

LIES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

A Thesis

by

MELISSA JUNE WELLINGTON

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2005

Major Subject: English

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ABSTRACT

Lies: A Collection of Short Stories. (May 2005)

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The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate understanding of the themes, techniques and traditions of creative writing, combining all of the knowledge gleaned from coursework in a body of original fiction. The thesis consists of a collection of short stories and a critical introduction which positions them within the mode of modernism. Themes, structure and the process of creative development are examined and explicated. Influences on style, theme, subject and tone are also described so as to create a line of continuity linking this work to its literary predecessors.

The stories follow the path first blazed by Chekhov, then expanded by later modernist writers such as James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. Stylistically, I have been most influenced by the lyricism of writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Flannery O'Connor. I have chosen as the subjects of my stories ordinary people who lead ordinary lives generally devoid of fabulous and exciting incidents that might comprise an exciting plot. The characters themselves do not represent anything in particular, except perhaps a general human condition that, due to their very ordinariness, is inescapable. By encompassing within the narratives both dreams and extended imaginings, these stories will challenge the boundaries of literal reality in some small

degree. Although each story will advance its own “discrete moment,” all the stories will share a focus on internal struggles rather than on external actions and an overall theme of lying, concentrating on the lies that we, as humans, tell ourselves in order to deal with events that occur in our lives and the consequences of our actions.

Following in the footsteps of James Joyce and Flannery O’Connor, each of the stories will be epiphanic rather than anecdotal in nature. However, some of the stories will center on false or failed epiphanies, wherein the main character fails to come to a realization or comes to an incorrect realization.

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INTRODUCTION

“Short-story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of—the present moment,” writes Nadine Gordimer (Gordimer 264). In this collection of stories, I have attempted to capture moments in the human experience: emotions, reactions, and discoveries. However, it is always necessary to bear in mind that each story is no more than a flash; as Gordimer puts it: “How the characters will appear, think, behave, comprehend, tomorrow or at any other time in their lives, is irrelevant.” People are complex and contradictory, but in short stories only “[a] discrete moment of truth is aimed at—not *the* truth, because the short story doesn’t deal in cumulatives” (Gordimer 264-5). Thus in this thesis I have selected six moments to illuminate, six flashes in which there is an opportunity for discovery in the lives of the characters.

Using Gordimer’s concept of “discrete moments of truth” as a basis for my stories leads me to follow the paradigm of modernism; choosing “fragments of everyday reality” as the subjects for my stories situates me at the end of a long line of writers who have come before me—a line extending back through Flannery O’Connor, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway to Anton Chekhov, whose ability to “dispense with a striking incident, his impressionism, and his freedom from the literary conventions of the highly plotted and formalized story marked the beginnings of a new or ‘modern’ kind of short fiction that combined the specific detail of realism with the poetic lyricism of

This thesis follows the style and format of the *MLA Handbook for Writers*, 5th edition.

romanticism” (May 199). As Elizabeth Bowen notes: “His hero was the subman; he crystallized frustration, inertia, malaise, vacancy, futile aspiration, shy or sly pretentiousness. . . . The suffering, too-intelligent and submissive bourgeois is typified in him . . .” (Bowen 257). The stories presented here are not based on a series of elaborately plotted occurrences, but are descriptions of ordinary individuals dealing with plausible experiences. The drama of the stories is derived from the personalities, actions and reactions of the characters rather than vice versa.

The same types of characters that are found in Chekhov’s fiction act as the protagonists in the stories collected here. My heroes are ordinary people who lead ordinary lives generally devoid of the sort of fabulous and exciting incidents that might normally comprise plot. The characters themselves are not symbols; they represent nothing other than what they are: people suffering the pains of the inescapable human condition.

In keeping with the standard practices of modernism, these ordinary people are shaped and developed in the prose through “mood rather than as either symbolic projection[s] or realistic depiction[s]”; in other words, realistic-seeming characters are created not through the accumulation of details and social interactions but through a manipulation of mood combined with a few significant details purposely chosen to suggest the desired character traits. For example, in “Fridays,” Nancy’s persona is crafted through the portrayals of her feelings (anger, jealousy, suspicion) and, since the voice of the third-person limited narrator is close to her own voice, through the tone of

the narrative. Aspects of her appearance, dress, and actions then spring forth from this persona, complementing and supporting it.

Another facet of the modernist short story is a concentration on “reality as an ambiguous mixture of the psychic and the eternal” (May 205). This curious combination leaves room within the narrative framework for the mental exploration of the characters and mixes that exploration with an understanding of how the characters fit into the greater scheme of the universe. The overlap of the psychic and the eternal allows fiction to function not simply as a window onto the lives of the characters portrayed, but also as a mirror wherein readers see themselves and their own realities reflected. This quality is most evident here in those stories that, while not autobiographical, are drawn from real-life experiences: “Jimmy and Susan,” “Second Marriage,” “Funerals,” and “Reconnecting.”

A final hallmark of modernist writing which I have strived to exemplify in these pages is its objective style, which results in a detailed yet nonjudgmental presentation of characters and situations, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions as to what is “right” and what is “wrong.” Chekhov writes: “When I write, I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story” (Chekhov 195). If traditional stories could be described as transcriptions of trial, verdict, and sentencing, then modern stories are the trials only, governed and overseen by the author, with the reader sitting in the front row of the jury box. In “Second Marriage,” Ted is not condemned for his inability to change his situation, nor is he honored for his decision to

make his marriage work. He is merely presented, the circumstances of his situation revealed, and readers are left to make of him what they will.

Descending from Chekhov, Ernest Hemingway continued a tradition of objective writing. Hemingway is both objective and austere, paring his stories down to the bare minimum, developing understatement into an art. However, his stories nearly always operate on the iceberg principle: that is, 90% of the story lurks beneath the surface. In “Hills Like White Elephants,” the American and his girl sit at a train station alongside the Ebro, drinking beer and Anis and engaging in conversation. The subject of their conversation is never mentioned.

The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings.

“And you think then we’ll be all right and be happy.”

“I know we will. You don’t have to be afraid. I’ve known lots of people that have done it.” (“Hills Like White Elephants” 275)

The above short passage is typical of the exchange. Although it seems at first that not much is said, in examining the context it becomes clear that the couple is discussing an abortion. The American is eager for her to have the procedure so that they can return to their normal lives, but the girl wants something more from life, something that she feels they are giving up by continuing on as they have been. Taking hold of the two strings of beads in the curtain, she reminds us of the rosary, of the moral implications of their

discussion. But all of this exists below the surface. On the surface we see only the conversation and the physical actions and observations of the couple as they sit at the train station.

The action that typically takes place in Hemingway's stories, the conflicts that seem to occur on the surface, are simple and ordinary, but as in "Hills Like White Elephants," there is a tension underlying what he shows us, a fiercer conflict hidden under the façade of ordinariness he has drawn, in which the characters struggle to come to terms with the real issues at hand. In "Cat in the Rain," a different American couple is staying at a hotel in Italy. The wife sees a cat crouching under a table outside in the rain and decides she wants it, but the cat has wandered off by the time she has gone outside to retrieve it. Upon returning to her room, she attempts a conversation with her husband, who is preoccupied reading. "I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel," she said. "I want to have a kitty to sit in my lap and purr when I stroke her" ("Cat in the Rain" 169). In all likelihood, these are no more than transitory desires, but they represent something much deeper. A more matronly hairstyle and a pet are signals of the wife's desire to settle down. But Hemingway never mentions anything of the sort. It is all left below the surface.

My stories, like Hemingway's, are fundamentally psychological in nature, and although my style is to be much more forthcoming than Hemingway, I endeavor always to keep something tucked beneath the surface. In "Fridays," Nancy's suspicions and emotions are always clearly presented, but the foundation for those emotions is never revealed. Even when she finally confronts Miguel with her suspicions that he is having

an affair, the underlying problems in their marriage that have led them to this point are ignored.

“If I’m so bad, why did you marry me?”

“It’s not so bad, Nancy. It’s just the way you are. Look, maybe you should talk to someone about this sort of thing.”

“I don’t need counseling.”

“Fine. But I’m not cheating on you. Okay?” (“Fridays” 27-8)

Miguel refuses to admit that there may be a problem with their marriage, instead pinning all the blame on Nancy’s paranoia. And Nancy, while denying that she has a problem, still refrains from pointing out any specific difficulties she thinks they may be having. But all of this remains below the surface.

In other instances in these stories, however, the characters’ psychology is not concealed. Unlike Hemingway, I enjoy delving into the internal worlds of the characters, keeping secret or hidden only those things which the characters are hiding from themselves. In “Haunted,” Amy forces herself to confront her memories in an effort to fully recover from the pain of her husband’s death. Once she has opened the floodgate, memories pour into her, and she is trapped by them and almost destroys herself. It is only when she makes the conscious decision to put the present ahead of the past (her mother’s reaction ahead of her longing for her husband) that she escapes from her memories and is able to save herself. “*Not like that*, Amy thought. ... She tried to

take a deep breath, and dialed 911. Memories weren't worth dying over" ("Haunted" 62). Her thoughts and motivations remain on the surface because they are what make the story interesting.

Although I have been influenced by Hemingway's understatement, his somewhat stark, minimalist writing style is not really to my taste. Following in the literary footsteps of Flannery O'Connor, I prefer a meatier style that allows more room for description and an individual voice but avoids the richly poetic and sometimes over-the-top lyricism of writers like Eudora Welty. O'Connor's style is economical yet expressive, avoiding unnecessary words while still capturing the flavor of the characters. In "Everything that Rises Must Converge," O'Connor writes:

She was almost ready to go, standing before the hall mirror, putting on her hat, while he, his hands behind him, appeared pinned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him. The hat was new and had cost her seven dollars and a half. She kept saying, "Maybe I shouldn't have paid that for it. No, I shouldn't have. I'll take it off and return it tomorrow. I shouldn't have bought it" (O'Connor 3-4).

Her use of language that contributes to characterization without crippling the text with an overabundance is something I have sought to emulate throughout this collection.

Like both O'Connor and James Joyce, I prefer stories that are epiphanic rather than anecdotal, by which I mean that they uncover "a fictional world not by developing a

plot involving purposive agents but by unfolding particular sensations or emotions and proceeding to a climactic revelation that does not necessarily take the form of a complete, overt action” (Leitch 131). One example of this type of story is Joyce’s “Araby,” in which the boy narrator experiences a moment of realization, an instant in which he understands that Mangan’s sister, the young woman with whom he is infatuated, has no more feeling for him than the young woman in the market stall, whose interest is all in the men with whom she is flirting. He realizes that, regarding Mangan’s sister, he has done nothing but fool himself. “Gazing up into the darkness, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (Joyce 35).

In “Second Marriage,” a similar epiphany is suggested. When Ted allows Sylvia to lead him into the bedroom, he knows he will never talk to her about the night before, or about any of the numerous similar evenings in the past. Although he had made the decision to leave he will not follow through with it.

I stayed where I was. “We’re going to have to talk about this some time, Sylvia. We can’t put it off forever.”

“I know, but ... not right now, okay? I just don’t think I can do it now.”

She tugged on my arm again. “Please?”

Nodding, I let her lead me into the bedroom (“Second Marriage” 53).

Like the young narrator in “Araby,” he has only been lying to himself.

In “The Boarding House,” Joyce presents a more indirect, but also more pleasant, epiphanal moment. Polly weeps over the consequences of her affair with one of her mother’s boarders, but upon internally facing and dealing with the issue, she overcomes her sorrow and sees the possibilities of the future.

Polly sat for a little time on the side of the bed, crying. Then she dried her eyes and went over to the looking-glass. . . . She regarded the pillows for a long time and the sight of them awakened in her mind secret and amiable memories. She rested the nape of her neck against the cool iron bed-rail and fell into a reverie [sic]. There was no longer any perturbation visible on her face (“The Boarding House” 68).

“Funerals” depicts an instant of epiphany in which Petra, like Polly, faces her fears. At a stranger’s funeral she is confronted with the memories of her father’s funeral and is finally able to deal with her grief and move on. “She felt someone firmly squeezing her left hand. With her right, she wiped the tears from her eyes. She looked up and saw Nick smiling at her . . .” (“Funerals” 72).

The last major influence on the stories in this collection is Gabriel García Márquez and magical realism. In his stories and novels, García Márquez uses magical realism as a means of allowing a story to transcend reality. By realistically treating fanciful events, he is able to portray reality in a way that might not otherwise be possible. For example, in the short story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,”

García Márquez invents an old man, tattered and dirty, with enormous wings growing out of his back. The old man appears one day, and through their reactions, García Márquez is able to portray the attitudes and personas of numerous townsfolk, from the couple on whose property the old man appears to the parish priest. In this case, magical realism becomes a tool for showing many people as they really are, a feat that would be far more difficult without the trigger of an incredible and mysterious event.

García Márquez has also demonstrated that magical realism can be a technique for presenting an ideal solution to an insolvable problem, as at the end of his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

“And how long do you think we can keep up this goddamn coming and going?” he asked.

Florentino Ariza had kept his answer ready for fifty-three years, seven months, and eleven days and nights.

“Forever,” he said (García Márquez 348).

Clearly it would be impossible to continue traveling back and forth along the river, always flying the cholera flag, but Florentino is utterly serious when he makes the statement. This is the perfect solution for him and Fermina: after their freedom to love each other on the boat, they cannot return to the strictures of life on land.

Although I have been influenced by the concept of magical realism, I do not use it in this collection. Instead, I have replaced it with imagination, which I use to similar

effect: to allow the reader to experience something *unreal*, to show the mind of the protagonist in a way in which it could not be revealed through the course of more ordinary events.

In “Second Marriage,” Ted imagines trying to track down Sylvia after she storms out of their house.

I imagined her on Spring Street, winding her way down the bluff, passing old house and cars. ...

I started over from our house, trying to trace a new route along Spring in my mind, looking for the first place along the bluff to get a drink, until I came to that little spot next to Casita’s, the one that doesn’t even have a name. That was where she went last time (“Second Marriage” 44).

His imaginings give the reader glimpses of past experiences and details of Sylvia’s past behavior that could never be revealed through an actual search, a search that would seem out of character for the Ted that exists in the flash of the story. This Ted is impotent.

Imagination is also prominent in “Jimmy and Susan,” where Jimmy dreams of how he might marry Susan and what that marriage might be like. His dream reflects his cynicism and lack of confidence as he is unable to fully realize his desires even in his own mind: “I stood beside the bed and looked across to see Susan standing there, naked. She started to climb onto the bed and then stopped. She looked up at me. ‘You won’t mind terribly if I’m thinking about ... something else, will you?’ she asked. ... Her

eyes refused to meet mine, ‘Could I have a blindfold?’ she asked” (“Jimmy and Susan” 38-9). The dream portrays an unrealistic Susan, a Susan whose actions are motivated more by Jimmy’s negative view of himself than by her own character.

