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Men, Women, and Children

Marie Dufour Goodwin

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by

Marie Dufour Goodwin
B.A., Tulane University, 1969
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iv
MEN	1
Men Worth Keeping	2
The Package	20
Third Child	34
WOMEN	48
Leaping Hares and Angels	49
Louisiana Territory	57
Feet of Clay	67
Prostrate	78
CHILDREN	89
Darkness	90
Scapegoat	98
Mary's Funeral	110
VITA	130

ABSTRACT

All of my fiction has to do with relationships. I suspect this is true of most creative writers, but in my place this broad theme takes precedence over other creative aspects of writing, such as language. While I would not call my prose minimalist, I have tried to set down my short stories in a plain rather than an involved or noticeably poetic idiom.

As for the three-tiered division into “Men,” “Women,” and “Children,” the stories themselves naturally fell into these three categories, depending on the main, point-of-view character. I found it enthralling to change the authorial voice to conform to the story. It has been an interesting exercise to think my way into the minds of characters who differ from myself in gender and/or age.

My ultimate goal, of course, is a synthesis of human experience as I see it. As we pursue our lives as men and women, and children of both sexes, we are all ultimately subsumed under the rubric “human beings.” I hope both my characters and I have arrived at better ways to be human and humane.

MEN

MEN WORTH KEEPING

His plane, of course, had been delayed for security reasons. It was the first time he'd set foot on a plane since September 11th. Though he'd been prepared for long lines at Dulles airport, the two hours he stood to check his bags and the additional security checkpoint set his timetable far behind. He wondered if he should call her but decided against it. When they'd talked on the phone last week he'd told her he had no idea how matters stood at the Washington airport, the only one open in October 2001. He'd said he would contact her from his hotel room in New Orleans. There had been a short silence, then she'd said, in the girlish voice which still surprised him, "Fine. I'll see you when I see you. If you call when I'm not in, just leave your full name and a telephone number. Don't leave a message." Slight stress on the words 'full name', the one he only had legal title to: Brad Forster. This instruction sounded ominous to him.

He already knew her full name, Natalie Clerens Dominick. He had her address, 1314 Lesley Place in uptown New Orleans. His grad school buddy, Chuck Soniat, whose family had lived long enough in New Orleans to have a street named after them, had told him Lesley Place was pretty fancy. "It's right off Audubon Park. Lots of big houses," Chuck had said. "Who is this friend you're going to see?" He'd sounded more than interested, but Brad had put him off with a shrug. "Some girl I met at SCMLA last year. A Tulane grad student," he'd said casually. Chuck whistled.

Later, if things went well, he'd tell Chuck the truth. He really didn't like lying to friends, but the Jesuits who'd taught him in high school and at Georgetown, and who now crouched perpetually in the back of his brain, reminded him of the concept of mental

reservation. Chuck had no real right to the information. As for Brad's own family, they didn't approve of his search, but had tried hard not to disapprove out loud. Good old Mom and Dad, he thought. Ignore it and it will go away. However, this was *not* going to go away, not if he had any say in the matter.

He wondered, from Natalie's slightly skittish conversation, if she had told her family yet. Maybe she felt they had no right to know either, which might prove troublesome in the days ahead.

The girl at the Avis counter in New Orleans was helpful. She showed him on a map how to take I-10 coming from the airport and suggested he get off at the Carrollton exit, turn right and follow the broad avenue to where it turned into St. Charles Avenue. "One stoplight, you pass Audubon Park, another stoplight, and then you're there. Take a right on Calhoun and another right on Lesley."

It sounded easy. Natalie had made a reservation for him at the Park View Hotel which, apparently, he'd pass on the right just before the park. He'd be going back there to call her, but first he decided to drive past 1314 Lesley Place to see where she lived.

He found the interstate, he found the Carrollton exit, and just as predicted he found the turn to St. Charles Avenue. As he drove down this double-barreled street with the well-known streetcars running in the median, he enjoyed the trees lining the road and the overflowing flowerboxes adorning stone and frame double-decker houses. He already liked the city of his birth, though he found the October heat oppressive. The barebones, non-air-conditioned little Chevy he was driving began to seem like a cheap mistake.

Braking at the corner of Calhoun and St. Charles, he took a red-light turn to the right and, sure enough, there on the right was a quiet, tree-lined street named Lesley. 1305 to the left, 1306, 08, 10, 12, 1314 on the right. He realized that from the time he got on the interstate, he'd only made one left turn. Right, right, right all the way. Some superstitious molecule, possibly from his blood but more likely from his sister Tracy's astrology compulsion, stirred in him.

He pulled into a parking place two houses away from 1314 Lesley Place and got out. He checked his watch; four o'clock. Didn't Natalie say she taught school and was usually home by four? But then, she didn't expect him to come to the house, did she? The street was impressive, huge frame houses with gingerbread on the porches, a further profusion of flowers wilting in the unseasonable heat, but it was a dead street. Not a soul, not even a sound except the muted noise of traffic behind him on the avenue.

On an impulse he never later could explain to himself or anyone else, he marched up to Natalie's house and stared. It was a two-story frame structure, taller than it was wide, with a deep, columned veranda and ten-foot windows in the porch bay. The upper windows and the bay had open, dark-green shutters, while the basic house color was a middle gray and the trim was white. A brick walk led to the darker gray porch.

Kee-rist! he thought. These people are rich and probably snobs; I'm the last person they want to see!

And then, because he felt like running all the way back to D.C., he forced himself to walk up the porch steps and ring the doorbell.

*

Jeanie had stayed home from school that day. At fifteen she was certainly old enough to be alone, plus the alarm was on. She wasn't really sick, but she did have cramps, and she hadn't done her math homework last night either. She'd caught Mom in one of her abstracted moods this morning and weasled out of going to school. Since she knew Mom didn't believe her and it was nearly time for Mom to come home, she decided to go downstairs and lie on the den couch looking pale and interesting. Jeanie was an aspiring actress; she knew just how to do this.

She lay down and clicked on Oprah. And then the doorbell rang.

"Shit!" Did Mom forget her house keys again? That was a sign of menopause, forgetting things, but Mom was too young, only forty-three. Muttering under her breath, Jeanie stomped to the door. Some instinct made her stand on tiptoe and check the peephole first. All she could tell was that the person outside wasn't Mom; it wasn't even female.

The bell rang again, almost in her ear. Jeanie jumped back from the door and yelled, "Yes? Who are you and what do you want?"

"I'm sorry to bother you," a young male voice said. Yeah, right, Jeanie thought.

"What are you selling?" she called. The door was thick oak; you had to raise your voice to get through it.

"I'm not selling anything. I'm —"

Oh. A Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon. "We've got a religion already. Sorry." She retreated a step and missed his comment, though it was probably some mumble-mumble about how his religion was better than hers. "What?" she cried.

“I said, good for you. I’m not selling religion. I’m not selling anything. I need to see you.”

“See *me*?” All of a sudden, Jeanie wanted to wet her pants. This was the worst, some stalker who’d seen her around the neighborhood. “I’m calling 911 *right now*, so get off my porch!” she shrieked. Then, to her vast relief, she heard the familiar sound of her mother’s car pulling into the driveway. She heard the car door slam. Then silence. Then --

“Natalie,” she heard the young man say.

“Brad,” her mother said.

“Mom!” Jeanie screamed at the top of her voice. “Mom, watch out!” She flung open the door. Her mother was on the top step, briefcase in hand, just as she came back from school every weekday. A couple of feet away from her stood a young man she’d never seen before in her life. He was kind of cute, she noticed in the brief moment before her mother spoke again.

“Brad? Is it you?”

The young man raised his shoulders and held them taut. “Yeah, it’s me. I think – I’m afraid I frightened –” He indicated Jeanie standing in the open door.

Mom turned to her. “Honey, there’s nothing to be afraid of. This is my cousin Brad Forster from Washington D.C. Brad, my daughter Jeanie.”

It took all her trust in her mother to come forward and shake hands. But why hadn’t Mom told her this, this *person* was coming by?

“Uh, Mom?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“Why didn’t you tell me to be on the lookout for him?”

Natalie deposited her briefcase inside the front door. “Tell you the truth, Jeanie, I forgot all about it. Now, how are you feeling?”

As she went into her routine, “I’m better; maybe I can go to school tomorrow,” Jeanie realized that Mom hadn’t invited the young man, what’s his name, Brad inside. All she said was, “Glad you’re better. Get on that math homework. Oh, and tell Daddy I’ll be back around six.”

“What about dinner?”

“Takeout Chinese. You order; here’s twenty dollars.”

Jeanie mutely took the bill. She submitted to her mother’s kiss, then turned away. Behind her, Mom closed and locked the front door, then she and that Brad person clumped down the porch stairs. “We’ll take my car,” Jeanie heard her mother say in a strange, kind of choked voice. Then she ran upstairs to her room and pulled the bedcovers over her head.

*

“Are you angry at me for coming to your house?”

Brad stared at Natalie’s fine profile, the only view of her he’d had for the past five minutes. Nor had he heard her voice; they had been silent as she threaded her way through the traffic-clogged streets.

Now she gave him a quick glance. “I’m not really angry, just sorry Jeanie got scared. You might have thought –” She broke off. When she resumed, her voice was a pitch lower. “Sorry, Brad, that was offensive. You are my child as much as Jeanie. I’m sure you needed to come by.”

Damn right he had. For a second, anger floated him out of the car and away from her. He felt like firebombing something, though such a thought had never occurred to him before. He felt like tearing the steering wheel of this upscale BMW out of her manicured hands and plowing into the nearest parked car.

“Brad?”

“I’m sorry too,” he said gruffly. “I didn’t mean to scare your daughter.”

“Your sister.”

“My half-sister.”

She sighed. “You know, I think we’d better drop the heavy stuff until I’m not driving.”

“Fine by me.” He settled back into the leather seat. *His* mother had never had a car to match this, nor a six-slot CD player in her car. The Beemer was a dream car and Natalie drove well, navigating streets as narrow as Georgetown alleys until they reached their destination. Only then did he speak again.

“Where are we going?” he said as she pulled into a private parking area.

“Claudius’ Wine Bar. Just here, around the corner.”

They entered a shadowy brick space at least two stories tall. “It used to be an old firehouse, but it’s been converted into a wine bar and restaurant for a while now,” Natalie said in a conversational tone. “You can still see the fire-pole in the back.” He peered toward the back of the two huge rooms and noticed a gleaming brass pole extending from an upper floor. Great, fine, real interesting; but what the hell was she doing, treating him like some tourist?

Natalie made the hostess give them a booth looking out on the street. The place was practically deserted but still they were seated by a hostess, not a waiter. Brad, who had waited on tables in grunge joints all through college, knew this too was an upscale sign and one he wasn't used to.

I should have listened to Mom and Dad, he thought with some bitterness, whether against them or himself, he was in no shape to decide. *This is going all wrong and I don't know what to do with this Beemer-driving, uptight bitch. Maybe I'll just get up and leave.*

"May I take your order?" The question came from a pimply youth at least five years younger than Brad. Natalie flashed him a robot's smile.

"Yes, we'll have a bottle of the Cakebread Chardonnay '98," she said. "That okay with you, Brad?"

He glanced down at the wine list. Cakebread Chardonnay '98 cost seventy-eight dollars a bottle.

"Naw, I'd rather have a Bud," he said. As the waiter moved off, he met Natalie's stare.

"What is it?"

"You're the image of your father."

Oh, shit. "What do you mean?" he said.

"It's just, you have his eyes. All smoke-blue and that ring around the pupils and -- and --"

"*And?*" He truly did not want to get mixed up with this woman. She obviously had issues with the mere fact of his existence, not to mention the guy she'd had sex with

twenty-seven years ago. And what about her present husband, and her daughter? Mom and Dad were right; this quest of his was all wrong.

And then she did something that almost killed him. She reached out her glossy-nailed hand and touched his cheek. And he crumpled.

“Don’t.”

“I’m sorry.” She withdrew the hand. “That’s all I did before.”

“Before?”

“When you were born. They let me hold you for a few minutes and all I dared to do was touch your cheek. Then they took you away.”

“*Here we go.*” The waiter produced their order with adolescent good cheer. He elaborately uncorked Natalie’s bottle of wine and poured Brad’s beer into a frosted stein. “Enjoy!” he cried. Brad felt like busting his Roman nose but, hey, it probably sucked to be him, beaky, pimply, and clueless.

His absence left an uncomfortable silence. Natalie closed her eyes and sipped her wine. Brad, not usually a chugger, gulped down half his beer. He set the stein down and waited. After all, *she* was the parent. She had agreed to this meeting. It was her place to talk first.

In the end, he did. Natalie couldn’t seem to manage it, though she got through two glasses of wine in quick succession. Finally Brad couldn’t stand another minute of this and said, “So, who was my father?”

“Is,” she said faintly. “My husband. Sylvester Dominick.”

“*What?*” He clunked his beer stein on the wooden table. There had been no name in the father’s space when he reviewed his adoption records. He’d assumed Natalie had

moved on from his birth father, on to some guy who could give her a Beemer and a two-story mansion.

“We were seniors in high school. Marriage was out of the question at the time, so we put you up for adoption.”

“And never looked back, huh?”

“Brad, please. Of course we looked back.” She gagged as if she wanted to vomit and covered her mouth with the expensive hand that so offended him.

“So how come your daughter, *my full sister*, doesn’t know about me?”

“That would be – counterproductive – at this time.”

“Counterproductive, Christ! Now I know you’re an English teacher!” The waiter had looked up as he bashed his beer stein on the table a second time. Brad stared him down.

“Brad, please, please, calm yourself. I’ll tell you anything you want to know, but please hush!”

He hushed. This had better be good.

“Syl and I were lovers in senior year. Don’t ask me why we never took precautions; that just wasn’t done among Catholic teenagers back then.”

He snorted and said, “I was raised Catholic too. *We* took precautions.”

“Yeah, well, with AIDS –“

“Bullshit. Even back then, pregnancy was always a risk.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I honestly can’t tell you why –“

“And I think this is off the point. By the way – SYL? Is that my father’s name?”

“Sylvester. It’s an old New Orleans name.”

“Oh, well, just fancy.”

She eyed him for a moment. Then she said, “You don’t like me.” It wasn’t a question.

Brad had been raised to be honest; usually he was. In this case, he saw no other course. The woman was asking for the truth so he’d give it to her.

“No, I don’t.”

“May I ask why?” The tone was once again conversational, mannered, upscale.

Okay, I’ll tell you why I don’t like you. I don’t like your fucking Beemer, your skanky daughter, your fat-ass husband (my own father!) with his stupid name, your house, your scruples, your reluctance, the fact that you’ve not asked ONE THING about me in all this time –

Yes, I’ve got plenty to tell you, Ms. Natalie.

But he couldn’t say it. All he could do was rise to his feet and say, “Perhaps I’d better leave.”

“Oh, Brad! Please don’t.” She reached across the table and clutched his wrist. Without meaning to, Brad thought, “That’s the second touch, after my cheek.”

“Okay,” he said and sat down. “But let’s get something straight, Natalie. I’ve got terrific parents. They welcome me whenever I come home. They ask about me, what I’m doing, what I’m planning. They love me as me; I’m not some abstraction to them, some given-up baby twenty-six years ago. You and your husband, if you don’t want me around that’s fine. I’ve got parents who’d knock the socks off of Jeanie’s parents, even if they don’t have a Beemer and my Mom can’t afford a manicure.”

“Brad.” She put down her third glass of wine and buried her face in her hands. He looked at the fingernails he’d just dissed a moment ago and knew he had to stay. He at least owed her a completed conversation. Then he could return to D.C. and never think about her again.

*

“Another beer?”

“Sure, okay.”

Five minutes had passed. He watched as she poured her fourth glass of wine and realized he’d have to drive the Beemer back to her house.

“I’m sorry for that display,” she said. “I don’t usually cry in public.”

“S’okay. You don’t usually meet your son for the first time either.”

She smiled faintly. “You’re pretty sharp.” He shrugged and waited. Finally, she roused herself to say, “Tell me what you’ve done for the past twenty-six years?”

So he told her about the family he’d been placed with, Mom and Dad and Tracy who was also adopted. He talked about the big house on the back slope of Capitol Hill, the house he’d grown up in. “It’s not D.C.’s best neighborhood, but the house is huge. Mom and Dad were renovating it the whole time I was growing up, so I learned carpentry and plumbing and wiring. Dad taught me.”

“Your – your father’s a carpenter?”

He could see how it looked to someone like her, people who hired that stuff done. She’d probably never had a drink with a manual laborer before in her life.

“No, Dad’s a plumber,” he said. “He has his own plumbing business, but he can do all kinds of things. He and Mom practically rebuild that old house.”

“You seem proud of him. Of them.” Them – his parents.

“I am proud of them.” He paused to allow her to absorb the facts he’d laid out on the table between them. His fondness for his family. His class, certainly lower than hers.

She reached out and touched his hand. The third touch, he thought. “Brad, what do you do? Are you a plumber too?”

“I’m an English graduate student at American University,” he said and couldn’t prevent a mean little thrill at having shot down her expectations.

“Oh. Oh, goodness. So you did inherit that.”

“That?”

“English. Literature, all that stuff. What’s your field?”

He had the absurd feeling of being at a college mixer. “Where are you from? What’s your major?” He felt dislocated for a second. I’m here in New Orleans, having a drink with my mother here on –

“What’s this street?” he asked.

