green Christmas candles were burning on the plastic mantle, which frames a fake fireplace with plastic glow logs. Major fire hazard. Marvin Gaye was on the stereo singing, *Mother, Mother there's too many of you crying*. Mom went to remove her curlers and hollered at us from the bathroom.

"There's some very nice wine in the fridge. Help yourselves."

Gerald looked at me before he answered her. Then he said, "Thank you."

We went to the fridge and found this bottle of pink, bubbly stuff. I poured two glasses and took a sip. Gerald took a sip and said, "I like this music."

My mom was standing in the doorway with fat, bouncy curls.

"I do too, Carl," she said. "It's good dancing music." She twisted her plump hips a little and twirled around in the middle of the dining area, knocking over one of the chairs. "I just love to dance. Do you dance, Carl?"

"It's Gerald, Mom," I said and was sorry I ever agreed to take him there. We hadn't even eaten and she was already bumping into the furniture and calling him "Carl."

"I'm sorry, Gerald. Carl is a decent name, though. Who do you listen to?"

"I like Buddy Holly and Elvis and Cat Stevens. I like Elton John, too."

"Oh, good taste," she said. "Elton John. He may be a bit queer, but I sure do like his voice." Mom shifted her hips around and belted out over Marvin Gaye, "*Barry and the Jets. Ba da da da dum.* Don't you love it? Come on Delores. Dance with your mother!"

I poured another glass of pink wine and sat down on the sofa. Then, the door opened and in walked *Whore-Ass*, without even knocking.

He's short and has yellow hair. It's not human. It's like doll hair, wiry and straw-like. He wore a purple raw silk blazer over a black shirt and off-white cargo pants and I started to wonder what he saw in my mother since he seems to think he is fly enough to get away with those clothes. My mother, Constance, is frumpy and old-fashioned. She wears pinafores over bag-frocks, and shirt-dresses with Sass shoes. I watched my mom embrace Horace in all his ridiculousness. She looked old next to him in her white lace blouse and brown, elastic-waist, polyester pants. Her already limp brown curls against Horace's awful sunshine mustard do were pitiful and homely. He looked her over and smiled at us.

"Huh? Everybody's got bubbly?"

My mother let out a fake guffaw. "Horace, you nut, it's wine. Have some." She poured his in a big green wine

glass with TGIFriday's stamped on the globe. Horace took a sip and extended his hand to Gerald.

"Horace Farhood, young man," he said and pumped Gerald's hand ferociously, like only a man with Napoleonic Complex would.

"Gerald Cochran, nice to meet you." Gerald stood as Horace shook and soon Horace was looking up at Gerald.

"Glad to have you, Gerry," Horace said as if he and Gerald had nicknames for each other and as if he lived in my mom's house and could say things like "glad to have you." Horace dropped Gerald's hand and turned to me.

"And you are?"

"What's up?" I said, not really wanting to know the answer and hating his little game of not recognizing me.

"You have grown like a weed since I last saw you, girl. Look at you."

Mom stepped in with a plate of fried cheese puffs and sausage balls.

"Horace, twenty-five year old gals don't grow unless it's in the waistline. Now, work on your own waistline."

She thrust the plate of appetizers under his nose and he took a handful and kissed her cheek.

"I did say weed, didn't I?"

Horace elbowed Gerald and Gerald forced a laugh.

"Delores, you're a beautiful gal just like your mom." Then he started waltzing with her and I rolled my eyes at

Gerald. "How's the corn business? Should I be buying J.R. Miles stock?"

"It's J.O.W.," I said.

"The boss, that McWashington, cut her lunch break on her birthday!" Mom said.

Horace made a deep frown like a sad clown.

"That's friggin' awful."

Friggin'. The guy was more uncool than a station wagon with a bug bra. He sat down next to me on the couch, reached into his pocket, and slowly pulled out a small pink box with a baby blue stick-on bow.

"Happy Birthday anyway, Delores."

I unwrapped and opened the box. Inside was a beautiful little red sequined cat collar with a tiny red bow. It had a little silver loop where an ID tag hung. "Poopie" was engraved on the tag.

I wrapped the collar around my fingers so tight they turned purple. I stood and went to the bathroom, where I sat on the counter and cried in the mirror. There was a knock on the door.

"What?" I said.

"Delores, it's Carl," said Gerald, laughing.

I unlocked the door and Gerald came in and sat on the toilet. He smelled like cheap wine.

"I'm sorry about, uh, your cat. Horace didn't know. He feels really bad. The guy's trying."

I slid off the counter and washed my face in the sink. Gerald chuckled some more and walked out. A man sticking up for a sorry man is a depressing sight.

In the living room, Chaka Khan was singing, *I want to rub you, want to feel for you* and Mom was wiggling over the appetizers. Horace and Gerald stood in the corner pointing out the window and laughing. When Horace noticed me, he walked over and put his arm around me and made that clown frown.

"Del, sweetie, I had no idea. Please, forgive me. I'd like to get you another cat."

"No, thanks," I said and I hated him for trying to make it better. Mom sashayed over.

"Delores, you apologize. Do you think The Escape Artist would ever get you a cat necklace? Do you think that lousy son of a bitch cares about you as much as Horace? What's wrong? Do I embarrass you in front of Carl?"

I looked over at Gerald and said, "Let's go."

Gerald looked shocked and I knew I was helping to ruin the night. But, it was too late. I just wanted to go home.

"Delores," my mom rushed over to me and threw her arms around me. She could barely stand. "You're not leaving. This party is for my little girl. I forgot to tell him about your goddamned Dookie." I worked out of my mom's death grip and opened the front door. "Del, come dance with me, young lady!"

I walked out the front door. They could pee on each other. They could run off and get married for all I cared.

"See ya, Horace," Gerald said and shook hands with him as if they were old buddies. He waved at my mom. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Bye Gerry," they said in unison. I was the asshole.

We sat in Gerald's truck in front of my mom's apartment. He switched on the Buddy Holly tape and then immediately turned it off. From the passenger's seat, I could see my mother's gyrating silhouette in the window. Gerald put his hands on the steering wheel and sighed. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It was *Whore-Ass*."

"I lied," he said.

"In the bathroom?"

"No. About my parents. My mom didn't kill herself and my dad isn't a bartender in Columbia."

"Columbus," I said, correcting his memory of the lie as if it made any difference.

"My parents are alive and well and living in Walkersville. My dad is a lawyer and my mom plays tennis at the country club."

"You're a maintenance man," I said in disbelief.

"My dad owns your complex."

His mom stopped screaming in the polar bear cage.

"What street is this? I think he owns your mom's complex, too."

I felt hot, like my face was sunburned. I felt like jumping out of the truck and running off down the street. I also felt some weird relief.

"Drive to the end of the street," I said and Gerald obeyed like the good-mannered son of Mr. and Mrs. Cochran of Walkersville. We stopped in front of this little bar called The Grotto. My mom and I got drunk there after Grandpa's car accident. It has a heavy blue door with peeling paint and is dark and damp inside, like a cave. There are little statues of spelunkers under green lights in the front window. Gerald and I walked inside. Four old men in matching bowling shirts stood at the bar, laughing. They looked like they'd been there their whole lives. In one booth was an Asian couple and they were leaning in, kissing each other. We went in and took the other booth in the back. I sat facing the door.

"Was the couch spring a lie?" I said.

"The dog? No. You think I lied about everything?" he said. There was an old black man playing the blues on an electric guitar in the corner. It was the kind of place where you could melt down and lay everything out. I was exhausted.

"I guess I'll wonder for a while," I said. The waitress came over and Gerald ordered two bourbons and coke without asking me what I wanted. It was exactly what I wanted. I felt like we had known each other for years, yet

everything I thought I knew was a lie. "Why, Gerald?" I said.

He gulped his drink and cleared his throat. He looked around and I wondered if he were trying to make something up.

"My old girlfriend, Alegna, lived in your building," he said. "Her name was her Mom's name, Angela, backward. Her dad drove a Chiquita truck. Her mom died. I asked her to marry me, but she said no, and when she broke up with me, she said it was because my dad was a lawyer and my mom played tennis. She said we would never jive."

One of the old bowlers stood up at the bar. Another old bowler in a Dick Tracy hat had to hold him up. He held his shot glass in the air and said, "May you all die before your money runs out."

Another bowler with a long white beard yelled, "What money?"

The old bowler in the Dick Tracy hat said, "Just because you look dead doesn't mean you get out of buying the next round." They all laughed and the bartender brought them another round.

"Are you mad?" Gerald said.

"No," I said and I really wasn't, only I couldn't help but go back over every word he'd said and wonder if it were true. Alice LaJeune was going to love this. We sat there and listened to the old blues man sing, *Hush hush. Baby, don't believe a word. Hush hush. Darling, don't believe a*

word. Well, you don't know nothin', but you believe everything you heard. I tried not to listen. The waitress brought the second round and Gerald took a big gulp.

I lifted mine to take a sip, looked up, and saw my mom stagger in the door. "Son of a bitch," I said.

"I'm really sorry," Gerald pleaded.

"Not you," I said and got up to intercept her.

"Don't try to make me, Delores," she slurred and almost fell in the Old Toaster's lap at the bar.

"I would have put on after-shave if I'd known," Old Toaster hollered and his buddies wailed in unison.

"Where's Horace?" I said, desperate to get her out of there. She had done enough for one night.

"My daughter wants to ask me about *Whore-Ass*."

"Sounds like a great gal," White Beard taunted Mom.

"Yeah, when's she coming out?" asked Dick Tracy.

The blues man sang, *And Saturday I go out to play. Sunday I go to church. Monday I got the stormy blues.*

"Give me a Tom Collins," she breathed at the bartender and, like an idiot, he served her. Mom immediately spilled it on her white lace blouse and stumbled out into the middle of the room, swaying to the music.

"Mom, you have to go home," I said and realized I was whispering.

I sat down in the booth and Gerald said, "What should we do?"

"Nothing," I said. "She won't listen."

"Where's Horace?" Gerald asked and I shrugged. He stood up and went to the bathroom. I couldn't blame him. I'd have gotten the hell out of there, too.

Mom stumbled backward and almost fell down, but a stool broke her fall and she sat down on it suddenly and clapped her hands. "That was close," she squealed, and I was relieved that the old men had lost interest in her. They were toasting again and hugging each other. One man was hunched over the bar, passed out. The Asian guy had moved to the same side of the booth as the girl and they were watching the stage and giggling like it was a comedy act. The girl held her hand over her mouth.

The blues man stopped playing suddenly and I looked over at the little makeshift stage expecting to see him taking a break. Mom was leaning over his shoulder and looked like she was trying to climb in his lap.

"No," I said loudly as if she were a dog about to take a leak on the poor guy. I ran up there and grabbed her arm.

"Hey buddy," she said. I tugged at her, but she had a chokehold on the poor guy. He was staring straight ahead as if none of this were really happening. "Hey buddy! Play a song we can dance to!" she wailed as I jerked her arms from around his head and pulled both of us down onto an old drum set in the corner.

The cymbal clanged and Mom's elbow hit the bass drum with a thud. She began to whimper like a puppy. The old blues man shot us a sly look from the corner of his eye and

shook it all off like a wet chill. He strummed his guitar and cleared his voice in the microphone.

"All right," he said to everyone but us. He sang, *You keep on shakin' me, darlin'. You done messed up my happy home.*

I helped Mom to her feet and she swayed back and forth a little to the music. She was still crying and her voice was becoming increasingly more audible. Gerald's and my booth was still empty and, for the second time that night, I contemplated running into the street and never looking back. Instead, I leaned up against the jukebox and watched my mom dancing and crying. I didn't even want to help her. Who is there to be embarrassed in front of in Jasper County? I was the corn factory girl with an escape artist for a dad and a drunk for a mom.

Suddenly, the door open and in walked yellow-headed *Whore-Ass* in his purple jacket. He stopped and surveyed the bar, waved at the bartender.

"Hey, love that jacket," said White Beard and Dick Tracy leaned over and slapped Horace on the shoulder like they were old buddies.

"Is that a wig?" he said.

Horace saw Mom over by the jukebox, swaying and crying. He walked over and put his arms around her.

"Not you, Horace," she said and worked to wiggle free of him. "Not you."

I walked over to assist, but he turned his back to me and lifted heavy-set Mom off her feet. He carried her to the door and pushed it open with one foot.

"Night Larry," he said to the bartender, who was washing glasses. He waved his rag without looking up.

I followed them out to the street. He put Mom in his red Cougar and walked around to the driver's side.

"Horace," I said. "What should I do?"

"I can take care of your mother, Delores," Horace said and started the engine.

I stood in the road under a streetlight and watched him maneuver away from the curb and drive slowly toward her complex. I imagined I was standing on the street in some other town. I imagined a bus coming along and running me over just like John Lennon's mother. Then, I imagined a bus coming along and my jumping out of the way just in time. Would I calculate different things and have different phone conversations? The little spelunkers in the windows under the green lights were smiling blankly at me like I was an idiot and the answers were obvious. I could hear the blues man playing inside The Grotto as if time didn't exist. I pushed open the heavy blue door and some paint chipped off onto my sweaty palms. The streetlight shone on Gerald's face in the booth, where he was sitting with a new set of drinks. He stood and walked over to me.

"Delores, would you like to dance?"

He took my hand before I could answer and I followed him to the middle of the room. He pulled me close and we moved together like some couple from the fifties at a high school prom.

"Is your name really Gerald?" I said.

"I told you," he said. "It's Carl."

The old blues man sang, *I am the backdoor man. Well, the men don't know, but the little girls they understand.*

I propped my chin on Gerald's shoulder, folded my fingers behind his thick neck. The old blues man breathed his song into the microphone. I let it take me.

Billie Holiday Sings the Blues

I am finishing my last semester as a piano major at a woman's college just north of the city when Redding writes to tell me that his wife has terminal throat cancer and will probably die soon. It is Christmastime, final exam period, and outside my dorm window the quad is empty except for a girl in a blue raincoat on a bench under a peeling birch tree, reading. Her hair is held back in a clip and long tendrils of stringy, golden hair hang down over her eyes. I recognize her as a girl—Francine, I think her name is, or something old-fashioned like that—who is in my astronomy class. Her mother was murdered in a mall parking lot last summer and I remember wanting to tell her I was sorry when school commenced in the fall, but I didn't know her, so I said nothing. I am no good at grief. What is the point in wallowing in it, talking about it endlessly like people do with therapists? I wonder if she has any friends, if she is stricken with sorrow. What kinds of books do girls with murdered mothers read?

Redding is coming to say goodbye, he writes. He is taking the train—the 3:35—to visit me at college next weekend, the letter says. He wants to see me one last time while I am young and beautiful and have my whole life in front of me. A time bomb disguised as a compliment. I recognize his spiteful allusion to my ticking clock and the mortality of womanly beauty and think, how silly and old he sounds, how empty his childish print looks on the stark

paper. He is, after all, an old man. He hasn't broken off a relationship in thirty years. Or maybe he has never broken off a relationship. He says that his daughter will be enrolled in my college soon and will I befriend her? (Has he forgotten that I graduate this month?) He says he loves me but that he can't bear to continue seeing me because of the guilt he feels for Lydia, all sick and rotting with cancer in her bed. I fold the letter and watch the girl under the tree until she stops reading, grabs her book satchel, and walks slowly toward the refectory, her hair still covering her eyes.

Two months before, I suffered through rubbery Eggs Benedict with him in a smoke-filled coffee shop near his studio. Each table was set with paper napkins and dusty plastic geraniums in unraveling miniature baskets. It was the sort of place in which Lydia wouldn't be caught dead, he said. We wore sunglasses just in case. Redding talked about our upcoming trip to Niagara Falls. He showed me the train tickets in his portfolio next to a tiny, dog-eared photo of me.

"It's funny how small you are in this picture," he said, fingering the edges and tracing my photographed mouth with his pinky. "Portrait of a tiny princess."

"Why do you want to go to Niagara Falls with me?" I asked.

"I've always wanted to go. They say it's magical at night all lit up with colored lights—like a fairytale. Lydia never wanted to go."

"Why not?"

"She thinks Canadians are boring and says the food is worse than in England."

"What's the food like in England?"

"Are you still playing that jazz?" I hated the way he said "that jazz."

"Yes, but my recital—"

"You know, you are as talented as a young Edvard Grieg. You shouldn't waste it messing around with Billie Holiday and all that jazz."

I couldn't understand why he wanted me to be a classical pianist when he himself played jazz. It wasn't fair.

"Are you finished?" I asked, wanting to leave the conversation and the ridiculous Astroturf-covered booths of the coffee shop.

"Very much so," he said in a whisper, speaking more to the photograph than to me.

We walked around the corner to his studio and he unbolted the endless succession of locks on the heavy metal door that led to his plush piano studio with the concert grand Steinway. I loved his studio. There was something mystical about the soft, sunken lights in the ceiling and the padded walls. The only sound meant to be heard in that

room was the sound of the wooden mallets making contact with the piano's strings. Redding was a talented pianist, a composer who'd written numerous musical scores for Broadway productions and was working on his fifth album. It was a Christmas album of carols all written in minor keys. He sat down at the Steinway and played the saddest jazz version of "Jingle Bells" and "Frosty the Snowman" I had ever heard. He said he changed all the song titles to match their somber quality. "Here Comes Santa Claus" was renamed "There Goes the Old Fat Man." "Up on the Housetop" became "Alone on the Roof." Redding said a famous old Dixieland bassist named Toons Mederis was coming up from New Orleans to play standup on the album and when he went to the soundboard and played the demo cassette of the two of them playing "Rudolph" in F sharp, I cried.

We went to the Moses Motor Motel across the street and he sat on the edge of the lumpy mattress with his raincoat folded in his arms. He looked so small—all thin and hunched over, looking at his feet—like a little boy. I slowly undressed for him in front of the full-length mirror. I remember I was wearing a new red velvet bra and matching high-cut panties. When I peeled them off and got on top of him, he finished immediately. We lay on our backs in the still-made bed on top of the covers and looked at water stains on the ceiling until it became dark outside. One stain looked exactly like a helicopter, I said. Redding

said he missed me. I asked how he could miss me when I was lying right next to him. He said anything was possible.

Our trip to Niagara Falls happened a month later during Fall Break. Students at school call it "Suicide Break" because rumor has it that the administration invented the mid-term vacation so students won't go mad from too much studying. They say four students have thrown themselves from the bell tower within the last thirty years. The trip reminded me of one I took with my father when I was six. We had driven Dad's Volkswagen Beetle to East Aurora to visit my aunt one fall just after she'd bought a horse. My mother had left us for another man in the middle of a school night. I remember waking up the next morning, realizing Mother was gone and wondering who was going to pack my lunchbox. The lunchbox was my main concern. Daddy was late for work because he made me tuna salad with walnuts and apple and a thermos full of tomato basil soup. We didn't talk about Mother on the way to school or for years after. Daddy said this trip to my aunt's was a vacation and I could do whatever I wanted. I ate two banana splits for dinner one night, watched cable TV until one in the morning, stayed out at the stables riding Juicy Fruit for six or seven hours at a time. I was being spoiled, but it was that strange kind of spoiled where you feel like the person doing the spoiling is trying to make up for something they'll never be able to give you. Spoiling in the form of an apology. It was the same spoiled I felt years later when my father gave me a

hundred dollar bill at the video arcade so I would leave him alone in the Tonga Island Lounge across the mall. He got drunk on Old Foresters poured by a chesty, over-tanned bartender.

In Ontario, Redding and I went to every four-star restaurant I highlighted in my Fodor's. He bought me a dusty blue evening gown with sequins and seed pearls sewn into the bodice. He took me to a day spa for a manicure and makeover. My fingernails were cut so short for playing piano that the polish made me look like I was playing dress-up. Redding loved it, though. He took me to Fielding's Fine Jewelry where they measured my neck for a triple-stranded aquamarine choker to match the gown. Before we left, he told the saleslady to throw in the teardrop pearl earrings in the front window. While walking back to the hotel past the Canadian Horseshoe Falls, he told me he had a Lady Smith and Wesson at home—an antique his mother had given him—with a mother-of-pearl handle. He was saving it for me, he said.