And it is through her imagination that Petra, in “Funerals,” is finally able to come to terms with her father’s death. Twenty-two years after his burial, she returns to her father’s funeral while attending the funeral of a stranger. As she sits in the synagogue, it transforms around her into a Catholic church: “A dark, barren altar rested in front of the cabinet. At either end of the dais, toward the front, stood large podiums. Her mind added a white marble baptismal font and a crucifix, decorating the altar with the colors of Pentecost. Her father had died in early June” (“Funerals” 69). Without imagination, Petra would be unable to return to the site of the original funeral, and her acceptance of her father’s death would be a less personal moment.

According to Edgar Allan Poe, the most important aspect of a short story is something which he calls “unity of effect.” When beginning a story, a writer must first select an effect, a discrete moment of truth, to convey. Then, “having conceived [of one], with deliberate care ... he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. ... In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to be the one pre-established design” (Poe 61). Every word should be used to create one distinct impression or idea that will be most clear at the end of the story. Continuity of effect is not only a vital aspect of the short story, however; it also plays a crucial part in unifying a collection of short stories.

After surviving the fire swamp only to be captured by his true love's fiancé in "The Princess Bride," Wesley is promised, in front of his true love, that he will not be harmed. Once she has been led away, he says to his captor, "'We are men of action. Lies do not become us'" (Reiner). Unfortunately, lies are a part of what makes us human. Even the most honest person, when forced to confront the dimmest recesses of his soul, would find that he has built some fragment of his life upon untruths, little white lies, or self-deception.

The six short stories in this collection, although involving different characters in a variety of settings and circumstances, all focus on that very theme: lies. In each story, the protagonist struggles to rectify a relationship that has somehow been damaged by self-delusion or deception. Some are successful; others are not. But in each, lies must be confronted if there is to be any hope of creating a healthy relationship.

Within the collection, the stories have been arranged in what Robert M. Luscher calls a "short story sequence: a volume of stories, collected and organized by their author, in which the reader successively realizes underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme" (Luscher 148). The stories progress from tales of self-deception to tales of repression (a specific form of self-delusion) to a tale of an external lie; from lack of awareness to closure and self-awareness to an awareness of others. Each story has a slightly more positive conclusion than the last, emphasizing a hopeful tone in the collection overall.

In addition to the major theme of the collection, a concentration on family becomes apparent in the third story ("Second Marriage") and is continued throughout the

remainder of the collection. In both “Second Marriage” and “Haunted,” family members play an important role in guiding the protagonist (unsuccessfully in “Second Marriage”) toward a resolution. The role of family becomes even more significant in the last two stories, “Funerals” and “Reconnecting,” as the focus shifts from romantic to familial relationships.

Religion, specifically Roman Catholicism, also helps tie together several of the stories. In “Jimmy and Susan,” Jimmy works in a monastery, a fact about which he jokes with his friends. However, his Catholicism is a major part of his life, as suggested by the setting of the majority of his dream within a cathedral. He uses religion as a crutch to help justify the stagnation of his life. Catholicism plays a minor role in “Funerals” and “Reconnecting” as well, helping to foreground the stories in a tradition of commitment and sacrifice and establishing a basis for the protagonists’ points of view. (For example, Allison’s abhorrence of divorce in “Reconnecting.”)

The subject of memory, too, connects the last three stories, “Haunted,” “Funerals,” and “Reconnecting.” In “Haunted,” Amy must acknowledge her memories and then deny them a central role in her life to recover from her husband’s death. Likewise, Petra revisits memories of her father’s funeral to finally put the event behind her. In “Reconnecting,” however, memory plays a different role. Lacking memories of her mother and her mother’s family, Allison depends upon what she has been told by Aunt Maggie. But when she discovers that Aunt Maggie has been less than fully honest, Allison decides to reject her beliefs about her mother’s family and to attempt to build a relationship with them. She will create new memories to replace her untrustworthy ones.

To return to Poe's concept of "unity of effect," I believe that from the first word of "Fridays" through the final word of "Reconnecting" each word must contribute to the overall effect, not just of the story in which it appears, but of the collection as a whole; each word must build upon the last. As B. M. Éjxenbaum states: "By its very existence, the story, just as the anecdote, amasses its whole weight *toward the ending*" (Éjxenbaum 81). It is with this goal in mind that I have composed and organized these stories. I can only hope that, with this collection, I have achieved that objective.

FRIDAYS

Nancy woke early Friday morning when her husband kissed her forehead, and she knew he was having an affair. Her eyes were blurry with sleep and the sunlight thrusting through the slats of the blinds made everything white and hazy, but she could feel his clean-shaven cheek and smell his aftershave.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

The quilt slipped down as he pulled away from her, exposing her shoulder. “I have to see a client in Sugar Land,” he said. “I’ll probably be gone all day. Go back to sleep.”

“What day is it?” Nancy asked, though she already knew.

He didn’t answer.

“Miguel?”

She sat upright and turned her back to the window so she could look around the room. He had already left. She climbed out of bed and stumbled through the door into the kitchen/dining area, tripping a bit on her long green nightgown. Miguel stood at the tiny patch of counter beside the stove, filling his thermos with coffee.

“Isn’t it Friday?” Nancy asked, attempting to smooth her shoulder-length brown hair. “I thought you didn’t work Fridays.”

He looked up, coffeepot in hand. “I don’t normally,” he said, “but this is the only day the client is free. I’m setting up an at-home work unit that connects directly to the office network. So I have to make a house call.”

“What client?”

“Black Hills.”

“The law firm?” Nancy squeezed past him to open the refrigerator. “That’s not in Sugar Land. I thought you were driving to Sugar Land.” She grabbed a container of yogurt and shut the door.

“I told you, Nancy, it’s a house call.”

“But I thought you were in consulting specifically to avoid stuff like this,” Nancy said.

“House calls? I don’t mind house calls. Damn sight better than sitting in an office all day. And I make my own hours,” Miguel said. He set down the coffeepot and screwed the lid onto his thermos, then scooted out of Nancy’s way so she could set down the yogurt and get a spoon.

She put the spoon down beside the yogurt and turned around, leaning back against the stove. “That’s what I mean. I thought you wouldn’t be working on Fridays.”

“You do what you have to do.” Miguel walked past her, through the dining area into the living room. His black leather shoes scuffed a corner of the blue kitchen rug, revealing the black and white linoleum that serves as the universal kitchen floor of cheap Texas apartments.

Nancy knelt to straighten the rug, her wide hips pulling the nightgown tight.

“You don’t have to go,” she said.

Miguel, standing in the living room, looked back at her with one eyebrow raised.

“You feeling okay? You need anything?”

“I’m fine.” She noticed that his blue and white plaid shirt looked particularly nice against his dark skin and that he was wearing his best khaki slacks, the ones that accentuated his butt. “You look nice,” she said.

“Thanks. I got to go.” He came back into the kitchen to kiss her forehead again, then returned to the living room and opened the front door. “Call me if you need anything,” he said as he walked out.

Nancy poured the last of the coffee into a World Wildlife Fund mug, all green jungle with a Sumatran tiger peering between nondescript bushes. She needed proof before she talked to Miguel. She’d have to be patient. No way was she confronting him like some sniveling *housewife*. She’d find evidence and confront him calmly, choosing her own time and place.

She leaned her elbows against the almond-colored countertop, stared into her coffee, and thought. Where to look? Check his pants pockets? Only an idiot left evidence of an affair in his pockets. Idiots and characters in soap operas and romance novels. Besides, she did the laundry—she went through his pockets once or twice a week. She might check his laptop bag or his cell phone, but she’d have to wait until his return, and what would she say? That she’d dropped an earring in his bag?

She took a sip of coffee. Perhaps she was leaping ahead of herself. What was she looking for? Traditionally, it’d be lipstick on his collar or the scent of another woman’s perfume. But women who fooled around with married men rarely kissed their lovers’ shirts, and perfume proved only that a man had been around women, not that anything illicit had occurred.

Nancy picked up her coffee and wandered into the bedroom. She looked through her husband's dresser drawers, sifting through his underwear, socks, gym clothes, and T-shirts. Nothing suspicious except four pairs of white crew socks stuffed in the T-shirt drawer.

Searching the closet and the bathroom, she found only the usual items out of place: hangers on the floor, comb in a puddle of water on the counter, cap to the shaving cream lying in the sink.

She returned to the kitchen, with its off-white walls and its oak-finished MDF cabinets, to eat her yogurt, and surveyed kitchen, dining area, and living room. There were no hiding places in the three small but open rooms. That left only the extra bedroom, converted into her studio and Miguel's office. The door that led into it from the living room was the only closed door in the apartment.

On tiptoe, Nancy crept to the closed door. She leaned her shoulder into it and turned the knob, pushing the door open slowly.

The room was dim and shadowy with the curtains drawn, but she could make out the hulking frame of her black wire storage unit against the far wall, the stack of canvases resting faces to the wall beside it, and the blurred shape of her easel propped up in front of the window. On her right stood Miguel's wooden table, seven feet long, supporting his computers. A desk lamp perched on the corner nearest the door. She flicked it on.

Walking around the long table, Nancy pushed aside her husband's chair and knelt on the floor. Twin two-drawer filing cabinets were tucked beneath the table. The right

cabinet held Miguel's business files, and the left held their personal files: bond certificates, birth certificates, marriage license, tax returns, medical records, the title to their car, receipts, and a large stack of miscellaneous papers.

Nancy had never bothered to look in the filing cabinets before. She often told Miguel that's what she'd married him for, to keep track of finances and such. Now she pulled out the folder of miscellaneous items first. There were some receipts from paintings she had sold, last year's household budget, and a program from her friend Susan's wedding.

It had only been two months ago. A nice wedding. Really . . . tasteful, probably expensive. It had been held in the First Presbyterian Church, near Rice Village. The bridal party had twenty-four members, the entire church was covered in black magic roses, and the reception featured white damask table cloths and an open bar. A mariachi band serenaded the couple while they ate, and after dinner there was a deejay. Nancy thought everything was very nice, but that something was missing. It was the first wedding she'd been to where she hadn't cried. Everyone played their roles perfectly—but that was the problem; it was like going to a play in which the actors had over-rehearsed, and even though no errors were made, the entire performance was flat and lifeless.

Miguel had enjoyed it, though. He said that it was much better than their wedding and too bad they hadn't had more money back then to really make a party of it.

Nancy dropped the wedding program into the folder and shoved the folder back into the cabinet. No incriminating items had appeared. She reached into the back of the

drawer and lifted out the stack of receipts. Groceries, Chinese take-out, Benihana's about a month ago. An oil change. But the next receipt was for a bottle of pinot grigio, \$65.84. She and Miguel only drank red wine, and never anything that expensive. Miguel always said there was no point in buying expensive wine since neither of them could tell the difference between a ten dollar bottle and a fifty dollar bottle.

She fingered the wine receipt in her chubby white hands as she sat on her knees and stared at it. She had suspected Miguel was cheating for weeks, and she had known he was this morning, but finding evidence made it seem real in a way that blind knowledge couldn't. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, chest and shoulders shaking. Then she carefully placed the receipt in the stack and leaned forward to set the pile neatly in the back of the drawer.

As she pulled her hands out of the cabinet, her right wrist brushed against something soft tucked down along the sides of the folders. It was a red cotton bag with the top carefully bent over. She drew it out and opened it.

Inside she found about thirty strips of construction paper, red, pink, orange, and yellow, each folded over. She unfolded a red one, then an orange one. Lyrics were typed on each scrap. She unfolded all the strips, smiling as she remembered how Miguel had given her these strips when she'd returned from a month-long trip to Chicago after her father died. Every time he'd heard a song that reminded him of her, he'd typed the lyrics, just the pertinent ones, onto a strip of scrap construction paper.

She tucked the strips back into the cotton bag. It had been four years since he'd given them to her, and she had nearly forgotten about it. Such a sweet, romantic gesture.

And he'd saved them. She slipped the bag down the side of the drawer and closed the cabinet. Maybe there was some logical reason for the wine. Maybe he really was working Fridays. She stood, smoothing her long nightgown over the fleshy folds of her waist and hips. Then she thought about Miguel leaving for work only an hour ago, and she knew once more that he was having an affair. She could feel it, like a pea caught in her throat, like the first shot of tequila on an empty stomach.

Giddy with the knowledge of his unfaithfulness, she sat down at his long computer table and tapped the space bar on the sprawling ergonomic keyboard. The monitor hummed and phased from dull black to the blue login screen. She typed his password—he'd used the same one for everything for years—and opened his email account. Scrolling through his inbox, she found the usual emails: a chatty email from his mom, computer questions from his brother, a slew of technical emails from various clients, and an ad for a testicular enlarging product featuring an anatomically impossible squirrel. There were several from a woman named May Wallace-Brown, presumably a client. The first two seemed innocent enough, asking when a program Miguel was writing to chart oil industry data would be available and how best to back up sensitive files. The third email, more recent, was a request for him to "do lunch." Another cancelled an arranged meeting because "there will be too many other people around." It was signed simply "M." The last email had been sent yesterday. The woman wrote: "My place tomorrow sounds perfect. I've taken the day off, so we should have plenty of uninterrupted time. -M." None of the emails from Wallace-Brown showed Miguel's replies.

Nancy sagged forward, elbows splayed across the tabletop. Maybe he had an excuse for the wine, but the email was irrefutable. She tried to imagine what the woman looked like. Tall and trim, probably, with perky breasts, like Nancy about ten years ago. The woman worked in a law office, and Nancy could picture her, snug light blue jacket, skirt a few inches above the knee, tall black pumps, and a low cut blouse. She'd wear a necklace with a cross dangling from it, and her bleach-blond hair would be tucked into a bun. She'd sit at her desk with her legs crossed so that her skirt slid up her thighs while she typed the lawyers' correspondence.

The lump in Nancy's throat seemed to swell and harden, becoming a walnut instead of a pea. Right now, she thought, Miguel is at her house. And they're alone. Thinking about the two of them, Nancy felt the walnut at the back of her throat dissolve in a rush of hot anger and adrenaline. She clenched her fists until the feeling passed, and then she left the office, walked calmly to the bedroom, and flung herself onto the bed. She cried into her pillow until her nose ran and her head ached, and then she lay there staring at the slots of sunlight splintering through the closed blinds.

Her cell phone rang and she sat up to answer it.

"Hello?" She sniffled, searched for a tissue.

"Hey, Nance. I'm at the court. Are you coming or not? We're going to lose our reservation if you don't get here soon."

Nancy mouthed a curse. "I'm sorry, Daniel, I totally forgot about racquetball. I haven't been feeling well and I'm still in bed . . ."

“You’re sick? Don’t worry about the game, we can play next week. Just feel better. Is there anything I can do? Need anything?”