“What?” She looked bewildered at his abrupt change of topic. “Oh, this is Magazine Street.”

“Looks like a fun area,” he said.

“Oh, it is. Lots of antique shops and restaurants and coffeehouses.” She seemed more animated now, as if he were a simple tourist and she was acquainting him with her home town. “Maybe I can show you around tomorrow.”

“Don’t you have to work?”

“I’ll take a personal day. I get five of them a year.”

“Look,” he said and leaned forward. “You know what I want to do, don’t you?”

She nodded. “But, Brad, I’m not sure –“

“Why not?”

“Because –” She looked away.

“Because you haven’t told them yet,” he said. It was not a question.

She took a breath and faced him. “No, I haven’t. I need time to prepare them, myself . . .”

“But you knew I was coming down to New Orleans! Why the *hell* didn’t you tell them before?” He slammed the table with his fist. Her eyes flew open.

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

“Well, I know why. It’s because you’re ashamed of me. You thought I’d just go away, but let me tell you, that’s not going to happen. Either you tell them and let me meet them or else –”

“Brad, please,” she said sharply and glanced around. He realized he’d been shouting. The wine bar was beginning to fill up, which evidently made her nervous. Somebody she knew might see her, sitting across from a strange young man who was yelling at her.

“Let me explain a few things.”

“Jesus! I wish you would. This is beyond me. Didn’t you and your husband – my *father* – ever consider the possibility –”

“Brad, be quiet and listen.” For the first time, she sounded like a mother, like Mom, his real mother, telling him to shut his mouth and use his ears. It was one of Mom’s favorite sayings.

“Okay,” he said grumpily.

“I always thought about the day you’d show up. Dreamed about it, even. But Syl is different; all he wanted to do was forget the whole thing happened. Especially after –” She reached for her wine glass and took a deep swallow. Brad decided not to prompt her any more.

“Before we had Jeanie, we had another child, a son,” she said. “He died in a car wreck when he was six years old. He’d be twenty now. Syl – Syl’s never gotten over it. And Jeanie, well she was only two, but she remembers her brother. There’s a lot of, of groundwork I have to do before I can introduce you to them.”

Brad sat back in his chair. “I see,” he said. “That might be tough.” He paused and finished his beer. “What was his name?”

“Sylvester Junior. That’s tradition, of course; naming the first son after his father.”

So that would have been my name, he thought and felt slightly dizzy. Sylvester, Syl Junior. Well, thank God he’d dodged *that* bullet.

“So, you see, it’s kind of impossible right now,” she went on. “But when you called, I couldn’t resist. I really wanted to meet you.”

“Of course. Me too. So where do we go from here?”

“Look, let me take you around tomorrow, show you the city, we’ll go out to lunch.”

“Won’t your husband wonder why you’re taking off? And your daughter?”

“No, they’ll think I’m at school,” she said briefly.

“Lot of secrets in your family,” he murmured.

“And not in yours?” she retorted. He was reminded of his own skill in debate. Just the way she came back at him, sharp as a dart. Here, finally, was something he could identify with.

He saw her glance at her thin gold watch then back up at him. “It’s almost five-thirty,” she said.

“You’ve got to go.” He measured the wine bottle; she’d left over a third of it. At seventy-eight dollars a pop, that was twenty-six dollars wasted, unless she planned to carry the bottle home. Somehow, he didn’t think she’d do something so crass.

She paid with an Amex credit card, gold card, no less. Twenty-six dollars down the drain, unenjoyed, just like the twenty-six years of his life. Oh, shut up, he told himself; you’re getting as superstitious as Tracy.

She signed the check and stood up, staggering a bit. Brad pushed himself up from his chair and moved around the table to help her.

“Oh, I’m fine,” she said brightly, but she let him hold her elbow.

“Give me your car keys,” he said.

“No, really, Brad, I’m okay. I’m not a total alcoholic, you know.”

Methinks the lady doth protest too much, he thought. Aloud, he said, “I’ve always wanted to drive a Beemer.”

“Oh. Okay.” She reached into her purse and dropped the keys in his hand. They were silent as they got into the car and he pulled out against traffic, a harrowing experience since Magazine Street was narrow and crowded. They stayed silent for most of the ride back. About two blocks from her house, he said, “Chaucer.”

“*What?*”

“You asked what my field is.”

“Oh,” she said. “I like Chaucer too.”

“Good,” he said.

He pulled into her driveway and turned off the motor then handed her the keys. She remained in her seat, so he got out of the car and came around to open the door for her. “Thanks,” she murmured. “How about I pick you up at nine-thirty?”

“Great,” he said, wondering if she was going to kiss him. Then thankful that she didn’t. She squeezed his arm instead.

“Goodbye, Brad. See you tomorrow.”

He watched her go inside then turned and walked up the block to his down-market Chevy. In his mind he saw her enter the foyer, greet her husband and daughter, answer their questions about where she’d been and who she’d been with. He felt her anger at the situation, her impatience and anguish at having to lie. He was so deep into her head that he almost missed the left turn onto St. Charles Avenue.

And then he thought, hell and damnation! She’s lucky I’m a good guy. I could have been a criminal, a dope pusher, a sponger. I could have seen the house and the car and her watch and the Amex card, not to mention the pricey bottle of wine, and asked her for a loan. I could have hit her in public; I sure wanted to for awhile there.

Hey, I’m an okay guy. If she doesn’t want to keep me around, the fucking hell with her! Maybe I just won’t go tomorrow. Maybe I’ll make that decision tomorrow. After all, as Scarlett O’Hara was fond of saying, tomorrow was another day. And that other cliché, tomorrow’s the first day of the rest of your life.

No, God damn it! Tomorrow's the first day of the rest of *their* lives. I've known who I am for a long time.

THE PACKAGE

The alarm clock rang at its usual time, 6:30; far too early for Len that Wednesday morning. He and Ethel had stayed up well past midnight the night before, watching TV and hoping George W. Bush would carry Florida and beat that liberal tree-hugger, Gore. Five hours ago, they'd thrown in the towel and crawled into bed, but now he couldn't sleep. He never could sleep through an alarm; never had in all his years of working. The minute the noise woke him, his brain started scurrying.

Beside him, Ethel lay curled up in quiet, economical sleep. In all the years they'd shared a bed – forty-six last October 8th – he'd never heard her snore unless she had a cold. Or make those gurgling noises she accused him of. And she didn't thrash around either, and he knew he did that. Ethel was – he struggled for the right word. He should know it; he was a writer after all. Ethel was *elegant* in her sleep. Waking too, she was some cookie; she always had been.

He punched the clock into silence, staggered to his feet and promptly fell to the carpet. Ethel sat up and tore her sleep mask off.

“Len?” She blinked several times; it took her a while to focus her bad eyes. Thank goodness *his* eyes worked fine, Len thought.

“My feet fell asleep,” he said from the floor.

“You okay?”

“Sure.” To prove it, he pushed himself up to his knees with the help of the mattress. He got to his feet and waited for the blood to obey gravity and flow down his legs. It took longer now, but so did everything else.

“G’night then. Wake me at nine.” Ethel turned away from him and lapsed back into slumber. She didn’t seem to recall a thing about last night, not the election, nor the drinks, nor his clumsy attempt at sex. Oh, well.

He felt for his leather slippers with his feet, remembering last night when he kicked them off. Like kicking a field goal back in high school. One slipper was under the bed now and the other in a dark corner of the room. Stifling a groan, he bent and retrieved the under-the-bed slipper then limped off to get the other one. He closed the bedroom door with care and shuffled to the kitchen to fix some coffee.

By the time the Mr. Coffee machine had dripped half-full, he remembered something else: the package might come today. He’d been expecting it for about a week. Of course, he’d really been expecting Lois to call. As he filled his mug, the longed-for conversation ran through his head:

“Len, this book’s a real winner.”

“You liked it?” He’d have to be real cool when he said this. Not let her think he was fishing for praise.

“Sure, I liked it. What’s not to like? It’s got real promise.” He could hear Lois’ New York accent; actually her Brooklyn accent, kind of like the Ninth Ward here in New Orleans.

“And?” He’d have to keep it casual.

“I’d be happy to represent it for you. We’re looking at six figures here.” Len closed his eyes in pleasure at the words. And promptly stumbled on the raised threshold of the dining room. The full mug flew out of his hand and landed on Ethel’s mushroom-

tinted rug. The rug was new and darkish, but not dark enough to disguise broad splotches of black coffee.

“Shit!” he yelled. “Shit, shit, shit!”

He ran back to the kitchen and grabbed a roll of paper towels. Ethel was going to be royally pissed at him. Frantically he thumped the coffee stains and discarded wad after wad of soggy brown towels. He’d used up half the roll when Ethel appeared in the doorway.

“What happened?” Then she saw the coffee mug lying on its side. “Oh, Len, you didn’t!”

“Yes, I did. Sorry, honey.”

“Don’t pound away at it. Go get the stain remover.”

She got on her knees beside him and removed the paper roll from his trembling hands. Len got to his feet and returned to the kitchen. She always kept the stain remover under the sink, didn’t she? He couldn’t remember.

What a start to another day, and it wasn’t even seven o’clock in the morning. The way things were going, he would turn on the TV to find out that Gore had won Florida and Ethel would have to buy another rug and the package would be returned with another rejection letter and –

And everything. Blinking back stupid tears, he began to rummage in the cabinet under the sink.

Why was Ethel so damn house proud? He brought her the stain remover and picked up his coffee cup, then retreated to the kitchen. He knew better than to hang around a pissed-off woman whose new rug had been ruined by her klutz of a husband.

He flipped on the tiny black-and-white T.V. on the counter. Neither Bush nor Gore had won yet; wouldn't you just know it? There hadn't been an election like this ever; that's what the local news at seven said. Totally unprecedented in American history. Oh, well, maybe not. When he switched to the *Today* show, Matt Lauer was interviewing some history professor who mentioned John Quincy Adams and Rutherford B. Hayes.

Fifteen long minutes later, Ethel came back into the kitchen. She gave him a disgusted look, then threw the sodden paper in the trashcan.

"They haven't got a winner yet," he said, just to keep from breaking out in apologies once again.

"Oh?" Her tone was icy. She turned on the tap and washed her hands. Then she dried them and applied hand cream. Every motion was jerky with suppressed – or was it repressed? – anger. Whatever, he just wanted to get away from her vicinity.

"I'm going to take my shower," he announced unnecessarily. He was too anxious to ask about the rug.

"Yeah. You go do that." As he turned away, she took down a coffee mug and started pouring her first cup of coffee.

*

UPS returned the package at eleven o'clock that morning. Len tottered from the front door back to the study, the entire length of the house, clutching the package to his chest like a refugee mother with a baby. Thank goodness Ethel had a house showing. He made a face, as he did every time he recalled that she had a job, even if he didn't any more. But today he was glad she was out of the house, away from whatever awfulness

awaited him. He fell into his reading chair, fumbled for glasses and scissors, then cut the head off the envelope. Out slid his baby. The doctor's report on that baby, laser-printed on Lois' fancy letterhead, fell to the floor. He could see it only contained three paragraphs.

Coffee; I need more coffee before I read it, he thought. He took his weight on his wrists and hoisted himself up from the depths of the chair. In the five minutes it took to rinse out the coffeepot and make a new batch, Len remembered every kind word and every put-down Lois had ever sent his way.

"Yoohoo, I'm home," Ethel called from the front door.

Len almost dropped the second mug of the day; as it was, some drops spilled on the counter. He shoved the pot back into the machine and fled to the study. Ethel must *not* see the letter and rejected manuscript. Quick, quick, where to hide it? He lifted the cushion of his chair and thrust the bulky rubber-banded pages underneath. Then he sat down heavily.

"What's with you and coffee today?" Ethel demanded. "You dribbled it all over the counter." She stood in the doorway, looking slightly different, but also still annoyed with him.

"Huh? Oh, you startled me when you came in."

"And you can't take a second to wipe up the mess?" She turned abruptly and went back to the kitchen but she could return any minute. Did he have enough time to find another hiding place? No, here she was again.

"You like my hair?" she asked.

He looked up at her. So that's what was different; her hair was lighter.

“I thought you were showing a house.”

“No, that’s tomorrow.” She assumed a pose like a pinup girl from their youth and fluffed her hair. “It’s called Champagne Ice. I got a new cut too.”

“Looks terrific.” All of a sudden he identified a problem. He had to piss, but he couldn’t get up because she’d see the manuscript. After all his snafus today, and last night, he didn’t want her to know. He still hadn’t read Lois’ letter.

“So what did you do this morning?” she asked.

“Oh, I dunno. This and that.” And I didn’t break anything, he added in his head.

“Anybody call?” She meant Joyce, her sister in Florida. Joyce called nearly every day, right before lunch. And sure enough, the cordless in the study rang. Len reached for it and handed it to Ethel.

“Hi, Joyce. No, nothing special; I changed my hairdo. Yeah, yeah. Same old thing.” A pause. Len wondered if he could get away with a quick bathroom dash. “No, he hasn’t heard anything yet.” Ethel covered the mouthpiece. “Joyce said to tell you not to worry about your book. At least you’ve got an agent.”

He snorted. Thanks a bunch, Joyce. If she weren’t so longwinded, if Ethel would only take the cordless and leave the study. His bladder exerted vicious pressure but he didn’t dare budge. Beneath him, he could hear the faint protest from 496 pages of typescript.

The sisters’ conversation rarely changed; he could recite Ethel’s side of it by heart. Except that today ditzy Joyce had a topic; she lived in a widow’s condo in Palm Beach and apparently had voted for a pregnant chad yesterday rather than a real candidate.

“Of course your vote got registered,” Ethel murmured soothingly. Len leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. The conversation wound on and on, but finally it wound down. Ethel said, “Love you too, Joyce,” and hung up.

Len sighed. “Tell me, who did Joyce vote for? The tree-hugger?”

“Of course not!” Ethel said indignantly. “She’s as much of a Republican as you are.”

“So why’d she go live in Palm Beach with all those liberals and –“

“Len!” Ethel’s mouth folded up in an expression he both hated and dreaded. It said she wasn’t going to take any more of his nonsense.

He closed his own mouth guiltily. This was definitely not his day. He knew that Ethel had adored Joyce’s Jewish husband, Sam Kaplan, who’d been large and funny and at ease with all his in-laws. In fact Len had liked Sam too; he’d also been mighty grateful to Sam for taking crazy Joyce off their hands twenty years ago. Despite the difference in their backgrounds – a New Orleans Catholic and a New York Jew, an old maid of forty and a widowed patriarch of fifty-two -- Sam and Joyce had seemed to enjoy a happy marriage for many years. But Sam had died of heart trouble two years ago and Joyce had promptly reverted to being the nut-basket she’d been at birth. At least in Len’s opinion.

Len knew he wasn’t really a bigot. Around Ethel, he never used offensive words for Jews or Italians, just like he never really cussed around her. That “shit” this morning had just tumbled out of him. As for blacks – well, African-Americans, now – Ethel had banned the N-word about the time Martin Luther King was killed. But he saw no reason not to call a spade a – oops! The mayor of New Orleans was black, Sam had been Jewish, and now that he thought about it, so was Lois. Lois Stern, of course.

Len closed his eyes. He felt disgusted with himself. So that was where this nasty little spurt of anti-Semitism had come from: Lois and her still-unread three paragraphs. Not good news.

His bladder responded to the word spurt as if it had been a command. He had to get Ethel out of the study. *Had* to, or else he'd go all over the chair.

"What's for lunch?" he asked.

She looked at him curiously. "I thought you'd tell me. It's your day to make lunch, isn't it?"

He cursed himself for ever agreeing to the new lunch arrangement when he'd retired. "Oh, God. Ethel, please, you get lunch today and I'll do it tomorrow."

"I'm going out to lunch tomorrow." She mentioned her clients, the Hoffmyers.

"Okay, okay, just get it today," he snapped. "I'll owe you double."

"Are you all right, Len?" She came up to his chair and placed a cool hand on his forehead. "You feel a little hot to me."

"Yeah, maybe I'm sick," he mumbled, shifting in his chair. The mass of paper under his ass crackled.

"What's that noise?" she said, suddenly alert.

He shook his head. "Noise?"

"Lenny? Is something wrong?" She peered at him with growing suspicion. Lord, the woman had antennas all over her champagne'd head when it came to him.

He tried for an innocent look. "Why should anything be wrong?"

"I don't know; you're acting funny."

“Funny?” This was going nowhere fast. “I’m hungry, is what,” he grumbled.
“And –” He seized on her diagnosis. “I think I’m coming down with something.”

“You poor darling.” She swooped and kissed his forehead. “I’ll make you a tuna salad sandwich and soup. You’ll feel better.”

“Sounds great,” he forced himself to say. And then, blessedly, she turned and left, clicking away in her high heels to the kitchen. It would take her at least ten minutes to fix lunch.

He groaned his way up from the armchair and lifted the cushion. A crumpled mess met his eyes. Glancing around the small room, he muttered, “Shit” again, twice. Why hadn’t he insisted on cupboards instead of the open shelves Ethel had wanted when they converted their grown daughter’s room into a study? He should have realized he’d eventually need to hide something from Ethel. Especially the sort of raunchy stuff he wrote.

“Lettuce or not?” she called.