That night over a Chinese dinner, he ordered cold sake and told me he would never leave his family for me because that's what liars tell their lovers. He said he'd never lied to me. Only to Lydia. One day, he said, he would die and I would meet a man and get married and have a family just as he had. For some reason, having a family "just as he had" didn't sound like much of a deal to me. The waiter brought us flash-fried sea bass and tuna rolls. I didn't

want a family like Redding's. Maybe I would meet a man before he died, he said, and I would introduce them. He didn't know how things would turn out, but it sure sounded like he had been giving it some thought.

"Anything is possible," he said and it was beginning to sound like a mantra. Either way, he hoped I would always remember him fondly. He said he'd always loved me. He said he'd always wanted to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

On the last night of our vacation, Redding told the concierge to order us a limo instead of a regular taxi and we rode the stretch four blocks to Du Monde with barely even enough time to turn on the mini television or make a drink. We had reservations on the Grand Terrace and sat at a candlelit table next to a night-blooming jasmine. It reminded me of my mother's dime store perfume. Fodor's recommended the Foie Gras, but I opted for two plates of mussels swimming in garlic and olive oil and drank Bombay Sapphire martinis. Afterwards, we walked to a jazz club across the street and sat at a tiny table in the back, watching other people dancing and having fun. I'd had too many martinis and was getting bored in the throes of Redding's silence. He hadn't said a word since we'd walked into the club and wasn't even tapping his foot or drumming his fingers to the music like he usually did. He just sat stiffly in his chair and looked straight ahead, like he was in a trance. His eyes were wide and wet, unblinking. He hadn't touched his scotch.

Finally, a young man asked me to dance. He spun around in front of me, took my hand, and nodded at Redding as if for permission, but Redding held his fixed stare and never even looked at the young man. We must have danced twenty songs together—the band played Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis, and Louis Armstrong—all my favorites. The young man was so energetic and had perfected the craziest steps. We were all over the crowded floor, yet never once bumped any of the other dancers. He had hair the color of ebony shoe polish and a mouth full of perfectly straight, tiny teeth. He wore a gardenia corsage on the lapel of his mohair suit. Nobody wears corsages anymore and I wish they did. I buried my nose in the candy-sweet petals during a slow song—I think it was "Lover Come Back To Me" by Sarah Vaughan—and afterwards the young man grinned and wiped a drop of sweat off my temple with his manicured fingertip. His eyes, the color of his hair, were round like a doll's and even though I have a hard time making eye contact with people, I looked into them and noticed they were kind.

When the club was closing, the young man followed me back to the table where Redding, still in his trance, was seated and asked if my "father" and I would be interested in joining him for a drink. Redding rose, shook hands with the young man, bowed to me, and said he was stepping out for some fresh air. He took my hand and pressed the hotel room key into my palm. He leaned over to kiss my cheek and whispered, "It's your night. I'll see you at the station in

the morning at ten." He smiled his most gracious smile where the deep lines at the corners of his mouth carve into his cheeks like gills on a fish. He turned and walked into the street and I was six again with that horse and all the time I might ever need to do whatever I wanted. I was motherless and free and spoiled rotten like a girl by her daddy.

I didn't need another drink. I stumbled twice on the sidewalk in front of the jazz club. So, the young man and I went to the Golden Griddle and had sausage and cheese omelettes. I felt an uncomfortable pit in my stomach. I guess it could've been the liquor or the sausage, but I wanted to be alone. I couldn't think of anything to talk about. I drank a glass of milk in one swallow and was unable to suppress a yawn. I asked him to walk me to my hotel. He would, he said, and paid the check like any kind young man in a corsage would.

Redding had booked our room at the Renaissance Fallsview so that we would be close to the falls—a mere 500 yards. The young man and I walked past the Horseshoe Falls on the way to the hotel and stopped to watch the ceaseless cascade behind its strange pink and blue lights. The artificial illumination made the falls look more like the Spelunker's Cave at Six Flags than a natural setting, I thought. I half-expected to see plastic gnomes leering in the sculpted shrubs next to the railing.

"Have you ever heard of Jessie Sharp?" the young man asked, his face pink in the lights.

"No," I said and his doll eyes widened.

"He's a local hero. He came here from Tennessee to shoot the falls in a kayak."

"What happened?" I asked.

"They never found his body," the young man said.

"So, he died," I said.

"Well, yes, he wasn't wearing a helmet or lifejacket or anything."

"How does that make him a hero?" I asked and the young man was silent.

I don't remember the young stranger's name or how we said goodbye in front of the elevator in the lobby of the Renaissance. If we kissed, then it wasn't anything worth remembering, I guess. I sat on top of the covers in my sequined gown and waited for Redding, trying to stay awake. I drank a coke and chewed six Pepto Bismol tablets. I watched a children's movie on pay TV about a baby duck that leaves home for the first time. I removed the polish from my nails. I lay on my back and thought about Redding and Lydia, wondered what they talked about late at night. He never came. But, the next morning, he met me in the station, just like he said he would. He was wearing a new green wool gabardine suit he'd bought that morning. He was in jolly spirits and seemed excited about getting on the train home.

I hardly spoke to him on the train and just listened while he ordered potted meat sandwiches from the vendor, went on about the weather to a woman across the aisle and described for me the rose-lined walkways in the park across from the falls. He had visited some museum—The Daredevil Gallery—that displayed old barrels, rubber floats and even human-sized rubber balls in which people had actually ridden over the falls. Redding said one guy, William “Red” Hill, had fastened thirteen inner tubes together with fishnet and canvas straps and was quoted in the local paper as calling his contraption “a thing.” The daredevil had broken his neck and drowned—which seemed like dying twice, I remarked. What was left of the tubes and canvas—deflated rubber pieces and a bit of cloth—was on display in the museum like a religious relic. I hated Redding’s excitement over the museum and his kooky desire to attempt the same feat. I was glad to be getting back to school and the piano.

That night, when the train pulled into the station near my college, I rose to grab my suitcase from the rack above my seat and Redding stood and grabbed my elbows.

“Can I get off the train here with you?” he asked.

“Why?” I asked, praying he wouldn’t say he wanted to make a phone call or just needed some fresh air.

“Let’s have dinner. I thought I was doing what you wanted last night, but I ended up hurting your feelings. I don’t know how to be with you.”

“You were doing what you wanted last night,” I said.

The doors opened mechanically and I picked up my suitcase and started walking to the door. Redding grabbed his own bag, followed and stepped out with me. Night was descending on the station like a wool blanket over the sky. There were little moth holes in the wool where light beamed through and made stars. Redding took my suitcase and placed it next to his on the platform. He cradled my face in his long pianist's fingers and kissed me gently on the lips. He pulled me against him, opened his coat and wrapped us both in it.

"Will you let me apologize?" he asked.

"Okay," I said and was relieved.

"How does Italian sound?" he asked.

We sat side by side in a booth in a dark corner of Il Borgo and drank cheap Chianti from jelly jars. We ordered arancini and cheese cannelloni with mushroom ragout. I told him you could always tell a couple was in love if they sat side by side in a booth. He said he and Lydia had never sat like that in a booth. He said he was a kid with me and cupped his big hand over my knee throughout the meal.

We had eaten there before. The crespelles were homemade. We had never seen any students there because of the high prices. Not that I was worried about seeing my classmates. Other girls knew about my affair with Redding and thought it was romantic and sophisticated. Besides, I would graduate by the time Redding's daughter began her

freshman year and nobody there would remember my short-lived affair with her father.

After dinner we walked over to the campus and sat on a park bench and talked—something else he said he and Lydia never did. He said they lived their lives in a mad rush with no time for park benches or long after-dinner conversations. He told me that she gained weight after the birth of their daughter and slept on the foldout in their den for years. He couldn't remember the last time they'd made love. She forbade him to play piano in the house. In former years, she had been consumed with Garden Club, Junior League, and the country club tennis team. But, she stopped playing tennis and going to club meetings. She joined a woman's support group, but wouldn't tell him exactly what kind of support the women gave each other or what they talked about in their secretive meetings. She started coming home late, smelling like incense, and saying "get in touch with my center" and "fill the void." When he asked her what the "void" was, she threw her cold wheat toast into the sink and said, "You, Redding. You are 'the void.'" She said he was sad holiday songs and worn-out suits. He was a "non-father" and a "non-husband." He was not even a man.

Redding said he and Lydia had stopped arguing altogether after she was diagnosed and that she didn't even bother to accuse him of having affairs anymore. He wondered if she were having an affair. She had lost her hair because of the chemotherapy and wore a blonde wig. She had lost

weight. He knew she didn't feel well and couldn't drink and had lost her appetite. But, she was incredibly beautiful, he said and he looked off toward the bell tower, his eyes misted over as if I weren't even there. He said he couldn't imagine his life without her. When she died, part of him would die, too, and he really didn't know if he could go on living. Then, he kissed me with his eyes closed. It was a thin, sad kiss and his lips were dry. We sat on the park bench until one in the morning, then retired to a nearby motel with a mattress so lumpy we piled all the bed linens in a heap on the floor, crawled underneath them and slept. He left at dawn on the 5:02.

And now Redding is coming to say goodbye to me so that Lydia can die while he is her non-man and hers alone. I rehearse my nonchalance all the way to the train station. What about this affair anyway? It is simply that word I had always used when I talked about my mother's affair: a fling. It is a pair of overloaded ships passing in the ubiquitous night, the cliché of strangers who met somewhere before, sometime before and—oh! it is fate, right?

I am wearing a navy silk dress with an embroidered yellow rose on the collar and new matching pumps. I stand stiffly on the platform and wait for the 3:35. He will arrive solemnly and step off the train like a gallant war hero returning home with some brave wound we can all be proud of. But, really, he will be ant-like on the inside—a sniveling child coming to apologize and make excuses. I

won't let him feel good about the speech he will make. I will not forgive him. I will remind him it was a sorry fling and that I have already gone on with my life and forgotten him. I will say I gave away the Grieg book he gave me for my birthday and changed my recital piece to Haydn. I will tell him I almost didn't even come to the station, except that I didn't want him to come and find me at school. He embarrasses me, I will say. He is an old, sad man who cheated on his dying wife. He is a selfish lover. He doesn't even compose original music. There is nothing more to say.

At 3:36, the train slows to a heavy stop next to the platform. The doors open and passengers begin to file out. A child in a red baseball cap clutches a yellow metal lunchbox in one hand and his mother's hand in the other, laughs as she swings him down the stairs one by one. A young man with a ponytail carrying two large suitcases steps down and embraces an old woman in a trench coat on the platform next to me. Three men in matching dark suits carrying shiny leather briefcases hurry down the steps and brush past me. I watch as the last of the passengers continue to file out of the train and I recognize no one. When the crowd thins, a conductor walks along the outside of the train, closing each door as he passes it.

"May I get on to see if anyone is left?" I ask.

"I've been through, ma'am. It's empty," the conductor says. Then, he smiles warmly, tips his hat and says, "I like your high heels."

I don't know how long I stand there and watch him closing the doors. He is young. Probably in his thirties. He has short, curly blonde hair. He reminds me of a boy I loved in grammar school who cheated off my test papers. Harold, I think was his name, kissed me behind the gym on the last day of fourth grade.

I sit on a metal bench on the platform and think about Jessie Sharp in his kayak plunging over Niagara Falls like some kind of deranged hero. I study the clouds overhead—one is shaped like a guitar, another looks like a dog, running. I watch the sky as if I am waiting for something to fall out of it. When nothing does, I stand and slowly walk home, careful not to scuff my new shoes, all the while humming a little tune by Billie Holiday.

Birthday Boy

"Joseph, this was your mother's. It's from the day we found about you," Joey's father said as he gingerly placed the pregnancy test dipstick Joey's mother had urinated on fourteen years ago into Joey's outstretched hand. The stick was swaddled in pale pink tissue paper and encircled with a blue ribbon. In the tiny testing window, the trace of a pale pink + was still visible.

Joey—only his parents called him "Joseph" and he hated it—was having a birthday. He would leave home the next day for the first time to attend boarding school at The Meadowbrook Baptist School for Boys in Valley, Virginia. Earlier that day, during Rev. Willie T. Smith's "Jesus Saves Hour" on the radio—mandatory daily listening in the Hebert household—Joey had daydreamed of four-wheelers and a big party with the neighborhood kids dancing to a pop rock band on his front lawn. Now, however, the only image he could conjure in his head was that of his father's fateful ejaculation into his mother, the one that created him. This was not a scene he wanted to witness.

"Joseph," his father said, disrupting the awful vision, "Don't you have anything to say?" Joey shook his head. His mother and father sat side by side on the chartreuse wrap-around sofa they'd had since they were married. His mother's hands were folded delicately in her lap. She was smiling sweetly, as usual, and had not uttered a word.

"Joseph, your mother labored for nine months under the weight of your body in her womb. Now, in the eyes of the Lord, she was beautiful, but in the eyes of man she grew overweight, her breasts were heavy, her back hunched. She had hemorrhoids—"

"Father—"

"No, Joseph, let me finish. Today is your birthday, but it's your mother we should be honoring . . ."

His father's voice trailed off while Joey daydreamed. His father's sounds became tiny moths that fluttered up into the air conditioning vents in the ceiling and Joey's own body began to vaporize into tiny droplets of rain sucking pouring backward toward the ceiling and seeping into the vent following his father's moths.

"And that is why we are taking your mother to dinner at Red Lobster. To honor and obey. That is the duty of a son, the Bible tells us. Are you listening to me, Joseph?"

"I hear what you're saying, Father," Joey said, turning the dipstick over in his hands, "But it's just not registering."

It was a line Joey had picked up from a kid at Lindley Elementary. He had taken to saying it a lot around the house and therefore, breaking the Fifth Commandment. His punishment was to pray, asking God's forgiveness, for one hour while kneeling naked on a crude wooden board his father had cut with his Skill saw in the garage. The floors in their house were covered with butter-colored

wall-to-wall carpeting, "very unlike anything Jesus had to kneel on," Joey's father had said. That was why he insisted Joey use the board.

There would be no party, no four-wheelers, no pop rock band in the front yard with the neighborhood kids. Joey was sent to his room to kneel at his bedside on the wooden board and ask God's forgiveness for being "sarcastic and unthankful." After an hour passed, his mother knocked on the door.

"Joseph," she said. "Are you hungry, yet?" And, at that, Joey and his mother and father went to Red Lobster, his mother's favorite.

Red Lobster was out on the highway in front of Parkplace Mall. They sat in a plastic-covered booth by the window where they could see the cars racing past, heading for wherever. Joey scanned the ditch next to the highway for dead animals.

The waiter, who wore a nametag that read *Richard!*, arrived to take their order. Joey, who was allergic to shellfish, ordered a grilled cheese sandwich with bacon and pickles and a side of fries from *Richard!*. His father ordered the Fried Captain's Platter and his mother ordered the Atlantic Baked Clams in Cream Sauce and a Side Salad with Fat-Free Ranch. The family sat in silence until *Richard!* returned with the entrées.

"Joseph, since it is your birthday, we decided you could pick out any dessert you like," his father said as he

chewed a fried jumbo shrimp away from its tail. "And then, we have a surprise for you when we get home."

"What is it?"

"Well, now, Joseph, if we told you, then it wouldn't be a surprise, now would it?" his mother said, smiling sweetly and took a bite of her clams. Her fork was greasy pink with a lipstick smudge.

Joey was silent.

"Joey, I don't believe I heard you thank your mother for giving birth to you yet," his father said.

Silence.

"Joseph?"

Joey slurped his Coke through its straw and rolled a fry in a ketchup blob. Some other little kid in a high chair was having a birthday on the other side of the restaurant and the wait staff had gathered around to sing out of key "Happy Red Birthday Lobster." The other birthday boy was wearing a big lobster hat and was sticking his fingers in the chocolate brownie before him and slinging it onto the smiling adults around him. Joey wanted the chocolate brownie. He would not stick his fingers in it. He would not sling it on the adults around him. He would savor it.

"Joseph, there will be no surprise until you've thanked your mother for bringing you into this world. I don't care one whit if you never get another birthday present. We can do this your way, if you want." He was

always saying that "we can do this your way" bit. But, Joey noticed they never did things his way. There would be no four-wheeler, no pop rock band. Other kids got CD players and laptop computers for their birthdays. He got grilled cheese and a urine stick.

"JOSEPH!" his father demanded.

"I hear what you're saying, Father. But it's just not . . ." Joey's voice trailed off thinly. His father flagged *Richard!* in a white-hot heat, paid the check, and they left without any dessert.

In the silent car on the way home, Joey sat in the backseat and watched the roadside for dead animals. He did that a lot. Whenever their car passed a smashed possum or a German Shepherd, its head twisted and disfigured, hair matted with dried blood, Joey would say a tiny prayer under his breath. This time he saw a large white cat next to the ditch with barely a scratch, its legs reaching out from under it as if it were merely stretching after an afternoon nap.

"Prepares to meet thy maker," Joey whispered to the road kill, in a baritone not unlike the chest voice of Rev. Willie T. Smith.

They arrived at home and Joey's father said, "Joseph, take out the garbage before your repentance on the board."

Joey dragged the cans to the street and stood at the curb surveying his father's once lush St. Augustine lawn. It was summer's end and the brown, shaved yard depressed

him. Tomorrow, he would go away to Meadowbrook to study the Bible for four years with a bunch of nerds. No video games, no four-wheelers, no pop rock.

He went to his room and knelt on the board, naked. At first, his mind was blank as a sheet of white paper. He thought of nothing. Then, he thought of the white cat by the ditch.

His mother knocked at the door. She was wearing her flowered zipper robe with the Elizabethan-esque collar.

"Joseph, it's late. Have you packed your duffel?"

"No," he said.

"Finish packing and come into the living room."

Joey slipped into his pajamas and dragged his father's old military backpack out from underneath the bed. He stuffed his Sunday loafers into the bottom, then layered his rolled-up corduroy slacks, starched white button down, three white v-neck t-shirts, Fruit of the Looms underwear, and the candy-striped tie his grandmother had given him for Christmas. He scanned his room for any other items he might need at boarding school. He grabbed the baseball signed by Jose Conseco at the game his father had taken him to the year before. That should go. And the hunting cap that was his grandfather's. He should take one thing his mother had given him. Then, he would go into the living room and get the surprise whatever-it-was. His pillow. Joey's mother had given him the fluffy pillow on his bed. He couldn't sleep without his pillow. He stuffed it into

the bag, on top of the clothes and striped tie, the baseball and the hunting cap. He used one hand to squeeze it into the tight pack and the other to tie the bundle down, but the edges of the pillow worked out of the openings at the top of the bag.

"You'll be issued a pillow, Joseph," his father said from the doorway.

"I want to take this one," Joey said.

His father knelt next to him and moved Joey's hands from the bag and the pillow and opened it where Joey had managed it closed. His father removed the pillow, tossed it back on the bed, and tied the bag together tightly and swiftly, as he had done so many times while in the military.

"There," he said proudly and held the pack away from him to study it. "Have you asked forgiveness for your sins?"

Joey nodded.

"Come into the living room. There is one more thing you will need at Meadowbrook." His father was grinning.

In the living room on the overstuffed chartreuse wrap-around sofa sat his mother. She wore pink foam snap-curlers in her hair. She held a Barbie doll in one hand and a Ken doll in the other.

"Joseph," his father started, "Have a seat."

Joey took a seat on a small needlepoint-covered stool next to the fireplace. He stared at the dolls in

disbelief. His parents had finally lost their minds, he thought. He must be the unluckiest boy in the world to have two parents who actually believed he wanted dolls for his fourteenth birthday.

"Joseph, your mother and I have given this gift a lot of thought. We put our heads together and decided that the most special gift we have to offer our son is the gift of knowledge."

"Dad, I don't want dolls," Joey blurted and his eyes welled with tears. He fought hard to keep them back—he was no crybaby—but he felt helpless to change any of it. He hated that they were his parents.