“Oh no, I’ll be fine,” she said. “I just need some rest.”

“Well, call me if you need anything. I’ll see you later.”

She hung up the phone. Daniel’s voice echoing her husband’s words stung. But at least he had meant it. She wondered what Miguel would do if she called him now. He wouldn’t answer, she was sure.

Miguel returned home a little after six. Nancy was still in bed. He sat down on the corner of the quilt and asked her how she was feeling.

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” she said. “I’m sure it’s nothing. Probably all in my head, right?”

“What are you talking about?” Miguel said.

“Nothing, nothing. So how was work? Did you get everything done?”

“Not quite. I’ll probably have to go back next Friday to finish. It’s an older house, so I had to pull some wire.”

“Isn’t that too bad,” Nancy said.

The next week while she sat at her easel painting, she thought about Miguel and that woman. She daydreamed about what would happen on Friday. Maybe she’d follow him to her house and catch them in the act. Maybe she’d go by the law office and see the woman on her own. She said nothing about it to Miguel. She knew now that her original idea of confronting him wouldn’t be satisfying; like every argument they ever had, he’d pretend to be oblivious and then twist things until it was somehow her fault.

Friday morning Miguel kissed Nancy's forehead before he left, but she pretended she was still asleep. She climbed out of bed once she heard the door close and headed into the kitchen. On the counter next to the coffee pot was a note from Miguel. "See you tonight. Call me if you need anything." The words reminded her of last Friday's phone call from Daniel.

Getting ready for racquetball that afternoon, Nancy spent extra time fussing in front of the mirror. Perhaps spending more time on her appearance would return Miguel to fidelity. Even though he wouldn't see her in this, it would be good to get back into the practice of looking nice. She put on a black thong and neon pink nylon shorts, then debated wearing only a black sports bra versus the sports bra with a smallish white undershirt; neither pleased her, and she finally settled on a compromise: a black lycra tank top with extra support that helped camouflage the fifteen or twenty extra pounds she'd gained over the last seven years. Makeup was rejected—she had a naturally smooth complexion, and besides, it would run as soon as she started to sweat. She twisted her thick, straight brown hair into a ball at the back of her head and fastened it with a large-toothed black clip. After donning white crew socks and her tennis shoes, she was finished. She grabbed her bag and her keys and headed to the gym.

Daniel was warming up on court three when she arrived. She watched him for a moment. His pale skin was already splotchy from exertion, and his light brown hair was so stiff with some type of gel that sweat was having no effect on it. Nancy sighed. She didn't play racquetball with him for his looks, but because she'd known him since high school and he was a good racquetball player.

She tapped on the glass and then let herself onto the court. “Hey, Daniel,” she said, trying to make her voice sexy. She might as well practice that too.

He turned around, lowering his racquet. She saw his eyes drift over her body and swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. It wasn’t his fault he was so unappealing, and she had wanted to be noticed. “You look nice,” he said.

“Thanks.” She blinked and looked away, struggling not to let him see her revulsion, then looked back at him and smiled, trying to act normal. “You want to serve first?”

He started walking toward the back of the court. “No, you first,” he said.

Nancy sauntered forward and to the right to position herself between the red lines, consciously swinging her hips from side to side to keep her thong from riding up. She’d forgotten how uncomfortable thongs were. As she passed Daniel she noticed the way his close-set hazel eyes fixed on her hips and suppressed a shudder. She leaned forward to serve, bending at the knees into a squat and turning her body to swing through her hips. Her pink nylon shorts molded themselves into the curve of her cheeks and she suspected that her thong was visible, but there was nothing she could do about it.

“Zero, zero,” she said, dropping the ball and swinging her racquet.

Each of the three games was something of a blur to her. She’d missed playing a few weeks in a row and had fallen out of shape quickly. Daniel won all three games, but it seemed to Nancy like she had a few more opportunities to serve than she should have. She should have thought before dressing sexy around Daniel. He’d always had a crush on her and she knew it, but his blatant admiration made her uncomfortable.

“Good game,” Daniel said. His eyes flicked from her face to her breasts, which were heaving slightly. He licked his lips. “So, do you have to go home right away?”

Nancy tried to keep shock from showing on her face. She realized then that he must think she’d dressed up for him, that she was expressing interest. She must have looked like she was coming on to him.

He licked his lips again, seeming nervous. His tongue looked almost purple against his thin lips and white face, and Nancy had a disgusting thought. She forced a seductive smile. “I was kind of hoping we could do something else,” she said. “You know, I’ve never actually seen your place.”

“Do you want to come over? I’ve got a water bed,” Daniel said. He blushed, eyes now fixated on her chest. “I mean . . .”

She reached out and grasped his arm just below the shoulder, drawing her fingernails lightly over his skin. “I’d like that.”

She’d never realized how short he was before. He couldn’t be more than an inch taller than her. And his breath smelled of damp grass and rotting fruit. They walked out of the gym into the parking lot. It was humid and she felt the sun baking her skin as she started to sweat. “Shall I follow you, then?” she asked.

Daniel stood next to his car, an old model Corolla. “Yeah, okay.”

Following him in her clean red Honda, Nancy gripped the wheel tightly. Her palms were sweaty and her heart thudded. They’d arrive at his place in a few minutes and, unless she’d misunderstood him completely, she’d have to go through with this. She imagined his thin lips and purple tongue on her mouth. She thought of his clammy

hands touching her. No, not even to show Miguel how it felt could she put herself through that. Daniel turned left onto Bissonet, but she pretended not to see and continued straight ahead. She made a u-turn at the next light and headed back to her apartment.

She pulled into the spot under the pin oak outside her building and sat in the car for a few minutes until her breathing was under control. Then she stepped out and climbed the stairs to the apartment.

From the doorway she could see Miguel in the kitchen cooking dinner. He was about to pop a rack of lamb, her favorite, into the oven, but looked up as she came in.

“Hi,” he said. “Play well?”

“What are you doing home so early?” she asked.

“I told you it wouldn’t take long. I would have been here before you left, but I stopped at the store to pick up some things for dinner.” He slid the rack into the oven and closed the door. “I know you haven’t been feeling well lately, so I thought maybe a nice dinner and an evening of relaxation might help.”

Nancy stared at him. She hadn’t realized she’d been acting in any way unusual. It was so sweet of him to surprise her like this. He left the kitchen and crossed the living room to give her a kiss.

Her mind bubbled with doubt. He couldn’t possibly be having an affair, could he? Thinking about what she’d almost done with Daniel made her nauseous. Surely she couldn’t even have considered such a thing if Miguel were innocent.

He was talking about work as he set the table. “. . . network all set up, so I guess the job with Black Hills is finished and I can get back to—”

“Are you having an affair?” The question burst out of her mouth before she could stop it.

He laid the fork down carefully on the table. “No,” he said. He looked at her. “Is that what the quiet treatment has been about?”

“But there was a receipt for white wine. You spent almost seventy dollars on one bottle!”

“It was for my mom. It was her birthday a few weeks ago, remember?”

Nancy remembered fixing a fancy meal for his mom. Her sixty-fifth birthday was a big deal for the whole family. And, yes, Miguel had brought her a bottle of wine, as well as a box of chocolate-covered strawberries. “That doesn’t explain the emails,” she said.

“What emails?”

“The ones from that Wallace-Brown woman. About meeting her at her house so you two could be alone?”

“May? She’s the lead attorney at Black Hills. She wanted to talk about the oil data program while I was setting up her home network so there wouldn’t be any interruptions. She was always too busy at the office. Come on, Nancy, I told you about her weeks ago.”

“How can you be so calm when I’m accusing you of having an affair?” Nancy yelled.

Miguel sighed and sat down at the table. “Would you rather I yelled about it? What good would that do? Besides, you’re always convinced someone’s doing something awful to you. I should have seen this coming”

“What are you talking about?”

“What am I talking about? Only two weeks ago you were sure that some guy waiting for the bus must be stalking you.”

“He was out there almost two hours.”

“Because one of the buses broke down!”

“How was I supposed to know that? He kept looking in the window. It was our bedroom window!”

“What was he supposed to do stand there with his eyes shut?”

She shrugged. “I just don’t like having strange men look at me.”

Miguel raised an eyebrow. “Then why are you wearing that?”

“I was trying to look nice for you! Anyway, the guy at the bus stop was an isolated incident.”

“Really. Last winter you thought someone was trying to break in every morning when it was just the newspaper hitting the door. You made me sit up all night with a baseball bat.”

“If I’m so bad, why did you marry me?”

“It’s not bad, Nancy. It’s just the way you are. Look, maybe you should talk to someone about this sort of thing.”

“I don’t need counseling.”

“Fine. But I’m not cheating on you. Okay?”

She sat down on the sofa and nodded. Miguel finished setting the table, then returned to the kitchen. He took the pot of potatoes off the stove, drained it, and began to mash.

“Do you need any help?” Nancy asked.

“I’m all set, thanks. Why don’t you go take a bath?” he suggested. “You’ll feel a lot better after.”

She nodded again and went through the bedroom into the bathroom. As the tub filled, she thought about what Miguel had said. She thought about him coming home early, about his suggestion that something was wrong with her. How dare he? Nancy climbed into the tub and slid under the water, arms crossed to cup her breasts. Maybe he wasn’t having an affair, but something was going on. And she’d find out what it was. He’d be the one that needed help then.

JIMMY AND SUSAN

I slammed the car door and hurried toward the diner in the sweltering August heat. It was important that I be on time and that I get a table. Not that anyone else would be there yet. But they would expect me to be there, waiting for a table, when they arrived. You can count on me, because I am responsible. Because I am punctual. Damn it, because I'm boring.

I swung open the thick wooden door of Bubba's Cafe and was blasted with a wave of cold air. Inside it was dark and musty. I smiled at the waitress lounging at the front counter. "Table for five, please," I said.

The waitress looked at me sharply, like I'd just asked her something dirty, and popped her gum. "Five? Can't seat you till your whole party is here."

I looked around. The diner was fairly rundown, with chipped, graffiti-marked tables and torn faux leather booths. A fat woman and her skinny friend sat in one of the nicest booths in a corner. There were no other customers. The place was pretty quiet, except for the corner jukebox blaring "Achy, Breaky Heart"—something I'm sure we could all have done without. "It doesn't seem busy," I said. "Could I go ahead and get the table now? My friends will be here in a few minutes."

She scowled and I could see where she'd gotten all those wrinkles from. "No," she said. "Not until your whole party arrives."

I leaned against the counter and thrust my hands into my pockets to wait. My old roommate Matt had chosen the location this week; he always picked weird, hole-in-the-

wall places. He swore the burgers were good, but I remained skeptical. If they were that good there'd be more people.

We'd been meeting once a week for four years, ever since we'd finished college and everyone else we knew had left San Antonio to start jobs elsewhere, but never before had anyone picked a place that looked quite so seedy. When it was my choice we went to some kind of buffet. Chad and Alicia generally chose chain restaurants, like Chili's or Applebee's. And Susan always picked Mexican food.

The restaurant door opened and I heard them laughing even before I could make out their figures against the glare. Matt and Susan, with Alicia and Chad right behind them.

"Hey, Jimmy!" Susan said. Her smile seemed to light up the entire restaurant. Suddenly it didn't seem as dingy as it had before. She beamed at the waitress. "Five, please," she said.

The waitress smiled back. How could she help it? "Right this way."

Walking to the table, I exchanged pleasantries with the rest of the group. We sat down at a table against the window. I snatched the seat across from Susan. The chair legs were uneven, so the chair rocked back and forth, but it was worth it. Susan was wearing a gray suit with a short skirt, and a hint of cleavage peeked out of the top of her blouse. Her lips glistened with some sort of gloss. "You look nice today," I said.

"Thanks," she said. "I had an interview. But I wish I'd had time to change—I feel so overdressed!"

I knew Susan was between jobs at the moment. She'd had to quit her job at Frost Bank over some sort of difficulty with her boss. She hadn't been very forthcoming about it. I said, "Just get your husband to take you to a nicer restaurant." I smiled at Matt.

He laughed. "And miss out on this wonderful atmosphere? You got to be kidding. Besides, I told you the burgers are awesome—thick slabs of meat without any of that rabbit food. I don't know what I'd do without my weekly plate of grease. Susan's got me eating right. It's horrible."

Susan rolled her eyes. "What you guys don't see is Matt wandering around our apartment, complaining about how fat he's getting," she said. "He's the one who started this whole diet thing."

He blushed, turning red from the collar of his dark polo shirt all the way to his hairline. Even the skin that showed through his closely trimmed blond beard was splotchy. "I'm just concerned about my health, okay?"

I turned away from them to study my menu. It was plain paper, stained with spilled soda, and featured only a half dozen or so choices. Hamburger, cheeseburger, chili cheeseburger. Chicken-fried steak. Chicken-fried chicken.

I looked back up at my friends. Matt was advising Alicia and Susan to split the chicken-fried steak. He wiped a finger under his nose.

How had a guy like him ended up with a woman like Susan? Because he met her first, I guess. I remembered when I first met the two of them, sophomore year in college. Matt was my roommate, and she was already his girlfriend. I'd been interested

then, but you can't go after your roommate's girl, and besides, I liked Matt, even if he was kind of a doofus. So maybe he sometimes wore pink shirts, and he'd always refused to admit that Wayne Gretzky had been a better hockey player than Mario Lemieux, but he was still a pretty decent guy. When he asked me to be the best man at his wedding, I'd been disappointed, but I'd done it.

We ordered and I listened to the four of them chattering while we waited for our meals. Our table wasn't far from the kitchen, and I could smell hot grease and frying onions. My stomach gurgled in spite of my determination not to like the food. The sound of clattering plates and a woman, presumably the waitress, yelling that no one had cleaned out the ice machine mingled with the conversation at the table.

I tried to block out the angry waitress and concentrate on what Alicia was saying. Something about her and Chad taking a trip to Alaska to go fishing. I didn't catch why they couldn't go fishing somewhere closer. I gave up on trying to figure out what she was talking about and watched Susan suck her soda up through a clear straw with her glossy lips puckered.

"So what have you been up to, Jimmy? Anything exciting?" she asked. A strand of shiny brown hair brushed across her nose and she tucked it behind her ear.

I smiled, tried a joke. "Not really. I spend all my time around monks and priests. It'd be hard to find a less exciting group of people. Except maybe accountants."

Chad, seated on my left, nudged me. "Come on, Jimmy, you only work at a monastery. You've got to be doing something else with the rest of your time."

Matt laughed. “Yeah, tell us about it.” He eyed his wife teasingly. “We married men never get to have any fun.”

“I think you’re having a whole lot more fun than I am,” I said. “The last date I went on was two months ago.”

Chad groaned. “That girl your mom set you up with? The one with the lisp?”