Len jumped. It took him a moment to call back, “Not.”

Quick! He fumbled under the computer desk and picked up an empty box. Shoving the manuscript in, mutilated pages and all, he closed the cover and reset the box on the floor. Then, greatly relieved, he sought the bathroom for greater relief.

*

Later that afternoon, with Ethel napping and the answering machine between him and the world, he drew out his agent’s letter. It was worse than he’d thought:

Dear Len, (wrote Lois)

Please find enclosed the manuscript of Male Nymphomaniac. I'm sorry, but I've decided not to represent this work. I know writers are told to write about what they know, but I seriously doubt if the adulterous couplings of a bunch of 1960s Cadillac salesmen would be of interest in today's market. In addition, your work suffers from a lack of character motivation, blah, blah, blah.

He flung the letter to the floor. Then stooping with pain, he retrieved it. Something else had caught his eye, some horrible last paragraph.

In addition, I must decline to accept further manuscripts from you. I have tried to advise you through four works, but to no avail. Please don't send me anything more.

Sincerely, Lois N. Stern

Tears came to his eyes. Len scrubbed them away with an impatient gesture. He tried to call anger to his side: damn the bitch! She'd encouraged him and shot him down through four novels, good novels too: *Men into Beasts*, his World War II epic; *Sherman the Monster*, his Civil War novel; *Little Girl Lost*, his tale of a New Orleans prostitute in Storyville; and now *Male Nymphomaniac* had bit the dust.

What the hell was *wrong* with his writing? Lois – no, he wouldn't go there, wouldn't be anti-Semitic – the real problem with Lois was that she just didn't like male authors, at least authors as masculine as he was. She was probably a lesbian, that's what she was.

He thought about calling Lois up and threatening her, but he'd never threatened anybody except when he was a kid, and certainly never a woman. Crumpling the accursed piece of paper in his fist, he buried it deep within the wastebasket. Then he sat

rocking in his chair for about an hour, until Ethel came into the darkening study and asked why he hadn't put the light on.

*

It used to be so easy with Ethel back when he first met her. He remembered her clicking her way into the old Chevy dealership back in 1954, his first job after the army. Full skirts flirted with her calves, and she had on gloves and a hat.

"May I help you?" he'd intercepted her, almost running across the showroom floor.

"Come to see my sister," she'd murmured, indicating the boss's secretary sitting in her glassed-in enclosure.

"Joyce?" He remembered how his brain had frozen up. There was no comparing the two, lumpy Joyce and this slim vision of beauty.

Then Joyce saw her and came out and introduced them. Six months later he and Ethel were married; five years after that, they had a son and a daughter and Len had started work at Taylor Cadillac on Jefferson Highway. He'd done damn well there too.

For a long time, nothing really changed. They got older, their kids grew up. He'd stacked a tire or two around his middle, nothing too bad, but Ethel stayed as trim as ever. Her only change was that her tongue got a sharp tip to it, but he could usually jolly her out of that. At least until recently.

And now, if last night was any indication, she was hanging up her skates. Her swaying walk still taunted him and her quickness, but he, he had nothing to woo her with. And that was why he'd written all four novels, including *Male Nymphomaniac*, even

though she'd disapproved of the title. She'd never read it; her only comment had been, "Why do you write all this sex stuff? Why not a nice murder mystery?"

*

"Lord, it's dark in here. Len, what are you doing?"

He jumped in his chair, then blinked as Ethel turned on the light. "What on earth?" she said, taking in his red eyes.

Hastily he scrubbed his face. "I dunno; I've got a bug, I guess."

She came over and sat on the arm of his chair. Her hand felt the side of his neck. "No, you're cool. So what are you crying about?"

Well, he could say he wasn't crying, but that would lead to more of the same: I'm not, you are, I'm not, you are.

"I got rejected again," he said.

"Oh, honey." She shifted and fell into his lap, hugging him hard. This felt better, he decided, and gathered her close.

"But, Lenny, you've been rejected before. Why now. . .?" She stopped; something had clicked. He knew for a fact she was remembering last night, though she couldn't begin to understand it. *She* certainly didn't care all that much about sex *or* his writing.

"I see," she said finally.

"Do you? Really?" He prayed that she not put it in words, and thank God she didn't.

"Yeah," she said and hugged him again. "You poor thing."

"I wanted to surprise you with a bestseller," he confessed.

“You silly man,” she laughed. “I don’t care if you write a bestseller or not.”

“And – the other?”

“What other? Oh!” She blushed and for a moment looked terribly young. He slid his arms from her waist to her shoulders and tipped her toward him.

His mouth came down over hers. She struggled for a moment, then relaxed into the long, luxurious kiss. Harald the Viking felt the hot blood pounding in his veins, flooding his every part. He strove for control but the blonde beauty a-trembling in his arms inflamed his senses and he growled in her ear, “I must have you, Brigitta.” She whispered back, Yes, Harald, yes. . .

“Well, that’s enough of *that*,” Ethel said and gave him a last smacky kiss. She slipped off his lap and held out a hand to him. “Let’s go start dinner.”

“Glass of wine?” he asked once they were in the kitchen.

“Sure,” she said and started to peel carrots. Len took his time uncorking the bottle. He imagined Harald’s hands, broad and sprinkled with rust-gold hairs; a hand fit to wield a sword, soothe a horse, woo a maiden.

“Ethel, what do you think about romance?” he asked.

“Romance?” She sounded wary again.

“Yeah, romance novels.”

She thought for a moment. “Well, I don’t read them, but a lot of my friends do. It’s a big market. Lenny!”

She turned around and looked straight at him, so directly that he ducked his head. Suddenly she came over and gave him a hug, carrot peeler and all. Her small breasts fit neatly into his midsection.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea!” she said. Len relaxed. He got out two wine glasses and poured them each a tot. *Harald, old buddy, you’re going to see me through this one*, he toasted his new, just-imagined, best friend. *You’re going to teach me how to woo a woman.*

He couldn’t wait for tomorrow. While Ethel showed houses, he’d start novel number five: *For Love of a Viking*. And this one would be a winner.

THIRD CHILD

Every third child born in the world is Chinese.

Sylvia Bonet had read this somewhere, but she didn't have a third child. She'd barely managed to produce the twins, and their arrival in the world heralded the departure of her uterus. Louis and Clark were the only children she would ever have.

People unfamiliar with the Bonets wondered at their choice of names. It was very simple: Louis was named for Ray's father, Clark for Sylvia's. The combination might ring in the ear like a history lesson, but Ray and Sylvia didn't hold sophisticated views on naming. The boys had acquired the nicknames Buster and Bo in grade school and now only the IRS addressed them by their given names.

No, it wasn't her sons' names as such that bothered Sylvia. But the two childish names had begun to seem like a disappointing form of destiny; by age twenty-three, the twins had been kicked out of Vanderbilt and U.T., and now they were trying to get kicked out of the local community college as well. Practically every night Bo and Buster went out on the town and came home closer than not to dawn. Hadn't Sylvia heard them stumbling up the stairs at four-thirty this morning? They wouldn't surface until noon at the earliest.

She sighed and stared out the breakfast room window. Her husband Ray stood beside the vegetable patch, hose in hand, watering before the day got hot. Speaking of children, Ray resembled one with his cherubic face and wispy, light hair blown every which way. He even had a small pot belly, the kind babies lose once they start walking. Ray was a dear, good man, Sylvia thought. If only he didn't have to spend so much time

traveling around Tennessee selling textbooks. But it was summer now and Ray was off the road until mid-August.

Sylvia suddenly realized that her hair appointment was for nine o'clock that morning and it was already eight. She had to get a move on. But some lack of motion outside caught her eye; Ray stood motionless at the verge of his garden. He wasn't even waving the hose around.

She yanked up the window and yelled, "Ray, watch the water!" He jumped, then began to wave the hose up and down the beds. He didn't answer Sylvia, or even look at her. Thirty minutes later when she took off for the beauty salon, Ray was still standing there with the hose. Those plants are getting drowned because my husband's a zonked-out moron, Sylvia thought.

*

The Bibb lettuce had long ago vanished into spring salads, but now the replanted spot bristled with zucchini vines, flat parsley fronds, and staked pepper and tomato bushes. Ray turned off the hose when water began to seep into his shoes. Damn, he was an idiot! Why on earth had he been watering for nearly an hour?

He didn't have to ask himself what he'd been thinking about; the same thing he'd been thinking about for the past six weeks. Lately he'd avoided Sylvia, as if she could read his mind. He dreaded the conversation he would have to initiate before Monday. Today was now Saturday and his boss needed an answer in two days.

Ray stood for a moment watching the sun touch the speckled zucchini vines. Undulating light poured through the pin-oaks, twisting the garden roots into a startling

pattern that looked like heaving rattlesnakes. Sylvia refused to harvest the zucchini for fear of finding a real snake among those roots, so he always had to do it.

He scratched his head, thinking about Sylvia's odd squeamishness. He didn't like snakes either, especially poisonous ones, but there *were* no snakes in his garden. Sylvia was crazy. No, she had too much imagination, that's what it was. She was always coming up with worst-case scenarios about him and the twins, car wrecks, dreadful diseases, incipient alcoholism. . .

In Ray's opinion, those two boys were well on the road to being alcoholics. Bums, as well. At their age, he'd been a husband and father, a high school history teacher, and at twenty-five a homeowner. What did those worthless sons of his own? Nothing; just one old rattletrap car which they bummed around in pursuing beer and women.

He wound up the hose on its circular wire frame with quick decisive movements. Just so he'd wind up this period of waiting, of agonizing about the right decision. He'd take Sylvia out to dinner tonight and break the news to her.

Satisfied that he'd finally made up his mind after all those weeks, Ray wandered back inside and turned on the TV. He clicked to Nickelodeon and sat back to watch Saturday morning cartoons, one small vice of his that Sylvia did not suspect.

*

Sylvia had thought about highlighting. As she sank into the salon chair, she noticed that her neighbor in the next chair was Harriet Fort, her old classmate from childhood. *Oh, criminy*; with all her worries about the boys, and now Ray acting dopey, the last thing she wanted to see was Harriet's perfection. Slim, tall, rich, naturally

blonde, Harriet affronted Sylvia's mood more than usual this morning. She wasn't up to Junior League chitchat, though of course, both she and Harriet were over forty, so they couldn't be in the Junior League anymore.

"Hi, Sylvia," Harriet said, a bit glumly for her. Usually Harriet's smile gleamed as brightly as her hair.

"I haven't seen you in a month of Sundays, Harriet. Where have you been?"

"Oh, well, busy." Harriet focused on her image in the mirror and began to smooth the skin beneath her chin, which somehow seemed tauter than before. Facelift! Sylvia realized. Harriet had gotten a facelift; that's where she'd been.

"You look so well," she said meanly.

Harriet turned to her, pathetically eager. "You really think so? I look all right?"

"Yeah, your skin looks great. What's your moisturizer?" Actually, Harriet looked tired, with big circles under her eyes. But her tightened skin did seem to glow.

"Moisturizer?" Harriet's new forehead creased, as if she'd never heard the word. Sylvia grinned to herself. Sometimes her old schoolmate was several knives short of a steak set. A sharper woman would name some expensive concoction available to preferred customers at eighty-five dollars an ounce.

"Uh, Mary Kay," Harriet said.

"Why, I use Mary Kay too, but my skin sure doesn't look like yours," Sylvia babbled.

"Hmmm." Harriet massaged the skin beneath her ears.

If you don't stop tugging on the scars, you'll need *another* facelift, Sylvia thought. She had no idea why Harriet brought out the worst in her, but she always had.

Maybe it was Harriet's perfect life and three perfect children. In contrast to Bo and Buster who were very far from perfect.

"Well now, Mrs. Fort, what do you want done today?" Amanda Nugent, the salon owner, came bustling up to them. As Harriet explained her wishes, Sylvia once again realized how far down she herself stood in the pecking order. She had to wait for the next available beautician, and so had plenty of time to catch Harriet's beauty salon revelations.

Apparently things had gone awry in the Fort family's paradise. Harriet's husband was never home, leaving her to cope with seventeen-year-old Melissa.

"The answer's obvious; take her to Planned Parenthood," said the salon owner.

"I can't; I'm on the board there," Harriet wailed.

"Well, there's one down in Columbia."

"Hmmm," said Harriet. "That's a thought."

Sylvia averted her face, hoping Harriet had forgotten all about her. Thank goodness she didn't have a daughter with fertile insides! At least Buster and Bo couldn't get pregnant.

Sylvia's underling approached. The next few minutes, they discussed what Sylvia might do with her dark, rapidly-graying hair. Go dark, go light, whatever. By the time she'd decided on discreet highlights, Harriet and Amanda Nugent were onto sixteen-year-old Andrew Fort, who it seemed had a closet problem.

"They say it's all the mother's fault," Harriet muttered.

"Nonsense; people are born with it. My brother's the same way and always has been."

“That’s what Andrew says. I wish I could believe it.”

“Eyebrows?”

Sylvia jumped. “*What?*”

“Want your eyebrows done?” the underling asked. “They look a little ragged.”

“Yes. No. Oh, okay.” She had a feeling she’d already heard the juicy stuff; now Harriet was talking about her third child’s Ritalin prescription, which was old-hat.

Everybody knew Sammy Fort was hyperactive.

“Come in the back room,” the underling said. Sylvia left her chair without saying goodbye to Harriet and obediently followed the girl to the eyebrow-removal room. All the while thinking, thank God. If Bo and Buster screw around, it’s with *girls!* And they’re not even active, much less hyperactive!

*

Ray checked the VCR clock, then switched from cartoons to PBS. It was eleven-thirty; Sylvia should be home soon. On PBS he watched a documentary about abandoned babies, a hundred to one female, languishing in some rathole in inner China. “After six months to a year in this orphanage, these children lose fifty percent of their IQ,” the commentator droned.

Good Lord, Ray thought. The Chinese babies lay six to a crib in a grim, frigid warehouse. They only had thin blankets and the body heat they provided to warm one another. No caretakers bothered to cuddle them or play with them, and their food ration, three small bottles of formula a day, hovered just this side of starvation. Ray felt his eyes grow hot as he watched those sluggish babies, too malnourished to turn over or push up on their thin little arms. He recalled Bo and Buster at six months old; how their plump

baby muscles strained and stretched to raise the oversized heads, then to turn from stomach to back. How they pulled themselves along the carpet on sturdy little arms until the day it dawned on them that they could use their knees and then they were off and crawling. *Go, Buster; go, Bo*; he remembered cheering them on, rejoicing as they pulled up to a standing position and took the first big step into unknown, unsupported space. All his best memories followed: Little League, family campouts, Cub Scouts, living room tussles, earnest conversations he'd had with two brown-eyed eight-year-olds.

"Hi, honey, I'm home!" Sylvia called from the breakfast room. Ray hadn't heard her drive up. He dashed the shaming tears from his eyes and muted the TV.

"What are you watching?" she demanded from the doorway. Something about her seemed different; her hair, probably. He took one quick glance at her then turned back so she couldn't see his reddened eyes.

"A program about orphans in China. Bunch of little girls; apparently the Chinese all want boys." He pointed to the screen where the camera now panned the bleak expanse of baby cribs. "You know they're only allowed to have one child."

"Yeah," Sylvia said and patted her hair, which he saw because he snuck a look at her. She looked pretty, about ten years younger, and smug.

"Honestly, Sylvia, this is heartbreaking stuff! Those kids lose half their IQ in six months."

Sylvia crossed to the TV and turned it off by hand. "And it's my fault what happens in China?" she said with an edge to her voice.

“No, it’s not your fault, for God’s sake! I’m just –” Ray stopped. There was no way he could tell her how moved, how sad he felt about the Chinese babies. Sylvia would never understand.

“Hi, Mom, what’s for lunch?”

Bo galloped down the stairs, followed by Buster. Both looked like death warmed over, Ray thought. How had his fine, bumptious babies turned into these lazy good-for-nothings?

“Whatever leftovers you can find,” Sylvia said sharply. She left the den, but Bo and Buster fell on the sofa beside Ray. Buster grabbed the remote and got an ESPN Nascar race.

“Hey, Bus, I was watching something,” Ray protested.

“Oh, sorry, Dad.” But he didn’t give up the remote. Ray hoisted himself from the sofa and left the den. Behind him, Bo was saying, “Let’s go to Sally’s; she always has food.” Sally was Bo’s girlfriend, a twenty-six-year-old grad student at Vanderbilt. Two years ago she’d flunked both boys in English composition, then this past autumn turned around and started dating Bo. Ray thought she must be nuts.

“Sure, fine,” said Buster. The two of them lumbered through the kitchen, en route to their junk car.

“Later, Dad, Mom,” said Bo, for both of them. The door slammed, the car started up. Ray wondered if they were both getting it on with Sally-the-grad-student. Nothing was too strange for his alien sons.

Sylvia pulled a package of store-bought lettuce out of the refrigerator and set it on the counter. Then she abstracted a tomato, a cucumber, and a container of mushrooms. It

was obvious she was contemplating a salad lunch. Unfortunately, by June their salad veggies from the garden had either expired or were unripe.

“So, Ray, why were you crying at the TV?” she asked.

“Crying? I wasn’t crying.” Only under serious torture would Ray confess to a moment of tears.

“I saw you; your eyes were red. They still are.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” he burst out.