"Let me finish, Joseph. We are not giving you a doll for your birthday. If you had been listening, you would have heard me tell you that we are giving you knowledge, son, knowledge. It's one of the most powerful gifts you can own and you sit there crying."

"Dear," said Joey's mother to his father and she placed her hand on his knee as if to silence him. Joey's father, shocked by this gesture, was silent for a moment.

Then, his father said to his mother, "Well, why don't you start?"

His mother carefully placed the dolls on the coffee table, sitting nicely, facing each other. Barbie was wearing a pink dress with a tiny bow at the neck like an old-fashioned schoolteacher and Ken wore an argyle sweater

and blue and white striped trousers similar to an Easter suit Joey's mother made him wear one year.

"Joseph," his mother said softly and folded her hands carefully, "We don't want you going off to Meadowbrook without knowing about the miracle of life. Sometimes children don't learn the facts from their parents, but from other school children who are misinformed. As a result, they go through adolescence in the dark and may not understand how life is created until it's too late." Joey's mother smiled proudly. His father patted her shoulder as if to congratulate her for successfully completing the longest sentence she had ever spoken. The two of them sat and stared at Joey, who was slumped over on the little stool with a worried expression on his face. Now she was going to tell him where babies come from, he thought. This was terrible. Maybe she would raise her shirt and show him some awful scar where the doctors had to cut him out of her and he would have to thank her for it. He couldn't even look at her with her pink foam curlers and her zipper nightgown. This was worse than getting two Barbie dolls that he could just throw in the trash and forget about. This might take hours and Joey figured he probably knew more about sex than these two squares anyway. He had heard songs about sex and seen pictures of sex.

"I hear what you're saying," Joey said smartly and was immediately frightened that his father might explode and come down on him.

His father's face reddened, but he didn't give Joey a chance to continue. "I'm glad you can hear, Joseph. We don't need to have your hearing checked out before sending you off to school. Now, however, we would like to hear what you have to say, Joseph." Both of them leaned toward him and waited.

"Nothing," Joey blurted.

"I'm sure you have something to tell us about the creation of life, young man. Enlighten us, son. We want to know what you know."

Joey frowned. This was even worse than he thought.

"Afterwards," his father said, "We'll talk about what we know and compare notes." Then, his father said, "That way, no one will be left in the dark." Joey knew that his father meant that he was the only one who might be in the dark. Otherwise, why would they be having this stupid conversation?

"Feel free to use the dolls," his mother said and gestured proudly toward Barbie and Ken.

Joey pondered the question. To say he knew nothing would make him appear foolish and immature. And besides, it would be a lie. He had looked at a dirty magazine that the Balmontino twins had stolen from the counter at Duck In near his grandmother's house one summer. The Balmontinos made him pay to look at the magazine and since Joey only had two dollars, he only saw two pages that summer. The magazine was called "Oui" and the three of them had

pronounced it "Oo-wee" all summer until he'd gone back to school in the fall and learned it was a French word meaning, "yes." The title made less sense to him after acquiring this new vocabulary, but he'd never forget the women's boobs, the furry-and furless!-patches between their legs, and the men. Most of all, he'd never forget the men. Some men were behind the women, their pelvises flattened against the women's buttocks. And there were others he couldn't explain. Other men's pelvises were flattened against the buttocks of other men. The pleasure in their faces, all of them, seemed so sweet and innocent as if only good was being done, as if only good was being given and received. And the next Sunday in church school, he'd placed his own pelvis on the buttocks of another little boy and felt such pleasure, he was sure his face looked like the face of one of the men in the magazine and that he was spreading the joy all the men and women in the magazine were spreading to one another. Yet, he was snatched by the hair on the back of his neck and taken to a broom closet in the hall and was left there throughout church and even the picnic and had waited in silence and darkness until his mother put her hand on his forehead and asked if he were all right. And when he said, "no," she pulled him into her breast and carried him to the car. When he got home, he waited on the board in his room for several hours for his father to return home from the preacher's house. And what happened after that was just a memory stuffed away

someplace in the back of his head with other memories he didn't want to think about. Maybe this very moment would take a seat right next to that memory and they could keep each other company and keep him out of it.

"Joseph, we're waiting," his father said.

Joey's face felt like it was in an oven. He wished he could run out the front door and down to the bus stop and hop on a bus and never see them again. He hated them and the creation of life and Barbie and the whole world.

"Joseph," his father said sternly, "Your mother and I are prepared to sit here all night if need be."

Joey's hands were trembling. He leaned over and picked up the dolls. He placed Ken behind Barbie and bent Barbie over at the waist. He placed them down on the coffee table and he and his mother and father stared at the dolls in silence. Then, his mother looked at her feet. His father cleared his throat.

"Joseph," he said, "Where did you learn of this position?"

Joey shrugged and looked out the window. Mr. Parker across the street had been washing his powerboat and was now spraying his Golden Retriever, Big Boy, with the hose. Big Boy was barking crazily and biting the water. Joey's father looked out the window, too.

"Joseph," he said hopefully, "Did you learn this from watching two dogs?"

Joey smiled. Two dogs. Exactly. Oo-wee. Dogs have sex, right? "Yes," Joey said matter-of-factly. "Dogs. That's where I saw it. That's all I know about creation."

"Well," his father said and removed Ken from Barbie. He placed them side by side again and sighed heavily.

His mother smoothed her nightgown and said to Joey's father, "Reginald, would you like some coffee?"

"No, we don't need coffee. It's ten o'clock at night," Joey's father said and Joey's mother looked very disconcerted and began to inspect the leaves of an ivy next to the sofa.

"Joseph, there is one position that humans should use when they are in the act of creating another human being and that is this." Joey's father reached out and flattened Barbie on the coffee table. Then, he took Ken and laid him on top of Barbie. "This is called the missionary position." Joey's face reddened a little and he rolled his eyes. "Stay with me, son. Other things have to happen. You too, Agnes—stop messing with that plant." Joey's mother stopped fidgeting and paid attention. Joey's father picked up Barbie again and yanked off her pink dress with its tiny bow in one swift yank. Then, he picked up Ken, tore off his argyle sweater and pulled off his pants. He placed them one on top of the other again, in all their plastic tan nakedness. Joey giggled. "Now, the man, well, you know what the man has. What does a man have between his legs?"

Joey grinned.

"Well?"

"A dong," Joey said shyly.

"Well, okay, we'll call it a penis, though. And what does the woman have between her legs, Joseph."

"Coochie," Joey whispered.

"'Cootie?' Oh, you kids today. We'll call it by its real name, son. It's a vagina, Joseph. Vagina and penis. Now, the man's penis gets near his wife's vagina and it hardens. When a man and his wife are in the missionary position, the penis may enter the vagina. Are you listening to me, Joseph?"

Joey nodded an emphatic "yes." He didn't ever want to have to hear this story again.

"And when the penis enters the vagina," Joey's father pressed the dolls together. "Well, this male doll doesn't exactly have a penis . . ." Then, he spread Barbie's legs and inspected between them. " . . .And this female doesn't have a vagina, either. Honey, where did you get these dolls?"

"Wal-Mart," Joey's mother stated. "All dolls look like that."

"Anyway," Joey's father said and pressed them together again. "The penis—you know what a penis is, right son?" Joey nodded. His father's voice was getting thin. "It releases a liquid in the vagina and that liquid has little things called sperm . . ." Joey was watching Big Boy out

the window again. Mr. Parker was drying him with a big yellow towel. " . . . that swim to the egg and try to fertilize it . . ." Joey's mother licked her fingertips and wiped dust off the ivy leaves. " . . .and that's where babies come from, Joseph."

Joey sat and waited until his father hadn't said anything else for a minute or two. His mother had begun to remove her pink foam curlers. "Do you have anything to say?" Joey's father asked.

Joey thought for a second. There must be some way to shut him up. Joey didn't want to hear another word about sperms and missionaries. He knew just what to say to shut his father up. "Thank you," Joey said.

"You're welcome, son," his father said and smiled.

His mother leaned over and patted his head. Joey stood and sprinted off to his room. As he lay awake in his bed that night, he couldn't fall asleep. His head was swirling with expectations of The Meadowbrook Baptist School for Boys intermingled with memories of Lindley Elementary. He pictured the classrooms at Lindley filled with boys in uniforms like the ones he saw in the Meadowbrook pamphlet. He envisioned a teacher who looked like Barbie and a principal with hair like Ken's. Suddenly, he heard a sound in the bedroom next door. His father was moaning. He sounded as if he were in pain. Joey turned back the covers and started to crawl out of bed. Then, he heard another sound. It sounded like a dog

whimpering. He wondered if Big Boy across the street was all right. What if a car had hit Big Boy? Then, Joey heard the low moans of his father again intermingled with the whimpering and both sounds grew louder. He was frightened. Perhaps a burglar was in the house. Finally, he heard an unmistakable sound. His mother's high-pitched voice said, "Oh, Reginald." Joey pulled the covers up over his head. He squeezed his eyes shut until he could see bright colors zigzag through the darkness. As hard as he tried, he could not help picturing his father on top of his mother and his father's dong in his mother's coochie, or whatever his father had called it. Joey thought he would never fall asleep.

When he opened his eyes, it was the next morning. Joey's parents took him to the airport at six a.m. to fly alone to Charlottesville, where he would take the bus to Valley. Joey sat in the backseat and watched the roadside for dead animals. He thought he saw a small black dog, but it turned out to be a torn-up tire. He didn't say any prayers that morning.

At the departure gate his father shook his hand firmly and said, "Joseph, pray for forgiveness. And don't forget Rev. Smith's hour."

"Friday's, Saturdays, and Sundays at seven. AM 1300," Joey, his mother and father said slowly and mechanically in unison.

Joey's mother hugged him against her breast and smoothed his hair. Joey looked at the curves of her body beneath her terry cloth warm up suit and tried not to think of Barbie. Joey's father pocketed his hands and jiggled his keys and Joey tried not to think of the Ken doll and its smooth crotch where a penis should have been. Joey shuddered. He paused for a second before turning to leave. There was something he wanted to say to them just in case he never saw them again, just in case the plane crashed or they wrecked their car on the way home. He shifted his father's military pack onto his shoulder. His parents stood side by side, smiling politely and studying him as something they had made. Their son. Joey. He said nothing and turned away to hand his boarding card to the perky, strawberry-blonde attendant in a tight uniform at the gate. She had neglected the third button on her blouse and the material formed an open pocket, a window to her chest. Joey couldn't help noticing the thin lace camisole stretched over her full breasts and he smiled and turned to wave at his mother and father.

Sitting the Rundle's

I returned from my semester abroad last Saturday and saw someone that night in front of The Campus Club who reminded me of Mr. Rundle. I could never forget him or that morning on the way to school when I was fourteen. I had asked my dad if we could drive by the bridge where Mrs. Rundle's car went over. I told him I wanted to see where it was, what it looked like. Dad said he understood and it didn't matter if I was late for homeroom.

We drove down around Lee and Second Streets where Jacque's, that deli on the corner with the gingham tablecloths and jug wine, was closed last summer after they built the new mall on Baker and Third. You can't find a good Reuben in Chester anymore. Dad drove slowly past a small crowd huddled at the dock, rubbernecking to see the churning river below the bridge. It looked like they were waiting for an outdoor performance to begin. Two children swung from their mother's hands and another pointed wildly; one man in a hunting cap snapped a Polaroid while a boy next to him held the drying photos in his fingertips; two women in furs hugged and bounced on their tiptoes in the cold. Beneath the arm of a crane—a mechanical giant fishing around in the white-capped, gray Mississippi—men in bright orange suits darted and waved their arms authoritatively. Four of them hunched, straining together to pull two taught lines from the river's surface. Every minute or so, the red hooded head of a scuba diver surfaced like a buoy surrounded

with bubbles and then disappeared again under the blanket of water. A wrecker, two ambulances and half a dozen police cars were parked next to the crowd, lights flashing, waiting just like everybody else. All the vehicles pointed in different directions, as if they might crash into each other, the crowd, or the river if they drove off at the same time. Yellow police tape sagged between the crowd and the crane and workers, twisted and whipped when a gust roared through. I read and reread the twisting tape:

CROSS NOT DO CROSS NOT CROSS DO NOT CROSS DO NOT DO

The bridge's railing was ripped loose and dangled over the water like a broken tree limb.

My dad pulled up as close as he could to the dock and we sat in the car with the engine off and the radio on. That song, "Lady Love" was playing on WABZ. That was my dad's favorite song. He was humming to it and making up words like he always did. *You're my Lady Lo-ove. Your love is hmm-mm like the summer breeze, the hmm-yeah. My reason for living and taking out the trash.*

It was early December and cold enough outside to turn your breath to fog. The people behind the police line opened their mouths and talked like little chimneys letting out smoke signals. The song finished. My dad put his hand on my shoulder and started to say something just as the crane dodged the bobbing red scuba divers and their blue and white striped rescue boat, and rose swinging from the surface, clutching something in its claws. Cameras flashed.

The WXYX news truck inched forward as Mandy Fisher, the mousy reporter I recognized from the news, sculpted her blonde helmet and applied lipstick in front of the ready camera, the crane looming in the background. Leaning forward and squinting at the scene, I imagined the swinging object was Mrs. Rundle in her blue orchid dress, caught by the neck like a prize fish to be stuffed and mounted, missing both arms and legs, perhaps missing her head. She might be missing everything and her parts lay scattered on the floor of the river. I shut my eyes and opened them again to see only the mangled bumper from Mrs. Rundle's Mazda swing from the crane hook, slinging globs of chocolaty silt onto the crowd. The crane lifted slowly and you could see the bumper covered with roots and sludge from the river bottom, like it had been under the water for ten years. River water gushed from the bumper. I rolled down the window and leaned out to watch the workers unhook it. The air, sour with diesel fumes, was so crisp and cold it felt like snow. People shouted and the crane whined and cranked. A woman in a wide-brimmed hat sang "Amazing Grace" as a policeman barked at the crowd and backed them away from the dock. I started to moan and cry and I watched tears steaming on my cheeks in the side mirror of Dad's Grand Prix.

Poor Mrs. Rundle. She and the kids and Mr. Rundle had lived next door for four years. And I had been babysitting

them for almost as long. Never once did they go out together when I sat Wayne and Darby. Mr. Rundle usually had some meeting or had to work late and Mrs. Rundle sang in the church choir at St. Bart's. She had choir practice every Wednesday night and concerts most Saturdays. They never came home together. Mrs. Rundle usually came home alone first, paid me, then put the kids in their pajamas in the car after I was home in my room. I watched them out my bedroom window sometimes. She would carry sleeping Darby, and Wayne would trail behind her, wailing crying, pulling on her sweater. The next morning, when I checked my window, her Mazda would be back in the driveway with Mr. Rundle's gray Buick behind it. His Buick had a sticker on the back that said, "Don't Blame Me, I Didn't Vote."

Only one night did Mr. Rundle come home alone and send me home instead of Mrs. Rundle. He was a skinny man, older than Mrs. Rundle—in his fifties. She was thirty-four or five. Pretty in a cute way with bouncy, curly hair like the Pert girl on TV. He was tall and lanky, like Ichabod Crane, with that big Adam's apple and severe slender nose, but dark, with bushy eyebrows and a full head of black wavy hair. Wayne had his hair. Darby's was soft and curly blonde like Mrs. Rundle's and the Pert girl's. Mr. Rundle surprised me that night. I was asleep on the sofa. Darby and Wayne had been to bed over an hour ago. Some old Marilyn Monroe movie was over on TBS and the credits were rolling. Loud music filled the house. *Men grow cold as*

girls grow old . . . He appeared in the den with his shirt unbuttoned, a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken under his arm and a six-pack of Lone Star under the other.

"SUPPER TIME!" he announced in a booming baritone voice.

He was loud for such a gaunt, thin man. *And we all loose our charms in the end.* I rubbed my eyes and sat up straight in the fluffy sofa, fumbled around under the coffee table for the remote control to turn that music down. I couldn't find it. The TV boomed. *There may come a time when a lass needs a lawyer, but Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend.*

Mr. Rundle bounded into the kitchen, popped a beer and stumbled into the hall, slapping the walls and yelling, "SUPPER TIME! SUPPER TIME!"

But beware when they start to descend. He ducked into Darby's and Wayne's rooms and dragged them from their beds.

"Come on kids, Daddy's home! Got you some CHICKEN! You love chickie chickie chicken!" *Time rolls on and youth is gone.* "Come on Wayne— time to EAT! YOU'RE A GROWIN' BOY!"

Mr. Rundle carried Darby over one shoulder into the kitchen and dragged sleepy Wayne by the arm. I manually turned off the TV and was getting my books together. It was midnight. I didn't want any fried chicken, but I knew Rundle was going to offer. I stood in the living room and listened to the family making family dinnertime noises.

Darby was crying and mumbling, "Sleepy, sleepy, no chicken."

Wayne was asking for a leg and more mashed potatoes. I stood there in the den, watching the black screen on the TV sparking after the hours of cartoons and movies. I stacked and re-stacked my books in my arms. I waited. Rundle and the children were silent except for smacking and chewing. I left quietly through the front door without my twelve dollars.

My mom and dad never went out together on dinner dates or dancing or anything, but they did play softball together. They were on a league in Chester with a bunch of other couples. They had orange uniforms and white caps that said *Roadrunners* on them. I went to a game with them one time. There were some other younger kids there. Everyone seemed pretty normal— the adults drinking lots of canned beer and getting into the game, screaming and yelling. They went to a cookout at the Walters' after. I took some of the other kids to Pizza Hut in my dad's car. It was all right. I never went with them again, though. I had my own friends. I didn't want to hang out with my parents' friends' kids. But I think it's good that my parents did stuff together. Sometimes they took trips together to Hot Springs with the Walters. Once, when I was a little kid, they went on a trip and I found a porno stash in my dad's bathroom cabinet. A long strand of blue beads with a loop at one end, some magazines, a plastic battery-operated dildo, videos of men

and women, women and women, men and men. Kinky stuff. I curled up on the bathroom floor and studied the pictures on the video boxes. There was one of a woman being spanked by two men. I thought about those pictures a lot when I was going to sleep at night. I liked to pretend I was the woman being spanked. One night while my parents were out bowling, I wore the beads around my neck like one of those tacky thick necklaces Carol Burnett used to wear. My babysitter paddled me (to my delight) and made me take them off, said they were my mom's jewelry and not a toy. I didn't know where those beads had been. My babysitter probably didn't know either. I mean, that string of beads was a toy. My parents were obviously still having sex. That was good sign, I think.

But the Rundle's. I'd been through their cabinets. Tums, Gas-Ex, razors, corn pads, cream bleach, hair tonic for men. There was a pair of crutches in the closet and a box of old women's clothes marked "Goodwill." No pornos or handcuffs hiding in there. Mr. Rundle had a handgun, a picture of an old man at a lake, a duck call, shoehorn and some loose change in his top drawer. There was an old faded Neil Diamond ticket. Everything in the drawer smelled like Mennen. Socks with holes, dingy underwear. She had an old antique-looking hand mirror, a locket with pictures of Wayne and Darby as babies, a bottle of football-shaped pills, what looked like a Christmas list. Next to "Gary" (Mr. Rundle) it said, "Izod socks, photo album." Mrs. Rundle's

nightgowns were shapeless and young looking with pink appliqué, like Darby's.

The last time I babysat for them, Darby cried the whole time. I kept telling her everything was all right, that her mom would be home soon to tuck her in, but she was six. When you're six, it's hard to figure out when "soon" is. Ten minutes can seem like a lifetime at the dentist office or pass before you know it at the video arcade. I still look at my watch and can't believe how much time has passed since I last looked at it. Unless, of course, I'm stranded in traffic or failing at something, like an exam. Wayne played *Space Invaders* all night that night and ate microwave pizza pockets. He was usually talkative and funny, wanting me to play Lincoln Logs or "Little Mannies" with him. "Little Mannies" was Wayne's name for the little Fischer Price people with plastic hair who lived in a two-story house that opened from the back so you could see inside. Wayne would be the father and the son, I would be the mom, and Darby would be the daughter. But that night, he sat in front of the TV playing *Space Invaders* until I told him to get in the bed. Then, he jumped up and threw the joystick at me. It came unplugged from the Atari and hit me in the lip. Immediately, I could feel the skin under my lip swell and burn into a blood blister.