“Yeah,” I said. I unwrapped my silverware from its napkin and started tearing the napkin into little strips. “You know how it is. You can’t say no to your mom. Anyway, after that fiasco I think it’ll be a while before I venture out again. The single life’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

I stared into my drink. I sure as hell wasn’t going to say the real reason I stayed home.

“You’re just not putting yourself out there, Jimmy,” Alicia said. “You can’t just wait for someone to fix you up with the girl of your dreams.”

She sure had that right. “I’m not really a big fan of the bar scene,” I said.

“I met Chad at a basketball game. You just need to get out of your apartment more often.”

Susan glared at her. “I’m sure it’s not as easy as that,” she said. “Sometimes going out and meeting people can be just plain weird.”

She winked at me across the table and launched into a story about going to a bar and having the female bartender ask to take her home. I wondered if the story were true or if she was making it up just to change the subject. That would be just like her. She couldn’t stand to see anyone uncomfortable. The story was ridiculous, especially when

she got to the part about taking the phone number and stuffing it into the toilet paper dispenser in the ladies' room. But at least they weren't asking about my love life any more.

The waitress brought our food to the table. I stared at the enormous burger and wondered how in the hell I was going to eat all that. I looked up and Susan smiled at me. I smiled back. "I've been waiting for this all day," I said.

She looked confused. "Waiting all day for a story about a lesbian bartender? You really must be hard up for entertainment."

I just nodded. I couldn't have cared less about her story. It was just another chance to sit across from her, to look at her, to listen to her voice. She didn't get it. I lifted the bun off the top of my burger and started dumping on the salt. I took a bite. I had to admit, it was a pretty good burger. But not quite salty enough. I reached for the shaker again.

Alicia was watching me, her hazel eyes narrowed. "Geez, Jimmy, that's disgusting. Want a little burger with your salt?"

I stuffed another bite into my mouth. "Tastes better this way," I said.

"You need a woman to break you of bad habits like that," she replied.

I swallowed and wiped some of the grease off my face. "All the good ones are taken," I said.

Matt glanced at my burger and grimaced. "Women or burgers?" he asked.

Mouth full, I nodded.

Alicia rolled her eyes. “That’s not true,” she said. “There are tons of single women out there. I have plenty of single friends who have absolutely nothing wrong with them.”

“Yeah right!” Chad said. “If you want my advice, Jimmy, you’ll stay far away from any of Alicia’s single friends. They’re all single for a reason.”

“What about Amanda?” Alicia demanded.

They argued and I turned back to my burger. Susan kicked me under the table. “You know, Jimmy, all you have to do is ask. Most women would love to date you. Hell, if I weren’t married, I’d date you,” she said. She winked at me again.

My stomach felt queasy. I glanced at Matt. He grinned at me. “Well, then, I guess I’ll just sit around and wait for Matt to die,” I said. I really wasn’t sure if I meant it or not, and that made me feel like shit.

They laughed. Chad started teasing Matt about watching his back. We finished eating and walked to the counter to pay.

“Why don’t we go bowling?” Susan asked. “There’s a place off 281, with strobe lights and a disco ball.”

“You mean Midnight Bowling? That could be fun,” Chad said.

The jukebox started playing the Dixie Chicks, “Tonight the Heartache’s on Me,” and I just didn’t think I could take it any more.

“Y’all go ahead and have fun,” I said. “I think I’m going to make it an early night.”

Matt frowned. “No way, man, you have to come.”

“Nah, I’d just feel like a fifth wheel. Besides, I’m not feeling too good.”

Chad shrugged. “If you’re sure,” he said.

“Definitely. I’ll see you guys next week. Call me and let me know the details.”

Chad and Alicia paid first. “See you later, Jimmy,” he said. Alicia waved as they headed out the door.

Matt paid his bill and started for the door as well with Susan. She suddenly turned back and threw her arms around me. “Cheer up, Jimmy,” she said. “Things will get better.” Then she ran after Matt.

I stood staring after her for a minute, imagining her getting in my car and not his. I paid the waitress and left.

As soon as I stepped outside I was soaked with sweat. At 8:00 p.m. it was even warmer than it had been that afternoon, and so humid I felt like I was swimming to my car. I got in and headed home. My stomach still churned and I couldn’t help feeling like somehow I’d done something awful. I’d never wish anything bad on Matt.

I turned off Thousand Oaks into my apartment complex and headed for parking space number 819, but an enormous truck was already in my spot. It was a diesel, gunmetal gray with muddy tires, the kind probably owned by some guy about six feet two with fourteen inch biceps, a crew cut, and a cowboy hat. I parked in visitor parking and walked to my apartment.

Loud music blared out of my neighbors’ window, and I could see a bunch of people inside, hanging around a keg. I rolled my eyes. The noise was irritating, but I hoped nobody called the cops this time. The parties were never all that bad, and the cops

would just come down and pass out a bunch of tickets and everyone would blame me, because I was boring and never had anyone over, so I *must* be calling the cops. I'd thought of dropping in some time, having a few beers, but I doubted I'd be welcome. Those guys all had girlfriends and hobbies and hell, one even had two girlfriends, though the girls didn't know it. What would we talk about? I went inside quietly and tried to pretend I wasn't home.

I lay down on the couch and wiggled around a bit until I found the right sunken place to settle myself. I stared at the ceiling and thought about what Susan had said at dinner. "If I weren't married . . ." But she had Matt. I wished with all my heart that Matt was born in Russia, or maybe Mongolia. With my luck, though, he'd have somehow ended up meeting her anyway and it wouldn't have made any difference. Susan would have loved him then because he was foreign and interesting, just like she loved him now because he reminded her of her home in Kentucky. No, it didn't really matter—people's lives were already planned out for them, and it didn't matter what you did, you always got the same result.

I rolled over and switched on the TV. There was nothing on, but it was better than just staring at the wall. Eventually I fell asleep.

I dreamed. I was in a cathedral, sitting in one of the first pews but off to one side, listening to the funeral Mass. The massive stone walls soared upward on either side of me in great curving archways, with geometric vines incised in the stone, and I felt my eyes drawn heavenward by the long, narrow stained glass windows depicting the holy lives of the saints and by the shadows reflected on the glass of the curving, delicate-

seeming buttresses sweeping up from the cold stone courtyard outside. My eyes traveled upward with the lines of the gracefully sculpted pillar beside me to the clerestory and still higher, to the perfect roman arch overhead. Sunlight streamed in through the topmost windows and illuminated the floor in multi-colored patches. There was a hush over the congregation, and it felt as though the hand of God had reached out only moments before to affect the world, and the world was still frozen with awe by the power of its Creator. I wondered whose funeral it was and then I saw Susan, dressed in black and weeping, and I knew it must be Matt's. The light from the windows grew brighter and brighter and suddenly I could feel the earth turning beneath me. The cathedral spun around me and felt like I was inside a kaleidoscope. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, I was kneeling in a tuxedo before the clean wooden altar rail of St. Mark's. Out of the corner of my eyes I could see a woman in white beside me. I turned and lifted her veil and it was Susan, with tears in her eyes.

I let the veil fall back, but it draped itself over my face, not hers. I pushed it aside and it dropped to the floor, revealing a fine hotel room with a king size bed. I stood beside that bed and looked across to see Susan standing there, naked. She started to climb onto the bed and then stopped. She looked up at me. "You won't mind terribly if I'm thinking about . . . something else, will you?" she asked.

"No, I guess not," I said. After all, isn't that what women do anyway? Why did we have to talk about it?

I climbed in to bed and lay on my side to watch her come to me. She slid into my arms and I began to caress her, but she stiffened in my arms. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

Her eyes refused to meet mine. “Could I have a blindfold?” she asked.

I opened my eyes and was lying on the couch in my apartment in the dark. The TV was still on and I looked at it without really seeing anything. Yeah, I said to myself, that’s the best it could ever be. I could feel the erection brought on by the dream, but it seemed to belong to someone else and I ignored it. It’s not even worth it, I thought. I shifted around to find a more comfortable spot and started flipping through channels in search of something to watch.

SECOND MARRIAGE

I walked in the front door on Thursday just as the living room telephone slammed into the door frame. I ducked back outside for a moment, accidentally knocking my naval officer's cap aslant, then warily leaned in once more, stretching my neck to see if anything else was headed in my direction. The living room seemed ordinary enough: brown sectional sofa across the back wall, TV on the stand by the window, DVDs piled haphazardly on the floor beside a stack of old pizza boxes, coffee table with all the knickknacks in view. Only the phone, which lay at my feet with its receiver cracked, was out of place.

I entered the room slowly and closed the door behind me. As the door clicked shut, my wife, Sylvia, boiled out of the kitchen, black hair flowing behind her, eyes burning, like a fire goddess spewed forth from a volcano. "How could you do this to me?" she shrieked.

Leaning over, I gathered the phone into my arms. I moved slowly, giving myself time to arrange my face into the blank mask I reserved for the bad days, days like today. "What happened?" I asked.

She sneered. "Like you don't know."

I stood there stupidly, still in the doorway, with the phone cradled in my left arm. My neck was still stretched out, exposed, waiting for the guillotine blade to drop. I stared at her, my moustache twitching slightly.

"Why didn't you tell me about the restrictions on the insurance?" she asked.

“What restrictions?” I said.

“Don’t play dumb with me.” Her fist slammed into the top of the coffee table, knocking over a photo of the two of us lounging on the beach. “I called to make the appointment, but they won’t let me see him because he’s not on the list, and anyway I’m not on the list either. Ted, you knew this would happen. You did it on purpose.”

“What list? What are you talking about? Just calm down.”

Sylvia flung a sofa pillow at my head but missed. “Don’t you dare tell me to calm down! What gives you the right to tell me what to do? I tried doing what you said, I called Dr. Morrison. And where did that get me?”

“Honey, it’s okay if he can’t see you now; we’ll get you an appointment whenever he’s available. There’s no hurry, right?”

“Don’t you listen?” Sylvia yelled. “He’s not on the list. The insurance won’t pay.” She squeezed her fists into tight balls and screeched, a sound like the cracking of a colossal campfire.

“Then we’ll find another doctor,” I said. An orange bottle marked lithium sat beside the photos and trinkets on the coffee table. It was nearly full; I relaxed somewhat. There was no hurry about the doctor, then. “You can see the counselor on base if you want. It’ll be okay.”

She shut her eyes and clenched her fists tighter until the skin turned white. Red blotches formed in her cheeks. “No, Ted, it won’t be okay,” she said. “Because I’m not on the list either. It doesn’t matter what doctor I pick, your insurance won’t cover me.”

She paused, then opened her eyes. They bored into me. “Did you do this on purpose?” she asked. “Get me to call, knowing I’m not covered?”

At this charge, I broke. I could no longer keep my expression empty of emotion; I curled my lips disdainfully. “That’s ridiculous. Why would I do that?” I rolled my eyes from left to right. “I guess the paperwork just hasn’t gone through yet. Damn! We’ve been married, what, six weeks? The Navy’s slow with paperwork, but I didn’t realize it’d take so long. I’m sorry. We just have to be patient.”

“I have been patient,” Sylvia said, “and I’m damn tired of it. You said if we got married, things would get better, but not a damn thing has changed.” She turned her back to me and faced the wall, but I could see she was waiting for me to respond. I knew she was frustrated. The counseling sessions, the group therapy, the medications all added up—we couldn’t afford it. Hadn’t we tied the knot after all this time to get the insurance coverage? The paperwork was taking a long time to go through. But what could I do about it?

“Sylvia . . .” I said.

“No! I don’t want to hear it. I’m going out.” She snatched up her purse from beside the sofa. At least I wouldn’t have to try to explain that I couldn’t fix it. She wouldn’t believe me anyway.

I stepped out of the doorway to let her pass. “Fine,” I said, “but please don’t drink.”

“What? Now I’m not allowed to have a drink?” She stopped in front of me, leaning forward, and poked me in the chest. “Who made you my boss?”

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea,” I said. *Please, please don’t drink*, I thought. *It’s been almost a month. Please don’t drink.*

She snorted. “And we can all see where your good ideas have gotten us.” She spread her arms and looked around the room as if making an appeal to the old, worn furniture. “Yeah, your ideas are *great*. Besides, why should you care? You smoke. It’s the same thing.”

I sighed. There wasn’t anything else I could say. She was right. I smoke. She drinks. I guess we’ve both got problems.

Sylvia shoved past me, muttered “asshole,” and slid out the door. I stood with my back to the doorway, listening to the sounds of the car door slamming, the engine turning over, the hum of the motor fading as she drove off. I pulled the door shut and thought about all the other times this had happened and, more importantly, the times that it hadn’t. I remembered how it was when we first moved in together, how I came home the next day and she’d scrubbed out the whole place, no more dust or spider webs; not even Mo, the bathtub daddy long legs, had survived. She’d brought in the photos, some candles that made the place smell better, some cushions for the sofa that added purple and orange to the relentless browns of the furniture. I remembered my birthday, when she set up that weekend in Vegas and we had such a great time it was worth the money I lost in the casinos, even if it wasn’t worth the binge-drinking that followed or the trip to visit her in the hospital psych ward. But I guess the bad walks hand in hand with the good. I knew what I was getting into when I married her.

With another sigh I walked over to the sofa, dropping heavily onto the frayed brown-plaid upholstery. I placed the phone on the table, frowning at the long crack in the receiver, and plugged it in. I finally removed my cover, tossed it onto the sofa beside me, and watched it fall on the floor, its narrow plastic brim causing it to bounce. But I didn't bother to pick it up. I ran my fingers through my hair. It was starting to turn gray. I closed my eyes, trying to picture where Sylvia was. I imagined her on Spring Street, winding her way down the bluff, passing old houses and cars. She would cross the trolley line at Lemon Tree and head into an area north of Chula Vista where the graffiti was a bit more upscale. She'd have to stop at one of those lights that meters the flow of traffic onto the interstate before heading north toward San Diego proper and the bars on C Street. But no, that was an expensive area. Not the kind of place Sylvia would go.

I started over from our house, tracing a new route along Spring in my mind, looking for the first place along the bluff to get a drink, until I came to that little spot next to Casita's, the one that doesn't even have a name. That was where she went last time. She was drinking and she got in a fight with that big fucker, the one with the tattoo. Always thinks she's invincible when she's drunk, so there she was, maybe 120 pounds, picking a fight with the biggest mother fucker in the bar. Someone had called the police. I hoped she hadn't gone back there.

I continued visualizing her driving, past Casita's to the gas station on the corner of Spring and Lemon Tree. Maybe she'd gone there? Sometimes she buys the bottles and takes them with her out to Balboa Park. Sometimes she drinks in the car, bottle after bottle of Bacardi 151. She can put away more than anyone I've ever seen. And then she

drives home a different way. Like that time she got on the interstate, driving south in the northbound lane, and then slugged the officer who pulled her over. Lucky that lady cop didn't press charges.