Sylvia frowned and pulled her mouth into a dry rosebud. He knew her so well, had known her so well for the past twenty-four years. Her Presbyterian soul hated his occasional Catholic lapse into blasphemy. Her face reminded him that her God wasn’t exactly his God. Shit, they even called that commandment of the ten by different numbers. Four for her; three for him: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.”

For a second, the gaps, the ruined bridges of his marriage yawned before him. He didn’t know how he’d ever had the courage to cross religion, gender, and childhood all those years ago in pursuit of her. Maybe his dick had crossed the bridges, but his spirit remained on *his* side of the chasm.

“Sylvia, I’ve got to talk to you,” he said.

“About Chinese orphans?” she said. He detected a jeering note in her voice which set his teeth on edge.

“*No*. About my job.”

She spun around, her salad chopping half-finished. “What about your job?” she asked, and now the tentative fear in her voice reunited him with the Sylvia he loved and had vowed to protect in that Presbyterian wedding so long ago.

She was staring at him. “What about your job?” she repeated.

He sighed and sat down at the breakfast table. “They want to move me to Atlanta.”

“Atlanta? But, my G – my goodness, our whole *life* is here. In Nashville.”

He watched her abandon the salad and sit heavily opposite him. Sylvia was not heavy, nor old, but now her movements were those of an ancient, lumpy woman. She ran her hand through her coiffed hair, destroying whatever shape the hairdresser had given to it.

“What about the boys?” she asked.

This reply he had planned. To his mind, their absence from the twins’ lives would have only good repercussions.

“They’re twenty-three years old. It’s time for them to be on their own.”

“*Oh, my God, they’re not ready to be on their own!*” she screamed. She stood up suddenly, overbalancing her kitchen chair. It fell to the floor with a crash.

“Sylvia! Yes they are!”

He could tell she had started to cry. She fumbled for the chair’s back and set it upright. Then she sank into it and buried her face in her hands.

“Honey,” he said. No answer except her sobs. He let her cry for a time, then said, “Syl, if I don’t take the offer, I’m out of a job.”

“So?” she said and faced him.

“What the fuck do you mean, so?”

Her wet eyes blinked open but Ray realized that only the ugly words she'd banned forever in their house would get through to her. Leaning forward across the table, he stared her down. The hell with her prim little domain; he wanted her loyalty, to him above all.

“Okay, here's the deal. Either I take the job in Atlanta, at a higher salary I might add, or I quit the company. Is that what you want? You want me to get a job greeting people at Walmart?”

“The alternative,” she whispered.

“We sell this house and go to Atlanta –“

“And leave the twins and my father and our home and my church. Ray, I couldn't!”

My church as well, he thought. But Sylvia, a born-and-bred Bible Belter, had never thought *his* church worthy of importance. How ignorant she was, in so many ways. He suddenly wished she would decide against the move and force a separation. He decided to touch on a touchy subject.

“High time those boys of ours have to fend for themselves!”

“Ray! They're your sons – our sons! We can't just abandon them.”

“They're twenty-three years old.” He closed his mouth, hoping she would remember what he and she were doing at twenty-three. Being parents, searching for a house to buy. But she didn't. All she could think about was Bo and Buster abandoned to cruel landlords and the vagaries of fast food joints. But those bums should be, must be abandoned, if they weren't to turn out rotten!

“You want to move,” Sylvia said. Her hands threaded through her streaked hair as if seeking some comfort button to push. Finding none, she dropped her hands to the table’s surface. She finally looked at him.

“Honey, I don’t want to uproot you,” he said. He captured her wayward hand in his. “But what can I do if my job here no longer exists?”

“Get another job. There are plenty of textbook companies operating out of Tennessee.”

“It’s not that easy. All the companies are consolidating.”

To his surprise, she threw off his hand and stood up. “Okay, Ray, do what you have to do. I’ll go along with you.”

He rose and reached for her. “Sylvia, honey – I can’t even imagine how hard this is for you. Really –“

She tugged out of his grip. Her expression was venomous. “No, you can’t imagine, can you? Then don’t imagine! Let me worry about the boys and my father and what the HELL I’ll do down there in Atlanta without any friends or anybody –“

“Except me—“

“Right! Without anybody except you!”

“And I’m not enough for you?”

This was the ruined bridge they’d never crossed, but she crossed it now.

“You were never enough for me!” she shrieked. Then she took herself upstairs to lock the bedroom door and do whatever she needed to do. Cry, call her father or his sister, decide to kick him out or not.

*

At six o'clock she emerged. By three o'clock, Ray had structured his new life in Atlanta. He would buy a modest condo, send Sylvia enough to live on (though not in the family home, which would have to be sold), and boot his idle sons out into the cold world. He would also start dating again, and as soon as he found a warmhearted woman to marry, he would suggest that they (he and this imaginary she) adopt a Chinese baby girl. Even with alimony payments to Sylvia, he knew he could afford the baby a better life than he'd seen on TV. And the wonderful woman of his daydream would cuddle and feed and carry on about the infant as Sylvia used to do with Bo and Buster. The Chinese child would grow up loved, nourished, and productive. She would always love her father.

Ray took himself off for a nap in the guestroom which also had a lock on its door.

*

Two hours later Sylvia knocked on the guestroom door. It was probably the first time any door in the house had ever been locked against her, Ray thought as he groggily came awake.

"It's me," she said in a low, quiet voice.

"Yeah, right. Go away; leave me alone," he retorted.

"But, Ray, I have to talk to you. Please open up."

She sounded sane at least, so he got up off the bed and moved toward the door.

"What do you want?" he demanded though he knew it was a rude thing to say.

Apparently she was being conciliatory.

"I can't talk until I see you," she said. Ray backed away from the door.

"Then I can't talk," he said.

A small silence developed. Finally he heard Sylvia sigh. Or was it a sob? He couldn't be sure; their house had very impressive, solid-wood doors.

"Syl?" he said after a minute of choking sounds.

"Sorry, I can't talk. I'm too –"

He turned the key in the lock and flung the door open. Sylvia stood bowed over, her face to the floor, sobbing her heart out, but silently.

"Oh, honey," Ray said and drew her into the room.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, my God, I'm sorry! How could I ever think of leaving you?"

"Ssssh. Quieten down."

He sat them both on the bed and cradled her. "I hate the thought of leaving you too," he said, stroking her highlighted hair. Though awhile ago, he hadn't hated it *that* much. Still, Sylvia was Sylvia, his oldest and dearest friend, his wife and lover for a quarter of a century. He couldn't just throw her out of his life.

But did he want her in his life anymore? That indeed was the question; whether he'd rather have a needy Chinese baby to raise than Sylvia.

Who would never be raised.

WOMEN

LEAPING HARES AND ANGELS

“Which one do you like best?” my daughter Ruth asks.

“That one.” I point to a large canvas, six feet by four. It’s a quirky Annunciation scene entitled “Mary’s Answer.” The canvas overflows with deep red merging to rust, sky-blue to aqua-green, and white shading into faintest gold; color has always been Ruth’s forte. Slightly off center to the left an enormous pair of wings arise, attached to bony, angelic shoulder blades. The angel’s head is supported by a too-slender neck; its long upper arms are spindly, almost skeletal.

The angel sits suspended in the near-middle of the scene. In contrast to its white passivity, the Mary figure is all motion; she stands to the right leaning forward, index finger in the angel’s face. Mary is coffee-colored, as bony as the angel, and apparently in a state of fury. She is dressed in the traditional blue which shades to green in the folds of her gown, but there is nothing traditional about her stance, her wild dark head of hair, or her answer. At her feet lies a round ball of purple something. To the angel’s left, Ruth has added a profiled jackrabbit leaping away from the scene. The painting’s background swirls with agitation: deeper gold and rust.

I am impressed. Familiar as I am with the theme in art history, I have never seen an Annunciation where Gabriel has his back to the audience, nor one with such a take-charge Mary.

The well-dressed couple standing before Ruth’s painting also seems impressed. I turn to my daughter and grin. “You may have a sale. Get over there and hustle.”

She gives me an art student's weary look. "Oh, Mom, this show's not like that. We're not supposed to hustle the patrons."

Patrons. My goodness, are we back in the Renaissance?

Around us the vast hall of San Francisco's Fort Mason Center hums as students and guests intermingle. This annual show is a big event; every May, MFAs from the Art Institute display and sell the works which earned them their degrees. It is held on a Friday night, followed by the Saturday graduation, which is why I flew from Louisiana to San Francisco yesterday. Ruth gets her MFA tomorrow.

Her boyfriend Sam saunters up with three glasses of white wine in hand. He probably stood in line for the whole half-hour it took Ruth and me to make the tour of the exhibition. I sip the wine and discover a good grade of California Chardonnay. "Mm, thanks, Sam," I say. He's such a great guy and I'm happy for Ruth.

He smiles at me then turns to her. "Any takers?"

"Not yet." She gestures to the couple still standing in front of her painting.

Sam and I exchange a glance. He agrees with me, go over there and hustle, but we both know Ruth is not going to. Her contempt for people who buy a painting to match their sofa is notorious.

The couple turns to us. For some reason, they pick Ruth out as the artist in our group. Maybe it's her sixties retro look: long Indian cotton gown, paisley shawl, sandals and dangling earrings, the hair in a negligent pile on her head. They can't see her unshaven armpits and legs, for which I'm glad. I'm also glad she's bothered to wear makeup.

"Is this yours, this Annunciation?" the woman asks.

“Yes,” Ruth says. “Everything from that geometric study over there to the dead pelican is mine.”

I avert my eyes as they look at the dead pelican. Last semester, it featured prominently in her installation project, of which I’d only seen photos. Then it lay in a glossy, acrylic pond surrounded by moss, sent Fed Ex by me, and grass clippings. The point was pollution in Louisiana. Now the pelican hangs on the wall looking very papier-mache’, very dead. Ruth has put a \$250 price tag on it.

“Tell me about this picture.” The woman indicates “Mary’s Answer.” Ruth has trained me out of saying ‘picture’. One should call her works ‘paintings,’ accent on the ‘t.’

She steps up to them and begins to explain. “The angel’s just announced to Mary, ‘Hey, you’re going to have the baby Jesus.’ I pictured Mary bawling him out. You see her finger pointing at him; she’s saying, ‘No way, Jose.’ I mean, what would you say if some angel drops in on you and says, ‘You’re going to have a baby, but he’s going to get crucified and break your heart’?”

“Oh,” the woman says. I can tell she’s taken aback by Ruth’s vehemence. In fact, I wonder where that comes from myself, but I think I know.

“What’s this?” The woman points to the round, purplish object at Mary’s feet.

“She’s been winding a ball of wool and dropped it when she jumped up. It represents her uterus, which stays by her feet. It doesn’t roll toward the angel.”

“And the rabbit over here?” the man asks. He touches the leaping animal figure. Ruth, I know, is tempted to tell him to keep his greasy fingers off her work.

“That’s a hare. It represents life, fertility.”

“Yeah, Easter bunnies,” he says and chuckles. I hold my breath, praying Ruth doesn’t blow up at him.

“Why is Mary a black woman?” the woman asks. Her finger traces the long line of Mary’s dress, a bare inch from the canvas.

Ruth shrugs. “Why not?” She turns away from them and rejoins us. Behind her, they confer for a moment then move on.

“Ruthie, for Christ’s sake,” Sam whispers. I hold my tongue; this is dangerous territory, Ruth’s vision.

“Yeah, but really, why shouldn’t Mary be black?” She gives us a defiant look.

Sam wisely says nothing. I jump in. “It’s a wonderful painting, honey. It tickles me to think of Mary bawling out the angel.”

She gives me a grudging smile. “Me too.”

I look around at her other work and the theme of her show suddenly dawns on me. The ogival wooden triptych, four feet tall and six feet wide portrays iconic female figures: Princess Leia, Wonder Woman, and, in the middle, again Mary. This time a miniature silver pistol dangles from her praying fingers, to ward off encroaching angels, I suppose. Farther down the wall, ten lines of pigs-in-profile, eighteen pigs across each line, dance on rough plywood. Ruth has also included a sample of her latest series: freshly washed cows hanging from a clothesline. There’s a cheerfulness to these mythical beasts and people, aside from the dead pelican and the pistol-packing Mary, that warms my heart, and even the two Marys show my daughter’s odd sense of humor.

Looking at her artwork, I recall an incident from Ruth’s childhood; a small thing perhaps, but I remember it vividly, and my dilemma at the time.

*

Ruth was seven, Susannah was four, and Lisa only two that day. It was a Saturday morning and we were all congregated in the closet we called a study. Ruth was drawing, Susannah was patting a bobby pin into the electric pencil sharpener, and Lisa was zooming her toy cars around the bare floorboards. All stuff they usually did, though I tried to discourage the pencil sharpener business. My husband and I were having our second cup of coffee.

“Hey, Mama!” Ruth looked up at me. Worry creased her long face, the image of her father’s bone structure. “Sandy said there’s no Santa Claus. And Daddy puts his penis into your vagina to start a baby.”

For a second I regretted telling her the right words and I stalled. “Just where did Sandy hear all this?” I finally said.

“Her mama told her.”

Lisa picked that moment to run over my bare toes with her toy car. “Ouch, Lisa, stop it!” I yelped.

She rolled the car back and aimed at her father’s narrow feet beneath the desk. “Watch out!” he said and pulled his feet away.

I crossed glances with him. Delay would be fatal, we both knew, and we silently decided which issue, Santa Claus or sex, to address. He tipped his head to me.

Damn him, I thought. And damn Sandy’s truth-telling mother as well. Aloud, as casually as I could, I said, “Sandy’s mother is right. The daddy’s penis goes into the mama’s vagina to make a baby.”

Ruth jumped to her feet. Disgust bloomed on her face. “Pew-ee! You had to do that *three times* to get us?”

My husband sighed. I think I knew right then that the marriage wouldn’t last. It should have been a quasi-romantic moment; we should have been amused, thinking of all that Ruth’s question left out. We should have been thinking together, “Someday you’ll know the rest of it.”

Ruth sensed something. She turned to her father and touched his shoulders with nervous fingers. “Daddy, tell me, did you?”

“Yes, honey, we had to do that three times,” he admitted. More like nine hundred times at that stage of our marriage. Why did he sound so resigned?

I was too scared back then to form the question. Sex had always been a touchy issue for him, and consequently for me. I first realized this when Ruth was three and walked in on her father urinating.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing to the waterfall a foot from her forehead.

“My penis,” he said through gritted teeth. From the doorway, I could see his face turn a dull rose, almost the color of his penis. But all the parenting books said be open with your children, and so we had vowed to be, if it killed us.

“I don’t like that penis,” said Ruth. “It’s raining.”

“Great, fine. Get that child out of here,” my husband muttered to me. The bathroom door had stayed firmly shut after that. Ruth sensed our ambivalence; these weren’t everyday words like peanut butter and jelly. From three to seven years old, she’d never brought the topic up. I’d begun to think she never would, until that Saturday in the

study. There was never any question as to which issue we addressed. She would one day have sex, but as to Santa Claus – well, we answered the question we thought appropriate.

All through their childhood, I worried that our marital problems would rub off on the children. Talking about sex became a minefield, a fact Susannah, my middle daughter, pointed out to me on the day she first got her period. Naturally I talked to my daughters at this juncture, a lecture they (and I) came to call The Speech.

Susannah sat docilely through The Speech and its peroration, “Do you want to know any more about sex?” Then she shifted in her chair and said, “Yeah, but you don’t want to tell me.”

I knew then my reluctance. How could I go on about the joys of sex when I was being, oh so slowly, rejected? Even as far back as Ruth’s question that day in the study, I had been reluctant to discuss it with my children.

The marriage limped its way to a sad closure, and then my ex-husband was off to – whatever he went to. The odd thing was, after years of rejection, I felt very little loss. Sex as such, this goes in there, was meaningless to me without a person to love, and I doubted if I ever would let another person close enough for anything to go in anywhere. My main worry was that our long goodbyes might have cast a blight on our children’s future love lives.

*

We never did discuss Santa Claus that day in the study many years ago. Ruth learned the truth on her own and accepted it without tears. She also learned about sex from her own experience. She stumbled a bit but eventually she found Sam and the two

of them appear delighted with each other. If I sometimes think it's time for them to get married after four years of living together, I'm careful not to say so.

But now, looking around at her myth-soaked paintings in the Fort Mason Center, I realize that the unsaid affected Ruth as much as what was said. We made the right choice back there in the study. We left her free to believe in Santa Claus and all his joyous successors which appear in her paintings. Our reticence gave birth to dancing pigs and laundered cows, to dead pelicans and Wonder Woman surging from her background, to leaping hares and skeletal angels and nay-saying Annunciations.

LOUISIANA TERRITORY

Two days before Celeste Bergen left New Orleans, her ex-husband Larry called her. The phone had been ringing off the hook all day: old friends, school and library friends, the accursed Visa people whom Celeste was about to pay off in one lump sum. She'd been sitting at the computer, deep into her budget, when the phone rang again. The answering machine picked it up.

"Celeste, I know you're there," Larry's tenor voice said. "Pick up the phone. Please."

"What do you want now, you bastard?" she muttered. Her fingers clicked in another line of figures, then she lifted the receiver.

"Yeah, Larry?"

"Lou told me you're leaving day after tomorrow. Can I come over tomorrow night?"