"Wayne, get in bed!" I hollered.

He grabbed his plate of pizza pockets, dumped them into the front of his shirt and ran out the front door into the yard.

He was screaming, "YOU'RE FAT AND I'M NOT GOING TO BED!"

I followed him out into the front yard where he was pegging the magnolia tree with pizza pockets from his shirt, screaming at the tree, at me, at anyone who would listen. The Nugent's front porch light across the street switched on.

"Wayne," I announced, "I'm gonna tell your mom if you don't—"

"TELL HER, BLUBBERBABYSITTER!"

He was running in a circle around the tree and he had run out of pizza pockets, so now he was throwing those magnolia pods with the red seeds at the tree and at me. When he ran out of those, he bolted past me into the house and into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

I could hear him chanting behind the door, then singing it like a little annoying child's song: "*Blubberbabysitter, she's the fatty from next door! She's not my fat friend! She's the sitter! SHITTER! Big, fat BABYSHITTER!*"

Mrs. Rundle came home later than usual— around one a.m. Wayne had finally gone to bed. Darby was asleep with me on the sofa in the den where we had watched a taped Wild Kingdom rerun about kangaroo birth for the thousandth time. Mrs. Rundle came in quietly, turned off the TV and VCR, gave

me the usual twelve dollars. She smelled like menthol cigarettes and her eyes were red and puffy. Her soft blonde curls were wet and sticking to her forehead in clumps and her makeup was smeared under her eyes.

It didn't seem like the right time to tell her about Wayne, even though she stooped and grabbed his overturned plate off the rug and asked, "They were all right tonight?"

She took my place on the sofa with Darby's head in her lap, stroking Darby's head and shaking her own head back and forth. She was whispering something.

"They were good," I lied at the front door, then asked, "Are you all right?"

"Honey, we're gonna be fine," she said in a singsong voice like her answer was a lullaby. "Go on home. You've got school."

As I crossed their lawn into my own, I could hear the Rundle's phone ringing. I stopped between the yards and listened. It stopped and then started ringing again. I started back to the Rundle's door, then stopped and listened. The phone stopped ringing. I turned back around toward home and continued across the yard, past the tree swing to my house. I stepped over the flowerbed onto the front stoop and put my key in the lock. The front porch was lit brightly and moths were swarming around my head and then into the house when I opened the door. I was tired and it was late. I had school. I was fourteen. The next day I would have to get up earlier than usual to answer the cops'

questions. They would be in the living room sipping coffee with my mom. They would want to know what I knew about Jane Rundle and her children and their car that swerved off the bridge in the middle of that night.

Mr. Rundle moved out in his Buick in the middle of another night and we figured we'd never see him again. Their house was up for sale within a week and took six months to sell. Now, a furniture upholsterer named Glenn Dunbar lives there with his girlfriend, Rita. She sells Merle Norman cosmetics and has one of those pink Buick Le Sabre's with a sticker that says "Make Me Pretty!" on the back windshield.

So, I returned from Milan last Saturday night and I saw someone who reminded me of Mr. Rundle. Beth and Rachel picked me up at the airport and took me to The Campus Club to hear my stories. We parked in front and began walking to the door of our favorite bar and I saw this man, it was obviously a man, in the street in front. He was tall and thin and wore a large floppy hat, like a lady's sun hat, with a big fake yellow flower in the band. He wore a checkered dress with a white apron over it and a string of white beads. Black polished business shoes peeked out from under the dress. He was talking frantically on a cell phone and pacing back and forth. Halloween was two months ago. It was just a regular weekend night in small-town Chester

and here was this guy dressed up like a woman in men's dress shoes.

He was saying, "Yes. I got it. I got it. I got it." into the cell phone over and over again. Beth and Rachel hurried toward the door of The Campus Club.

"Get away from that nut," Beth said under her breath.

"Yeah, really," I whispered.

He was moving closer to us as we neared the door. When I passed him, I glanced at the face under that big, floppy hat into glossy eyes, red from lack of sleep or lack of something and I swear it was Rundle's face. That gaunt face, pale white and tired, dark eyebrows, bushy over swollen lids. His cheeks were thick with stubble and needed a shave. His lips were painted crookedly with pink lipstick. It looked just like him. I couldn't stop myself.

I said, "Rundle?"

He snapped shut the cell phone and hiked his checkered dress above his bare knobby knees, took off running down the street. I stood in front of the bar and watched him run. Once, he glanced back over his shoulder. I could hear his dress shoes pat-patting all the way down the block past Uncle Toe's Bar and Grill on Manchester, past Tonga Lounge and the post office. Beth and Rachel were grabbing the sleeves of my jacket, pulling me into the bar.

"You know that nut?"

We downed pitchers of beer in the booth in the corner. The one with the splits in the seats. I kept bringing it

up. Kept telling the story about how I was fourteen and Mrs. Rundle's car went over the bridge with the kids strapped in the backseat. How my dad had called it "an open and shut case." I was their sitter. The police were in my living room sipping coffee. Beth and Rachel tried to change the subject and talk about my semester in Milan, Italian men, Rachel's date with Brad Kilpatrick. I gave in and left it alone. I went to the dark, dingy bathroom in the back of the bar, cried in the mirror for a few minutes. Mascara ran down my cheeks in tiny black rivers and my eyes swelled like round red salad peppers. It sure looked like Rundle out there in the street like a woman.

Unfolding As It Should

He had driven down to New Orleans to see a specialist. An oncologist, actually. I met him afterwards for lunch at Galatoire's, and over Crabmeat Maison and scotch, he gave me the news.

"Prostate cancer. You gonna finish that salad?"

All I could think of was Celia and how she might be disappointed that something bigger than she was would eventually kill my brother.

Roy met Celia five years ago when she walked up to him at Kotter's Korner in downtown Little Roach and asked for a light. She was holding a Tampax instead of a cigarette and when Roy absentmindedly went to light the thing, Celia giggled and said, "Wanna watch me put it in?"

This story gave me the creeps, but Roy, always one for a laugh, seemed to think it was one of the best pick-up lines he'd ever heard. And Roy was constantly hearing pick up lines from women. He'd never dated before Celia, but was blessed with these shocking good looks: ink black hair, dark, deep-set eyes, and the cheekbones of a chiseled sculpture. He'd been twice proposed to—the first time by our cousin, Dorcas, and the second time in the parking lot of Triple A by a total stranger feigning the inability to fold a map. Women pursued him like he was a plastic surgeon giving away free boob jobs. Roy'd heard a million pick-up

lines and Celia's—I've never been able to come to grips with this fact: it worked.

Roy looked at me as if I doubted the verity of his news. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a thick stack of pamphlets. He held up the first one, which had this Gandhi quote on the front of it: "You are the change you wish to see in the world." I wondered what kind of change in the world a man would be concerned about making after finding out that he was dying. I knew Roy and I could just hear him in the doctor's office saying, "Here's a change I'd like to see in the world: me without cancer. Then, we'll talk about Third World Debt." Roy tossed the pamphlet across the table at me and I tried to thumb through it nonchalantly, but my eyes were so bleary with tears I could barely read what it said about DRE and PSA testing, digital rectal exams, the radical prostatectomy. The waiter came and Roy ordered another scotch and I wanted to order one, too, but I didn't open my mouth. Instead, I went upstairs to the women's restroom, put the stopper in the sink, and filled it with water. I put my face under the water and held my breath. It was cold and quiet under the water and I thought about those afternoons at Miss Walker's pool, next door to my grandparents. Roy and Dorcas and I would swim for hours until our skin shriveled and the water became icy when the sun began to sink in the afternoon. Our favorite game was "Whale." The whale was the person who could hold his breath the longest. If you weren't the

whale, you were just a fish. And nobody ever wanted to be a fish. I was always the whale because I wasn't afraid of drowning and would stay under, curled in a sinking ball, watching bubbles shoot from the water jets, until I was dizzy and my hearing and eyesight began to fail.

The first time I stayed under too long, I gulped that first breath under the water and I remember how shocked I was and my body was, because the breath wasn't air and I didn't have gills that would allow the water to pass out of my body. I inhaled water into my lungs and the pressure on my chest made me feel like I was going to explode. Later that afternoon, Uncle Buddy brought Roy and Dorcas to visit me at the children's ward. They were still wearing their swimsuits and were sunburned and damp-headed. They brought "Get Well" helium balloons and kept sucking the air out of them and asking questions in squeaky cartoon chipmunk voices. "Does it hurt to drown?" "Did you have to get a shot?" "Will Miss Walker allow you to go swimming ever again?" "Did you know that we let you be the whale?"

The door to the restroom opened and I lifted my dripping head out of the sink.

"Are you okay?" A dark-skinned woman in a white uniform stood in the doorway holding a mop. She was frowning. I had no idea how long she'd been standing there. I looked in the mirror. My hair was pasted to my forehead and mascara ringed my eyes like a raccoon.

"I just got overheated," I said.

"Yeah, you got to be careful in this humidity if you're not used to it," she said and asked if I needed anything. I said I didn't and she left. I dried my hair under the hand blower until it was crisp and frizzy and I looked like 70's Barbra Streisand.

When I returned to the table, Roy was paying the check. He had a drunk on from three scotches, and hollered when he saw me.

"You go take a little dip?" he asked and the people at the table next to us whispered and laughed. Roy knew about my love affair with water. His approach was to nag and joke about it until I developed some other fixation like racing cars or fasting. His approach never worked. I was still walking into lakes fully dressed, standing waist high in dangerous tides, sleeping in deep baths behind locked doors. I would wager that I had made him mad enough in the past to slap it out of me, but that would never happen, given the circumstances surrounding his marriage to Celia.

Our parents moved to Switzerland to grow cannabis on a farm when we were in high school. They were in shock over the fact that it was still illegal to grow pot sans THC in the U.S. for textile purposes and wanted to make hemp shower curtains, sell them wholesale. My brother and I couldn't have cared less about hemp or the environment or our parent's hippie ways and wanted to stay in the States with our friends and drink Budweiser. So after hearing us whine,

complain, and refuse to leave, the folks said fine, stay with your "Buttwiper." They said, "You're sixteen and eighteen. Old enough to take care of yourselves and the cat." So we stayed. Like a couple of brats. I still wonder how different our lives might be if we had listened to our parents back then. And how different their own lives might have turned out if they had listened to each other. Dad would never understand my mom's reluctance to have an "open marriage." And Mom would never admit that the "open marriage" my father wanted involved honesty and that infidelity was centered on mendacity. Their time in Switzerland was cut short for two reasons: Roy. And Mom's decision that money was more important than hemp.

After Roy and Celia dated for three and a half weeks, she said they were meant for each other and proposed. They flew to Vegas with her stolen American Express card and six overstuffed Hartman tweed suitcases, and were married by "Elvis" in The Little White Drive-Through Wedding Chapel. I didn't find out until years later that the "ceremony" took place at the drive-through and not in an actual chapel, but what difference does any of that make, now? Roy is in California and Celia is in prison where she belongs.

The first time she stabbed him they were having cereal in their butter-colored butler's pantry. The sun was glaring through the skylights between the wormy chestnut beams of the vaulted ceiling. Roy had torn the roof off

that breakfast nook two springs before, after a red-hot fight—wallpaper versus paint—outside Color Tyme. Three beers later he was positioned over the flat roof of that back room with an oversized claw hammer in one hand and a pick axe in the other. He went to town tearing the roof off like a mad heathen and two days later had reconstructed the thing in the manner of St. Elizabeth's of Our Holy Mother of the Covenant over on Chestnut Boulevard.

So, the sun was lighting up that little room like a used car lot on a Saturday night and Celia was asking Roy questions about a work trip to Hot Springs he had planned to take that afternoon. He would be gone all weekend and both men and w-women from the office would be present. Celia insisted Roy call her whenever there was a business lunch so she could find out who had sat next to him at the table and what they were wearing and whom he had spoken to and what they had talked about. She told Roy he couldn't go on the trip to Hot Springs and that it didn't matter if Benson and Graves was starting some new investment project for the pope. Not that she was religious or anything, she just worshipped anyone with prestige. Roy said she would be glad he went when she could charge up the new credit cards and buy a tennis bracelet and a new SUV. He said it would be worth the affair he would have in Bill's mountain cabin that weekend and that he would insist that the stripper not give him a lap dance.

In hindsight, that last little bit-bad joke that it was-was probably not the wisest thing for him to say. Roy knew how to push Celia's buttons. He knew how to use language to torment her and even when she wasn't drinking, she became as violent as a Presa Canario on steroids in a field of defenseless babies. Celia grabbed the first thing her manicured fingertips could find—a pair of sewing scissors—and shoved them deep into his carotid artery. He should've died that night in the ICU.

I didn't hear that story until Easter when Roy and I were in the Our Lady of the Lake emergency room in Baton Rouge waiting for a doctor to come and inspect multiple lacerations on his head. It was four a.m. Sunday and we were expected by Mom and Jacob, our step-father, on the third pew, sermon side, at St. Sebastian's First Church of the Friendly Way at 9:30. Roy and Celia had been at a casino all night and Roy had been ready to leave for hours. Celia was drinking heavily and losing heavily. Once she began to withdraw cash using Roy's debit card, he demanded that they leave. Celia wasn't going anywhere, she warned, and stumbled back to the blackjack table. Within the hour, she tore open her blouse and propped her full (fake) breasts on the table, hoping to find a sponsor. The casino bouncers threw them both out the front door in the midst of a gawking crowd. They fought in the street when she refused to get in the car and in the middle of it all, she took off her spike-

heeled boot and pummeled him in the head with the heel until he turned from her, bloodied, and doubled over in agony.

I entered the picture when he stood over me in the guestroom, blood dripping off his chin onto the collar of my nightgown, asking for a ride to the emergency room.

"Sure thing," I said and I spent the rest of the morning defending both of us in front of the ICU physician. Turns out he was the same one who saw me over Christmas when I took two Xanax and decided to go snorkeling in my mom's hot tub at three in the morning. A family of repeat offenders is frowned upon in the emergency room at Our Lady of the Lake.

Almost a year had passed since Mom and Dad had been in Switzerland and neither Roy nor I was failing out of school or wanted by the law, so I guess they figured we were doing all right. One night I ordered Big King's Pizza while Roy went out with his friends. I heard glass breaking in the street during "Dukes of Hazard" and when I went out to investigate, I found Roy, standing in the street next to his Chevy Blazer, wearing only a T-shirt and holding his right hand, which was bleeding from a wide carve across the palm. That hand was sliced open like raw flank steak. It started to rain and I noticed the glass sparkling all over the pavement.

"I locked the keys in the car. I had to bust a window," he said.

"Where are you trying to go?"

"Marianne's across the street at Teddy's. We were hanging out. She said, 'I wonder how many drugs it would take to kill me.' Her head lopped over the back of the couch and before I could say anything funny—you know me—she slid down over the pillows. Turned blue."

We both stared at the pavement where Roy's blood made black shiny pools like car oil and it seemed as if we were waiting for some kind of sign, or maybe a cue, from the street.

"I was gonna take her to Charity," he said and it was the first time I ever realized people could die so easily.

Mom and Dad had a pool when I was in grammar school. After I strapped myself to a patio chair and walked off the diving board to have an underwater tea party, they decided to have it filled. They had to lock me in my room the day the dump truck came with the dirt. Mom propped a dining room chair under my doorknob because I'd threatened to stand in front of the truck in protest. I said it would have to run me over if it was going to put any dirt in that pool. I was a mermaid and the days of my floating in the cool abyss of that gorgeous lime green pool were gone forever. I would sneak over the fence at the Y for a year before getting

caught and escorted home, soaking wet, and would never again love anything as much as deep water.

A few years ago at the art museum where I sell tickets, I met a Frenchman named Jean Luc who was the night janitor. After the museum closed at night, I would stay late and talk to him while he mopped the floors. His favorite paintings were dark and heavy, boldly sinister images that he said represented death. I loved the same paintings, but insisted they were water images. One portrayed a white figure floating in black space. An extended arm was attached to what looked like a kite tail, but could just as easily have been a sea anemone. Another was a series of black wavy lines that opened at the top into bright yellow bursts, which trickled down over the rest of the painting like spores or parachuting dandelion seeds. Jean Luc said he was fascinated with the darkness of the human soul and loved that I had almost drown. I wasn't sure how to take that and then he asked me to marry him one night after we kissed in the men's restroom. I kept wondering if he wanted to marry me or the idea of me. I was pretty, then, and smart, and sure of myself. I didn't like parties or large groups of people, but I liked long walks by the river in the rain. I liked drinking massive quantities of alcohol. I was Jean Luc's feminine mirror image, he said. I guess I would have been safer dating hydrophobic social climbers, but I was attracted to the fact that he was so attracted to me. But, not enough to say "yes" to his proposal.

Marianne died from the heroin overdose. She was already dead when her body slumped down over the pillows. All of us had to come to terms with the fact that Marianne wouldn't be the woman he spent the rest of his life with. My parents came back early from Switzerland, from the hemp they said could save the world. They were wrong in thinking that Roy had a handle on things. I think Marianne would've loved Roy until the day one of them died. And she never would've stabbed him with anything.

Leaving for school one morning, I had run over and killed Mom's cat. So they weren't very happy with me. Roy was their focus. They took him to shrinks and bought him a new car. They rented films about heroin addiction and even had a recovering addict they'd met at an NA meeting over to the house for dinner to talk to Roy. They never made it to dinner, though, because they found the guy sniffing through mom's panty drawer during the appetizer course and threw him out.

As soon as Roy stopped sleeping all the time and started taking an interest in his friends again, Mom started dental school and Dad started drinking. I could understand her severe disinterest in being around him. He was a pretty gross drunk. Unkempt and sad, more laziness than anything else. He had opened a head shop downtown called "The Day Tripper" and despite the number of high school and college kids who came in for pipe cleaners and Dugouts, business was

not good. He had one employee, Sasha, a skinny girl with stringy blonde hair who wore concert t-shirts over long flowing skirts. Sasha ran the place so Dad could just stay in the back smoking bong hits and drinking vodka out of a Styrofoam cup until closing. Then he'd come home and continue doing the same thing. If he'd had things his way, he would either still be in Switzerland or, at least, he would be balling Sasha. But, Mom never agreed to the "open marriage thing" and promised she would leave him if she ever found out that he was enjoying the fruits of such a set-up.

She was gone all the time after she started dental school. Roy wasn't bothered by her absence and I wasn't either, really, but I was the one who spent all my time at the house, so I was the one who overheard the phone call on that informative April afternoon. Dad was at the shop and Roy was playing Frisbee golf with some friends. Mom was at school, of course, so there were no cars in the driveway. Dad's brother, Uncle Buddy, drove up and parked his truck in the front yard. He always parked there whenever he came over and the grass in that spot was yellow and flat and stayed damp. I didn't go to the door because I was naked in the downstairs bathroom, waxing my bikini line for the first time. He had a key, since he would be the one to care for the house if we ever went anywhere. Of course, we never went anywhere, but that was beside the point. He let himself in and walked straight into the kitchen and picked

up the phone. I could hear him from the bathroom as I applied mineral oil to the bloody patches on my crotch.

"Is this the Day's Inn? I'd like a room for tonight. Two people. I'd like to pay now over the phone. My wife will be coming in late and will be tired."

Uncle Buddy didn't have a wife. He and my aunt, Mary—despite the fact that she was a devout Catholic—were divorced before I was even born. The marriage was annulled to Mary's delight, which gave Roy and me plenty of ammunition to pick on poor Dorcas. St. Dorcas the Motherless Wonder. Mary took Dorcas to live in a convent in Oregon when she turned thirteen, and none of us had seen or heard from her since the letter she sent six months after arriving, stating proudly that she had changed her name to Beth and was no longer St. Dorcas the Motherless Wonder. I had written her twice since then, but addressed the letters to "Dorcas" and they were returned to me unopened. It was common knowledge that Uncle Buddy was lonely after Dorcas left and had always been jealous of Dad. But I don't think anyone knew that he was satiating himself by sleeping in cheap hotels with my mother. No one knew until now, that is.