I slipped my hand into the pocket of my tan uniform trousers and felt the keys to the Camaro. Maybe I should go after her? It had been twenty minutes since she'd left. I could drive around, look for her car. At least it would be something to do. But what would I do if I found her? Go in and drag her out? Not likely. I sat on the sofa, twirling the car keys around my index finger, waiting for her to come home.

Shortly before midnight the front door opened. Sylvia stumbled in. She had a paper bag in her hand, a bruise on her cheek, and she was laughing to herself. She saw me sitting on the sofa and came over, sprawling over the arm closest to the door. Her face was a few feet from mine but I could taste the rum on her breath. I quickly slid the mask of blankness back over my features and stared at the window. "I wish you hadn't," I said.

She stopped laughing and narrowed her eyes. "Of course you do," she said. "You're forty-eight years old. You had your fun years ago. Now it's my turn. You're just jealous." She pulled herself upright and took off one shoe. She held the shoe in front of her, examining it. It was a black sandal with a tiny heel. She hurled it at the

wall, and the heel struck first, leaving a black mark and a dent. “Why don’t I ever get a turn?” She started crying.

I tried not to look at her or listen to her. I stared at the window. The blind was down, and I could see that one of the slats near the bottom had twisted so that the lower portion of the blind wouldn’t close properly. I tried to think about fixing the blind.

“It’s never my turn. Not to have fun, not to have a family, no.” She started speaking in a high pitched, imitative tone: “No, Sylvia, you can’t have this baby. It won’t be right.” Maybe I could just bend it back into place, I thought. She sank to the floor, sobbing dramatically. Here it comes, I thought, the abortion story. It’d been twelve years, but she still brought it up every time she got trashed. “They wouldn’t let me keep my baby. They made me lose it.” She was lying full-length on the floor now, weeping. It was just too much. I glared at her. For the hundredth time I wondered if it was all an act.

“Come on, Sylvia. We go through this every time,” I said.

“No,” she said. “I go through it every time. I relive it every time. It’s not about you. It’s about me. Can’t anything ever be about me?”

I started to tell her that it seemed like everything was about her, but that wasn’t really fair. She had problems. She couldn’t help it if that meant she needed more attention than other people. I said, “Maybe it would be easier if you didn’t drink as much.”

“What would you know about it?” she said. “You’ve never had anyone do you like they’ve done me. You try to make me feel like a bad person, but it’s you—you’re the bad guy, not me.”

“I don’t think you’re a bad person,” I said. “Sometimes you just don’t make the best choices.”

Sylvia laughed. “You want to talk about choices?” She staggered to her feet, standing awkwardly in one shoe. “What about your choices?” she said. “What about what you did to your first wife? You cheated with some slut on base. And even then, she wanted to take you back, but oh no, you wouldn’t stop fooling around with that other chick, so you left her.”

She waited to see my reaction, but I didn’t answer. She was right. I cheated on my first wife. And now the poor woman is dead, and even if she wasn’t there was nothing I could do to make it better anyway. I didn’t see how that had anything to do with *this* marriage, though.

“And what about your daughter?” Sylvia said. “You farm her off to your parents or to your brothers, you never see her . . . hell, I’ve never even met her. You don’t even remember her birthday!”

I stared at the floor. She was right, absolutely right. I abandoned my daughter years ago. And there were worse things, like the incident in Puerto Rico with those guys at the chicken place, or the girl in the nightclub in Miami. But she didn’t know about those things. No one knew about those things.

“Answer me, God damn it!” she said. She climbed over me, grabbed my shoulders and shook them. “Answer me!”

I said, “What do you want me to say?”

She leapt off me and ran into the kitchen, shouting. “You bastard. You insensitive fuck. Don’t you give a shit about anything?”

She came back around the corner with a vase in her hand. My daughter had sent it to me after my brother took her to Europe. “You care about this?” Sylvia asked. She threw it at me. It missed my head and smashed against the wall behind me.

She stared at me without moving, her eyes so wide that I could see the whites showing all the way around the irises. “Do you see what you made me do?” she said. “You bastard.”

She pounced on me, landing on my stomach and knocking me backward across the sofa. It was ridiculous. Here she was, this little bit of a woman, attacking a man almost seven feet tall. Her hands slapped at my face and I pushed against her with my elbow, trying to get her off me without hurting her. I grabbed her wrists, pinning them behind her back as gently as I could. She kicked me in the shins, but I didn’t let go.

“You’re hurting me,” she yelled. “You’re hurting me, you giant fucking mutant.” She thrashed, twisting her wrists in my grip, and I let go, afraid that she’d hurt herself. She got to her knees and screamed, “You fucking fuck,” and spit in my face. A moment later she was on her feet. She raced into the bedroom and slammed the door.

I sat up and wiped the saliva off my cheek. I hoped she wouldn’t come back out and that the knife cabinet was locked. I could hear her talking on the phone, and I

realized she was calling the cops. I could hear snippets through the walls: “He punched me . . . I’m so afraid he’ll break in . . . it’s 1910 Spring Street . . .”

I went to the closet across from the front door and pulled out a duffle bag. I ran into the bathroom and picked up my shaving kit and toothbrush. I threw them in the bag and snatched my cover off the floor. Time to go, Teddie, I thought. There was no way I was going to be around when any cops showed up, not with Sylvia having that bruise on her cheek. She might not be there either. Last time she called 911 she left before anyone arrived.

Friday morning I headed straight from the Howard Johnson’s where I’d spent the night to my office at Coronado. It was a long drive but a peaceful one, over the bridge with the dark blue-gray water below. The ocean seemed calm today, a rarity. The surfers down at Ocean beach probably didn’t like it, but it helped me relax. The guard at the base entrance saluted as I pulled up and I waved to him, feeling cheery. Today would be a good day. Several of the units on base were headed to the beach for drill weekend, so there weren’t too many people around. No meetings. I walked straight to my office and sprawled out as much as I could in the chair behind my desk. Maybe I could just sit at my desk all day, do nothing, and no one would bother me. Perfection.

The phone rang and I jerked upright, banging my knee on the edge of my desk. I picked up the phone and tried to sound cheerful.

A voice responded, “Daddy? It’s Janie. Is everything all right?”

I relaxed. I had been afraid that it would be the admiral and there was something happening after all. “I’m fine, how are you?” I said.

“Oh, great, it’s just that Sylvia called . . .” she said.

My lungs felt like they were sliding into my stomach. “Oh?”

“Honestly, she sounded like she’d been drinking. I mean, it was no big deal, I would have just ignored her, but she kept saying that something was wrong with you and that you really needed me. I was worried about you,” she said.

With a sigh, I told Janie what had happened the night before. I tried to explain about Sylvia having a bad day and it not being her fault, but I’m not sure Janie understood. I don’t blame her. It’s hard to understand about Sylvia unless you know her.

After I finished, Janie said, “You know I don’t want to get involved here, Dad, but things are getting out of control. You spend almost as much time at Ho Jo’s as you do at your own house. Things are getting out of hand.”

“I know,” I said, “but there isn’t anything I can do about that.”

“Have you considered leaving her?” she said.

I didn’t answer right away. I had considered leaving her, many times. “I can’t do that,” I said. “She needs me.”

“She needs your paycheck,” Janie said. “She needs your insurance. She needs your house and your car. But she doesn’t need you. And you certainly don’t need her.”

I didn’t blame Janie for feeling that way. “Maybe I’ll think about it,” I said.

She said, “Try to have a good weekend, Dad. I love you.”

“I love you, too, kiddo,” I said. I hung up. I leaned across the desk, stared at the door, and thought about Sylvia. The times I thought about leaving her were brief, nights when I couldn’t take it anymore, but I always stayed. Maybe it made up for the things that had gone before. How could I explain to Janie that I stayed with Sylvia partially as penance? Sylvia was right, though, when she said things weren’t getting any better. It was getting worse; some weeks the bad days outnumbered the good. And no matter what I did, it seemed to make things worse. Maybe I wasn’t helping; maybe she would be better off without me.

I slid open my desk drawer and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. It was almost 10 a.m. Long past time for a smoke.

I spent the rest of the day thinking it over, and that evening I headed home to Sylvia, mind made up: I would tell her she was right, that I wasn’t good enough for her, that I thought we maybe we should separate for a while. She could have the house, the car, money, whatever. Whatever she needed. Most importantly, she’d have time alone to concentrate on getting better. I knew tonight would be another one of those nights and that I’d probably be back at Howard Johnson’s, but once everything was taken care of, I wouldn’t be around anymore to get in the way of her recovery. I had it all worked out.

I pulled into the driveway and braced myself for the confrontation as I got out of the car. I shut the door slowly yet firmly and walked toward the house with a deliberate stride. I pulled open the door carefully and looked inside.

The living room was immaculate. The pizza boxes were gone, the DVDs had been arranged in the bottom of the TV stand in what appeared to be alphabetical order, the vase shards were gone, and a new cordless phone perched on the coffee table. Everything had been dusted, and the carpet might even have been shampooed—it was more beige and less brown than I remembered it. I could smell pumpkin pie spices, a sure sign that there was a pumpkin cheesecake setting up in the freezer.

Sylvia flew around the corner and out of the kitchen. She had on a red dress made out of some sort of soft, flowing material, and her hair was pulled back from her face. “Ted! I’m so glad you came back. I was so worried about you,” she said.

I took a deep breath. “I think we need to talk about last night,” I said.

She looked down at the ground, then up into my eyes. “I know,” she said. “I was a total bitch and I’m really sorry. You know I can’t help it. But I realize none of that business with the doctor or the insurance is your fault. I just got so angry . . . you were right about the drinking.” She looked down again. “I’m sorry,” she said.

I tried to smile at her. “I want what’s best for you,” I said. “We’ll get the insurance straightened out. But then maybe . . . maybe some time apart . . .”

“No, no,” she said. “I just need to listen to you more. I do try, but . . .”

“I know I don’t always make it easy,” I said.

She looked past my shoulder at the wall, avoiding my eyes. The kitchen timer buzzed in the next room. “Come on, let’s not worry about that now.” She took my hand. “You should change into something more comfortable,” she said, pulling me toward the bedroom. “Dinner’s almost ready. Green enchiladas.”

I stayed where I was. “We’re going to have to talk about this some time, Sylvia. We can’t put it off forever.”

“I know, but ... not right now, okay? I just don’t think I can do it now.” She tugged on my arm again. “Please?”

Nodding, I let her lead me into the bedroom.

HAUNTED

It's so quiet in here, Amy thought. She didn't like being alone. She huddled on the sofa with her knees drawn up under her chin, right arm dangling down past her feet, a glass tumbler of gin and tonic in her hand. She looked into the glass, then drained it. Was that four or five? "I forgot to turn on the heat," she said aloud.

She pushed her long black tangles out of her eyes, snagging her hair a bit on her rough, clumsy fingers. She winced. The two bulbs in the standing lamp were both on, and the light burned her eyes.

Like headlights, she thought. *Headlights piercing through the rain till you can't see anything but light, and each raindrop stands out and you creep forward so slowly, the shriek of the brakes ripping through your body, and the impact slams you forward, rain pours in, pounding. Hold your breath and there's nothing but water and light. Wake up! Paul's gone.*

Amy shivered and shook herself, trying to clear her mind. She wanted to ... turn on ... the light? She walked softly, barefoot on the hardwood floor, crossing the room slowly and unsteadily, like a sleepwalker. Her red flowered pajama pants twisted around her legs as she walked. She reached the lamp and stopped. It was already on. She stood there, uncertain. "Was this what I wanted?" she asked.

The glass in her hand was empty except for three melting ice cubes. She took the few steps to the small bar in the corner of the room, bumping her thighs against a stool, and set the glass on the edge of the counter. Her knuckles slid awkwardly over the

smooth pine of the bar as she reached for the bottle of gin. She smoothed the label with her thumb. Gin, Paul's favorite. Tasted awful, but she drank it anyway. In his honor.

The pale liquid sloshed up the sides of the tumbler as she poured, a couple drops splattering over the side of the glass to dot the counter. No more tonic water, she noticed. She tipped a little more gin into the glass. She'd have to drink gin and gin.

Carefully placing the bottle back on the bar, Amy lifted the glass. The ice cubes clinking against its sides reminded her of a toast, and she raised it a little higher, turning to face into the empty living room. "Happy anniversary," she said.

Sipping the gin, she wrinkled her nose. *Nasty*, she thought. *How could he stand to drink this stuff?*

Amy dragged the stool out from the bar a bit and sat down, still facing into the living room. It was important to remember their anniversary, the second since Paul's death. Last year she hadn't done anything. Hadn't wanted to remember. But it was easier now, to think about Paul. She smiled and reached for the green vinyl photo album on the coffee table, almost falling off the stool as she bent forward. She took another sip of gin and put the glass on the bar behind her.

Flipping through the album, she searched for pictures of Paul. He had taken most of the pictures, so wasn't in many. After turning a few pages, she came across one of the two of them, posing in front of her mother's fig tree. He had his arms around her and they were both smiling and the sun was shining through the branches of the fig tree, dappling their skin and clothes with spots of leaf-shaped shadow. She looked at Paul's face, his clear dark eyes, his brilliantly white teeth showing as he smiled. Her face grew

hot, and sticky tears clogged her eyes. She wiped the backs of her hands across her eyes impatiently. It didn't hurt that much any more. She licked her lips. They tasted damp and salty and faintly of gin, almost the way it had tasted when she and Paul kissed. Looking at the picture, she forced herself to remember, and to smile.

They had been in her mother's backyard, and the smell of the fresh cedar sawdust her father had spread in the flower beds filled the air. Paul stood with his back pressed against the pale pink brick of the house, facing the fig tree. Her mother was so proud of that tree; they had planted a tiny branch, and after five years it had grown taller than the house. Paul had never seen a fig tree before, and was impressed by the enormous leaves, but he'd laughed that he couldn't find any fruit. So Amy had pushed her way under the low hanging branches to pick the figs that grew close to the trunk.

As she'd crawled back out, she tried not to squish the thick meaty figs in her hands. Paul had scrambled away from the wall and grasped her forearm to haul her onto the grass, then quickly let go and wiped his hands on his jeans.

"How'd you get sticky all the way up to your elbows?" he'd asked. She remembered his one raised eyebrow and the slight curve of his lips. She had been thinking about kissing him, or rubbing fig sap in his hair, but her mother had stepped over the stack of railroad ties behind her, coming out of the vegetable garden.

She had pushed her straw hat back from her forehead. Passing Amy an old handkerchief to wipe her hands, she'd said, "Make sure you get it all off, Amy, or you'll stick to everything."

“Thanks.” Amy had turned to Paul. “You do like figs, right?” Her forehead had wrinkled a bit as she held out the ribbed, tear-drop-shaped fruit.