"What for?" she asked.

"Just to wish you bon voyage. Say around eight?"

Of course, Larry and whats-her-name, his twentyish girlfriend, had to have dinner first. "Sure, fine," Celeste said and hung up on him. It took her a minute to return to the computer. The backyard glittered outside her study windows in the sudden sunshine after an afternoon rain. Celeste sighed. She would miss this place.

She would miss more than that. In the past three years, Celeste had been forced to give up her husband to a mid-life crisis, her home to its aftermath, her two older children

to adulthood, and now this rented space to Lou, her college age daughter, and Lou's friend Nikki. The two of them were moving in today. In two days, she was leaving for a year.

Celeste returned to the computer and tried to concentrate on applying the Quicken program to her budget. She worked for half an hour, until Lou staggered into the study carrying a three-by-three cardboard box.

"God, these books!" Lou dropped the box right behind Celeste's chair, the only floor space left. Lou had almost as many books as Celeste did and her boxes littered the study floor.

"Hey, Mom, there's a note on your car," Lou said between heavy breaths. "I think it's from the neighbors."

Celeste turned her head. She couldn't turn her chair, thanks to Lou's boxes. "Did you get the note for me?"

Lou lifted her t-shirt and wiped sweat from her face. "Nope, it was addressed to you," she said and walked out the door.

Damn. Lou was gone before Celeste could tell her that the bookcase in the study was full. She wasn't about to move all her books to make room for Lou's. And now she had to get up, jump over Lou's boxes, and retrieve this stupid note.

Out in the kitchen, Celeste could hear Nikki rearranging the shelves. The two girls were wildly domestic. They owned pricey skillets, a timed coffeemaker, a fiercer Cuisinart than Celeste's ten-year-old model, a fancy espresso machine, and a butcher's meat slicer, wicked as a guillotine. Lou had shed blood and required stitches on Celeste's health insurance, using that machine.

Celeste swiveled sideways, got to her feet, and broad-jumped over the boxes. She felt like hitting somebody, for preference Larry – or Lou. Sometimes her family’s thoughtlessness drove her nuts.

“Good thing I’m getting out of town,” she said to herself. “I couldn’t live in all this clutter.” Among other things she couldn’t live with.

Lou and Nikki were doing her a favor, she reminded herself. She couldn’t afford to keep the apartment unless Lou and her buddy moved in. Plus, for a year’s absence, the time it would take her to get her library degree, it wasn’t worth the trouble to store her fragile antiques. But then – her resentment kicked in – she was doing Lou and Nikki a favor too, letting them move in here, a much nicer place than the hovel they’d been renting. Skirting a maze of boxes in the dining and living rooms, she went to collect the note on her car.

*

Celeste’s Carrollton Avenue apartment was on the slight rise known as the Carrollton Ridge. During the May flood, three years ago, eighteen inches of rain had poured off the Ridge and sluiced into the lower, perpendicular streets. “The flood of a millennium,” announced the *Times-Picayune*, which ran a front-page photograph of a drowned man washed onto a front porch down on Banks Street, off of Carrollton. Beside the sheeted corpse an ancient black man sat smoking a cigarette, waiting for the rescue squad.

At the time, she and Larry had owned a home on the corner of one of those streets off the Ridge. They lost two cars – one an old junker nobody cried about – as well as their basement workshop, some irreplaceable family photos, and a second refrigerator.

They nearly lost their dog, which was trapped in the basement when the waters rose. So the threat of flooding terrified Celeste. After the flood receded Larry took the FEMA money and left. Celeste had sold the house and rented on the highest ground she could find: the Carrollton Ridge.

Even so, her apartment building was on the lower, more vulnerable side of the avenue. She was entitled to a small parking space in front of the building, out of the street, provided she didn't block the neighbor's driveway on the left. She never did.

*

The note on her car was crudely printed in BIC pen on a paper napkin. It read:

To 2943 S. Carrollton:

We are KIND enough to let you USE our driveway. Please have enough respect to park your car so we can get out. Fact is you DON'T HAVE a driveway. If you have a problem with this, take it up with your land lord.

Or park on the street. If this continues, we'll make sure you can't get out.

-- 2945 S. Carrollton

Her first thought clamped down on tears: where the hell are you, Larry, when I need you? Her second thought was snide; r-e-s-p-e-c-t. There's even a song to help you learn to spell it. Her third thought was also snide: landlord, one word. What morons!

She fought down a wave of panic as she stumbled onto her porch. Larry was long gone; he didn't care how threatened she felt. She sank into one of the white rocking chairs, another memento of the house she and Larry had once owned, and reread the note. "We'll make sure you can't get out" was definitely a threat. "Or park on the street" – she

would never park on the street again. Not when floods came sweeping through, washing away everything in their path.

She jumped to her feet and glared at the scarred Camry parked in the neighbor's drive. She hated that car, hated its disgusting color, like pumpkin pie left too long in the refrigerator after Thanksgiving. It still boasted dusty Alabama plates after six months in New Orleans. The scruffy car matched its owners: a pudgy guy in skinhead shave, who was ill-advised to wear sleeveless black t-shirts with his fat upper arms, and an anorexic, redheaded girl. They'd refused to learn the give-and-take of city parking. No matter how politely she'd asked them to move their car further into the driveway, they'd continued to park on the sidewalk.

She squashed the napkin in her hand. Damn it, she paid for her parking space. Nobody, especially not those idiots who'd never heard of Aretha, could make her give up another square inch of territory. She'd given up enough.

Back in the living room, Lou and Nikki were taking down her paintings.

"Louise! What are you doing?" Celeste demanded.

Lou turned and showed Celeste her favorite painting. "Nikki doesn't like this."

"But your sister painted it."

Lou shrugged and looked uncomfortable. "It's too dark, Nikki says."

Celeste looked at Nikki. For a second, this was the person she wanted to hit, the curly-haired Hispanic girl who was her daughter's lover.

Nikki ducked her head. "I'm sorry," she said. "I think it's kind of creepy."

Celeste bit her lip. If the two of them were going to live here – doing her a favor, she recalled – she would have to accept their decorating decisions. Not to mention the other decisions, the lifestyle ones she didn't want to think about.

“So what's in the note?” Lou asked.

Celeste held it out. Lou read it, whistled, and passed it on to Nikki.

“Want us to beat them up?” said Lou. Celeste rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, we could slash their tires too,” said Nikki.

“How about raw eggs and honey on the windshield?” Both girls giggled at Lou's suggestion.

“Or spray the car red. It's so ugly.”

“Lou!” Celeste said sharply. “I didn't raise you to take petty revenge.” I didn't raise you to be a lesbian either, but that's neither here nor there; no wonder after your father left, you don't trust men.

“Ok, Mom, here's what you do,” Lou broke into Celeste's thoughts. “Write them back and tell them they don't own the sidewalk and beyond. That's city property.”

It sounded reasonable. Lou was an urban planning major; she probably knew what she was talking about. Still, it wouldn't hurt to get confirmation from Angus, her lawyer, and Paul, a city architect.

Angus assured her she had a right to street access. “But be careful, Celeste,” he added. “It sounds like a threat to me. Deal with them through your landlord.”

But she was leaving town in thirty-six hours. She didn't have time to go through the landlord. Nor did she want to leave Lou (and Nikki, of course) with a parking feud on their hands. She called Paul and got the same verdict; sidewalks and driveways

sloping down to the street belonged to the city. She was free to write the letter she'd been composing in her head for the past hour.

Her letter, laser-printed on a good grade of computer paper, ran thus:

To the tenants of 2945 South Carrollton Avenue:

I am sorry if my parking situation has inconvenienced you. However, as a tenant in this building, I have the right to park in the designated space in front of my apartment. As long as I stay within the property line of 2941-2943 South Carrollton, I am allowed to park there, according to my landlord. It is unfortunate that the properties are so close together. This is a fact of urban life we all have to deal with. Legally, no cars should block sidewalk access. I have this information from a lawyer and a city architect. My car never blocks the sidewalk, since my assigned parking space is deep enough and my Honda small enough to give me adequate room. In addition, both sources I consulted led me to believe that street access beyond the sidewalk is city property. When I leave by car, I find it much safer to utilize the incline which leads to "your" driveway rather than backing out into traffic. The few seconds it takes me to pull out need not inconvenience you. Obviously, if we were pulling out at the same time, I would let you go first. Let's not escalate this situation further. Please accept my apology for the inconvenience.

-- 2943 South Carrollton

She ripped the page from the printer and hurried outside to deposit it before her nerve gave way. For once in her life she would fight for her territory. She spent the rest of the evening packing and set her alarm for six the next morning.

*

Lou caught her in the driveway the next morning.

“Mom, *what* are you doing?” she called softly from the porch. “Come back inside.”

Celeste started guiltily off her knees and crammed the tape measure into her pocket. Once she reached the porch, Lou dragged her inside.

“You know the neighbors were out on their porch watching you.”

Celeste shrugged. “So what? Their car is six inches into the sidewalk. I’m going to call the police.”

“Mom, that’s bullshit. The cops will say, yeah, lady, there’s people getting murdered right in your neighborhood and you’re calling about six inches.”

Put like that it sounded funny, but Celeste was not amused. “Lou, they’re deliberately provoking me. I’m calling the cops.”

She started toward the phone but Lou grabbed her arm and swung her around. “Don’t you dare!” she yelled. “Nikki and I have to live next door to them. Don’t screw us up.”

For a second Lou, who resembled her, looked just like Larry in his most stubborn mood. And where did Lou’s anger come from? Then it hit her: Lou had territory too, her life with Nikki. She would fight to protect it.

Celeste fell to the couch and slumped down against the cushions. It suddenly dawned on her that nobody in the world wanted to protect her, not Larry, not her children, not anybody. Even Lou, her premature baby, was all grown up and committed to Nikki's comfort. Her mom was just her mom.

Why had she never seen it? All these years she'd felt privileged to raise Lou. She'd almost had to give her up at birth, with the hyaline membrane scare which had lasted only twelve hours. A great reprieve at the time, but now Lou was giving *her* up, in favor of Nikki.

"Mom?"

Celeste came back from the pediatrics ward of twenty years ago. "Yeah?" she said wearily.

"Mom, why the hell were you out there at six o'clock in the morning? That's crazy."

"I just wanted to protect your parking space."

"Oh, Christ, you're being a baby. Give me the tape measure." Lou held out her hand and Celeste glared at her. Now Lou was the one she wanted to hit.

"I've had enough of this," she said and stood up. She marched back three rooms to the kitchen, trailed by her daughter. Lou hovered by the door as she measured coffee and water. She started the Mr. Coffee machine and turned back to her daughter. Maybe they could have it out right now.

Lou yawned. "Mom, the tape measure. Give it to me *now*. I've got to go back to bed."

With Nikki. How could Celeste stand it? She pulled the red plastic tape from her breast-pocket and crushed it into Lou's hand. Then she turned to the sink: *all right, you two deal with those bozos.*

"Mom?" Lou sounded worried behind her back.

"Hmm?"

"Don't you think you're over-reacting? Why is this parking shit so important to you?"

Celeste grabbed the counter for a moment then turned to her daughter. Lou's blue-gray eyes stared back at her. How lovely, how familiar. How gone from her now. The red tape measure snaked from the pocket of Lou's work shirt. If she grabbed it –

"This is ridiculous." Lou covered her shirt pocket and stepped toward the kitchen door. "Look, Mom, I'm going back to bed. Six is too early for me."

"Lou, I can't explain –"

"Fine. When you can, let me know. Otherwise, I think you're just nuts."

She watched Lou leave the kitchen and go through the breakfast room. At the center of the dining room, Lou would turn left then right, en route to her bedroom with Nikki. Celeste could no longer see her at that point, but she followed her every step of the way until she reached the bed. Then she truly couldn't see her. She turned back to the coffee pot and poured the first caffeine slug of her day.

FEET OF CLAY

In fall of the year 2000, halfway through English graduate school, Amanda Boudreaux gained an unexpected bit of education in a burst of gunfire. After the hoopla died down, as her right arm healed and she was no longer reduced to a wobbly lefthanded scrawl, she realized that she didn't like human beings very much.

People had been good to Amanda for the past twenty-nine years of her life. Her parents had presented no more problem than most and considerably fewer intrusions than some. Her boyfriend Eric's parents, for one (or two, to be precise).

Amanda had learned the virtue of being precise on her own body. Her shot-up arm kept hitting door handles and appliances and she felt it even through the plaster cast; pain springing on her like the proverbial beast in the jungle. She learned to pivot in a world of objects, to pour her coffee and cook her dinner with her left hand and arm. Halfway through graduate school Amanda had taught herself the daily lesson, how to avoid pain.

Eric had been more than kind during her convalescence. Early days, he had stood between her and the press, between her and other people. He screened calls, he dodged his own work to keep her company, he had even set up a website for her – Amanda dot hero dot com – so her email wasn't clogged with messages.

By the time Amanda had been home two weeks, the site had registered over two hundred hits. It seemed that everybody loved a heroine, or a H-E-R-O-I-N, as some of the emailers called her, which was precisely why Amanda had rejected the female term.

Ninety-eight percent of her hits praised her quick response to the college freshman who had attacked her with a Smith and Wesson .38 special. The remaining two percent showed spelling and authority issues. As one correspondent put it: “Takes an English teacher to kill with a fucking dishonary.” In fact, it hadn’t been a dictionary at all. She had dropped Adam Naismith, her murderous student, with a seven-pound copy of *Bartlett’s Quotations*.

Eric, her good guy, could not screen Amanda’s mind, which was a shame because something in there badly needed filtering out. Every time she remembered a literary allusion, she shuddered. She loved literature and she used to love teaching, back before she started hating people. Now she felt her career plans going badly awry; you can’t teach if the mere act of entering a classroom could send you spiraling down the toilet.

She lied to her mother in New Orleans, her sister in Phoenix, and Eric’s inquisitive parents in Cleveland, while deploring their tendency to hover via phone or email. And she brushed off their unwanted advice with a series of platitudes:

“I’m fine. I’m getting better.”

“I don’t need to see a psychiatrist. All I need is time.”

“I’m going back to work next week. No, my arm doesn’t hurt too much.”

And then she gave both families black marks for believing her. Let them try living with a shattered right ulna pieced together with a rod. Only Eric escaped her ban on people. He didn’t hover; he bore her moods with a classy blend of patience and nonchalance, and never tried to bully her into “seeking help.” Eric seemed to understand that no magic psychology wand could wave away her memories.

But it was a shame and not fair to Eric that she still shrank from his touch. They had made love precisely once since she emerged from the hospital, very gentle love like two convalescents. Amanda hadn't enjoyed it. She couldn't bear the sight of Eric's blank, orgasmic eyes, so like the eyes of the late Adam Naismith, student and murderer. The tight, painful body she found herself in, this side of Adam's death, denied her all satisfaction. She wasn't sure if Eric realized she had ditched sex along with people, at least for a while. Until she got back to normal.

What was normal? asked jesting Amanda, and would not stay for an answer. Normal was not twelve to sixteen hours on the sofa, remote in hand (left, of course), letting daytime hype drown out the sound of doors crashing open and guns spewing fire. Normal was certainly not doubling up on Percoset to court sleep.

Eric's patience finally broke four weeks after the attack. He had come home at five o'clock on a rainy Wednesday in late October to find Amanda propped up in the exact place he'd left her that morning. The only change was on TV, CNN substituted for the *Today* show.

"How the hell long are you going to hibernate here?" he demanded.

"The English Department gave me medical leave for as long as I want," Amanda said.

"Yeah, and you're certainly taking it. Look at you; you haven't gotten out of your nightgown all day. It's not like you have the flu."

Amanda looked down at her ratty, coffee-stained gown. Her hair smelled too; she caught a whiff of it as she turned her head. Eric was right. She ought to make more effort. Only –

“Eric? I’m scared to drive with this cast.”

It was a lame excuse. Eric snorted and sat down in his favorite armchair across the room. Amanda switched to the History Channel where some orotund voice was going on about the pharaohs, how they were pickled for eighty days before being entombed. Then she threw the remote at Eric’s face. It missed him by a yard and fell to the carpet with a dull thud.

“Good eye,” he said sarcastically. He stooped to retrieve the plastic case and pushed the mute button. “Amanda, you’ve got to snap out of it. I’ll drive you to school this next week, but you’ve got to start driving again sometime.”

“And taking a shower is such a hassle with that plastic bag over my arm.”

Eric sighed and ran his hand through his thick brown hair. She used to love to do that, back when she could touch him. “Look,” he said. “Your arm’s going to heal someday, but if you don’t force yourself now, you’ll never go back.”

“Heroes don’t go back,” she said. Eric stared at her. In fact, she didn’t know what she meant either.

“How many Percosets have you had today?”

“Oh, Eric, Jesus. Don’t you understand? I can’t walk into a classroom.”

“So, get help. Go to the clinic tomorrow. I’m sure the university will pay for it, just to keep you from suing.”

“I don’t need help. I need time.”

“How much time?”

“I don’t know.”

He inched her over and sat on the sofa. Her legs and his jeans were their only point of contact, which Amanda appreciated. On the screen King Tut was being resurrected for the millionth time.

“So,” she said.

“So,” he retorted. “You want to be a mummy, Amanda. Just keep clicking the goddamn TV.”

Defiantly she clicked to the Food Network. “You think I’m post-traumatic syndrome or something?”