I sat quietly in the bathroom with mineral oil dripping down my legs until I heard the front door close and Buddy's truck pull out of the driveway. I threw on my clothes and called Teddy's to find Roy. That night, the three of us sat in the parking lot of the Day's Inn in Teddy's car and

waited. We wore baseball caps and sunglasses and I remember actually being excited about the stakeout before we saw Buddy's truck. When Mom's car pulled up a minute later, a knot formed in my throat and I had trouble breathing. Mom and Uncle Buddy even had the nerve to embrace on the sidewalk in front of the hotel and I remember Roy saying something about wanting to suffocate Uncle Buddy with a pillow from the Day's Inn.

I don't know how we managed to keep our mouths shut for so many years. I guess we looked at Dad and saw how pitiful he already was and knew that spilling the truth about Mom would only drive him to drink himself to death. Which he did anyway—without even learning about Mom and Uncle Buddy. Roy and I both went to the mall with Mom one afternoon and sat in the Food Court and told her about Buddy's phone call and how we saw her at the Day's Inn with him. She didn't deny it, but she didn't apologize for it, either. I guess we thought that, miraculously, she was going to cry and say the affair was a mistake and go running to Dad and fall down at the foot of his bong and beg forgiveness. We thought, the way kids think before they learn how desperate life can be, that our family would be saved. It wasn't. Mom, threatened that we might leak the story before she could escape, immediately served Dad with divorce papers, moved into a swanky little condo near the racquetball club, and bought a used Mercedes Benz 420 SEL. Dad, wasted, bitter,

and hopeless, made jokes to try to fool us into thinking he would be okay.

"Hey," he said after she bought the car, "at least it's a 420. She's not completely uptight." "420" –legendary police call code for marijuana investigation–was among my father's favorite stoner lingo denoting international pot-smoking time. He liked to say, "It's always 4:20 somewhere." Within the year, Dad fired Sasha without even sleeping with her, closed The Day Tripper, and was hospitalized for cirrhosis of the liver. Three days after checking in, enlarged blood vessels in his stomach burst and he died alone in his room at Our Lady of the Lake.

I didn't want to die when I was a kid. I just wanted to be a mermaid and swim under the water with whales and sharks and colorful fish. I wanted to saddle up on the backs of dolphins and chase sailboats. I dreamed of lying wrapped in seaweed next to mountains of coral and watching seahorses bounce past my face in the current. I loved my body's weightlessness under the water when I floated in quiet darkness in the deep end of the pool at the Y. My dad took us to Pass Christian one summer when I was in grammar school and I refused to get out of the water—even to eat. I stayed out there from sun up to sun down and collapsed as soon as I hit the bed I shared with Roy in the ice-cold hotel room with its rattling window unit. I loved the womb of the ocean beneath violent waves. I loved the absence of

everything I felt and heard above water. It was only later that those around me equated my longing for this feeling with a longing for death. Jean Luc loved the translation. But he also loved women who "danced with death." He was obsessed with female poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton and kept scrapbooks filled with the obituaries of famous artists and musicians. When he realized that I had no intention of slitting my wrists or putting a gun to my temple or doing a repeat of that pill-popping session in the hot tub, he got bored and broke things off. He quit his janitorial job at the museum and disappeared without saying goodbye. One of the curators said he went back to France. The day janitor said he met a girl on Bourbon Street and had moved to Oklahoma to raise pigs.

Roy loved Celia. Loved her as if she were Marianne. Nobody else understood how he could waste his life with her, but he saw some precious power in her, some life force a person wants to find in someone else before he agrees to purchase round-trip tickets with her. It was that same power, I guess, that made him drive 443.7 miles in six hours so that he could prove his ability to surprise and overwhelm her.

I was relieved when he headed his green Mercury away down Canal toward I-10 after lunch. I stood in front of Woolworth's and one of many discount camera stores and watched him dart through the traffic like Mad Toad at the

wheel. I have an uncanny ability to pretend everything will be okay and that the words from a poem I hung over my desk are true: "No doubt the universe is unfolding as it should."

Roy bounded down the endless sweeps and turns of the two-lane highway, straddled farm roads, and leapt over cattle crossings. The Mercury sailed past Lake Village, Eudora, McGhee and Star City. Pine Bluff, Moticello and Hamburg. Roy always traveled with a thermos of strong Folgers, a box of Lorna Doons, and a book on tape. I had loaned him a Stephen King for this trip and regretted it later when I got the news.

I didn't know at the time, but he was rushing home to surprise Celia, who was on her way home from a rendezvous. He knew her email password and had checked it without her knowledge. Turns out she was up in Jersey City with some motivational speaker getting a little personal motivation.

It was the morning after Roy returned. New hairdo, new dress, Celia came waltzing in the back door, into that sunny butler's pantry with its cathedral ceiling, smiling like the cat that ate the canary. And Roy was seated there in the Amish rocking chair in the corner, just rocking. She asked him what was wrong. Roy looked like hell, I'm sure, 443 miles with the pedal to the metal and this news on his mind. All this news.

"Where'd you meet him?" was all Roy said.

"Him who?" She said.

"Cut the crap, Cel. I know everything."

"Do you know I'm leaving you for him? Do you know he's rich and much better looking than you? Do you know you can just sit there in that stupid-ass rocking chair and die for all I care?"

"I am dying, Celia."

"As I was saying," she laughed and twirled around in her signature leaving-the-room-now manner.

He grabbed her from behind and put a chokehold on her neck. She tried to scream but he held onto her and squeezed hard, like he didn't care if it was the last thing he did. And damn if she didn't grab a steak knife—the serrated kind—out of the wood block on the counter and gouge it into his right thigh. She ran and locked herself in the bathroom and he dialed 911. Roy said the last thing he heard her scream was, "I hope you bleed to death, asshole!"

I guess if he'd strangled her, he would be in prison and she would be in hell. Or Jersey City. Whichever.

The universe unfolds.

Mom married Jacob, an investment banker, after Dad died. I could tell Uncle Buddy wished he were dead, too. He took me to brunch one Saturday at Commander's Palace and cried in his turtle soup.

"Your mother doesn't know what she wants," he said and slammed his milk punch.

"Things just happen," I told him and it must've been a good thing to have said because he picked up the tab.

Uncle Buddy had forgotten that the person you're cheating with is hardly ever the person you end up with. He was a relationship catalyst, a sexual stepping-stone. Mom needed him, used him, moved on. She met Jacob playing tennis at the racquet club and he came in the following week for a root canal. She held his hand while the nitrous took affect. On their ten-year wedding anniversary, Mom announced her retirement from fifteen years of dentistry. They say if you can get out of dentistry without committing suicide, you're doing pretty damn well. Mom and Jacob bought a boat and sailed to the Bahamas. Over their mantle hangs a pair of poster-sized photographs of Mom swimming with dolphins. The universe unfolds.

I got a postcard from Roy yesterday. He's in Santa Cruz. Rents a little one bedroom on the wharf near the Surfer's Museum. He opened a natural fibers clothing store and says his hottest item is the hemp shower curtain. Now get a load of that.

He says he's been out on a couple of dates. One of them with a woman he met at his cancer support group. She's lost both her breasts, he says. Her name is Bridget and she's tan and pretty and a contractor. Says he might be helping her with a vaulted ceiling soon. In exchange, she's teaching him to surf.

"No proposals yet," he writes. And I'm relieved for the time being. I have that uncanny ability to pretend everything will be okay.

I quit my job at the museum after Jean Luc left. I swear I thought I saw him in the storefront window of Royal Antiques last week fingering a porcelain figurine of Iphigeneia, the virgin from classical mythology whose sacrifice was demanded by Artemis before she would allow the Greek fleet to sail on from Aulis to Troy. I could have been hallucinating.

Now, I teach swimming to fourth graders at the Y. One of my students, Naomi, likes to pretend she's a mermaid. I tell her it's a phase she'll outgrow. But, she doesn't listen to me. She just says, "Never trust grown-ups" and frog dives into the deep end. No doubt the universe is unfolding.

THE BLUES, PART III: A SCREENPLAY

Cow

a screenplay

by DeSha Kelly

FADE UP ON:

EXT. MISSISSIPPI HIGHWAY--NIGHT

Blue interstate sign reads I-55 SOUTH. Woods flank the empty highway. All is silent and still.

From far away, a rumble begins and gets louder as if a herd of horses is charging down the highway toward us. The sound of hooves beating the pavement increases to a violent, thunderous roar. Trees twist and bend. The metal highway sign rattles. Trash blows across the road.

Suddenly, all is silent. The wind blows gently in the aftermath.

EXT. MISSISSIPPI HIGHWAY--DAY

Ducks in formation fly south.

JANE, a drifter in her early thirties, dirty and road-worn, walks southward down the highway with a guitar around her neck. She strums the guitar and hums in a major key. She wears a small backpack, a floppy old cowboy hat, and the expression of someone who knows a fantastic secret.

BUCKY, a skinny, tattoo-covered, surly-looking guy in his late teens/early twenties, trudges out of the woods. He's the kind of nightmare you pray your daughter never brings home.

Jane stops, watches him. At the shoulder, Bucky notices Jane and stops. She strums a scary tune in a minor key. Stare-fight.

Two cars pass. Bucky turns and walks southward. A thick chain attached to the wallet in his back pocket swings when he walks.

Jane follows. They both raise their thumbs when a car passes. More cars speed past. Bucky turns back to see Jane with her thumb out.

BUCKY

Hey!

Jane doesn't hear him over the traffic.

BUCKY

Hey!

JANE
(Noticing him now.) Hey, how you
doing?

BUCKY
Bitch, ain't nobody gonna stop for a
crowd of hitchhikers.

Jane looks around.

JANE
I don't see a crowd.

BUCKY
(Counting them both.) ONE. TWO.
That's a crowd!

Jane walks toward him bravely.

JANE
Well, now, you're welcome to move on
down the highway.

BUCKY
Only way I'm moving down this highway
is in a *ve-hicle*.

Jane resumes strumming in a major key and walks past him. Bucky stands and stares after her. She becomes a dot in the distance. He throws out his unlucky thumb again for a ride.

EXT. MISSISSIPPI HIGHWAY FARTHER SOUTH--DAY

Jane sits cross-legged on the shoulder next to a mangled tire. She works tricky chord changes on her guitar. She's given up on hitchhiking for now.

She looks up to see Bucky walking toward her. He walks by without acknowledging her.

JANE
That's a nice vehicle you got there.

Bucky spits and keeps walking.

EXT. EXIT RAMP--DAY

Jane walks up the exit ramp past a sign for US-82/WINONA/GREENWOOD and sees a DINER/GAS STATION in the distance.

EXT. DINER/GAS STATION--DAY

Jane walks up to the diner. Bucky sits outside smoking a cigarette and looking dejected.

Nearby, a BEGGAR sits on flattened cardboard.

JANE
(to Bucky) No luck, huh?

BUCKY
I decided to walk to Baton Rouge. Need the exercise.

JANE
Yeah, me neither.

Jane walks inside and sits at a booth. Bucky walks to the window and watches her and other PEOPLE eating. He licks his lips hungrily and goes inside.

INT. DINER/GAS STATION--DAY

Jane peruses a menu.

Bucky eyes dirty magazines on a rack near the checkout. The CASHIER helps a CUSTOMER.

Jane catches his eye, but he turns back to the magazines. He's up to something. When he glances over at Jane again, she stares at him. He pretends not to notice and fondles some nameplate key chains. He searches the B names: *Bob, Brad, Barry.*

BUCKY
(To the cashier.) Hey, why you ain't got *Bucky*?

CASHIER
I'll be with you in a minute, sir. I have customers buying gas.

The cashier helps a customer at the window. In one swift motion, he grabs a *Playboy* and stuffs it into his jacket. He's a pro. The cashier is clueless.

His eyes dart back to Jane. She motions him over to the table. He hesitates, joins her. A WAITRESS comes over.

WAITRESS
What y'all want?

Bucky grabs Jane's menu.

JANE

I'll have your grilled cheese and a glass of ice water, please ma'am.

BUCKY

Two fried eggs, side of bacon, side of country ham, grits, biscuits with red-eye gravy, and a beer.

WAITRESS

The *Lumberjack* only comes with one meat. You said you want bacon *and* ham?

BUCKY

That's what I said because that's what I want.

WAITRESS

We don't serve beer. We sell it over there in the store, but you can't drink it on the premises.

BUCKY

Aw, shit. 'Course you can't. Roadside shithole like this. Gimme a buttermilk.

The waitress frowns, nervously jots down the order, and walks away. Bucky pulls out the *Playboy* and tears the protective plastic off the outside. He opens right to the centerfold and holds it up to Jane.

BUCKY

Feast your gander on that! Huh?

JANE

I didn't say anything.

Bucky flips to another page and flashes it.

BUCKY

Check out the *beave* on this one. Heart-shaped.

JANE

What is *beave*?

BUCKY

You know. *Beaver*. *Coochie, cooter, snatch, bearded clam*. *Bald eagle* if you're talking about this one.

Bucky holds up another picture.

A disgusted MAN pushes two gawking CHILDREN past their table. The waitress brings the food. Bucky quickly stashes the magazine in his jacket. He begins to wolf down his food, barely pausing to breathe.

JANE

So, you like those kinds of girls?

BUCKY

Girls with beaves? Yeah! What's the matter? You lose yours on the side of the road somewhere?

Bucky piles food onto a piece of biscuit and stuffs it into his mouth.

JANE

You know what I mean--the girls in that magazine.

BUCKY

(With his mouth full.) Shit. I got one waiting for me in Red Stick. You seen *Playboy's Girls of the SEC*?

JANE

No, I missed that one.

BUCKY

Lo was almost in that one.

He holds his hands out to emphasize large breasts.

BUCKY

That's my bitch, Lo. She a ho.

Bucky opens a package of jelly and squirts it over his remaining food, stirs it up, and shovels it into his mouth.

JANE

Lo is a ho? You mean she gets paid to-

-

BUCKY

Do the wild thang? Yeah. I'm going down there to beat the hell outta her. She been ho-in' with Joe College jock cocks over at LUS, SUL, whatever.

Bucky wipes his plate clean with his last piece of biscuit. A piece of egg falls onto the table. Using his biscuit like a napkin, he wipes it off the table and stuffs the soggy thing into his mouth.

JANE
Think that'll work? Beating her up?

BUCKY
Shit, my mama's a ho. Bet *she'd* never
turn another trick if I beat the hell
outta *her*. Whipped her with a belt?
Beat her with a boot?

JANE
Your mom works with Lo?

Bucky looks at her like she's crazy.

BUCKY
That's disgusting.

Jane shrugs her shoulders and eats her grilled cheese.

BUCKY
Hell no. She's in New Orleans. So I
heard from some loser. Some dive off
Bourbon, so I heard from said loser.

JANE
Never been there?

BUCKY
Woman, I been to New Orleans a
kazillion times. Now, have I been to
my Mama's whorehouse? *Hell* no!

When he says this, an OLD WOMAN sitting in the booth next to
them looks up, horrified, from her menu. Bucky burps at her,
opens a sugar packet and pours the contents into his mouth.

BUCKY
That's disgusting. But, if you're so
interested, she's in some nasty joint
on St. Louis Street. Go on. Get you
some. I ain't seen that bitch in four
years.

The waitress comes and puts down the check. As she removes
the plates, Bucky grabs Jane's crusts off her plate and crams
them into his mouth.

JANE
Where's your dad?

Bucky laughs and spews food out of his mouth onto Jane's
arm. Jane wipes the food off without looking at it.

BUCKY

My who? Shit, woman, ain't never been no dick in my world. You ask a lot of stupid questions. You know that?

Jane studies the check and puts money on the table. Bucky quickly stashes his wallet on its chain down into his baggy pants.

BUCKY

(Jumping up from the booth.) Hey!
Somebody stole my wallet!

He looks around the restaurant accusingly. The old woman in the booth behind them clutches her purse. The waitress clutches her fanny pack. The cashier puts her hand on top of the register guardedly. After all, Bucky is one who looks the thief. Jane eyes the obvious bulge in his pants and the wallet chain.

WAITRESS

We don't want no trouble here.

JANE

It's okay. I got it.

Jane places more money on the table and gets up.

BUCKY

(To the old woman in the booth next to them.) You snag it? Huh? Retirement money? Get you a Winnebago?

The old woman shrinks away from him. Jane grabs Bucky's arm and pulls him toward the exit. Jane turns and faces everyone, her hands tight around Bucky's arm. An awkward silence.

JANE

(To the diners.) He's, uh, this is my brother. Got some problems.

Bucky bares his teeth at the diners and sneers.

BUCKY

You people are goin' to hell!

EXT. DINER/GAS STATION--DAY

Through the window, Jane sees the waitress frantically dialing numbers into a telephone.

BUCKY

Girl, are you deaf? I said I got robbed. You're my witness.

JANE

(watching the waitress) She's on the phone. They got cameras in there. You go back in and they gonna have you arrested for causing a ruckus and stealing that *Penthouse*.

Bucky pats his jacket to make sure the magazine's still there.

BUCKY

Playboy.

JANE

Whatever. I'm neither your witness nor your accomplice.

BUCKY

Huh?

The beggar on the flattened cardboard box holds out his hand to them.

BEGGAR

Help out a guy down on his luck?

BUCKY

Yeah. Here's some advice--get up outta the dirt and do something, you filthy old scab. You smell like ass.

Jane takes a granola bar out of her pack and hands it to the beggar. The beggar tears open the packaging and turns his nose up at it.

BEGGAR

What is this?

BUCKY

(To beggar.) Shut up and eat. (To Jane.) And what do you mean, I got some problems?

EXT. DINER/GAS STATION GAS PUMP--DAY

A TRUCKER is filling up his EIGHTEEN-WHEELER. A casket is painted on the side of the rig and underneath it, the words *Clarksdale Casket Company*. Jane approaches the trucker.

JANE

How you?

The trucker nods.

JANE

You headed south by any chance?

TRUCKER
Yup. To I-12, then east to
Tallahassee, drop off some gut boxes.

JANE
Gut boxes?

The trucker points at the casket on the side of the truck.

TRUCKER
Yeah, you know. Earthworm Condos, Dust
Boats, Hell Buggies, Ash Wagons,
Pontiacs to the Pearly G's . . .

Jane studies the trucker's face. Does this guy need
company or medication?

TRUCKER
. . . Submarines of Decomposition,
Motels 6 Feet Under--'course we ain't
leavin' no light on for ya.

Jane soaks it all up.

JANE
I see. Well, I'm Jane--

The trucker shakes her hand.

TRUCKER
Dick Yarbrough, Mound Bayou, *Missippi*.

JANE
How you doing? I was just wondering if
you would give me a lift as far as
Hammond.

Jane glances at the highway. A POLICE CAR slows down to
exit.

JANE
I mean, us a lift.

YARBROUGH
Us? Like me and you?

JANE
(Turns toward the back of the truck.)
Hey, Playboy!

Bucky appears.

JANE
(Realizing she doesn't know his name.)
This here's my friend . . .

BUCKY

Bucky. What's happenin'? You give me
a lift to Red Stick?

Yarbrough regards Bucky suspiciously.

BUCKY

That's French for Baton Rouge.

YARBROUGH

I'm gonna give *her* a lift to Hammond.

JANE

Bucky. He's sharp of tooth, but faint
of heart.

Both Yarbrough and Bucky wrinkle their foreheads, sharing
confusion.

JANE

Just to Hammond's fine. Bucky, this
is--

Jane pauses--she knows better than to tell Bucky that
Yarbrough's first name is Dick.

JANE

Mr. Yarbrough.