“I don’t know. Dried figs are kind of gross.” Amy had started to drop her arm back to her side when he continued, “I’d love to try a fresh one, though.”

He’d taken the fig and popped the whole thing into his mouth, then bit down and began to chew slowly. “Mm, it’s good.” She remembered watching him chew awkwardly and the way his Adam’s apple moved as he’d struggled to swallow.

Giggling, she’d said, “It’s okay if you don’t like it.”

Her mother, pretending to clean off the spade she’d been using to dig watering trenches around her tomatoes, had tried to hide her own smile.

“No, no, it’s great,” he’d said. “I don’t actually have to eat any more to prove it, do I?”

Both women had laughed. Amy’s mom pulled a disposable camera out of the pocket of her cotton shorts. “Why don’t you two let me take your picture?” she asked.

“Mother, I can’t believe you brought a camera out here.” Amy had patted at her hair, wiped a streak of dirt off the bottom of her shirt, and twisted her feet in the damp grass to clean off the mud from under the fig tree.

“You look great,” Paul had said.

“Don’t worry, you’re fine,” her mother had said. “Paul, move over next to Amy, right in front of the tree. Just like that. Smile!”

Amy remembered not really wanting to take the picture, making a face. Paul had laughed and lifted her up to tickle her cheek with his nose.

“Come on, none of that now. I want a nice picture,” her mother had said.

Paul had set Amy down, but kept his arm around her. They were both smiling.

“That’s perfect.”

Amy closed the album with a thump and tossed it back on the coffee table. Her smile now was genuine. Paul had loved her mother’s garden, and after that, they planted one of their own, with jasmine and hibiscus, irises in the spring and pussy willows in the fall. *We were going to build a greenhouse*, she thought, beginning to frown. She climbed off the stool, pushing it back under the bar. *I did it myself, and it was good for me. Even if it did take twice as long.*

“I need something to drink,” she said. She glanced at the bottle and tumbler on the bar. “Something *else* to drink.” She picked up the tumbler and headed into the kitchen, to the sink, and stopped. She glanced out the window at the last beams of sunlight glinting off a neighbor’s silver pick-up. *It was just like this*, she thought, *only the sun wasn’t shining because it was night. We couldn’t get away until after dark, and it was only for that one day. But I couldn’t stay here alone.* She turned abruptly away from the sink, drink forgotten.

A dark blue mug sat on the black and white tile countertop. *God, I hate coffee*, Amy thought. She picked up the cup and traced her index finger in circles around the rim. *But Paul always had to have his coffee. Ought to sell that stupid coffee pot. Takes up too much space.* She tipped the cup toward her and stared into it. A brown stain was etched on the bottom. Someone must have made coffee. She couldn’t remember having any coffee drinkers over. She scratched at the stain, then shrugged. No more coffee to

make, so the stain didn't really matter. She pressed the cool mug against her warm forehead, thinking about coffee.

After the funeral she had returned from the cemetery in her parents' blue Buick. Two elderly women from church were already at her house, bustling about in her kitchen, setting out trays of cookies and little sandwiches. The crystal punch bowl that she and Paul had received as a wedding gift, with its sharply cut pineapple pattern, had been set out on the counter, filled with something red. Paul and Amy had never had a chance to use the bowl. The smell of percolating coffee spread through the kitchen and wafted into neighboring rooms, and Amy had felt her stomach heave. She'd sat down at the glass-topped kitchen table and swallowed, struggling not to throw up. Her father patted her shoulder.

"I'm just going to see how everyone is. Your mother's in the living room if you need her."

She'd nodded without looking up.

Mrs. Elsbury, an older woman from Paul's office with fiercely dyed blond hair, had taken the seat beside her. "I'm so sorry, dear," she'd said. She'd wrapped Amy's hand in her own, her red lacquered nails standing out against Amy's pasty skin. "He was so young. If you need anything, just let me know. You'll do that, won't you?"

Eyes still focused on the floor, Amy had nodded again. She'd wanted to look up, to smile and say thank you, but she couldn't do it. She'd wanted to scream at the old ladies to get rid of the coffee, it was stinking up her house, but she'd kept her mouth shut. Mrs. Elsbury had squeezed her hand and joined the ladies at the kitchen counter.

Another woman had sat down beside Amy, and then a man, and a young woman who was there with her husband gave her a hug. After a while her father-in-law had sat down in the chair next to her, placing a coffee cup on the table in front of him. Maybe even the dark blue mug.

A flash of a sky blue coffin covered with a spray of white lilies flickered through her mind. Amy suppressed it, thought of her father-in-law. He'd folded his hands on the table top and studied his thumbs intently. When she finally met his eyes, he had gazed back, and they sat there, unable to think of anything to say.

"I'm sorry," Amy had said after a moment. She'd swallowed and tried not to see his coffee cup sitting on her beveled glass table top.

He'd put his arm around her and pulled her head against his chest. "Me too."

About an hour after the last of the mourners had left, Amy's mother had finished tucking away the last of the food into the refrigerator.

"You should have plenty of food to last the rest of the week here, honey," she said.

Amy had pushed a napkin over a few drops of spilled coffee on the table.

"Are you sure you don't need me to stay?" her mother had asked.

Amy had crumpled the napkin and looked up. "Plenty of food. Thanks," she'd said.

Her father had stood leaning against the doorway to the living room, his stiff black suit standing out against the soft yellow wallpaper. She recalled smiling at him, saying, "I'll be fine."

He'd nodded. "Call us if you need anything."

"I will."

It's funny how it's the smallest things that bother you, Amy thought. *My husband dead, and all I could think about is coffee.* She chuckled, fingers tightening on the mug, shoving it into her forehead, rolling it back and forth above her eyebrows, harder and harder.

She gasped as pain surged through her hands. The blue mug lay shattered on the cold linoleum floor. Her hands shook. A delicate trickle of blood from her cut forehead ran down her cheeks and had splattered her hands. *There's blood on my pajamas,* she thought, still chuckling. *It matches the flowers.* With a deep breath, Amy pushed herself away from the counter. *I must have drunk more than I thought.*

She blocked the drain in the sink and turned on the water. The hot stream gushed into the sink first with a harsh metallic rattle and then with a softer splashing sound as the sink filled. She pushed a small brush across the countertop, whisking away the remains of the mug. The pieces clinked against each other in the dustpan. She wiped a rag across the black and white tiles to wipe up the blood that had spilled on the counter, then plunged her hands into the sink. Smokelike clouds of blood billowed slowly from her hands, spreading out in the water and dyeing it red. She splashed her face and forehead to clean off the blood from the tiny cut, and watched the red clouds drift in the water. Pale red water surged from the sink to the counter as she jerked her hands up suddenly. She grabbed some paper towels and rubbed fiercely at her hands and face and at the counter. She flung the used towels into the trash.

Next to the trashcan lay a two-inch shard of ceramic from the mug. She picked it up and turned it in her hands, over and over. Her fingers shook, and she couldn't quite focus on the shard. She dropped it, but caught it reflexively against her wrist. The dark blue contrasted sharply with her white skin. *Almost the color of my veins*, she thought. She pressed the shard sharply into her flesh, making the veins stand out prettily beside it more and more until she cried out in pain. The shard fell to the floor.

Amy stared in panic at her bleeding wrist. She hadn't meant to cut herself, not so deeply. She thought, *What should I do?* She looked frantically around the kitchen. *Stay calm*, she thought. *Apply pressure*. She grabbed the yellow and white sunflowered kitchen towel and pressed it against her wrist. The blood was thick and sticky, and it was hard to hold the towel in place. Her hand slipped, and she felt dizzy. She sat down at the kitchen table and laid her arm across it, palm up, with the towel on top.

Just let go, she thought, head spinning. Screeching brakes echoed in her ears. *An accident, another accident, everything's an accident. Let it bleed.*

She leaned forward, resting her face on the cool glass. *Mom will understand*. She pictured her mother's face: the thin dark eyebrows, the fine creases in the skin around her eyes, the long thin nose, the narrow lips curving upwards. *Will she find me?* The face in her mind contracted in horror. *Not like that*, Amy thought.

She dragged herself upright and stumbled to the counter. The room swayed back and forth and she leaned her torso over the tiles. She turned her arm over to press her cut against the counter. With her uninjured arm, Amy picked up the phone. She tried to take a deep breath, and dialed 911. Memories weren't worth dying over.

FUNERALS

“David Feinberg committed suicide.”

Petra looked up from *Love in the Time of Cholera* and stared at her husband. He had just walked in the front door, and he stood there, placing his keys on the walnut end table, kicking off his loafers, absolutely expressionless.

Pulling her legs back over the arm of the chair and straightening her long, loose skirt, she stood up, still holding the book in her left hand.

“Who in the hell is David Feinberg?” she asked.

Her husband left his shoes on the edge of the braided door mat and entered the living room. As he passed the TV, he switched it off.

Petra dug her bare toes into the brown shag carpet and put her hands on her hips, frowning. “Nick, I was watching that.”

He sat down on the sofa under the window, across the room from her. “Looked like you were reading,” he said, loosening his tie and unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt.

“Who’s David Feinberg?” Petra asked again. She folded in the corner of the page she was on and laid the book on the arm of her chair. He couldn’t just walk in and announce someone committed suicide and then clam up.

Nick picked up a piece of brown pottery, shaped like a leaf, off the coffee table in front of him. “You don’t remember him from our wedding?” He turned the leaf over and over in his hands.

Petra walked around the side of the coffee table and took the leaf out of his hands, replacing it on the table. He was irritating her, refusing to answer the question. “No,” she said. “I’ve never heard of him. And I addressed every one of those invitations myself.”

“He was Cara Price’s date,” he said. “What is that thing, anyway?”

“It’s an incense burner.” Pushing aside a stack of books, Petra sat down on the edge of the coffee table. Cara was a good friend. “Cara’s boyfriend killed himself?”

“No, he wasn’t her boyfriend. Just her date,” he said.

She tugged on one of the stones in her bracelet, pulling the string of agates down around the back of her hand. She leaned over Nick, reaching past the end of the sofa to pick up the phone. “Still, I should call her. She’s probably upset.” She stopped. “Or have you already talked to her?”

He nodded, running his fingers through his dark hair, and pulled his feet off the floor to stretch out on the sofa. “She’s the one who told me.”

“So you knew him, then?” Petra slid the remote to the far side of the coffee table as Nick reached for it.

“A little bit.” He sighed. “We went to the same high school, and did an engineering project together back in college. I was on his list of contacts.”

“What happened?”

Nick looked at the row of plants on the windowsill over by Petra’s reading chair. “He went out Monday night, and didn’t come back. They found his body yesterday.”

She rested a hand on his arm. Her mind bubbled with suspicion, but she kept her face calm. “And they’re sure it was a suicide?”

For the first time, Nick met her gaze, his gray eyes staring into her brown. “Yes,” he said.

At a loss, Petra said, “I’m sorry.”

Nick shrugged, sitting up. “Me, too, I guess. I barely knew the guy. It’s sad, but it’s hard to get that worked up about someone you don’t know.” He untucked his dress shirt and pulled it over his head along with his tie, without unbuttoning it. He draped both over the back of the sofa. “Do we have anything to eat?”

“If you’re not upset about ...” Petra tried to remember the name. “...David, then what is your problem?” She glared at the wooden giraffe he had picked up and now cradled in his hands. He was acting like a four year old.

Carefully setting the giraffe back on the table, Nick sighed. “I have to ask you something and you’re not going to like it.”

Arms crossed under her breasts, she said, “Well?”

“Cara is afraid no one is going to attend the funeral, so she’s asking anyone who knew him at all to come out. She doesn’t want his parents to think that no one cares. So I told her I’d be there ...”

She interrupted him. “And you told her I’d come too. Nick, no. You know I hate funerals,” she said. She stood up and walked out of the room, into the kitchen. She called back into the living room. “I’m not going.”

She turned on the sink and began washing her hands. He knew how much she hated funerals. She hadn't even gone to her own grandfather's. There was no way she was going to the funeral of some guy she didn't even know.

Nick walked up behind her and put his arms around her. "Please?" he asked. "I don't really know these people, and it's going to be awkward and sad. It would mean a lot to have you there. Please?"

Shrugging him off, Petra dried her hands on a terry cloth kitchen towel. "No," she said.

"Come on, I don't know the family. I don't have any idea what to say to them."

"I don't know them either," she said.

Nick leaned back against the refrigerator and grabbed her hand as she tried to walk past him out of the room. "But you're so good at saying the right thing. It's tomorrow, so you won't have to find someone else to teach your classes. I'll take the whole day off, and we can have a nice lunch afterward. Please?"

"Fine then," she said, adjusting the left strap of her bright green tank top. "I'll go. But only because I'll never hear the end of it if I don't. Jesus. When is it exactly?"

"Nine. I'd like to leave here about an hour before that," he said. "It won't be so bad. And we'll have a nice lunch after."

"I doubt it," Petra replied.

The next morning she searched in her closet for something appropriate to wear. She really didn't have anything; almost everything she owned was brightly colored. She finally found a heavy black pantsuit with a white pinstripe that her mother had bought

her years ago for job interviews and a solid black short sleeved shirt that she hadn't worn in months. While she was getting dressed she thought about the first funeral she had been to.

It had been twenty-two years ago. She'd been six years old, and hadn't really understood. She remembered playing tag in the cemetery with her cousins.

She put on the suit and a pair of black pumps and started brushing her hair. As she brushed she looked at herself in the mirror. She was very small, with a delicate chin and a tiny pointed nose. Her pale blond hair was short and curly. She parted it on the left and put down the brush. The mirror reflected her big dark eyes like a matched pair of stones. I have eyes like my father, she thought.

She went into the living room in search of her purse. She checked behind the reading chair and in all the corners and thought about her last look at her father, at the funeral. The casket had been open, and he'd looked just like a giant figurine, with his skin smoother and paler than real life and his too-stiff suit. He'd looked just like a doll, except for two purple blotches on the neck that the makeup couldn't quite cover up. She had reached into the casket to poke an arm; it had been stiff and unyielding and unfamiliar. She found her purse and called to her husband, "I'm ready."

When they arrived at the synagogue she knew it was the right place as soon as she saw the parking lot. It was already nearly full; the hot white sunshine gleamed off the roofs of minivans and SUVs, family cars. A handful of older women in black were walking into the building. Nick parked toward the back of the lot. "We'll be able to

leave easily from here when it's over. I guess there's no reason for us to stick around afterward."

Petra nodded. She shrugged into her pinstriped jacket and they hurried toward the doors.

A long line of nearly silent people blocked the entryway. Nick whispered, "What's the line for?"

"Greeting the family?" Petra said. "Or maybe there's a viewing. I'm not sure. I've never been to a Jewish funeral." She tugged at the bottom of her jacket. It was just a little too short.