He took a moment to reply. “If you can’t go back to work, that’s a symptom. Statistically.”

“Of course. So I have a symptom, along with a messed-up arm and a horrible memory. And all you can tell me is to get back on the horse that threw me. Jump in the deep end. You have no idea what I dream at night. Fuck you, Eric.”

Again he left a pause. “I wish you would,” he said sadly.

Amanda couldn’t help laughing, but then she began to cry. Eric breached the space between them. Once in his arms, she felt comforted for the first time in a long while. Maybe all it took to be normal was to be treated so.

“I’ll go back next Monday,” she muttered into his neck. She could feel him relax.

Over the weekend before Halloween, Amanda switched her meds to the milder Darvocette. She called her department chair and the colleague who had taken over her class, and pulled out her lesson plans. Eric was right; somehow just getting back into a routine felt good.

She drove into the commuter parking lot early Monday morning. It had rained in the night and the streets were slick. Right fingertip driving, even when backed by her left hand, shot pain up her arm, and the turn into a parking space was a challenge, but she grit her teeth and did it. Once out of the car, she carefully hoisted the book bag onto her left shoulder. Then she looked up. A pearl-gray sky lifted high above, more cloud cover than rain. Amanda had always loved the parking lot sky, the best horizon on campus. You could see the clouds for miles and when rain threatened the view was spectacular. Today's sky held little chance of sunshine, but no rain either.

She took a deep breath, smelling wet tarmac, then turned to the glade, her other favorite campus spot. It was a round depression of horizontal oak trees and tall vertical cypresses, crisscrossed by student paths. The oaks were green even in winter, since they only shed the old leaves when the new ones came in, but the cypress trees had begun to lose their needles, leaving a springy residue underfoot. The glade was beautifully self-contained with ligustrum bushes rimming the lip of the depression. It was reported to be haunted, but by whom or what Amanda had never heard. The ghosts of murdered teachers, maybe?

The area also served as the drain for the north side of campus, which meant that the paths were rarely free of mud. Today she abandoned the footpath and trod on the verge over a spicy carpet of needles. Her way led through an impressive avenue of cypresses, eight of them, four on a side, obviously planted to highlight the entrance to a house, though why anyone would build on the lowest spot around was a mystery. Amanda walked gingerly, avoiding the rounded cypress knees embedded in the wet ground. On the incline out of the glade, she had to return to the muddy path for a few

paces. Ignoring the ache in her left shoulder and right arm, she struggled through the slippery mess to the sidewalk. She took a few breaths and looked down. In a horrible echo of that day, her Nikes were covered with mud.

Mud on her shoes had started the trouble that awful day. She'd been running late and had no time before class to clean them, so she'd opted for a teaching moment. She snatched up her office copy of *Bartlett's Quotations* and, in class, made a mild joke about her feet of clay, which led to a discussion of literary allusions, of heroes and tragic flaws, clay-foot idols, the Book of Daniel and how to use *Bartlett*. The discussion had been lively, even if the students still stared at her shoes, which were pretty grubby. She'd been pleased with their response, especially when they brought up modern references. Somebody mentioned Clinton. Someone else thought of Nixon. A future English major brought up Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and a future history major reminded them that the building they were in was named after a state governor who had ended his life in prison. Amanda had ended the discussion with a fifteen-minute writing assignment on modern-day heroes. Then Adam Naismith, who rarely participated in class, had risen in his seat.

Poor Adam had been insane. She hadn't driven him crazy with a fifteen-minute class discussion of the word "hero." He'd already packed the pistol in his backpack and could have pulled it out in biology class or Spanish or history. It was just her misfortune that a common literary word had pushed his skewed buttons.

A car honked at her. Amanda returned to the present day, as opposed to *that* day, now, five weeks after Adam stood up in class. She realized she had stopped right in the pedestrian crossing zone. Sorry, she signaled with a wave to the impatient drivers and

hurried across the street. She skirted the art and education buildings, went past the library and entered the English Department, then descended to the basement. Once at her office desk, she downed another Darvocette.

What if she hadn't thrown the book at Adam? Then she might have been killed, almost certainly would have been killed, and some of her students as well. Adam would still be dead, though probably by his own hand; wasn't suicide the last act of a Columbine spinoff? But she couldn't dismiss Adam so flippantly; only why had it happened in her class? *Because you were unlucky. Because you were there.* The answer chimed in her head like some obvious guardian angel. So much for Amanda-dot-hero-dot-com with her muddy Nikes.

It was eight-thirty; she had to get to class. But in her mind she was in class back on That Day. She thought of it in caps, as the Nazis had thought of invasion day as *Der Tag*. Ominous, without adjectives.

Adam had risen from his seat. He'd stared at her for a moment then marched from the room dangling his backpack off his shoulder. Just like Adam, she'd thought at the time. So dramatic about going to the bathroom.

"Ms. Boudreaux, do we have to skip lines?" exasperating Stacy had asked. She always needed instructions to be precisely repeated every time. God forbid she had to retain anything in her mind.

"Yes, of course, Stacy," Amanda had said as patiently as she could. "I need room to correct your essay."

The class had started their task. Amanda sauntered over to the desk and began to leaf through *Bartlett's Quotations*. Just then the door crashed open, its knob hitting the

blackboard. Adam stood swaying in the doorway, hands behind his back. Before Amanda could react, he dropped on one knee, pulled out a handgun, and aimed it at her. She couldn't remember the next few minutes or the gun, though she learned later it was a Smith and Wesson .38. She had no recollection of throwing anything, much less a book weighing as much as the average newborn baby. The next thing she knew, she was on the floor surrounded by faces – crying students, other teachers, eventually the paramedics. She couldn't remember pain in her arm until it merged with the ambulance howl. She didn't learn that Adam was dead until hours afterward and didn't realize until days later that *Bartlett* had hit Adam and Adam had hit the doorknob right on his temple.

“Freak accident,” the police said. “Self-defense, of course.”

“Anything you need, Ms. Boudreaux,” the university rep conveyed to her in the hospital. “We'll pay for all of it.”

No word from or about Adam's parents, not even a hit on Amanda's website. Unless the “fucking dishonary” comment was from them. She couldn't bring herself to read about Adam's background, if he had been the beloved only child of college professors or one of six neglected children of a man in prison. It wasn't that she didn't care; she simply *couldn't*. And now, in this common time five weeks later, she deliberately unlaced her Nikes and set them under her office desk. Then she went off to class in her sock feet. She was done with teachable sartorial moments.

Her students rose to their feet and broke out in fevered applause the minute she entered the classroom. This embarrassed the hell out of her and she motioned them all to sit down.

“Thank you. I’ve missed you all. It’s so good to be back.” She blinked a moment and turned to the blackboard where the door handle had crashed. Not the smartest venue to calm herself down, but she knew she had to turn away or else she’d burst into tears. Finally she turned back.

“I loved your cards and letters and emails. I so appreciate your concern –”

“You saved our lives, Ms. Boudreaux,” straight-C Jason called out.

“Yeah, you did. We got you a present to show *our* appreciation,” added exasperating Stacy. She rose and picked up a heavy pink gift bag from her desk. Seven pounds heavy. Even before she reached Amanda, it was obvious what the present was.

“Oh, my God.” Amanda slumped into her chair as Stacy plopped the infant-weight gift in front of her. “I don’t even need to guess, do I?”

“No, of course not,” Stacy said.

“You couldn’t keep your old one,” Jason chimed in.

“Naw, it’s exhibit one by the police, or something,” another student added.

Their glee was refreshing, and terrible in its resilience. Amanda cast about for the teaching element in all this and found nothing. Should she tell them it was in the worst possible taste, and not just taste, but reverence to the dead, Antigone’s attitude toward Polynices’ corpse (quotes on page whatever in *Bartlett’s*), to give her another *Bartlett’s* right away? Should she admit that she never intended to open that book again? Or should she accept gratefully, gracefully, their young gesture of healing? No question – no moral question, that is. Taste, mourning, her body and soul tainted by violence be damned.

Amanda stood up, again fighting tears. In her mind she cancelled the lesson on Aristotle's categories of rhetoric – logos, ethos, and pathos -- with which she'd planned to introduce the commentary unit. The Biblical quote, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," floated into her mind. Looking out on her students, she knew that this day was good: a day without evil. She'd look up the allusion later in her new, weighty gift.

PROSTRATE

“There’s my other line, Cynthia. I’ve got to go,” Virginia said to her pregnant daughter-in-law in New York City.

“Ok, Mom; I’ll talk to you soon.”

In Albuquerque, two thousand miles away, Virginia replaced the phone receiver as tenderly as she would in three months’ time replace Cynthia’s newborn in its cradle. Cynthia was a great girl, a good wife to Tom, and would be a terrific mother. It was a shame her pregnancy was so difficult, bed rest and all that.

Virginia sank back on the sofa cushion. There was no incoming call; nor had there been any in a week. She hated lying to Cynthia, but she couldn’t stand answering questions for which there was no real answer. “Yes, we’re dealing with it,” she’d told Cynthia. “No, Vincent hasn’t scheduled his surgery yet.”

She picked up her full coffee mug and balanced it on her left breast. Bending her chin to the rim, she sipped fast, but not fast enough. Damn! Another bright brown spot blossomed just over her heart, ruining her seventh blouse in as many days; and this one was dry-clean-only silk.

Vincent had elected to put off surgery for another month. Seven days ago, he’d told her why and sent her to the sofa for a week. Flat on her back, shot through the heart with a slug of hot coffee, she now recalled that awful conversation.

“I’m only fifty-one,” he’d said. “There’s a lot out there I haven’t sampled.”

“*What?*” She remembered thinking, I can’t take any more. First his prostrate trouble, now this, whatever this fresh horror was. “What the hell are you telling me?” she’d demanded.

“I’m not ready to give up sex.”

“But, Vince, it’s your *life* we’re talking about.”

He tugged out of his armchair and went to stand by the picture window. She looked at his rigid silhouette then decided to push him. “All right, just what are you telling me?” she said in the crisp tone she used as a legal secretary.

“We got married so young,” he said. “We never had the chance to party naked.”

“Party naked?” Where on earth did he get that expression? Probably from the kids at his school, Carson Senior High, where he was principal. Vincent was so pathetic.

“Listen, Ginny, haven’t you ever wanted to break out and do something crazy. And now if I have to give it up forever –” His voice was strained, like his recent attempts in bed. She knew how painful it was for him to discuss this, so she jumped in feet first.

“You don’t know that for a fact, Vince. The doctor said it’s possible that you can still perform –”

He cut her off with a karate chop in the air and came to sit beside her on the sofa. She snatched her hand away from his and clenched it in her lap. She still hadn’t heard the whole story.

“What are you talking about?” she asked coldly.

“I’m going to Vegas tomorrow after school. Alone.”

“And just what are you going to do in Vegas?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Maybe see some shows, hit the night spots, play blackjack.”

Virginia burst into tears. He tried to put an awkward arm around her, but she pushed him away and fled to the guest bedroom, the one with a lock on it. Hours later she’d heard him come upstairs, and he was gone the next morning when she emerged for breakfast. That had been a week ago.

Since then, she’d managed to go to work and somehow to eat, but every waking moment at home had been spent supine on the sofa. She’d watched the daylight fade and the setting sun flicker through the sugar maples right outside the living room window. Fall leaves in Albuquerque were spectacular, and she hoped clarifying. She wasn’t ready for her world to fade to gray.

The phone rang again. Virginia shifted her coffee mug from breast to table and picked up the receiver.

“Hi, Mom, it’s Tom.”

“Oh, Tom, I just talked to Cynthia. Do you really think – is she ok?”

“Sure, Mom, she’s fine. She just hates being flat on her back.”

And I just love it, Virginia thought sarcastically. “Are you at work?” she asked.

“Yep, for the past thirty-six hours.” Tom was a psychiatric resident at Bellevue in New York, working himself to death. “Listen, have you heard anything new from Dad’s doctor?” he asked.

“No, not really. I mean, we got the prostrate verdict and won’t know anything more until –”

“Prostate, Mom,” said Tom, the recent M.D.

“Ok, ok, prostate, prostrate, what does it matter?” She heard Tom sigh.

“Let me talk to Dad. He’ll know something. And there’s this new drug I want him to mention to his doctor.”

“He’s not here. He’s in Vegas.” Virginia’s voice trembled on the last word and she bit her lip. Never in a million years would she let Tom know what had happened between her and Vincent.

“Vegas? Has he gone to gamble?”

“No. He’s at -- a reading conference.”

“That’s always in March.” Tom knew Vincent’s yearly schedule as well as she did.

“Well, it’s some other conference, I can’t remember. Listen, Tom, I’ve got to go. My other line’s ringing,” she lied and hung up hastily. Before the phone could ring again, she grabbed her purse and jacket and hurried out the kitchen door.

*

Trudging down the stairs at the Albuquerque airport, Vincent was tempted to stop in at Gardunos for one of their outsized margaritas. That last bit on the plane had been frightening. Fifteen minutes outside of Albuquerque, a hint of smoke had begun to emerge from the cockpit. The flight attendants had scurried around, demonstrating the proper stance for a crash landing, but in the end, they had landed safely in the midst of screaming fire-trucks. Vincent staggered off the plane feeling sorry for any passenger who had to board a connecting flight. He himself just wanted a drink.

He glanced around the brightly-colored airport lobby. All he saw were desert murals on the walls, souvenir shops, display cases filled with kachina dolls, silver-and-turquoise jewelry from Santa Fe, and Western statuary. No Virginia.

Stupid, you didn't tell her your flight number, he thought to himself. He collected his single bag and caught a taxi home. When he called, she didn't answer. Dropping his suitcase in the kitchen, he searched the house. Virginia wasn't there; where on earth could she have gone at eight o'clock at night? Oh, God, maybe she'd flown to New York to see Tom and cry on his shoulder.

The need for a drink became suddenly urgent. Reaching into the liquor cabinet, Vincent seized the Dewar's and poured himself a double.

*

Virginia too was drinking, her second glass of white wine at Fiddlers, a fern bar in the Coronado mall. She'd already dropped two thousand dollars in the stores and now she sat sipping her wine and enjoying a petty revenge. She could waste money as well as Vincent, and in a lot less time.

The long-nosed sales clerk in Ann Taylor's had sniffed when Virginia explained that she needed a new white silk blouse. The pained glance and unspoken comment – “You certainly do!” – targeted her dried-blood coffee stain, which hadn't prevented the snooty woman from selling Virginia another blouse, a well-cut black suit, and a Merry Widow corset. Macy's in the mall provided the black Ferragamo pumps, a lilac cocktail dress, and a pair of taupe wool slacks on sale.

Swinging her packages, Virginia clicked into Fiddlers and sat in a booth. She loved the way the new shoes sounded. They gave her hips a swing and made her feel

pretty, not quite forty-nine years old. After she ordered, she let her eyes run over the evening's offerings up there on the bar stools. The men were all too young or too old, too committed to the TV ballgame and their next drink.

She herself appeared invisible, the only woman in the bar, limited to the periphery and one glass. No, make that two glasses; she could metabolize it. Was this what Vincent had been doing for the past week? She could imagine him bellied up to the bar then turning to survey the crowd, Dewar's in hand. Had he ever thought "Too young?" Had he approached some woman and gotten nowhere? The last time she'd heard him flirtatious was at a faculty Labor Day party chatting up Allison Pritchett, the twenty-four-year-old chemistry teacher. His comments had made Virginia wince for him: "Do you like the beach? What's the latest book you've read?" Great seductive stuff.

A tiny wisp of pity touched her mind. Vincent should be home by now. She finished her second glass of wine, paid the bill, and hurried to her car.

*

"Where on earth have you been?" Vincent demanded from the dark living room. She paused in the doorway to look at him, a dim figure hunched in his easy chair.

"Ginny? Where were you?" he repeated.

She gave him a dirty look and clicked upstairs to deposit her new finery. It was perfectly obvious where she'd been. Anyone who used his eyes for information rather than lechery would know from her packages.

She dropped the shopping bags in the middle of their bedroom, then flung off the suit, the blouse, the pumps, the panty hose, and her bra. Vincent entered the room just as she slipped into a housecoat. "Want a drink?" he said.

It wasn't a God-I've-missed-you kiss, but Virginia smelled sheepishness. She grinned to herself.

"Sure, I'd love a drink."

"Tom called while you were out," he said in the kitchen.

"Oh?" She wasn't going to tell him about Tom's call to her, or Cynthia's. She didn't exactly know why; it just seemed better not to say too much until *he* talked. Least said, soonest mended, her mother spoke in her head.

"Yeah, he wanted to push some new drug on me. He got on the Internet and looked up prostate treatments."

"Prostrate," she murmured. Then she remembered, no, it wasn't. Prostrate was *her* problem. She climbed on the bar stool by the kitchen counter and began to sip her drink, Dewar's just like his. I sure hope neither of us has to drive tonight, she thought.

"Tom wondered where you were at eight o'clock at night."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, and I did too."

"I see," she said. "What did you tell Tom?"

"Told him I didn't know. Where *were* you?"

Virginia smiled coldly. "I might ask you the same thing about this past week."

"I told you. Vegas."

"And?"

Vincent paused to make himself a second drink— no, probably a third one. Then he sat opposite her and looked her straight in the eye. "Ginny, I need to tell you something."