Yarbrough inspects Bucky and spits. He looks at Jane. She's
the kind of hitchhiker who appears only in his dreams.
The police car pulls up in front of the diner and a fat COP
gets out and adjusts his pants over his big belly.

JANE

(in a hurry now) So, what do you say?
Let's hit the highway!

The three climb into the cab of the rig. Bucky takes the
backseat and Jane gets in front with Yarbrough.

JANE

(To Bucky.) Actually, Red Stick's
English for Baton Rouge.

BUCKY

Huh?

JANE

Never mind.

INT. TRUCK CAB--DAY

Jane sleeps and Yarbrough sings aloud softly to a country love song on the radio.

YARBROUGH
(singing) *My radiator busted and my
tires went flat . . .*

Bucky attempts to sneak Jane's wallet out of her backpack. Suddenly, Yarbrough turns to face him and Bucky withdraws undetected.

YARBROUGH
How long y'all been together?

BUCKY
(His lies don't miss a beat.) Five years.

YARBROUGH
She got some pretty eyes.

BUCKY
Huh? Oh, yeah. She gots an all right rack, too.

Yarbrough studies Jane's breasts from the corner of his eye. Bucky notices and leans over to join in on the appreciation.

YARBROUGH
Yes, very nice indeed.

BUCKY
She ain't wearing a bra.

YARBROUGH
No, sir, she's not. Mighty fine melons.

BUCKY
That's a set of jugs right there. Ain't no fruit.

YARBROUGH
Udders, jugs, tatas, knockers, nobs, big brown eyes, headlights, bazongas, bouncers, balls o' fleshy ganglia. Name's not important. But, shape, girth of areola, nipple protrusion. Oh, young man.

Bucky concentrates hard, but he's met his match on the name game. His well of creativity is only so deep.

YARBROUGH

(continues singing). . .*that night she left me for my brother and my dad. Then she left me for grandpa and I tell you I was glad . . .*

BUCKY

And she gives mean suction on the skin highway.

Yarbrough eyes Bucky in the rearview mirror and frowns.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY OVERPASS--NIGHT

It's raining. The truck passes a sign for Hammond and stops under an overpass. Jane and Bucky hop out.

YARBROUGH

(to Jane) So, if you ever find yourself in Mound Bayou, I live right next door to the fire station, little chartreuse house.

JANE

Thanks, Dick. Be careful with those Fine Pine Rides to the Everlasting.

Yarbrough guffaws.

YARBROUGH

That's classy! Mind if I use that on my next victim?

JANE

It's all yours.

Yarbrough pulls away in the casket truck and sounds the horn. Jane waves.

BUCKY

(laughing) Did you just call him Dick? Fuckin' A! Thanks for the ride, *Dick!* 'Preciate the lift, dildo! Peckerwood!

JANE

So, good luck in Baton Rouge.

BUCKY

Yeah. Where you headed, girl?

JANE

I'm gonna check out New Orleans.

BUCKY

Shit, yeah. Go check out The Dungeon on *Too-loose* Street. That place is fucked up. Don't even open 'til midnight.

Jane sits down under the overpass with her guitar. Bucky sticks his thumb out.

BUCKY

Christ, this rain sucks a hard one.

It's hopeless at night in the rain. Bucky eyes Jane's backpack.

JANE

I don't think you're gonna have much luck tonight.

Bucky grins sadistically.

BUCKY

We'll have to see about that.

He moves closer and stands over her as if he's about to do something. Jane stands up quickly and takes a blanket out of her backpack. With her back to Bucky and the pack, she spreads the blanket on the ground.

Bucky squats down and reaches into her open pack to take her wallet. Jane turns to face him. He withdraws his hand from the pack and bolts upright. Jane sits down on the blanket with her guitar.

JANE

You want to hear a song before I go to sleep?

BUCKY

Know any Slayer?

Jane smiles and begins to strum the guitar softly and tune it. Bucky eyes her backpack and paces.

JANE

I think you'll like this.

Jane plays and sings, *She'll be Comin' 'Round the Mountain* in a beautiful, angelic voice. She plays fancy riffs and bluesy, trailing notes. It's a song that will break your heart and then put it back together again. It affirms your life, soothes your soul, and makes you weep with joy. Bucky sits down slowly when she begins to sing.

JANE

(singing) *She'll be comin' 'round
the mountain when she comes. She'll
be comin' 'round the mountain when
she comes. She'll be comin' 'round
the mountain, she'll be comin' 'round
the mountain, she'll be comin' 'round
the mountain when she comes.*

Jane sets down her guitar and yawns. Bucky stares at her, trancelike. His eyes are wide and wet. He looks as if he has seen an angel.

Jane settles down to go to sleep. Bucky sits and watches the empty highway and the rain. Suddenly, the rain stops and he can see the stars.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY--NIGHT

Bucky sleeps on the ground. A soft breeze begins and gradually turns into a powerful gust. Bucky awakes. He sits up and pulls his jacket around him.

A rumble begins that sounds like a herd of horses charging down the highway toward him. Bucky, alarmed, jumps up to see, but nothing is there. The sound of hooves beating the pavement increases to a violent, thunderous roar. Bucky braces himself against wind so powerful it almost knocks him down. The noise is deafening.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY OVERPASS--NIGHT

Jane sleeps peacefully, unaffected by the wind and noise. Her blanket does not even move. Bucky is frantic.

BUCKY

(his voice unheard over the din) *Hey!
Wake up!*

He runs over to her. Suddenly, all is silent and still. Bucky stands over her, transfixed.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY OVERPASS--DAY

Jane folds her blanket and puts it in her pack. Cars whoosh by. Bucky sits cross-legged with a peaceful smile on his face.

JANE

Well, my friend, Bucky--right? I'm gonna head on and try to get a lift to the Crescent City.

Bucky looks at her as if he's afraid he'll never see her again.

BUCKY

What's your name?

JANE

I'm Jane.

She reaches out and shakes his hand.

BUCKY

Jane.

Bucky stands up and takes his wallet from his pocket. He pulls out some bills.

BUCKY

Here, for lunch yesterday.

Jane shakes her head.

JANE

Nah, Bucky. You're gonna need it.

BUCKY

Jane, you--

Bucky looks down at his shoes. He's composing himself to say something important to her. When he looks up to speak, she is gone.

He sees her walking way down the highway with her thumb out.

EXT. GAS STATION-DAY

TOMBO, a middle-aged man in overalls, puts air in the tires of his old truck. Jane approaches him.

JANE

Good morning.

TOMBO

Mmm-hmm.

JANE

I hate to bother you, sir, but I was just wondering if you were headed toward New Orleans.

TOMBO

I don't pick up hitchhikers.

JANE

I understand your concern, sir. It's really not safe--you're right. But I could ride in the back of your pick-up just like a sack of sand. I wouldn't be a bother to you. Heck, you'd forget I was there, probably.

TOMBO

Probably not. Besides, I ain't going to the city. Going to my farm in Boutte.

JANE

You have a farm? You need any help out there? I'm looking for work.

The farmer lightens up a little.

TOMBO

Ever milk cows?

JANE

Of course. Why, I'm an expert. Got me a Masters in Milkin' from Bovine U.

Tombo regards her, stone-faced.

EXT. GAS STATION PARKING LOT--DAY

A school bus full of screaming kids passes in the parking lot. One boy in a uniform leans out, looks at Tombo and Jane, and spits on the pavement.

EXT. GAS STATION--DAY

Tombo watches the bus drive away. He pulls a quarter out of the pocket of his overalls. He flips it in the air, catches it in his right palm, and slaps it onto the back of his left hand.

TOMBO

Looks like it's your lucky day.

JANE

Quarry mine, blessed am I/In the luck of the chase./Comes the deer to my singing.

Confused and annoyed, Tombo eyes her and pockets his quarter.

TOMBO

What?

JANE

That's an old Navaho hunting song that-

TOMBO

(Getting to the point.) I'm warning you--I got a wife and all. There won't be no funny stuff if you know what I mean.

JANE

I know what you mean, sir. No funny stuff at all. Name's Jane. Pleased to meet you.

Jane extends her hand, but Tombo ignores her and gets in the truck.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY JUNCTION--DAY

Jane sits in the truck bed. They exit I-310 and turn onto a rural dirt road. There is an old farmhouse in the distance and a barn close by. Cows gathered near the roadside fence watch the truck as it cruises past.

INT. FARMHOUSE KITCHEN--NIGHT

CHARLOTTE is in her mid-thirties, slender and pretty, but worn out and sad. Her eyes are red and puffy and her cheeks are flushed, as if she has been crying. She has pretty, long hair that is tied in a limp blue ribbon.

She sets a bowl of steaming butterbeans on a rustic wooden table and wipes her hands on her apron.

CHARLOTTE

Jane is it? You'll be fine out there in the barn, won't you, Jane? Strong girl like yourself, out on the road like you are.

Charlotte loads Jane's plate with butterbeans and hands her a plate of golden fried chicken.

CHARLOTTE

You're used to sleeping outside on the highway cuddled up next to bums, I bet. Sounds like an adventure to me. Will you have some red-eye gravy?

Charlotte passes Jane the gravy.

JANE

Yes ma'am. I mean, yes ma'am, I'll have some gravy. I don't do much cuddling. And thank you, I'll be fine in the barn.

TOMBO

You'll be fine in the guest room. You stay in the house—not out in the barn. Stinks out there.

JANE

It's just natural. I like the smell of the outdoors. The smell of a farm.

Charlotte glares at Tombo.

CHARLOTTE

That smell doesn't seem to bother Tombo, either.

Tombo nervously helps himself to another slice of cornbread out of an iron skillet on the table.

TOMBO

You can stay in the guest room where my mama stayed.

CHARLOTTE

Tombo's mother died in that room, Jane. You don't want to sleep in that stuffy room with a ghost. Sweet tea, honey?

Charlotte pours tea from a pottery pitcher into Jane's glass.

TOMBO

Don't you pay no attention to Charlotte. Ain't no spooks in this house. Pass the butter.

CHARLOTTE

I didn't say she was an evil ghost, Jane. You got family in New Orleans?

JANE

Sure, I got family. Folks who need me down there.

They eat in silence.

JANE

I really appreciate your taking me in.

CHARLOTTE

You'll be right comfy out there in the hay. Just ask Tombo.

Jane glances back and forth from Charlotte to Tombo. Charlotte holds her drumstick like a mallet.

CHARLOTTE

Go ahead and ask him.

Tombo throws his napkin on the table and storms out the front door, banging the screen door behind him.

Charlotte gets up from the table and carries her plate to the sink and drops it. It breaks on the porcelain. She runs from the room.

Jane finishes her last bite and clears the table.

Charlotte appears silently in the doorway. She's been crying and her hair is a mess. She watches Jane wash the dishes.

CHARLOTTE

Jane.

Jane turns around, startled.

CHARLOTTE

You're good people.

JANE

Well, thank-

CHARLOTTE

You go on and sleep wherever you want. There's a blanket in the hall closet.

Charlotte turns and leaves the room before Jane can say a word.

INT. BARN--NIGHT

Jane settles down to sleep on her blanket on some hay in the corner. The barn door is open and one solitary cow can be seen in the moonlight. The cow is sleeping on a big quilt with pillows around it. Jane, puzzled, stares at the cow before lying down.

INT. BEDROOM--NIGHT

Charlotte gets into bed with Tombo, who is reading *The Farmer's Almanac*.

CHARLOTTE
(Sniffs.) I wonder if Tombo has a
broken nose.

TOMBO
I wonder what the hell crazy Charlotte
is getting at.

CHARLOTTE
Tombo must not realize that he reeks
like a filthy bovine. I wish in God's
name he would bathe before he got in my
bed.

Charlotte begins to cry softly.

TOMBO
I think crazy Charlotte should shut the
hell up or go sleep out in the barn
with the new farmhand.

Tombo throws his book on the nightstand and turns out the
light. He turns his back on Charlotte and closes his eyes.

CHARLOTTE
I doubt Tombo would really want crazy
Charlotte out there near his precious
cow.

Tombo opens his eyes in alarm.

TOMBO
Don't you ever go near that cow, you
understand me? You already got that
damn farmhand staying out there.

CHARLOTTE
That damn farmhand's name is *Jane*.

INT. KITCHEN--DAY

Charlotte serves scrambled eggs to Jane and then to Tombo and
sits down.

CHARLOTTE
I'm off to Grand Isle today.

JANE

You have folks down there?

TOMBO

Charlotte goes down there two or three times a week to stay with her mother.

CHARLOTTE

My mother was diagnosed with cancer of the ovaries two years ago. She's barely with us. Will you have some country ham, Jane?

Charlotte passes a platter of ham to Jane.

JANE

Thank you. I'm really sorry to hear that.

CHARLOTTE

I go down and clean house for her. Drive her up to New Orleans for chemo and so forth. She don't have a hair left on her head, poor thing. Help yourself to garlic cheese grits.

Charlotte passes a bowl of grits to Jane.

TOMBO

Charlotte thinks this chemo stuff is doing some good, but she's too blind to see that it's just making the last years of her life a living hell.

CHARLOTTE

Tombo thinks he knows something about medicine. You see, he was gonna be a medical doctor, that's right, but instead he decided to go to *farmacy* school and become a farmer.

Jane grins at Charlotte. Tombo gets up from the table, slams his chair up against it, and bangs the screen door behind him.

EXT. HIGHWAY--DAY

Charlotte drives her station wagon past a sign that reads *New Orleans Airport/Kenner*.

EXT. ESPLANADE BLVD.--DAY

Charlotte pulls over to park on Esplanade, the tree-lined boulevard that borders the French Quarter. She gets out

and locks her car. She is wearing a red dress with a white lace pinafore over it. She opens the trunk, lifts the pinafore off over her head, folds it neatly, and places it in the trunk. The red dress underneath is revealing and seductive. She takes an overnight bag from the trunk and locks it.

EXT. BOURBON ST.--DAY

She walks down Bourbon Street. People are partying in the street and coming in and out of bars. Charlotte walks past a Lucky Dog stand where there is a large Ignatius Reilly character, KENNEDY, serving hot dogs to tourists. He sees Charlotte and waves a hot dog at her.

KENNEDY

Mona! Mona! My darling, I've got something for you!

CHARLOTTE

Kennedy, sweetheart. I've got a 4:00. Come see me after.

KENNEDY

You know I'll be there!

Charlotte waves and turns down St. Louis. She walks up to the door of a little pink house with a porch and a courtyard off the side.

INT. BARN--DAY

Jane sits on a stool next to a pail. She rolls up her sleeves. The solo cow stands in front of her eating from a large shiny trough.

Tombo runs into the barn.

TOMBO

Girl! Get away from that cow!

JANE

What?

TOMBO

Don't touch that cow! Only *I* milk that cow. Get out to pasture. I already told you this morning.

Jane, confused and alarmed, grabs her stool and pail and heads out of the barn, looking back at the cow.

Tombo, in a panic, inspects the cow from the head to toe. Jane pauses at the barn door, watches Tombo.
INT. WHOREHOUSE LOBBY--DAY

Charlotte walks into a gaudy waiting room. There are red velvet sofas and gilt-framed posters of prostitutes on the walls.

BOB, a customer, sits on a sofa, flips through *Field and Stream*.

BOB

Mona, you're *radiantic*.

CHARLOTTE

Hi, Bob. I like your haircut.

Charlotte turns to a glass reception window. DIL, a large black woman in a lace bra with a pencil behind her ear, counts money.

CHARLOTTE

Hey, Dil. What you got for me today?

Dil eyes Charlotte, and then flips through a dog-eared appointment book.

DIL

Cute dress, girl. Look at you. You got Bob at 4:00, of course. Then, you're open from 5:00 to 6:00. 6:00 is Vladimir. 7:00 is Jake Martino--that guy who has the hot sauce store on Decatur. Then, Lenny at 8:30, Mr. Photopolous from 10:00 to 11:00 and you're on your own after that.

CHARLOTTE

Thanks, Dil. Oh shoot. I forgot to bring you that mayhaw jelly I made.

DIL

Tell me you're lying.

CHARLOTTE

I'm sorry. I'll bring it next time.

Charlotte winks at Bob and disappears behind a door with a little sign nailed to it that reads "MONA."

INT. WHOREHOUSE WAITING ROOM--DAY

Framed photos of hookers line the wall:

Lena, a voluptuous black woman in devil horns, wears a red negligee with a long tail in the back that's coiled around her neck.

Terry, a young-looking girl in ponytails and plaid school uniform, hugs a biology book to her chest. Her skirt is hemmed short enough to show off her panties.

Misti, a blonde with enormous breasts, the nipples pierced, holds a whip and has a knife between her teeth.

Cassie stands next to a Bourbon Street sign in a silk robe thrown open to reveal a cropped New Orleans Saints football jersey and a pubic region shaved into a *fleur-de-lis*.

Mona is stretched out on a chaise lounge, naked, her back to the camera. Her long dark curly hair trails down between her shoulders.

EXT. BARN--DAY

Jane, carrying two pails of milk, walks to the barn door. She halts when she hears Tombo's voice and hides behind the barn door to listen.

INT. BARN--DAY

Tombo sits on a little stool and milks the solo cow.

TOMBO

(To cow.) How was your dinner?

COW

Moo-ooo.

TOMBO

I hope it was good. I gave you more than the others, as usual.

COW

Moo-ooo.

TOMBO

I can get more for you. Charlotte baked a cherry pie. Would you like a piece? Or hell, you can have the whole pie.

COW

Moo-ooo.

A fly buzzes around the cow's head and Tombo swats at it.

TOMBO

You don't like cherries? Damn, stupid Charlotte. She always bakes those idiot cherry pies. I hate 'em, too. Do you like Granny Smith apples?

COW

Moo-ooo.

TOMBO

No? What about pumpkin? As stupid as she is, she makes a mean pumpkin pie. Or minced meat? I can tell her to bake a minced meat pie or I'll slit her skinny throat.

COW

Moo-ooo.

TOMBO

I know you don't like it when I talk violent like that. I promise I won't slit Charlotte's skinny-ass throat. I might suffocate her with one of her frilly little pillows, though-

COW

Moooooooooooooooooooo

TOMBO

Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Shh. I'm not gonna suffocate her. I just want the two of us to be together alone. You could move up to the house where it's nice and warm inside. Would you like that?

Cow looks away.

TOMBO

You could sleep in the big bed with me. We could cuddle and lie like spoons until we fell asleep. We could make love on your terms.

Tombo gets up and moves the pail full of milk and replaces it with an empty one, sits down, and continues milking.

TOMBO

You could be on top. I could blow in your ear real soft. We wouldn't have to jump right into it. We could have some of that, what you call it? Play-before?

COW

Moo-ooo.

TOMBO

I came down here to remind you that Charlotte is out of town visiting her skinny-ass mother. She's skinnier than Charlotte, if you can believe that. Hey, enough about Charlotte. I got something for you. I'll be right back--don't move a muscle.

Excited, Tombo runs from the barn.

EXT. BARN-DAY

Jane slips behind an old grain chute next to the door just as Tombo runs past her and disappears into the house. She peers in at the cow while he's inside. The cow stands still over the bucket.

INT. WHOREHOUSE BEDROOM--DAY

Charlotte is on top of Bob in a big brass bed between red satin sheets. They make love awkwardly. Charlotte, although a skilled expert, is very tender and forgiving of Bob, who is a like a blundering little boy. Bob's body parts get in the way. He elbows her in the mouth and pulls her hair.

BOB

You are the most *passionous* woman I've ever known, Mona. I never had it so good with anybody.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, I know. I know. You feel so wonderful.

BOB

Oh, Mona. You're so--so wholesome. You're like ice cream.

CHARLOTTE

Thank you, sweetie.

BOB

Oh, Mona. Will you marry me? Just say
it again. Say you will like last time.
Human me. You're so *geaugh* . . .

Bob gets so tied up in the moment his less-than-adequate
vocabulary begins to fail him completely.

CHARLOTTE

Of course, I will. Of course. Oh,
Tombo, I can make you feel so good.
Tombo, Tombo!

BOB

Mona! Oh, Mona! Mama!