"I don't think so," Nick replied. "This is just a memorial service." He tried to peer over the heads of the people in front of him. "Those are David's parents up there," he said. "You're right, we're standing in line to greet them."

"Oh," Petra said. She tried to recall if she'd had to talk to the mourners at her father's funeral. She couldn't remember. Maybe her mother had. She'd stayed outside until her grandmother came out and dragged her in with a sore bottom.

They arrived at the head of the line and David's father said to her, "It's so good of you to come," as he shook her hand. His eyes looked past her and his wrinkled cheeks were damp from crying. She smiled at him and nodded, but didn't know what to say.

Nick signed their names in the guestbook and they slipped into the synagogue itself. Had there been a guestbook at her father's funeral? Surely not. She had never

seen one. But then, she'd never asked about it either. She and her mother never talked about the funeral.

They entered the room where the service was to be held. Petra had never been inside a Jewish synagogue before. It seemed to her like a cross between the sanctuary of a church and her high school assembly hall. A narrow central aisle led from the entry to the front, with seats arrayed on either side. The seats were wooden-backed auditorium seats, the kind that fold down, and they were upholstered on the front with rough maroon fabric. Nothing like the hard wooden pews of St. Mark's. The rows of seats slanted down to the front, where there was a raised area. At the back of the dais was a great wooden cabinet with curlicues carved on its doors, and several chairs to either side. A dark, barren altar rested in front of the cabinet. At either end of the dais, toward the front, stood large podiums. Her mind added a white marble baptismal font and a crucifix, decorating the altar with the colors of Pentecost. Her father had died in early June.

She pulled her eyes away from the front of the synagogue, looking instead at the seats around her. Already half were full, but it seemed obvious that most of the attendees had not known the deceased well. They sat in small groups, leaning over the seats to talk to the people in front of or behind them. Nick led her to the far right side of the room, stopping occasionally to exchange pleasantries with the people he passed.

“Petra, this is Mr. Newland. He was my math teacher in high school.”

Petra shook Mr. Newland's hand and tried to smile, but it was too uncomfortable. She felt like people should at least pretend to be sad. Or just be quiet. "Nice to meet you," she said. It was such a bizarre thing, to be introduced to someone at a funeral.

Nick paused for a moment to catch up with another old friend.

For Heaven's sake, Petra thought, this a funeral. We're in the synagogue!

She peered around. Most of the mourners, if they could be called that, were older ladies, dressed in dark skirts and dresses, black shawls or scarves covering their heads. They stood around in groups, talking and laughing, hugging each other. She guessed they were members of the synagogue; some of them might not even know the deceased. She couldn't fault them for that. She hadn't known him either.

Nick finally moved on and they found a seat toward the back. Petra balanced on the edge of her seat, still trying not to look toward the front. She whispered to Nick, "Why does everyone seem so happy? It's a little creepy."

"I don't think they're happy," Nick whispered back. He took her hand and squeezed it. "I think they're just happy to see old friends and family they haven't seen in a while. Even if the occasion isn't a happy one."

"It's almost like being at a party," she muttered.

Nick shrugged, settling back in his seat. "It's how some people deal with things, Petra. In some cultures they sit up all night drinking and telling stories. How would you like that, huh?"

Petra didn't reply. What he said was all well and good, but shouldn't at least a few people besides the parents be teary-eyed?

She stared straight ahead, trying to look through the altar at the wall beyond. The wall was broken up by long, narrow stained glass windows. There were no designs in them, just swirls of color. The furthest to the left was blue, the next was purple, the next red, and the three behind the altar were brown. The windows on the right echoed those on the left, with red closest to the center, then purple, then blue at the outside. She wondered if the pattern of colors meant anything, or if it was just meant to be pretty.

A bearded man stepped up to the right hand podium and the service began as the last of the people standing around quickly found seats. The bearded man, a rabbi, said, “We come here today to remember David Feinberg, whose life came to a tragic end this week after many years of bitter illness. He suffered depression for many years, and in the end, it was this disease that led him to take his own life.”

The rabbi continued, offering a prayer for the bereaved, and reading, in Hebrew, a Psalm. Petra wasn't really listening. She sat in her auditorium seat and heard the deep chords of a pipe organ. She could smell the cloying scent of dozens of lilies, as though they were all around her. The wooden cabinet transformed into a crucifix, with Christ's eyes staring down in agony at the mourners. Father Mike stood before the altar, the gold embroidery on his white robes gleaming in the colored light shining through the images of the saints in the stained glass windows. His deep, warm voice filled the room, but she couldn't understand what he was saying. A portrait of her father stood beside the altar in a heavy gilt frame. Petra twisted her hands in her lap and looked down at her feet. Her little black maryjanes and ruffled white socks swung back and forth, nearly kicking the pew in front of her.

Words like “life has ended ... find peace in eternal rest ...” echoed off the walls and she began to weep. She wept with her eyes shut tight, picturing her father’s still, smooth face in the casket, a lump of dead wax. She thought of that face laughing, of those cold lips telling a bedtime story. She remembered her father’s strong hands and gruff voice and she cried.

She felt someone firmly squeezing her left hand. With her right, she wiped the tears from her eyes. She looked up and saw Nick smiling at her with tears in his own eyes, and she saw the many black-clothed strangers around her, most of them wiping at their eyes or blowing their noses. The rabbi asked that everyone stand for the final prayer. The gathered assembly rose and the rabbi recited in Hebrew, concluding with, “Amen.” The people in the synagogue shuffled to the door in small groups.

Nick stood and helped Petra to her feet. He slipped an arm around her. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Petra wiped her face with the back of her hand and said yes. They walked out to their car. “It was a nice service,” Nick said. “A tear-jerker, but nice.”

Petra nodded. “Do you still want to go out to lunch?”

“Yeah, sure,” Nick said. “As long as you’re still interested?”

“I don’t know,” Petra said. “I think I’d like to have lunch with my mom. We’re in the neighborhood.”

Nick’s forehead crinkled as he looked at her. “Okay,” he said, “if that’s what you want. Call and see if she’s home and I’ll drop you off, if you’re sure that’s what you want to do.”

“Thank you,” Petra said.

RECONNECTING

I jogged around the corner of the apartment building, past the oak tree scarred by lightning, and stopped at the door of my apartment. Panting, I leaned my forehead against the door as I fumbled with my keys. It was too damned hot for running outdoors. What I needed was a membership to one of those health spas, the kind with air conditioning and hot tubs and gorgeous personal trainers in muscle shirts.

I turned the key in the lock and shoved the door open with my right arm, then kicked it shut behind me before the cat got out. The inside of the apartment wasn't much cooler than the outside, and I switched on the ceiling fan before crossing the living room to throw myself into a chair at the kitchen table. The chair, old and fragile and desperately in need of new wood glue, creaked under my weight. I ripped the armband holding my MP3 player off my left bicep and flung it onto the table, then switched it off and tossed the headphones after it. Still gasping for breath, I used the T-shirt that I'd shed maybe two minutes into my run to wipe my forehead before sweat could drip into my eyes, then let the T-shirt fall on the floor. I reached for the bottle of water I'd set out before I left.

Sliding the water bottle toward me, I noticed a sheet of purple notepaper with "Allison" written across the top in all caps stuck in the crack between the table top and the fold-out leaf. A note from my roommate. She'd finally gotten everything together and left for her parents, she'd be back tomorrow night, and she'd found a letter for me when she checked the mail.

I opened the bottle and took a drink before I picked up the letter. To Miss Allison Harker, from someone in Bend, Oregon. I couldn't remember knowing anyone in Oregon.

Setting the water down, I wiped my hands on the sides of my black jersey pants, smearing sweat and condensation over the three green stripes running down the outside of my legs, and then picked up the letter, pushing a fingernail under the flap to tear open the top of the envelope. I pulled out the letter, four sheets of plain, linen-textured stationery folded in thirds, and immediately flipped to the last page to see who it was from. It was signed, "All My Love, Grandma Bev."

I stared at it for a moment. Grandma Bev. I hadn't heard from her, or anyone else in Mama's family, in 15 years. Not since the birthday card I received three months after my seventh birthday.

Ginger jumped up into my lap, rubbing her sleek orange-striped fur across my bare stomach and smoothing her whiskers along the low neckline of my sports bra. I dropped the letter on the table and reached down to pet her, careful not to muss her fur. She turned and placed a paw on the edge of the table and delicately bit the corner of the top sheet of stationery. I picked her up and cradled her against my chest.

"That's for reading, not biting," I said.

I picked it up and read it through quickly, then laid it back down, set Ginger in my lap, and flattened out the creases in the paper with my palms. I began to read it again, slowly.

Grandma Bev had received the graduation announcement I sent about two months ago. She was sorry she hadn't been able to respond sooner, but she had been ill and it had taken such a long time to recover. She congratulated me on being the first Dawson woman to get a college degree, even if technically I was a Harker, not a Dawson. And Carnegie Mellon. She would bet even the Harkers were impressed by that.

I looked at Ginger and smirked. "It's a shame none of the real Dawson women went to college. They're too busy popping out illegitimate babies."

Ginger blinked at me and purred.

I pushed a few wisps of dark hair that had escaped my pony tail back behind my ears and turned back to the letter. After the congratulations, Bev wrote about how various family members were doing. My much older cousin Stacie and her two children, by different fathers if I recalled correctly, were living in a trailer park. They were on government assistance, but Stacie was looking for work. Jobs were so hard to come by. Her sister Brandy was working as a bank teller; her daughter was in first grade. I remembered Brandy, about three years older than me, tall, trim, blonde, and gorgeous, and all too aware of it. Uncle Mike's wife had run off on him and he'd retired from the fire department, but his son Casey had become a fireman and had taken his place. Casey had always wanted to be a fireman. He spent several nights a week with the youth from St. Vincent's and often served as a Eucharistic Minister at the five o'clock Mass. I wondered if Casey could walk on water.

There was no mention of Aunt Charlotte or her son Chris. What happened there? Back when Mama was still alive, back when Grandma Bev had lived in northern California and we'd gone to see her every Christmas, Aunt Charlotte had always been the first to arrive, to help Grandma get everything ready. She was a quiet woman who could never quite hold still, with deep crow's feet at the corners of her eyes and a cigarette always dangling from her lips. And Chris was younger than I. I couldn't imagine either of them doing anything that would blacklist them. Maybe they became Protestants.

The cat jumped off my lap and trotted into the living room to snatch up her red stuffed mouse. Vigorously shaking it in her teeth, she leapt up onto the sofa. Her claws slid into the sofa a few times, but that was okay. There wasn't much she could do to further damage the frayed 1970s upholstery.

The picture in the announcement had been such a shock, Bev said. I looked so much like my mother, and she missed my mother so much. Perhaps I could come and visit some time soon. It would be no problem to get everyone together. We could go and visit my mother's grave.

My forehead crinkled as I raised my eyebrows. I read that line for a third time: "We could all go visit her grave. It's such a peaceful spot, and we always take flowers."

I wasn't exactly sure where Bend, Oregon, was, but I was certain it was at least a hundred miles from Renton, in Washington, where we'd lived when Mama died. The funeral had been local, a funeral home with a ridiculous name like Sunnydale Funeral Parlor. It had been in the morning, and there hadn't been any breakfast because Daddy

couldn't get the coffee pot to work and couldn't do *anything* without coffee, and I'd worn a polka-dotted sun dress. There was a viewing, and then we'd gone to church for the funeral Mass. Daddy and the priest had argued afterward about cremation. I'm sure Mama was cremated. How in the hell could we visit her grave? We had a deep blue vase, shot through with veins of red. Mama's ashes. I couldn't remember what had happened to it. People didn't bury those, did they?

A tearing noise from behind me in the living room jerked me away from the letter. Ginger was scratching at the carpet in the corner next to the TV, her orange tail twitching back and forth.

I twisted out of the chair, turning around as I jumped to my feet. "Bad kitty! Bad!"

She streaked from the corner to hide under the bulky armchair, peering out at me from underneath. I ignored her.

I folded the letter and stuffed it back in the envelope, then picked the sweaty T-shirt up off the floor, tossed the now empty water bottle into the trash, and went into my bedroom to get ready for a shower. My mother's grave. That'd be a neat trick.

After my shower, I pulled on a pair of jeans, a red blouse, and a pair of flip-flops. The tiny gold cross around my neck had a rose and thorns twined around it instead of the Christ figure. I brushed and blow-dried my long brown hair and left it down. From the waist up I looked exactly as I had in my graduation photos: high cheekbones, big green eyes with long lashes, a slightly over-large nose and a narrow waist. The red blouse looked nice with my tan. I guess I did look like Mama.

But it's funny how much a picture can't show. She was such a tiny person, barely five feet tall and slight. I was 5'10", broad shouldered, and could bench a little over two hundred pounds, and if we could have stood next to each other she would have looked like a child. And what would Grandma Bev think about the Celtic cross tattooed on the small of my back?

I brushed my teeth and checked the clock. It was 4 p.m.; plenty of time to drive over to Aunt Maggie's for dinner, and not much traffic on Saturday afternoon. Maybe she knew what happened to the vase. I tucked the letter into my pants pocket, grabbed my purse and the keys to my Jeep, gave Ginger a clam-shaped cat treat, and left.

Normally it would take about half an hour to drive from my apartment in Upper St. Clair to Aunt Maggie's house in McMurray, looping around the outside of Pittsburgh, but I decided to take the back roads, past old houses on multi-acre lots, the occasional church or school, and a handful of small farms. There was a farm just outside Maggie's neighborhood where they sold the best bread-and-butter corn, a family-run place. I stopped there just long enough to pick up a half dozen ears. We could have them with dinner; they were Aunt Maggie's favorite.

With the corn leaning against the door in the passenger seat, I entered Maggie's neighborhood the back way. The roads curved around in circles, each loop bringing me farther up the hill, and I swung onto Inverness and parked in the first driveway on the right. As I climbed out of the car, I noticed the pansies in the flower bed hadn't had much success; there were just a few scraggly plants set far apart. The petunias growing

amongst the evergreen bushes around the porch seemed to be doing well, though, as did the clematis on its trellis and the impatiens in their hanging baskets.

I rang the doorbell and then let myself in immediately; Aunt Maggie never locked up during the day when she was at home.

“Hi, Aunt Maggie,” I called.

“Is that you, Allison? I’m in the kitchen, hon.”

I walked around the staircase in the front hall and into a narrow hallway, past the basement door, and into the kitchen. Aunt Maggie stood at the sink, back to me, washing her hands.

Without turning around, she said, “I just put some barbecued chicken in the oven. You are staying for dinner, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” I said. I stepped up behind her and gave her a hug. “I brought some sweet corn,” I said.

“Let me dry my hands off,” she said, smiling.