She waited, dying to push him to say more, or maybe just push him off the bar stool. But Vincent had always been deliberate; he had to get to it in his own way.

She'd hear him out, not tell him what she thought. Not force him to realize that Vegas showgirls couldn't save him from impotence or death. No, she'd listen, she'd think, and then when she had an answer, she'd answer him. It depended on him whether her answer was mean and petty.

“It was the most miserable week I’ve ever spent,” he said. “I didn’t meet a soul.”

Poor guy, so nervous his drink had nearly disappeared. “Oh?” she said. “Why not?”

He raked his hair and swallowed residual Scotch. “I sat in my hotel room and had time to think. Ate room service, played the one-armed bandits when I couldn’t think anymore. Want another drink?”

“Vince, really, you’ve had enough.”

He stared down into his empty glass. “I’ve got some stuff to say and I need another drink.”

“Ok, me too.” She held out her glass. Neither of them drank this much on a regular basis; they’d be dead if they did. But tonight, maybe it was necessary.

He sat back down and handed her the glass. They each took a swig, almost like toasting each other in a sad sort of way. “I realize I hurt you, going off like that. If it’s any comfort, I hated myself all week long. You’ve never done anything to deserve what I did. It’s just that I’m so scared –”

He broke off. That was enough truth for him right now. Virginia was suddenly swept with anger. He'd said all the right things, everything she'd wanted to hear for the past week, but his words came too late for her, floated too easily.

"Stop! Stop it right this minute!" she yelled even though he'd stopped. "I can't stand it!"

"But I thought –"

"No, you didn't; you didn't think at all. You reacted. If you've been dreaming about Vegas showgirls all these years, you wouldn't have stayed faithful to me for twenty-eight years."

"Twenty-seven years," he said and hung his head.

"*What?*" She jumped off the barstool and stood clinging to the counter. The Formica bit into her nails.

"I had a fling at the reading conference last March," he mumbled to the table.

"But that's the only time, I swear it."

"Who was she?" Virginia shivered; she was ice-cold again.

"Some comp/rhet professor from Spokane. She gave a talk about reading levels."

This struck Virginia as supremely funny, and horrible at the same time. Trust Vincent to know his one-night-stand's academic specialty.

"I couldn't do anything much," he said. She circled behind him, so she wouldn't have to see his foolish, remorseful face. If it *was* remorse, and not just regret for misfiring with a college rhetoric teacher.

"You remember we began to have trouble about then," he went on. She did indeed remember. On her birthday, March 15th, he couldn't perform and this had

persisted for the next few months. She'd been sympathetic at first, then resentful, and finally frightened, at which point she'd dragooned him to the doctor to get this awful verdict.

"Oh, Vince," she said and closed her eyes. He swiveled on his stool and caught her arms. And she just let him. Finally she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Why did you tell me?" she asked a long time later. The side of her new collar felt damp; he'd been crying on her shoulder.

"Because I didn't want to go to my grave without telling you. Confessing."

From their joint Catholic background she thought, confession, absolution, go and sin no more. Poor guy, he probably wouldn't have any more chance to commit adultery; not that she wanted him too, of course.

"Oh, Vince. Poor, poor Vince. You're not going to your grave anytime soon," she murmured.

He shook his head and held her closer. She rocked him in her arms there in the doorway between the kitchen and the dark living room, rocked him for a long time while he cried it out. When he seemed recovered and finally pulled away to wipe his eyes, she whispered, "Let's go upstairs. I'll model my Merry Widow for you."

"What's that?" he asked, startled. Virginia could have kicked herself. To someone facing his diagnosis, the term "merry widow" conjured up an entirely different image than her sexy new corset.

She summoned a grin from somewhere. "It's one of those corset things with pearls and feathers like the showgirls wear. Come on, I'll show you."

He followed her obediently up the stairs. In the bedroom, he stripped to his boxer shorts and fell heavily onto the bed. She shoehorned him under the covers, then grabbed the Merry Widow and her new heels and slipped into the bathroom. The outlandish corset fit but it could have fit better; her struggle with the eyehooks running down the bodice cost her another fingernail. And all the while she was thinking, first about crash diets then about everything else.

Could she live without sex forever? Would she and Vincent, who'd burnt beds together, turn sexless, she denying herself sensation out of pity, he sensing her self-denial and hating it? Could they trust each other enough to heal the wound in her breast and that from his surgery?

She didn't know, but the not-knowing launched her into an open space where she only wanted to give and receive comfort, with or without sex. She couldn't live without Vincent -- unless, God forbid, she had to -- and after his apology, she was pretty sure he felt the same way about her. That was understanding enough for the time being.

She ran her hands down from her breasts to her hips. The torturous garment, ten pounds too tight for her, was good for a laugh at least and what she'd missed lately, the last seven months, was Vincent's laughter. Smiling to herself, stretching for confidence, she reached for the bathroom door knob.

CHILDREN

DARKNESS

Renee woke in the middle of the night. She wasn't in her own bed with its bars on the side and the high half tester stretched above her. A strange softness was beneath her and a squishy coverlet clung to her neck. She turned her head toward an unfamiliar glowing on the opposite wall, a dim light for which she had no word and which frightened her. It filled the room with a feeling she couldn't identify, pushing against the dark corners, turning the armoire on the opposite wall into a shapeless beast.

She ducked her head under the covers. The feeling in the room was now inside of her, swelling against her throat as if she needed to throw up or cry. She expelled air, inhaled, and expelled again. The feeling was still there, inside and outside as well. For a long time she breathed into her blankets until all the air was gone and she pulled the covers off her face. The glowing continued; the armoire crouched over there by the window. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the room away, but when she opened her eyes again it all remained: light, armoire, feeling. Maybe if she lay very still, this room would go away and she would return to her own bed.

Something was waiting for her out there in the room swollen with dark light. It wasn't the room itself, it wasn't a monster or anything scary like that. It didn't threaten *her*; it was simply there, swelling and swelling. She knew that if she left the bed and walked into the center of the room, it would press her and press her until she collapsed onto the floor like an airless balloon.

She was better off where she was. Here she could breathe. She took a deep breath, then another. From the other side of the room, someone else took a breath. That

scared her so badly she slid back under the covers, head and all. Good, now she could only hear herself breathing.

Usually when she woke in the night, Daddy came to her. Mommy needed her rest, he said. He'd get her water, help her to the bathroom, rock her in the little blue rocking chair and sing the song he always sang her, "The *eyes* of Texas are upon you, all the livelong *day-ay-yay-yay*/ The *eyes* of Texas are upon you; you *cannot* get away/ *Do* not think you can *escape* them, *ev'ning* or early in the morn./ The *eyes* of Texas are upon you, till *Gabriel* blows his horn. . ."

Her voice died away and the feeling began to swell up inside her from her middle to her chest to her throat to her mouth. It burst out in a cry she barely heard. Another wave of the feeling came up, then another. She bit the coverlet under her chin to keep it down; she knew that if she let inside her the feeling that crowded the room, she would lose all her air. It wanted to come and fill her up and *blow* her up, so she lay very still and clamped her mouth around the coverlet to keep the feeling out. She breathed through her nose and kept her mouth closed.

The springy coverlet ground between her teeth. Something felt funny, as if the coverlet had sand in it. No, not sand, not rocks, something, lots of little somethings, long and hard like tiny little sticks. They rattled over her teeth.

Something pricked her nose. She reached up and felt one of the tiny sticks poking out of the coverlet. It took her a couple of seconds to pick it out and when she did, she found a feather. It tickled her nose. She ran the feather over her nose and lips and cheeks. It felt good, kind of like when Mommy put that creamy stuff on her face after her

bath. She opened her mouth and tasted the feather and that was yucky. Quickly she spat it out.

The other person in the room made a noise. Renee remembered; she was not alone in her own room at home. For some reason, the feeling had gone away; now the room was just a room. She sat up on her elbows and looked around. The light showed just enough furniture for her to recognize the room; she was at her cousin Lucy's house and that was Lucy sleeping in the other bed. She'd spent the night here before, and now she knew the light was not a feeling, it was just a night light. She didn't have a night light at home. Daddy and Mommy said she was a big girl at five years old and didn't need a light to fall asleep. Lucy was a four-year-old baby.

The room was so still. At home she could hear outside noises through her half-open window. Lucy's family had air-conditioning units blowing all the time in the summer, but it wasn't summer now; it was going on winter and the windows were closed because it was cold. Renee remembered it was cold. She'd worn her new winter coat tonight, with the brown velvet buttons that looked like the buttons on the high pointy ceiling of Holy Name Church.

She didn't know why she was at Lucy's house, but she knew she wasn't happy about it. Lucy was boring and a baby. She was scared of the slide and the jungle gym at Renee's house, and she couldn't even ride a tricycle. She hated playing cowboys and Indians with Renee's cap pistols and she couldn't climb trees. There was nothing to do at Lucy's house, because all she wanted to do was color in coloring books and watch the TV set. Until the last few weeks, Renee didn't have a TV set, but then Daddy had rented one to watch Eisenhower beat Stevenson, she'd heard the names often enough to

remember, but it was boring. She'd thought beat meant really beat, like when she'd whomped Bobby next door over the head with a stick and Mommy made her say sorry. But the TV was just a bunch of old men talking; she couldn't wait for the shows *she* liked, like *Howdy Doody* and *Fury*. At Lucy's house they watched every show on TV, show after show, until Renee got jumpy and wanted to go outside and run around. Only Lucy's mother, Cousin Amelie, was afraid they'd run in the street, so they had to play in the back yard and that was no fun. There wasn't a swing set or anything, just a big, splintery wooden seat and some flowers you couldn't pick. And that was why Renee hated coming to Lucy's to play.

Maybe Mommy and Daddy were on a trip. But she always stayed with Aunt Sally and Uncle Brother next door when her parents went away. Last summer, right after her birthday, her parents had gone to Cousin Junior's wedding in some place with an animal name – a buffalo? Another time they went to Texas, where the eyes of Texas were upon them. Renee had almost not noticed they were gone. She'd had such fun at Aunt Sally and Uncle Brother's house, baking cookies, playing with the cat, watching Uncle Brother cut out a jigsaw puzzle for her and Mommy to paint. Mommy was an artist and she'd shown Renee how to use real oil paints on the jigsaw puzzle.

Why was she at Lucy's house? Lucy snored, a horrible wet sound like shoes sucking out of the mud. There was something wrong with Lucy's nose, even if her father was a nose and ears doctor. She was always sniffing and snorting, and Renee didn't want to be here at all.

She ducked back under the covers. The feeling began to build again. It started way down where her tummy rumbled and built up and up until it sat on her chest, on the

inside. It wouldn't come out. It wouldn't come out. She opened her mouth but nothing came out. She tried to say something aloud, anything -- "Mommy" -- but the feeling grabbed her throat and now she couldn't even breathe. She lay there helpless, waiting for the thing to finally smother her.

*

"So, how is she?"

"Ok. She wouldn't eat her egg."

"She hates eggs. Try her on some cereal. Did she sleep all right?"

"Oh, yes. We didn't hear a peep out of her."

Renee, at the breakfast room table, sat close enough to Cousin Amelie to hear both sides of the phone conversation, at least this last part of it. Cousin Amelie had been on the phone when she came into the kitchen. The other voice was a woman's. Mommy? Aunt Sally? Finally Cousin Amelie said, "Right, Sally. God bless you. Here she is."

Renee took the phone. "Aunt Sally? Where's Mommy?"

There was a pause. Then Aunt Sally said in a funny kind of voice, "Uncle Brother is coming to get you."

"Where's Daddy?"

"He's at home. He said to tell you he loves you."

"Why can't Daddy come get me?"

Aunt Sally made a weird sound in her throat. "Your Daddy's busy. Now, you be a good girl and eat your breakfast. Uncle Brother will be there soon." The phone buzzed

in Renee's ear before she could ask any more questions. She handed the phone to Cousin Amelie, who replaced it gently on the cradle.

Renee looked down at the bowl of cold cereal Cousin Amelie's cook put in front of her. She hated eggs more than anything else in the world, but she wasn't too fond of soggy Rice Krispies either. She didn't think she could get anything down her throat; it was doing something funny, opening and closing up on her. Across the table, Lucy slurped happily, then pounded the milky surface of her bowl with the spoon.

"Lucy, stop that or I'll have to feed you like a baby!" Cousin Amelie snapped. Renee looked up; she'd never heard Cousin Amelie so cross before.

"Yeah, stop it," she said to the four-year-old. But Lucy was enjoying herself. Finally Carleen, the cook, removed the bowl from the table and Lucy set up a howl.

Renee slid down from her chair. "Cousin Amelie, can I go outside? I can't eat any more."

Cousin Amelie looked down at her for a second then looked away. Before she did, Renee noticed something strange. Cousin Amelie's light brown eyelashes were wet.

"Can I? I want to wait for Uncle Brother outside."

"No. You might run into the street. I'll just go get your things from upstairs."

Cousin Amelie left the kitchen almost running. Behind Renee's back, Lucy kept on howling. Renee clapped her hands to her ears and whirled on her younger cousin.

"Shut the hell up!"

The child stopped in mid-scream and stared. Renee was shocked at herself; she'd never used those bad words before. Now Carleen would tell Cousin Amelie and Cousin Amelie would tell Mommy and Mommy would be so disappointed, she'd probably wash

Renee's mouth out with soap. It was happening right now; Carleen was turning from the sink, drying her brown-and-pink hands on a towel.

"Renee, come here," she began. Then her eyes filled with tears. So did Lucy's, but that was usual; Lucy had trouble coming off a tantrum.

But what was *wrong* with everybody? Carleen came toward her with outstretched arms and enfolded her in an embrace that smelled of apron starch. Cousin Amelie returned to the kitchen with Renee's black patten leather suitcase in hand. Nobody paid attention to Lucy's screams.

Renee wriggled out from Carleen's arms. The hug was comforting but unfamiliar; all of a sudden she wanted Mommy's arms, even though Mommy was bony and Carleen warm and comfortable. Why had Carleen hugged her instead of scolding her for cussing? Why wasn't she telling Cousin Amelie about it?

The doorbell rang. Cousin Amelie hurried from the kitchen. Renee followed more slowly. The feeling had her by the throat again, tight, tight. Uncle Brother was out in the front hall. He was much older than her parents and he looked it today, really old, real tired. He stooped down and gave her a kiss, then hugged Cousin Amelie, thanking her.

"I'm glad to be able to do anything," Cousin Amelie said.

"Well, Renee." Uncle Brother lifted the suitcase. "We're off."

He set the case on the back seat then helped her into the car. All of a sudden she realized they were on the street leading to her school.

"Are you taking me to school?" she demanded.

"No, we're going home."

“Why? I want to go to school!”

“You can’t, honey. Not today.”

Was this her punishment for cussing at Lucy? She started to cry as they drove past her school.

“Why can’t I go to school? This is my week to –” But then she forgot what it was her turn to do this week. She hadn’t been to school yesterday either but she couldn’t remember why. She couldn’t remember anything but Mommy, all the way home.

SCAPEGOAT

It was about time for lights out in the cabin. We'd been playing Mother-May-I and Red-Light up and down the aisle between the bunk beds, but now we were tired out and sat talking quietly in groups. I just knew the group around Carol was whispering about me.

"Did she really throw the soap in?" Barbara asked, her voice carrying across the room. "Who got it out?"

"I did," Carol said proudly. I clenched my hands and looked at Patty, my best friend.

"Don't worry about it," she said. But I felt like an idiot. Who else but me would drop a bar of Octagon soap into the campfire stew? I flopped back on my bed and stared at the rusted underside of the bunk above me. I'd had it with working for the Girl Scout Outdoor Cooking Badge and Scout camp in general. The cabin smelled like an in-ground basement that never dried out, and the bathroom with its stained urinals for the Boy Scouts was worse. There were no shower curtains and we all had to wash with harsh soap to guard against poison ivy, that same Octagon soap I'd dropped into the stewpot at lunch. What was I doing with Octagon soap around the cooking area? I couldn't even remember.

Whisper, whisper, whisper, giggle. I knew I'd never hear the end of this. We'd managed to eat the stew anyway, but the other three members of my cooking patrol all complained loudly. They made me want to run out in the woods and hide, but of course I did nothing; I just sat there and ignored them.

“Psst! Janet!”

I turned on my side and saw Patty pointing across the room. “Is she ever going to take a shower?” All of us had showered an hour ago, with one exception – Francisca. She was sitting on the bottom bunk all alone, staring into space. I looked at Patty and Patty looked at me.

“Hey, Tita, why don’t you take a shower?” I deliberately used the silly nickname her mother gave her.

Tita giggled. “I’m not dirty,” she said.

Well, she wasn’t as dirty as the rest of us, that’s for sure. She hadn’t dug the fire-pits or collected wood or lashed heavy branches together to make a frame to hang the pots over the fire or done any of the cooking. I couldn’t remember Tita doing much of anything at lunch except hanging about and giggling when someone said something to her. Like, “Go get some more wood.” She’d wander off through the pine trees and come back twenty minutes later with one stick. But she must have sweated; it had been hot out there at the fire-pits.

“Peuuu!” said Patty, holding her nose. The whisperers stopped whispering.

“You didn’t shower yet?” Carol demanded. Tita shook her head.

“Why not?”

“I’m not dirty.”