They both climax and Bob rolls off Mona panting like a dog.
An alarm clock rings on the bedside table. Bob turns over
and gives her little pecking kisses on her shoulder and arm.
Mona is annoyed.

Bob sees the clock, jumps up, and throws his clothes on.

BOB

I wish we could spend the night
together just once.

CHARLOTTE

I wish we could avoid having this
conversation just once.

Bob races around the bedroom looking for his socks. He
finds them, pockets them, flattens his hair in the mirror,
and leaves.

Charlotte lights a cigarette and watches the courtyard from
her window. A mangy CAT stretches and licks itself under
one leg. She watches a CUSTOMER in a bathrobe walk past it
and kick it absently. The cat squalls and runs off.

CHARLOTTE

Poor cat. Poor Bob. He ain't no
Tombo.

EXT. BARN--DAY

Tombo emerges from the house carrying a large white dress box
with a blue ribbon tied around it. Again, Jane hides behind
the chute before he sees her.

INT. BARN--DAY

Tombo kneels down in front of the cow and opens the box. He
pulls out a huge pink lace nightgown.

TOMBO

Do you like it? I bought it last week when I went into town. I told the saleslady your measurements and she said this was the largest size they had. I bought it just for you. You want to try it?

The cow looks away.

TOMBO

What's wrong? The color? Damn, I knew I should have gotten the green one. Stupid salesgirl. Straight-toothed little bitch. How would she know what you like? She never met you.

Standing there with its eyes closed, the cow appears to be sleeping.

TOMBO

What's wrong? You don't like me anymore? You've changed. You're not yourself lately. Was it something I said? Do you need some time? You're not going to tell me that you just want to be friends, are you?

Tombo stuffs the nightgown back into the box, puts it under his arm, and grabs the pail of milk from underneath the cow.

TOMBO

Wait a minute. You been consortin' with that farmhand. What did she tell you? She tell you to stay away from me? Say you could do better?

He takes a long, wistful look at the cow and turns to leave with the box under his arm.

INT. WHOREHOUSE--DAY

A knock on Charlotte's door.

CHARLOTTE

Yeah?

BOB

It's me, Tombo.

CHARLOTTE

Come on in, Bob.

Bob opens the door, grinning. He holds a white box with a blue ribbon tied around it.

BOB

I brought you a little something, Mona. It ain't as sweet and sexy as you, but it's darn near close to being. You want to try it on?

Bob holds the box out childishly. Charlotte sits at her vanity, smoking and looking out the window.

BOB

You want me to sit here with you while you get ready for--

CHARLOTTE

Bob, that's sweet. Put that on the bed and get going. Your wife's probably got supper.

BOB

Mona, you know if we lived in Utah and I was--

CHARLOTTE

Yeah, I know. If you were a *Moron* and all that.

BOB

Mormon.

CHARLOTTE

That's right, Bob. I'll be seeing you.

Bob closes the door quietly.

Charlotte sits down on the bed with the box. She opens it and pulls out a pink thong. She fondles it absently and puts it back in the box. She opens the closet where there is a pile of white boxes exactly the same, tied with the same blue ribbon, and deposits the new box with the others.

EXT. BARN--DAY

Jane secretly watches Tombo from the door. She picks up her pails of milk and hurries away from the barn toward the pasture. Then, she turns around and starts slowly walking back to the barn as if she has just finished her work in the pasture.

Tombo leaves the barn. He pauses when he sees her. He tries (and fails) to hide the big box under his arm. The

blue ribbon falls onto the ground. Tombo steps on it as he hurries toward the house.

EXT. FARMHOUSE--DAY

Charlotte drives up to the farmhouse. She looks in the rearview mirror and wipes traces of dark lipstick off her lips. Walking up to the house, she sees Jane and Tombo walking in from the pasture.

She looks down and notices the blue ribbon on the ground. She picks it up and stuffs it in her pocket.

Tombo leaves Jane and approaches Charlotte on the front porch.

TOMBO

I'm driving into the city. Got some business to tend to. Problem with the grain elevator and we're out of seed.

CHARLOTTE

I wonder why he needs to go to the city for that stuff when there's plenty of Seeds and Feeds nearby.

TOMBO

As if Charlotte would know where the Feed and Seed is. They never had one in Paradis and the one in Luling shut down ten years ago. Why do I even bother telling Charlotte where the hell I'm going?

CHARLOTTE

He should just go then.

TOMBO

I'll go when I'm good and ready.

CHARLOTTE

Good and ready? It's a cold day in hell.

Tombo shoves past her into the house.

INT. FARMHOUSE--DAY

Charlotte follows him inside and throws her bags down. Tombo emerges from the bedroom with a pillowcase containing the big lingerie box and heads quickly for the door. Charlotte follows him to the door.

EXT. FARMHOUSE--DAY

CHARLOTTE
(hollering after him) I wonder why
Tombo's bringing his pillow with him?
Maybe he's gonna do some sleeping in
the city!

Tombo walks out to his truck and peels out. Charlotte sits
down on the front porch steps and puts her head in her
hands.

Jane walks to the steps.

JANE
Charlotte, you all right?

Charlotte looks up quickly and wipes her face with her
sleeve.

CHARLOTTE
No, honey, I'm not. And you're not
gonna be either if you don't keep out
of Tombo's business.

JANE
I'm helping with the animals.

CHARLOTTE
I saw you out there with him in the
pasture.

JANE
Yes, you did.

CHARLOTTE
I think he's having an affair with
another woman.

JANE
He's not having an affair with another
woman.

Charlotte's eyes lock with Jane's. Charlotte holds her
hands out to Jane.

CHARLOTTE
Yeah, I know. Help me up.

Charlotte smoothes her hair. The blue ribbon falls out of
her pocket onto the porch. Charlotte picks it up and ties
her hair back.

INT. FARMHOUSE KITCHEN--DAY

Jane sits on the floor shelling peas into a big copper bowl. Charlotte sits at the table in front of a pile of linens.

CHARLOTTE

Come here Jane, I want to show you something.

Jane walks over to the table and Charlotte holds up a small white blouse with an embroidered collar.

CHARLOTTE

My mama made this before she-- before she got sick. It's very special to me and I want you to have it.

JANE

I can't--

Charlotte grabs Jane's hand and traces her fingers over the embroidery.

CHARLOTTE

Feel those stitches? Mama was good. You never see work like this. Never.

JANE

Thank you, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

That's jasmine. See the tiny petals? This type of jasmine is called *Stephanotis*. Mama had it all over the yard. Used it in my bridal bouquet.

She unbuttons the tiny buttons.

CHARLOTTE

Here, try it on.

Jane takes off her old work shirt. She wears a threadbare camisole underneath. She slips into the embroidered blouse. It's beautiful.

CHARLOTTE

Where's your mama, Jane?

JANE

My mama's gone, too.

Charlotte looks up at Jane cautiously. Slowly, she stands and takes both of Jane's hands and squeezes them. She leaves the room.

INT. FARMHOUSE KITCHEN--NIGHT

Jane sets the table. Charlotte comes in the back door with a huge platter.

CHARLOTTE

Tombo! Supper!

Tombo comes into the kitchen and takes his place at the table. Jane sits across from him. Charlotte sets the platter down on the table. It is piled with steaks so enormous they flop off the sides of the platter onto the table.

JANE

Looks delicious.

Tombo licks his lips and ties a napkin around his neck.

TOMBO

All right. Pass the iced tea.

CHARLOTTE

I guess he worked up a thirst in the city.

Silence. No one's touching that subject. Charlotte begins again. Where she comes from, it's bad manners to allow a meal to pass in silence.

CHARLOTTE

So, Jane, how's the work going? Have some black-eyed peas and pass them.

JANE

Fine. Only, I don't think I'm helping out enough to deserve all this wonderful food.

CHARLOTTE

Well, what's wrong? Tombo won't let you milk his special cow? Pass the biscuits.

TOMBO

Girl, I bet you'd like to do something besides milking cows. Why don't you go with Charlotte to help her mother this weekend?

Charlotte shoots a look at Jane, but Jane keeps her eyes on her plate.

JANE

I wouldn't want to get in the way.
Besides, I got to get going soon.

CHARLOTTE

Jane understands. Mama's real sick.
She doesn't want to see anybody but me.
Do help yourself to a steak, Jane.

TOMBO

Lord knows the old woman don't want any
of me. I haven't laid eyes on her in
five years.

CHARLOTTE

Tombo acts like he's ever offered to
help care for my mama. He can't seem
to lay his eyes on anything except that
cow out in the barn.

Tombo stands up and pushes his chair back. Charlotte
stands and stares at him wild-eyed.

CHARLOTTE

Don't leave before you've helped
yourself to a juicy *STEAK*, Tombo!

Charlotte holds out the platter piled high with beef and
Tombo's eyes grow to saucers.

TOMBO

Oh my God! No!

Tombo runs from the kitchen and out the front door, the
screen door banging behind him.

INT. BARN--NIGHT

Tombo runs into the barn and halts. The solo cow stands
over its trough eating. It looks up at him. Tombo
approaches it and cradles its head in his arms.

A car engine roars in the distance. Tombo turns and
watches Charlotte's station wagon drive away from the farm.

INT. SALVATION ARMY THRIFT STORE--DAY

Bucky walks around the store, sorting through clothing on
the racks. The CLERK, a very old woman, stands behind the
counter, eyeing him nervously.

BUCKY

I'm gonna buy something.

She barely hears a word.

CLERK

We don't have any bicycles.

She moves closer and stares at him accusingly.

BUCKY

Huh? Look, hold your horses. It's gotta be just right.

CLERK

Folded corsets. What do you want with folded corsets?

BUCKY

(louder and slower) Hold your horses.

CLERK

We used to have an old pair of forceps around here. A gynecologist bought them. Nice man from Natchez. He had a daughter who ran away with a drug addict and moved to Shreveport . . .

Bucky looks at her like she's crazy, grabs a garment off the rack and disappears into the dressing room.

INT. SALVATION ARMY THRIFT STORE MIRRORS--DAY

Bucky looks into a three-paneled mirror. He is wearing a pair of plaid golfing pants and a red sport coat. He turns sideways with his hands on his hips. He stands up tall and points at himself in the mirror. He struts. The clerk watches.

CLERK

Those were Dabney Rubenstein's trousers. He and his wife lived next door to us in the red house with shrubs clipped to look like monkeys and had the most outrageous naked dinner parties. His mistress, Tinky, was a blonde Korean, flat chested. Bless her heart.

Bucky turns to view his back and notices a huge rip in the seat of the pants. His naked butt pokes out. The clerk puts on her glasses and squints at Bucky's reflection. Bucky scowls.

CLERK

Dabney had a bit of a weight problem.
Died of a heart attack wearing those
pants.

INT. SALVATION ARMY THRIFT STORE MIRRORS--DAY

Bucky wears a powder blue tux with tails and a ruffled tux shirt. He sticks out his tongue like Gene Simmons. He does the moonwalk. The clerk stands nearby, watching proudly.

CLERK

That was my grandson Felder's tuxedo.
He wore that to his senior prom the
night he ate rat poison and collapsed
on the dance floor. God rest his soul.
He sure loved Barry Manilow.

INT. SALVATION ARMY THRIFT STORE MIRRORS--DAY

Bucky poses in a white pimp suit with a skinny black leather tie. He wiggles around and nods his approval at the clerk. The clerk walks up next to him and sighs.

CLERK

Well, I haven't seen that old thing in
ages. My dear cousin Garfield was
buried in that suit--

Horrified, Bucky runs into the dressing room.

INT. SALVATION ARMY THRIFT STORE MIRRORS--DAY

Bucky poses in a bowler and a pair of leather shorts that are two sizes too small for him. One of the buttons pops off the shorts.

The clerk approaches him, frowning at the leather shorts. She shakes her head. She holds a garment on a hanger.

CLERK

Those were my gardener's. Funny,
little man. Died, when--well you're
too young to hear about that. When my
nephew was a young man he used to walk
around in my high heeled shoes and one
day he walked down to the market and
there was a gang of men standing on the
sidewalk playing dice and they--

Bucky grabs the garment from her and disappears into the dressing room.

INT. SALVATION ARMY THRIFT STORE MIRRORS--DAY

He emerges in a wrinkled black tuxedo, which looks as if it has been dried in a dryer on high heat. He approaches the mirror, and turns slowly from side to side, grinning. The clerk grins, too.

CLERK

That was my daddy's--

Before she can say another word, Bucky switches on an old phonograph, which plays *These Foolish Things*. He turns the crackling music up full blast and grabs the clerk's hands.

They waltz awkwardly. Bucky twirls her around very slowly--she's no spring chicken--and dips her gracefully. Bucky bows as the clerk curtsies and for a moment it seems like they are from the same era.

She sashays up to the cash register and rings up the sale. Bucky pays her.

CLERK

When I was your age, young man, I dated an officer in the air force. Randolph Montgomery--died of an aneurysm, bless his heart--called me Boopsy and took me to dances at the USO . . .

Bucky begins to edge toward the door with a tortured look on his face.

BUCKY

Yeah, that's real interesting. I really have to be--

CLERK

. . . and he'd wear a white carnation boutonniere and bring me a corsage of sweet-smelling lilacs and we'd set on the porch swing while my father . . .

Bucky's hand is on the door. The clerk stares off into space, continues unaware of Bucky's attempt to escape.

BUCKY

Lilacs, wow. I'm real sorry to cut you short, but I--

CLERK

. . .and my mother had this shiny new Cadillac and said Randolph could drive us, but there was one stipulation. My cousin, Lucious, got to go and . . .

Bucky opens the door. The little bells on the door jingle. He steps out quickly, unnoticed.

CLERK

. . . my goodness I like to died of embarrassment having little Lucious in that car, but my mother gave us money for root beers at the--

Bucky pokes his head back in for an instant.

BUCKY

(spits the words out in one breath)
That's a real nice story--thanks for the digs--bye!

Bucky disappears out the door and it swings shut behind him.

CLERK

(in her own world) . . . and back in those days a root beer was a special treat. Even if it meant having to cart that little son of a bitch Lucious. . .

EXT. SALVATION ARMY--DAY

A BEGGAR sitting next to the door raises his cupped hands to Bucky. Bucky, still wearing the tuxedo, holds up an index finger.

Bucky runs across the street to a deli and runs inside. He emerges carrying a bag. He pulls a three foot-long hoagie from the bag, tears it in half and gives half to the beggar. The beggar smiles wide-eyed at his half of the huge sandwich and they both take bites.

INT. FARMHOUSE KITCHEN--NIGHT

Jane serves piping hot chicken and dumplings onto Tombo's plate, then serves herself and sits down with him. Tombo blows on his dumpling-piled fork and takes a big bite. He chews, raises his eyebrows.

TOMBO

Wow, better than Charlotte's.

JANE

Glad you like it.

Tombo chews his bite, then takes another, and shakes his head.

TOMBO

This is amazing. I've never had chicken and dumplings this good. Really.

JANE

When's she coming home?

TOMBO

Hell if I know. Surely that old woman's gonna drop dead any day now.

They eat in uncomfortable silence.

TOMBO

How's it going out there?

Tombo regards her suspiciously.

JANE

I work the way a cow grazes.

TOMBO

Huh?

JANE

No longer diverted by other emotions, I work the way a cow grazes. Käthe Kollwitz, an artist, said that.

Tombo shakes his head and gulps his milk. She might as well be speaking in tongues.

TOMBO

I didn't ask you about no artist. I asked you how it was going out there in the barn.

JANE

Well, I've that one cow to keep me company.

TOMBO

Keep you company. Is that right? And what exactly do you mean by that?

JANE

I didn't touch the cow. I just mean I'm not the only one out in the barn. I don't mean the cow literally keeps me company. I mean, you can't talk to a cow, can you?

Tombo smiles secretly.

TOMBO

No, you can't talk to a cow.

EXT. FARMHOUSE FRONT PORCH--NIGHT

Jane and Tombo sit in rocking chairs. Jane gently strums her guitar. The stars are bright and clear in the night sky. Tombo picks his teeth with a toothpick.

TOMBO

So, quit screwing around and play me something.

JANE

Well, all right.

TOMBO

Do you know *Git Along Little Dogies*?

JANE

No.

TOMBO

What about *Cow Cow Boogie* by the Judd's?

JANE

No, but I think I know a song you might like.

Jane plays and sings *She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain* in the most angelic, beautiful voice Tombo has ever heard. He is transfixed. He sits motionless, smiling and peaceful, watching her and listening as if she is telling him the meaning of life on earth and relaying good news.

JANE

(Singing.) *She'll be comin' 'round the mountain when she comes. She'll be comin' 'round the mountain when she comes. She'll be comin' 'round the mountain, she'll be comin' 'round the mountain, she'll be comin' 'round the mountain when she comes.*

INT. WHOREHOUSE BEDROOM--NIGHT

Charlotte rolls around between the red satin sheets with Kennedy, the Lucky Dog vendor.

KENNEDY

Run away with me. You're an angel
straight down from heaven here to save
my soul from the devil! Can I put my
love liquid in you, now?

CHARLOTTE

Yes! Oh, Tombo. Give me all your
love. Tombo.

Kennedy finishes and lies next to her, smoking. Charlotte lies with her back to him, watching the clock. The alarm buzzes.

Kennedy throws his clothes on. He touches Charlotte's behind beneath the sheets, and leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Charlotte sits up in the bed. She looks as if she senses that something big is happening.

CHARLOTTE

Tombo.

INT. FARMHOUSE BEDROOM--NIGHT

Tombo flips through an old scrapbook. He looks at photos of himself and Charlotte when they were first married. There is a wedding certificate, dried flowers, a lock of hair, old sepia tone baby pictures. One photo shows a young Charlotte holding her mother's hand. She is wearing the blouse she gave to Jane.

Tombo looks like a man who's lost everything. His eyes are full of tears.

He closes the book and hugs it to his chest. A small scrap falls out from beneath the fabric cover of the album--obviously something hidden. Tombo notices the paper and picks it up.

The scrap, a yellowed newspaper clipping, reads:

WALDRUP, Nell-- Died January 23 in Grand Isle, LA. Loving wife of the late Byron Waldup. She is survived by one daughter, Charlotte Waldrup Brown, of Boutte, LA.

The glass panes in the window begin to rattle. A sound like thunder in the distance. Tombo runs to the window. Chickens run across the driveway. Trash cans fall over.

EXT. FARMHOUSE DIRT ROAD--NIGHT

The rumble on the empty road gets closer as if horses are charging down the road, nearing the house. The sound of hooves beating the pavement increases to a violent, thunderous roar. Trees twist and bend, dust blows across the road. Then, as soon as it began, all is silent and still.

EXT. SMALL TOWN--DAY

Bucky crosses the street to a florist. He buys a bouquet of yellow roses. He walks out of the florist and looks around. He sees the beggar outside the Salvation Army Thrift Store across the street. The beggar sits on a flattened cardboard box next to the door.

Bucky crosses the street and motions at the cardboard under the beggar. The beggar holds his cupped hands up to Bucky.

Bucky throws his hands in the air, exasperated. He takes out his wallet and hands the beggar a couple of dollar bills. The beggar tears off one of the flaps of cardboard and hands it to Bucky, who puts a thumb in the air.

Bucky begins to open the door of the Salvation Army Thrift Store, but pauses and frowns. He will be in there for days listening to the old woman ramble if he goes back in. He runs back across the street to the florist and goes inside.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY--DAY

Bucky stands on the shoulder in his wrinkled tuxedo with his hair slicked back. He holds the wilted bouquet in one hand and the cardboard in the other. Written on the cardboard are the letters *NOLA*.

EXT. FARMHOUSE--DAY

Charlotte drives up to the house and gets out of the car. She walks toward the barn and stands at the doorway. Tombo is in the barn with the solo cow. Charlotte breaks down, shakes her head in disgust and leaves the barn.

EXT. PASTURE--DAY

Tombo ceremoniously guides the solo cow into the pasture where there are other cows grazing. Jane is on her stool next to one of them, milking it. She looks up and watches Tombo.