“I noticed when I came in that your pansies aren’t doing much. Everything else looks good though. You want me to help pull them up so you can plant something new?” I asked.

Aunt Maggie wiped her hands on a fluffy white towel, carefully not leaning against the counter so she wouldn’t get any water on her crisp linen slacks. “No, it’s really too late in the season. A shame, though. I was sure those pansies would work out. The ones out back look so nice.”

I laid the paper sack of corn on the counter next to a green plaid kitchen towel heaped with damp, freshly washed dishes. Aunt Maggie tore the sack open and pulled the trash can up against the counter. We each grabbed an ear and began shucking.

“How are things at the hospital?” Aunt Maggie asked.

“Oh, we finally got in the new monitoring software, so next week I’ll be installing it.”

I told her about work, and she told me about the bridge club, and we tossed the corn into a big pot on the stove before sitting down with two glasses of iced tea at the massive oak table at the far end of the kitchen.

“Aunt Maggie, do you remember a vase, kind of short and squat, with red streaks in it?”

The corners of her mouth drew down and the wrinkles on her forehead deepened. She looked at me out of the side of her wire-rimmed glasses. “Your mother’s ashes,” she said.

“Yeah, I guess.” Suddenly uncomfortable, I swung my legs back and forth under the table.

“You didn’t want that vase for something,” she said. She glared at me.

“No. I just wondered whatever happened to it, is all.”

“Oh.” She sighed and her shoulders sagged. “My God, Allison! I thought you wanted to put a flower arrangement in it or some such.”

I felt bile rise in my throat. “That’s ... gross,” I said.

“Exactly.” She reached up and patted her reddish curls where silver combs held them back from her face. Despite the ten years she had on my dad, she didn’t have a single gray hair, a fact of which she was very proud. “I suppose your dad got rid of it years ago, after scattering the ashes. I don’t think he kept the thing.”

I pulled the letter from Grandma Bev out of my pocket and handed it to Aunt Maggie. I sipped my tea while she read.

When she finished, she handed it back. “That’s interesting,” she said.

“Interesting? That’s all you have to say?”

She stood up from the table to check the chicken. “Well? What else should I say?”

“Don’t you think it’s weird that I haven’t heard from any of them in 15 years, and then there’s this letter, and they want to take me to some nonexistent grave?”

Maggie turned off the heat under the corn. “The chicken will be just another minute or two,” she muttered. She turned to face me. “It is weird, but they’re weird people. Maybe your father gave them the urn and they buried it. How should I know?”

She opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of potholders designed to look like slices of watermelon. “As for hearing from them, of course you did. You’re all grown up now, college educated. You probably have a good job, maybe some money. Maybe you feel like you want to make up with them after all these years. Could you get the plates, dear?”

“Make up with them? They’re the ones who never called or wrote,” I said.

“You didn’t write to them either.”

I stared at her. "I was a little kid!"

Aunt Maggie pulled the baking dish out of the oven. "Plates?" she said again.

I stood up and opened the folding cupboard doors behind the table. The plates, all bone white china, were neatly stacked alongside serving platters and a cut glass punch bowl. I took two, closed the cupboard, and set the plates on the table.

"She didn't even ask me about my job," I said.

Aunt Maggie set the chicken in the middle of the table, then hurried back to the stove. "She didn't ask you anything, not even how you've been. And you'll notice she didn't send any kind of gift. Silverware, too. And you can set out the coleslaw that's in the refrigerator. Leftovers from Wednesday night's potluck, so we better eat it up."

"It sounds like she's been having a hard time. Gifts aren't compulsory," I said, reaching into the silverware drawer.

Using tongs, Maggie picked the corn out of the water in the pot on the stove and dropped them into a deep serving bowl. "Oh, you know it's tacky not to send something," she said.

I fetched the coleslaw from the fridge, peeled back the Saran wrap, and took it to the table. Aunt Maggie brought the corn, and we both sat down.

After murmuring a quick prayer, she said, "Anyway, my advice is just throw it away. You get involved with those people, you're just going to get hurt."

I poked a piece of chicken with the serving fork. "But they're family."

She sniffed. "Be that as it may. Would you like one or two ears of corn?"

"Two, please." I dropped the subject.

After a few minutes, Aunt Maggie asked me if I was dating anybody, then told me about a nice young man at her church. We finished dinner, and I helped her wash the dishes before heading home.

Back in the Jeep, I drove home the direct way, down Route 19. I had decided to write a letter to Grandma Bev, just to let her know how I was doing. I'd give her my phone number and email address, in case she wanted to talk. But the grave visitation was still bothering me. I wasn't going to Oregon any time soon.

I dropped the letter in the mail Monday on the way to work. The next Monday evening, I checked my email when I got home from work and found a message from Grandma Bev:

“Dear Allison,

I'm glad to hear that you are doing so well. I unfortunately have been sick again and had to quit my job. I may be selling the house to move in with your uncle Mike. Going through the closets, we've found some of your mother's things. Please tell me if you would be interested, and I can send them. Also, there is the matter of her life insurance policy. We sent the money to you when you turned twenty-one, but didn't hear if you received it. Let us know. That money could be very important for you, for your future.

Love, Grandma Bev.”

After the lengthy letter, the email seemed rather abrupt. Not knowing what to think, I left the email on my computer screen and leaned through my bedroom doorway and around the corner into the kitchen. Libbie, my roommate, was opening a can of tuna for the cat.

“Hey, Libbie,” I said. “Do you have a few minutes to read something and tell me what you think?”

Libbie looked over her shoulder and tried to push her short blond hair out of her face with an awkward shrug. “Sure, just let me give Ginger her food.” She held the can over the sink and pushed in the top of the can to drain off the excess liquid. Ginger dashed into the kitchen and rubbed against her heels, meowing.

“So what is it you want me to read?” Libbie asked, scraping the tuna onto a plate.

“Weekend before last I got this letter from my grandmother,” I said. I told her about the letter, about what Aunt Maggie said, and about my response. “And I just got this email from her. It just seems ... odd. Tell me what you think.”

Libbie set the plate of tuna and the floor next to Ginger’s food bowl and followed me into my room. She read the email to herself, tapping her index finger against her front teeth.

“It seems like a nice email,” she said. “She responded really quickly. I’ll bet your letter didn’t arrive until today.” She pulled the red and white quilt up to the top of the bed and smoothed it before sitting on the edge of the bed, legs crossed in front of her. “Poor lady. It must be miserable to be that sick.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “If she’s so sick, how come she responded so quickly? She should be in bed.” I dropped into the desk chair, leaning on the desk, and ran my fingers through my hair.

“Don’t you think she might be excited to hear from you?” Libbie said.

“Sure. I thought about it. And then I rejected it. ‘I’m so sick, I have to quit my job. By the way, do you have that insurance money?’” I shook my head. “I’m supposed to say yes, and then there’ll be some sort of test or something, but she won’t be able to afford it. And then I’m supposed to send her the money. Yeah, right.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re too young to be so cynical?”

I glared at her.

She leaned forward, lady-like with elbow on knee, and rested her chin in her hand. “So what about this insurance policy? Did you receive it?”

“Yes.” I picked up a pen and started tapping it on the desk. “From a lawyer. No mention of my mother’s family was made in the letter. It basically said, here’s your money. We held it until you turned twenty-one and now it’s yours. I put it in an IRA.” A particularly violent tap sent the pen flying out of my hand and across the room. It landed on top of my dresser, next to a framed picture of my mother.

Libbie retrieved it and laid it on the desk top. “And your mom’s things?”

“I have no idea.”

“Allison, you’re letting what your aunt said get to you.”

“She made good points.”

“Maybe.” She looked at the computer screen and then back at me. “But they’re your family. Maybe you should give them the benefit of the doubt. It seems like they’re making a real effort. Your grandma even suggested sending you some of your mom’s things. That’s nice.”

“I guess.” I sat up in front of the keyboard and clicked reply. “I can email her back and let her know about the money. And see about Mama’s things. It’s not like I have to send her a thousand dollars right this minute.”

Libbie nodded. “I’m going to watch a movie. Want to join me?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve got a lot to do.”

“Okay,” she said. She went back out into the living room.

I began typing my reply, trying not to sound rude—no easy task in a short message, but I didn’t see any need to be chatty.

“Hi Grandma Bev,

Thank you for getting back to me so soon. I’m sorry about your recent health problems, but hopefully Uncle Mike is taking good care of you. Let me know what you have of Mama’s; I don’t want you to ship it if it’s something too large or too fragile. As for the insurance, I received it a little over a year ago and have invested it in an IRA. It’s a nice start on retirement savings. Take care and recover quickly!

Love, Allison.”

By Sunday I still had no reply. I should have expected it, but it still hurt. Maybe I should have taken Aunt Maggie's advice from the start and thrown the letter away.

After evening Mass, I drove over to Aunt Maggie's, as usual. The sun was just setting as I pulled into her driveway, the last bands of apricot and rose light mixing with strings of distant clouds just above the horizon. Overhead the sky was a deep blue, with the brightest stars just beginning to shine through. I parked and walked down the driveway and around the back of the house. The house perched atop a hill, the lawn extending down over a quarter acre to end in an area of brushy woods that backed up onto the property. The lawn was nothing but smooth grass, broken only by a massive maple tree that shaded the back porch and Aunt Maggie's flower garden. I could see her sitting on her porch, enjoying the evening. She waved as I walked up.

"Beautiful sunset," she said.

I climbed the stairs up to the porch and took a seat in an old cherry wood rocking chair. "It's a nice night," I replied.

Aunt Maggie nodded. "It is that," she said. "But it looks like something is bothering you."

I laughed. "Nothing important. I've just been thinking about Mama's family. I should have taken your advice."

"What happened?" she asked.

"Not much." I told her about the letter I had written and about the emails. "And I haven't heard anything since. So I guess you're right."

“Don’t take it so hard, honey,” she said. “I told you, they aren’t nice people. They can’t help themselves. Why don’t you get a glass of lemonade or something?”

I lifted the ceramic pitcher from the small table between us and poured lemonade into the empty glass. “I know you said that, but it’s just weird. Why nothing for 15 years, then this letter out of the blue? I got the money over a year ago. If it was about that, why not write sooner?” I took a sip of the lemonade and set the glass on the table.

“Who knows? People are funny that way.” Aunt Maggie pushed her glasses up on the bridge of her nose. “I think it’s time to turn on the light, I can barely see anything out here.”

I got up and pushed open the screen door leading into the house so I could reach inside and turn on the porch light. “Feels like something’s missing, though. Like there’s something that I don’t understand. There’s got to be more to this,” I said.

Aunt Maggie rocked gently back and forth.

I said, “Maybe I was too close-mouthed, maybe I offended them.”

Looking out across the lawn, she said, “Oh, I doubt that. They took offense a long time ago.”

“What do you mean?” I sat back down in the chair.

“I don’t mean anything. Don’t worry about it,” she said. “I just mean, I’m sure it’s nothing you did.”

“But it’s something someone else did?”

Her rocking chair stopped moving and she looked at me directly for the first time. “You’re too perceptive by half,” she said.

“Come on, Aunt Maggie,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“It’s not right for me to be the one to tell you. You’ll have to ask your father about it.”

“When am I going to do that? He’s only here, what, three days a month? And he sleeps most of the time,” I said, gripping tight to the arms of the chair.

“Driving back and forth across the country all the time is tiring, I’m sure.”

She sat there, looking at her hands folded in her lap. Neither of us spoke for a minute. Finally, she said, “I’ll tell you what happened. I guess you ought to know.” She looked up at me again. “But if you want to know any more, you’ll have to ask your father. All right?”

I nodded.

“When you were just a little girl, and your mother was still alive, and your father out of town driving trucks all the time, your mama, I guess she was pretty lonely. And when he came home, tired out, they fought like the blazes.”

“I don’t remember that,” I said.

“Why would you? You were only maybe two years old at the time.” She started the chair rocking back and forth slowly as she continued. “Well, she got to complaining about him, to her family, and that started them saying how he was no good, and lazy, and not worth a damn, but she’d made her bed and now she could just lie in it.”

I nodded again. I knew how everyone felt about divorce.

“And then your grandmother said, how did she know he wasn’t cheating on her? And your mama started to think on that, and finally she up and asked your father one

evening when he came home.” She stopped rocking. “To make a long story short, your father moved out for a while. After a few months, they worked everything out and he moved back home, but your mother’s family never forgave him for leaving.”

“Was he having an affair?” I asked. I couldn’t believe it.

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask him about that,” Aunt Maggie said.

I waited a moment, then asked, “But what does this have to do with the letter?”

She frowned, biting her lower lip. “After your mother died, the Dawsons threatened to go to court to get custody of you. They claimed your father was no good, and an adulterer, and he’d raise you to be just like him.”

I stared at her with my mouth open.

“Well, you’d already come to live with me, and they didn’t have enough money to do anything about it, but they wouldn’t stop pestering us. We argued for a few months, and finally broke off contact,” she said.

“So it’s not entirely their fault,” I said.

She took a sip of lemonade. “I wouldn’t say that,” she said. “They started the whole nasty business, bad-mouthing your father left and right. Whatever happened, your mama forgave him. That should have been enough.”

I kept my mouth shut. No point in upsetting Aunt Maggie any further. We both sat on the porch, rocking back and forth, staring into the night sky. After a while, I stood up.

“Well, I have to get up early tomorrow. I’d better head out,” I said.

She stood up as well. “And I’ve got plenty of baking to do tomorrow.”

We stood there awkwardly for a moment, then she reached out to give me a hug.
“Have a good night, Allison.”

“You too, Aunt Maggie. I’ll see you next week.”

I drove home the back way, seeing only a few other cars on the road. I’d like to know whether there’d been an affair, but how would I bring that up? By the way, Dad, did you have an affair when I was baby? Like he’d tell me the truth. I felt bad about the Dawsons, though. Maybe I’d send Grandma Bev another email, try to find the time to go see them.

When I returned to my apartment, Libbie was out. I scooped Ginger up into my arms and went into my bedroom. Taking one of the leftover wallet-size graduation pictures out of my desk drawer, I tucked it into the corner of the gold frame holding my mother’s picture. We really did look alike. It could be nice to get to know her family. We might have more in common than a resemblance.

SUMMARY

This thesis, a collection of short fiction, consists of a critical introduction and six stories comprising approximately 80 pages of original fiction. The critical introduction, analyzes in detail the influences on the fiction and its place within the modernist family. Quotations from the original fiction and from those writings which have most notably influenced it demonstrate concretely the connection between previously published modernist stories and this collection. The critical introduction is vital in establishing the relevance of the stories that follow.

These six stories, arranged in what Robert M. Luscher calls a “short story sequence” (Luscher 148), consider the themes of abandonment, loss, infidelity, memory, and relationships. I believe these stories demonstrate an understanding of the themes, techniques and traditions of creative writing.

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