He hugs the solo cow around the neck and removes the tether. He waves his arms out at the pasture as if to say, *you are free!* The cow runs into the pasture with the others.

INT. BEDROOM--DAY

Tombo finds Charlotte in bed. Her back is to him and she is crying. She wrinkles her nose as if she smells something when he walks into the room. Tombo pauses, then goes into the bathroom and starts water in the tub.

INT. BEDROOM--DAY

Tombo comes out of the bathroom, clean and fresh, hair wet, a towel around his body and his head. He climbs onto the bed next to a lump in the covers. He pats the lump softly, finds that it's a pillow. Tombo hears a car engine and runs to the window to see Charlotte outside, overnight bag in hand, getting into her car.

EXT. FARMHOUSE--DAY

Charlotte drives out onto the dirt road. Tombo, hair wet, in his boxers, a pair of boots, and an unbuttoned shirt, jumps into his truck. He pulls out after her, slowing carefully at the road so that she doesn't see him.

EXT. HIGHWAY--DAY

Tombo secretly follows Charlotte at a safe distance. They pass the *New Orleans Airport/Kenner* sign.

EXT. HIGHWAY--DAY

Cars whoosh past Bucky on the shoulder of the highway where he stands poised with his thumb in the air. A shiny new pick-up truck with *Rockford Fosgate* and *Protected by Smith and Wesson* stickers on the back window pulls over, country music blaring from inside.

An arm jerks out from the driver's window, motioning Bucky to get in. Bucky begins to climb into the truck bed when the horn sounds and the arm jerks out again, motioning him into the cab.

INT. TRUCK--DAY

Bucky climbs into the cab. The DRIVER wears a t-shirt with the words *Bikini Patrol* on the front. A fried chicken drumstick in his mouth, he extends a greasy hand. Between his legs is a bucket of fried chicken. Bucky shakes the hand.

EXT. TRUCK-DAY

The truck peels out down the highway.

INT. TRUCK-DAY

The driver devours three pieces of chicken and throws the bucket out the window. He licks each finger on his right hand.

BUCKY

So, where're you fro--

The driver reaches over and grabs hold of Bucky's groin.

BUCKY

WAHHHHH!

EXT. TRUCK-DAY

The truck swerves all over the highway and then onto the shoulder, slowing down without stopping. Bucky shoulder-rolls out of the truck, still clutching his flowers and NOLA sign.

INT. TRUCK--DAY

A piece of chicken rolls around on the floorboard of the passenger side of the truck as it speeds off down the highway.

EXT. HIGHWAY--DAY

Bucky rubs his groin, smooths his hair, and squats on the side of the highway with his bruised roses and crumpled NOLA sign. Cars whoosh past.

EXT. PASTURE--DAY

Jane walks among the cows. She pats their backs and rubs their heads. She approaches the once-solo cow, looks it in the eye, and smiles.

EXT. ESPLANADE BLVD.--DAY

Charlotte parks her car along the street. Tombo searches for a spot to park. He drives the truck up onto the boulevard and parks on the grass. He jumps out and follows her.

EXT. BOURBON STREET--DAY

Charlotte heads down Bourbon St. and Tombo follows at a safe distance. He watches Charlotte dodge the crowds comfortably. A DRUNK steps out of a bar and sees Tombo in his underwear.

DRUNK

Hey, buddy. Nice outfit.

Charlotte nears St. Louis and waves to Kennedy, the Lucky Dog vendor.

Tombo hides behind a parked car and watches Charlotte walk into the house on St. Louis Street. He waits, then walks in the front door.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY--DAY

Vultures circle road kill on the side of the highway. Bucky wipes the sweat from his forehead and combs his hair. He takes a whiff of the wilted roses. Cars whoosh past.

Another pick-up pulls up onto the shoulder. This one is old, rusty, and banged-up.

EXT. TRUCK--DAY

An OLD MAN nods from the driver's seat. Next to him on the seat is a large menacing-looking dog. The old man motions for Bucky to get into the cab, but Bucky smiles, shakes his head no, and climbs into the bed of the truck.

The truck pulls off down the highway and Bucky falls asleep. The rose's petals blow off their stems.

The truck passes a sign for *New Orleans Airport/Kenner*. Bucky wakes up, sunburned and even more disheveled than before. Still, he clutches the rose stems, sans petals.

EXT. ESPLANADE GAS STATION--DAY

The truck stops at a gas station. Bucky hops from the bed of the truck with his sign and flower stems. He approaches the old man, who is filling the truck with gas. Bucky smiles and fishes a bill from his wallet. The old man takes the money without looking at him. Bucky studies his NOLA sign and, smiling, hands it to the old man.

Bucky walks away down Esplanade toward the Quarter. The old man tosses the sign into the garbage.

EXT. ESPLANADE-DAY

Bucky walks down Esplanade. He passes a cop car and a tow truck in the middle of the boulevard. He stops and watches a blue truck being hooked up to the tow truck. The truck is Tombo's.

BUCKY

Poor sucker's got a surprise waiting for him.

EXT. DIRT ROAD-DAY

Jane stands on the dirt road in front of the farmhouse with her guitar and backpack, thumb out. A motor home pulls up and a WOMAN rolls down the passenger window. She is pale with frosted hair and wears a collared shirtdress with a ribbon tied at the neck. She smokes a long, thin cigarette. The MAN in the driver's seat next to her is a Native American with long black braids and a headband. He's wearing a deerskin jacket with fringe on the sleeves and a turquoise bolo.

WOMAN

(In a mid-western accent) You're mighty lucky we didn't run you over ya there.

The woman leans back and opens the side door on the motor home.

WOMAN

Well, get in, young lady.

INT. MOTOR HOME--DAY

Jane cautiously climbs in and takes a seat on the sofa in the kitchenette. The entire interior of the motor home is decorated in a mushroom motif. There are mushroom drapes in the windows and a mushroom cookie jar and a mushroom stool and mushroom pillows.

WOMAN

My mom always told us kids to stand at least a car's length off of the road. That's right. A car's length. You remember that next time you want to stand out in the middle of the road hitching rides. It's dangerous to boot. I'm Linda, by the way. Linda Quinipegouek. And this is my husband, Percy Quinipegouek.

Jane extends her hand and Linda shakes it. Percy nods at Jane in the rearview mirror and takes a pull from a forty-ounce bottle of beer.

JANE

I'm Jane.

LINDA

So, where are you going with that guitar, young lady?

JANE

Well, ma'am, I'm going to New Orleans. The French Quarter, to be exact. You can just drop me off at the highway.

LINDA

New Orleans? What on earth are you doing going to New Orleans by yourself, young lady? Have you ever been there?

Jane shakes her head no.

LINDA

Do you have any idea how dangerous it is down there? We just came from there. We've driven this motor home from Milwaukee to Disney World. There's a lot of great gambling down here, but I'll tell ya, I never knew homesick 'til we got to New Orleans. Oh my goodness! All the beggars and streetwalkers and drug-addicts and pimps and musicians.

Jane regards her guitar for a moment and smiles.

LINDA

Not to mention the rednecks.

JANE

I guess I don't know too much about it. I have heard a few stories. Say, what is a *redneck*?

LINDA

You don't know what a redneck is? Oh, honey, this whole area is full of them. They're everywhere. Nasty people. You've seen them. Or *heard* them. Isn't that right Percy?

Percy grunts and sips his beer. They turn onto the highway and the sign through the windshield reads I-10 South.

LINDA

(Attempting a Southern drawl.) *Hey, y'all. Let's go get some crawdads and set on the front porch for a spell. Let's throw rocks at the dog and marry our sisters.*

Jane looks out the window at two barefoot boys and a dog playing in a ditch along the highway.

LINDA

They're so ignorant. They sound so stupid! Say, you have a bit of that accent. Where are you from anyway?

Jane breaks out the smile of a woman with the ability to recognize an ignorant cliché--and even the cliché of that cliché--and begins to daydream:

EXT. COLLEGE CAMPUS--DAY

A female REPORTER stands poised with her microphone in front of a TV camera.

REPORTER

I'm Shirley Jones here today with the world-renowned taxonomist, Tombo and his assistant, Bucky.

Bucky and Tombo wear expensive suits. Tombo wears a monocle and Bucky wears a pocket watch on a gold chain.

REPORTER

Bucky, why do you think that taxonomy is of such fundamental importance to biology?

Bucky takes a wad of chewing tobacco and stuffs it into his cheek.

BUCKY

Well, Shirley, I've always been interested in this area of science. The taxonomist looks at the daily face of creation, not only identifying and classifying, but studying the intricacies of anatomy and physiology. Tombo, here, paved the way as a leading authority on animal behavior while synthesizing entirely new disciplines. His influence was paramount to my interest in the field.

Tombo stands next to his favorite cow, stroking her gently.

TOMBO

Well, thank you Bucky. I always believed that restoration of the study of whole organisms to the center of biology was a way to open conversations on biological diversity. I'm convinced that thinking along those lines is what earned me the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for ecologists and evolutionary biologists.

Bucky leans over and spits.

INT. MOTOR HOME--DAY

Jane shakes off her daydream.

JANE

Some folks sound ignorant, some don't. I don't think it's their accent or their dialect as much as what they say and do.

LINDA

You don't have to tell me you don't think. Not with that accent you got. Where are you from again?

Percy leans over and smacks Linda on the shoulder. When he does, he spills beer in his crotch.

PERCY

Goddammit.

He eyes Jane suspiciously in the rearview mirror.

PERCY

(whispers, but loudly enough for Jane to hear) Linda, stop being so frank. Remember, we're still in the South. They have voodoo here.

An animal paw on a chain dangles from the rearview mirror. Percy fondles it.

PERCY

(to Jane) What Linda meant was: while the deer may sleep in the forest, the wolf runs.

Linda sits up proudly.

JANE

We are not hypocrites in our sleep.

Percy and Linda frown at each other. Jane smiles and grabs her guitar.

JANE

Would you two like to hear a song?

EXT. MOTOR HOME--DAY

Jane plays her guitar and sings. Linda and Percy grin and nod their heads in time with the music.

The motor home passes a sign for *New Orleans Airport/Kenner*.

INT. WHOREHOUSE--DAY

Tombo goes in and walks up to Dil at the reception window.

TOMBO

Where's Charlotte?

DIL

Who do you want?

TOMBO

Charlotte. I just saw her come in here.

DIL

I'm sorry, sir, we don't got a Charlotte. We got a Cassie. You think you got her name wrong? Where'd you meet? Canal Street? Warehouse District? Quarter? Help me out here.

TOMBO

What the hell is this place?

DIL

Look, we don't want no trouble.

TOMBO

What the hell is this place? Where's my wife? Where's Charlotte?

DIL

Your wife? Look Buddy, you need to leave right now. There ain't no Charlotte here and we have the right to refuse service to anybody we choose. Did you see the sign?

Dil points to a needlepoint framed sign that says, *We have the right to refuse service to anybody we choose. And that means YOU.*

TOMBO

You better get my wife out here right now.

Tombo begins walking frantically through the lobby in his boxers and boots, looking at the posters on the wall. He halts in front of the poster of *Mona* and stops breathing. The door marked *Mona* opens and Bob kisses Charlotte in the doorway.

TOMBO

Charlotte!

Charlotte, alarmed, pushes Bob out the door and slams it.

TOMBO

Who the hell are you?

BOB

I'm Bob—I mean, I'm Tombo. And just who the hell are you? Or who the hell do you think you are? Standing there in your britches in a reputational house like this.

DIL

We don't want any trouble here.

Tombo rushes at Bob with his fists in the air.

The front door opens and in walks Kennedy. He smiles at frantic Dil, who is now waving a pistol, and walks toward the door marked *Mona*.

Bob hits Tombo and Tombo falls on the floor. Kennedy dodges the fight and pounds on *Mona's* door. No answer. Bob turns to Kennedy. Tombo wipes his bloody lip and looks up at Kennedy.

BOB/TOMBO

(Both, to Kennedy.) Who the hell are you?

KENNEDY

I'm here to see Mona, of course. I'm
K--I'm Tombo.

DIL

Hey, Mr. Lucky Dog, she's booked up
right now.

TOMBO

Booked up!?

Tombo jumps to his feet and he and Bob both grab Kennedy by the shirt and hair and begin to pummel him. The front door opens again and in walks Bucky and behind him, another man, VLADIMIR, with a mustache and spectacles. A gun fires.

BUCKY

Good God-a-mighty. Check this out.

Dil aims a hot pistol at the ceiling.

DIL

I'm the sherrif around here. And you
gonna stop all this nonsense right now
or I'm gonna make you stop.

VLADIMIR

(To Dil in a thick Russian accent.)
Should I reschedule my appointment vis
Mona vor later time?

The men stop beating the hell out of each other. Nobody's going to cross Dil. HOOKERS and their CUSTOMERS in various stages of undress, file out of their rooms in the midst of all the commotion.

Charlotte opens her bedroom door and sees Bucky.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, my God. Bucky!

Bucky, rose stems in hand, runs to Charlotte.

BUCKY

Mama! I'm so sorry for running away.

Dil comes out from behind the counter, lowers her gun, and puts her arm around Vladimir. Everyone stands speechless and watches Charlotte hug Bucky. She pulls away from him and inspects him from head to toe.

CHARLOTTE

My boy in a tuxedo. Will you look at that? And he brought me some . . . stems.

EXT. FRENCH QUARTER-DAY

The motor home drives slowly, stopping every few feet for crowds to pass in front of it. Linda, Percy, and Jane are all smiling and talking inside.

INT. MOTOR HOME--DAY

PERCY

So, you see, Quinipegouek is a Fox word meaning *people of the stinking water*. The French called us *stinking people*, not knowing that the reason Lake Winnebago stinks is because it's rich in algae.

LINDA

It's still beyond me why someone would want to name a motor home company *Winnebago* instead of *Quinipegouek*.

The motor home stops and Jane opens the door.

PERCY

You know, Jane, I learned something recently that I haven't told Linda, yet. Our ancestors--my ancestors--are descendents of earlier Southern Mississippian cultures.

Linda gasps in horror at Percy's revelation. A man in Mardi Gras beads stops and pees on the front tire of the motor home. Linda gasps in horror again.

PERCY

That's right, Linda. I'm a local.

EXT. BOURBON ST.----DAY

Jane walks with her guitar and backpack over her shoulder. People are partying in the streets, coming in and out of bars and clubs, dancing and laughing.

One GUY grabs Jane and waltzes with her in the street. Jane smiles as they twirl in the street. They stop abruptly when a man walking past them pauses to vomit on the sidewalk.

Jane releases her dance partner and bows courteously to him. He laughs and bows back. She continues walking down Bourbon, dodging the raucous crowds.

INT. WHOREHOUSE LOBBY-DAY

TOMBO

(points at Bucky) Charlotte, who is this?

CHARLOTTE

Tombo, this is my son, Bucky. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about him.

CHARLOTTE

And that's Kennedy. He sells wieners. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about him, either. By the way, where are your trousers?

TOMBO

I thought he said his name was-

CHARLOTTE

And this is Bob.

Bob nods at Tombo.

Tombo looks down his nose at Bob and Kennedy, the *Tombo* posers.

TOMBO

(sneers) *Bob*, huh?

CHARLOTTE

'Course you met Dil already.

Dil shyly waves her gun at Tombo as if it were a handkerchief. Charlotte notices Vladimir next to Dil and waves.

CHARLOTTE

Hey, Vladimir. That's Vladimir, honey.

VLADIMIR

(Murmurs under his breath.) She never calls me Vladimir.

Charlotte looks around the room at all the hookers and their customers. One CUSTOMER, his hands tied behind his back, wears a leather suit with a zipper for a mouth.

Another CUSTOMER wears a dress and high heels and holds a teapot. Two other CUSTOMERS are dressed in dog costumes. They wave shyly at each other as if to acknowledge their shared fetish.

CHARLOTTE

And this is everybody. Everybody, this is my husband, Tombo, and my son, Bucky. And my real name is actually Charlotte.

TERRY in the school uniform extends a hand to her CUSTOMER, who is wrapped in a sheet.

TERRY

(in a man's voice) My name is actually Brad. Nice to meet you.

Tombo attempts a wave at all the hookers, then glances over at Bucky who has started to make eyes with Cassie.

CHARLOTTE

Tombo, Mama died.

TOMBO

I know.

Tombo and Charlotte embrace. Bucky is winking and licking his lips at Cassie.

CHARLOTTE

Bucky, if you don't cut that out, you'll be joining your grandmother a lot sooner than you think.

Vladimir cranes his neck to listen, but looks very unsure of what's going on.

VLADIMIR

(To Dil.) So, should I come back later vor my appointment vis Mona?

Everyone except Tombo begins laughing. The hookers and customers clamor around, shake hands with Tombo and Bucky, hug each other and Charlotte.

Bob and Kennedy shake hands and smooth their hair, inspect one another's cuts.

DIL

(To Vladimir.) Mona is going out of business. Now, have you ever met Lena?

Dil motions to LENA, the voluptuous woman in devil horns.
Lena winks at Vladimir and cracks her tail like a whip.

INT. WHOREHOUSE BEDROOM-DAY

Charlotte grabs her overnight bag. She opens the closet door and looks at all the unopened gifts. She closes the door.

INT. WHOREHOUSE LOBBY-DAY

Charlotte hugs all the prostitutes, and even Bob and Kennedy and Vladimir. Kennedy cries and hugs Tombo.

KENNEDY

She's an angel straight down from heaven. She really is.

EXT. ESPLANADE-DAY

Charlotte, Tombo, and Bucky stand where Tombo's truck was once parked. Tombo scratches his head.

BUCKY

Wait a minute. Is your truck blue?

TOMBO

Yeah, why?

BUCKY

Mama, you still got that old station wagon?

INT. PAT O'BRIENS--DAY

Jane sits on stage in the packed piano bar. The pianist accompanies her in "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain." The entire crowd sings along with them.

JANE/PIANIST/CROWD

*She'll be comin' 'round the mountain
when she comes. She'll be comin
round the mountain when she comes.
She'll be comin' 'round the mountain,
she'll be comin' 'round the mountain,
she'll be comin' 'round the mountain
when she comes.*

*She'll be drivin' six white horses
when she comes. She'll be drivin'
six white horses when she comes.
She'll be drivin' six white horses,
she'll be drivin' six white horses,
she'll be drivin' six white horses
when she comes.*

*We will all have chicken and
dumplings when she comes. We will
all have chicken and dumplings when
she comes. We will all have chicken
and dumplings, we will all have
chicken and dumplings, we will all
have chicken and dumplings when she
comes.*

*We will all go out to meet her when
she comes. We will all go out to
meet her when she comes. We will all
go out to meet her, we will all go
out to meet her, we will all go out
to meet her when she comes.*

INT. TRUCK--DAY

V.O. Jane's song.

The sun is setting. Tombo, Charlotte and Bucky all ride back toward the farm, shoulder-to-shoulder together in the front seat of Charlotte's station wagon. They are all smiling, talking, and laughing.

EXT. BOURBON STREET--NIGHT

Bourbon Street is empty except for remnants of the ubiquitous street party earlier in the night. A rumble begins as if horses are charging down the street. The sound of hooves beating the pavement increases to a violent thunderous roar.

Doors and shutters slam opened and closed, banners flutter and trash whirls and blows across the road.

Six white horses run down Bourbon Street.

VITA

DeSha Tolar Kelly was born in Monroe, Louisiana, and raised in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. She received a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1993. She then moved to the French Quarter and worked as a reporter, a jewelry-maker, and a hostess at Brennan's restaurant. Following her stint in New Orleans, she worked as a waitress in St. Croix, a fish processor and roe packer in Kenai and Bethel, Alaska, a teacher of English as a second language in Seoul, Korea, a veterinary technician and singer in a funk band in Austin. In 1998, while studying Italian and the pedagogy of composition at Emory University in Atlanta, she decided to begin pursuing a Master of Fine Arts. DeSha lives and works in San Francisco with her husband, Gene, and her dogs, Grace and Lily.