We all looked at each other and grinned. “You probably don’t know how,” Cecile said.

“Yeah, your maid probably bathes you,” Sue chimed in.

We collapsed laughing; the idea of someone bathing you when you were eleven years old! What a baby Tita was!

“That’s gross,” I said. “We can’t sleep in the same cabin with you if you don’t take a shower.”

Tita got to her feet. The tail end of one of her inch-wide plaits hung in her mouth like a captured mouse as she shuffled to the bathroom.

“And don’t chew your hair!” Carol called after her. “You’ll get a hairball in your stomach.”

“How about your pajamas?” I added. Tita was such an idiot! She’d forgotten her towel too.

The minute we heard the shower go on, I turned to the others. “Let’s short-sheet her.”

“And put those prickly things at the bottom.” The prickly things—we had no idea what they were called. Some plant which grew right outside the cabin door.

Patty and I stripped Tita’s bed, threw the bottom sheet underneath and folded the top sheet to look like two. Carol took her washcloth and went outside to gather the prickly things. The rest of us kept watch.

“She’s turned the shower off,” Sue warned us. Patty and I hurried over to our side-by-side bottom bunks trying to look innocent. But where was Carol?

A moment later Tita came out dressed in her dirty clothes. She was dripping wet, from her tight pigtails to her plump, ugly bare feet. Picking up her pj’s and towel from the bottom of her bed, she crept back into the bathroom.

Carol appeared on the threshold of the cabin holding a clump of prickly things with mud clinging to the bottom. “Boy, those things were hard to pull up,” she said.

“Quick, put it in the bed,” we whispered. She crammed the prickly things down to where the sheet stopped, then someone got the lights and we all jumped into our bunks. When Tita came out in her pajamas, we appeared to be sleeping. Except for Barbara who said, “Turn the bathroom light off!”

“I can’t find the switch,” Tita whined.

“Well, look -- stupid.” A second later the bathroom light went out and we heard Tita groping her way to her bunk. She clutched at the bottom bar of my bed, and Patty’s, then somehow found her own bunk.

We all held our breath. At least I know I held mine. This was the good part, when she wiggled and heaved around trying to push her feet through the sheet. Then she’d discover the prickly things –

“Ouch,” she cried.

Several of us stifled giggles. I could hear Patty’s right beside me.

Heave, heave, ouch. We could hear Tita moving. We could feel her toes come in contact with the prickly things. “Ouch,” she yelped again, then we heard her feet slam against the floor. We also heard her tear the blanket off and the sheet. She threw these down, then climbed back onto her stripped mattress. And then silence. Somehow, I drifted off to sleep. Tita wasn’t any fun; if it had been me, I’d have yelled at them.

In the middle of the night, I woke up and heard someone crying. I turned over with a sigh of satisfaction. It was Tita.

*

Why did we all hate her so much, at ten, eleven, and twelve years old? Patty and I, Carol and Barbara, with Cecile and Sue as hangers on, our group didn't wonder why at those ages. Tita was obviously repulsive.

She was a real aristocrat, our parents all told us. Her father was a Spanish count, run out of Spain for some reason; we later found out it was the Spanish Civil War. Her mother, Lillian O'Donnell Quintana came from the laiciest of lace-curtain Irish. One of her great-uncles had been an Irish-American cardinal and Lillian, like Grace Kelly, had married a European blueblood. Of course, all of us Catholic, middleclass schoolgirls found this out later; at the time, we only knew Tita was different.

She appeared physically loathsome to us. There were tiny bumps on her arms, which we thought were the result of infrequent bathing. Her waist-length pigtails were ugly to us and the piglike squeals which shot up from her fat body when we threatened to cut them off made our skin crawl. That happened at camp too, but she ran crying to the Girl Scout leader and we got scolded.

Rumors about Tita's home life kept us talking for hours, in the years before we discovered boys and had something else to talk about. At eleven, she confessed that her Spanish maid still bathed her. *Gross!* we all thought, in the favorite word of 1960. We knew when she reached puberty, from her smell and the lack of a much-needed bra. How could anybody want to go around without deodorant and bobbling all over the place? We didn't care what kind of people she came from; none of us wanted to sit next to her in class.

We were all Brownies then Girl Scouts, from age seven to seventeen. The big thrill of Scouting was overnight camping, two or three excursions a year. We particularly

enjoyed camping because it gave us another chance to torment Tita. There was the time we short-sheeted her, and then the fuss when we tried to cut her hair. Somehow, we couldn't seem to help ourselves; Tita was so horribly herself.

Her parents were weird too. Her father Alberto was a bland, foggy man known in New Orleans as Coca-Cola because he showed up at all cultural events. He never seemed to hold down a job and was rumored to shave his legs to the knee. Lillian, her plump, librarian mother, didn't shave at all. How we learned this, I can't say; we never got a close look at the parents' legs or armpits. Or maybe we extrapolated from Tita, who didn't shave either.

And then the way they talked about her, at least the way her mother talked. Her father, poor man, wandered around in a leg-shaven cloud of mild social embarrassment, nodding to various people he might have seen before in this lifetime. It never occurred to us as we sneered at his blank courtesy that his English was poor.

Lillian Quintana compensated for her husband's lack of conversation. She called her daughter "Tita" on every occasion and bragged about her grades. By the time we could associate "Tita" with the taboo word "tits," it was far too late for Tita to join our human race. Our parents had been affronted by Lillian's bragging as well, so we realized we had some sort of *carte blanche* to torment her.

*

The worst thing we did to her happened on our Girl Scout trip to Mexico after eighth grade. We had four chaperones, all women: our two leaders and two mothers. There were twelve of us Girl Scouts, including Tita, the only one who could speak Spanish. We started plotting on the long train ride across Texas and northern Mexico.

By Monterey, our plans were made, but we decided to wait until we were in a hotel with a real bathroom in Mexico City before we attacked.

Nobody sat with Tita on the train; she had her own little area all to herself, two sets of facing seats. She read a book the whole time, unless one of the leaders needed her to speak Spanish to the conductor once we reached Mexico. Finally, we couldn't stand it a moment longer, so Patty and I and Carol sauntered up and plopped ourselves in the three remaining seats.

“Whatcha reading, Tita?”

She shrugged. “A book.”

“Yeah, what book?”

She showed us the title. None of us had ever heard of it before, though we came to know it well later on.

“What's it about?”

“Some boys on an island.”

“Is it good?”

“I like it.” She buried her nose in the book again. Patty and I and Carol looked at each other across her head.

“Say, Tita, want an Oreo?” I said, holding out the pack to her. She shook her head.

“You're sure?”

She put her book face down and looked straight at me. “Yeah,” she said. “I'm sure.”

We filed away feeling vaguely disappointed. Not that we were going to strike while we were still on the train. It just seemed like a good idea to get Tita in the habit of taking Oreos from us.

Maybe she didn't like Oreos? Maybe she didn't like us? Oh, nonsense, everybody liked us, we thought at the time.

Maybe she was becoming a snob like her mother? After all, Tita would be going to that fancy high school for rich kids and smart kids next year. We were all going to the local Catholic girls' high school.

But we got lucky; Tita developed a greedy taste for Oreos somewhere between Monterey and Mexico City. So did I, and it took me all summer to lose the five pounds I gained in Mexico, but that's another story. Tita didn't care about weight; she just kept getting fatter and fatter.

"Do you have the – you know?" I asked Patty when we were in the hotel room we shared with Carol and Barbara. It was our first night in Mexico City, but the leaders were too tired to take us out.

Patty giggled. "You bet! Best chocolate in the world." She rummaged around in her suitcase and finally pulled out six tiny packages of Ex-Lax chocolate.

"They're too, too fat. You can't hide that in an Oreo. She'll see them and spit them out."

Carol came up and took a package in her hand. "Well, then, we'll have to crowd around her and *make* her eat it." She tossed the package up in the air and caught it.

"What's the matter, Janet? Got cold feet?"

"No," I said. "But let's get it over with. I'm running out of Oreos."

“What’s her room?” asked Barbara.

“Two-oh-nine, right down the hall. We’d better do it quick before she goes to sleep.”

I unpacked the brown paper bag with the Oreos and handed several to Patty. We had all agreed that she was the one to doctor the cookies. She had the lightest touch.

“No, seriously, how are we going to do this?” I asked. “You can’t just walk up to somebody and cram a cookie in her mouth.”

Barbara thought for a moment. “I know, we’ll have an Oreo-eating contest. Fix up about six, Patty.”

A few minutes later, we were creeping down the hall. It was official lights out, so we didn’t want the leaders and chaperones to hear us. One of us knocked on Tita’s door.

“Who’s there?” She came to the door and opened it a crack.

“Tita, can we come in?” I was the spokesman for the group.

She stepped back to let us into her room. It was smaller than ours, since she didn’t have a roommate. “What do you want?”

I held up an unblemished Oreo. “We’re having a contest. Winner gets the rest of the bag.”

“But it’s late and I just brushed my teeth.”

“Brush them again,” said Patty.

We all sat down on the floor, with the bag of Oreos in the middle. I could smell dust flying up from the rug; this wasn’t a really good hotel, nor very clean.

“Okay, here’s the rules. We all close our eyes and reach into the bag. You go first, Tita.” Of course, there were only doctored cookies in the bag. *We* weren’t going to eat any.

Tita reached out. “Close your eyes!” we all yelled.

“What’s in that bag?” she asked.

“Oreos! Now, come on; we’re getting hungry.”

She reached in. “Keep your eyes shut!” Carol commanded. “No peeking.”

Tita obediently squeezed her eyes tighter. She pulled out a fat Oreo with a glistening bit of chocolate in the center.

“You’ve got to eat it in one gulp,” Patty said.

Tita opened her mouth and crammed the plump cookie inside. We watched her chew, eyes closed, for what seemed like an eternity. Did she know how silly she looked? Patty and I grinned at each other. Finally Tita swallowed and opened her eyes.

“That didn’t taste like any Oreo I’ve ever eaten,” she said.

We slumped down in giggles on the floor. We were laughing so hard, we didn’t realize Tita had collapsed as well. At first we thought she was laughing with us, then we thought she was crying, then we realized she was trying, and failing, to catch her breath.

“Patty! What’s *wrong* with her?” I jumped to my feet and so did the others. On the floor, Tita’s face had turned red with her exertions.

“Janet?” Patty turned to me.

“Carol?” I turned to her.

“What should we do?”

“What *happened* to her?”

“Oh, my God, she’s allergic!” That was Barbara, who was also allergic to things.

We left Tita on the floor like a big, gasping fish and ran to the leaders’ room. And then everything happened very fast; the ambulance came and Tita was scooped up and carried away to the hospital. I don’t even want to think about what the leaders said to us, but behind all their scolding I could smell fear. Tita was the only one who spoke Spanish among us, adults or Scouts, and now we’d have to face Spanish-speaking Mexico without her.

*

Again I ask, why did we hate her? We were six ordinary girls, but living with secrets that made us all feel weird. Two of us came from single-parent homes: Patty’s father had abandoned her mother and my mother had died. Quiet little Sue lived with an alcoholic father and physical abuse, which we only learned about later. Barbara’s parents sent her to a Catholic school, though they weren’t married in the Church because Barbara’s mother had been divorced earlier. Barbara kept quiet about this all through grade school and high school; the nuns back then would have called Barbara illegitimate to her face if they’d known. Carol’s parents were elderly and strict; clueless, we’d say today. Cecile’s parents seemed too young to cope with five kids. We were all white, of course, though some of us were more racist than others in 1960. And every one of us was destined to write a high school book report on *Lord of the Flies* without once thinking of Tita.

Here’s how we all turned out. Four out of six of us have college degrees, and Patty only needs one more semester to finish. We became two housewives, one ex-airline attendant, one artist, and two teachers. Two of us are still married, three are

divorced and one of us is widowed -- good riddance, the rest of us say. Among us, we have fourteen children, mainly in their twenties now. Only four of us have had kids; of these kids, five are married and two have children. Patty and I are the only grandmothers.

Four of us still live in New Orleans; one is in Austin, Texas, and another in Tucson, Arizona. None of us has died yet.

Tita didn't die either, but she dropped out of Girl Scouts after our trip to Mexico. She went to her fancy high school, where she learned to speak French as well as she spoke English and Spanish. Then she went to Princeton and on to Harvard Law School. With her trilingual skills, she became an international lawyer in New York, a fact her mother Lillian kept bragging about to our parents. Lillian and Alberto died -- oh, about ten or twelve years ago. I heard that Tita got married and I think she had a child, but I don't know if it was a boy or a girl, and I certainly don't know if Tita or the maid (of course, she'd have a maid) bathed the child after the age of eleven. I'm convinced Tita is still alive, though this is just a belief I have, not anything I know for sure.

MARY'S FUNERAL

The phone call came at eleven o'clock Wednesday night. Martha and Clara, the Argentine exchange student, were perched on Martha's bed in the upstairs front bedroom exchanging curse words. Clara's command of English was better than Martha's present-tense Spanish, but Clara still thought *playa* was a dirty word in English. Beach, bitch, all right. Martha giggled, then the phone rang.

"*Quien* – who answers at night?" Clara asked in her careful English.

"Me." Martha jumped off the bed. "It might be Billy." She ran into the hall and caught the phone on its fifth ring. Her heart suddenly pounded; it was really too late for Billy to call.

"Mist' Charles?" It was a black man's gravelly voice. Martha knew who it was and why he was calling.

"No, it's Martha," she said, as if Rodney couldn't have figured that out for himself.

"Miss Martha, I'm sorry to tell you, Mary passed away two hours ago."

Martha's voice died in her throat. Mary was dead who'd always been there waiting when she came home from elementary school, baking cookies, ironing shirts, listening to the Dodgers, cooking dinner. The third of Martha's six parents to die.

"Miss Martha? You there?"

"Yeah, Rodney, yeah, I'm here."

"Can I talk to your father?"

“Yeah, sure.” She put down the phone and was halfway down the stairs before she remembered she hadn’t said a word of sympathy to Rodney, Mary’s nephew. But Mary was Martha’s loss too.

“Daddy.” She opened the study door into a blast of operatic mayhem. Crossing to the record player, she turned the volume way down.

“What is it?” he said at the sight of her face.

“It’s, it’s Rodney. Mary’s –”

“Oh, God.” He rose from his chair, an antique rocker with elongated arms that came from the plantations a hundred years ago. They always called it the mint julep chair. As her father moved toward the hall, Martha slumped into the chair and began to rock.

“Hello, Rodney? I’m so sorry to hear about Mary. God bless her.”

A silence. Then “Uhn-huh. Right. Saturday, three o’clock in St. Francisville. We’ll be there.” More silence. “Yes, of course, I’ll speak; we all loved Mary. Now give me directions to the church.”

Saturday! Martha’s heart thumped again. She didn’t want to sacrifice a Saturday with Billy. The thought of him laughing with all those cute Argentine girls in the exchange group made her nervous.

Slowly she trailed back upstairs. Clara intercepted her in the hall.

“*Marta, que pasa?*”

“Our cook just died.”

Clara’s dark brown eyes went soft with sympathy. “You loved her?”

“Yes, of course.” It occurred to Martha that plenty of people didn’t love their cooks. But Mary was different. “She raised me,” Martha said.

Clara opened her mouth to ask something more, but Martha had had enough of being a good hostess. Shaking her head, she sidestepped her guest and went to her room, closing the door almost in Clara’s face. That was rude, but she couldn’t help it. All she wanted was to climb into bed and cry. And get mad about her ruined Saturday.

She conjured up smells: Mary’s apron, her dark hands glossy with starch, sugar cookies in the oven, the round, hard feel of her bosom and stomach when Martha squeezed her. Their private jokes, like when Mary put her apron on backwards and the embroidered name read Yram. Ahtram and Yram they had called themselves after Martha reversed the letters of her own name. The food Mary cooked, my God, her gumbo and fricasseed chicken, her pie crusts, her redfish courtbouillon and crawfish etouffee. Now she’d never get that gumbo recipe she’d asked Mary to write down.

Martha muffled a sob in her quilt. She’d lived without Mary for a year, a whole year without her presence and her cooking while Mary recovered from a heart attack. Martha’s father had paid Mary for that whole year, on the idea that she was coming back. Once Martha had asked him, “How much?” and he said, “None of your business.” Later on she found out it was eighty dollars a month. So they couldn’t afford another cook too, which was fine with Martha. She herself had started filling in for Mary, at least in the kitchen. She didn’t do dishes or shirts. Her uncle Hop did the dishes and her aunt Gladys ironed shirts. Both of them lived in the big rambling house with Martha and her father. Daddy’s job at the newspaper supported them all.

Martha had been so sure Mary was coming back, she hadn't bothered to write her or even visit her in the hospital except once. She just knew Mary would return all healed and pick up where she'd left off. Even though Martha was going to college next year, Mary could still iron her blouses and skirts and make her favorite dishes. Be there when Martha came home from college classes.

How could Mary die so soon? Sixty-two wasn't really old. Maybe it was this house: everybody seemed to die around sixty, if they didn't drop dead in their forties. Martha knew all about sudden death. Four years ago Uncle Jimbo, her favorite uncle, had dropped dead just as she took off for the movies. He'd been sixty. When Martha returned – she couldn't even remember what the movie was – Aunt Gladys and Daddy came out to meet her. Daddy had said, "Prepare yourself for some bad news," before telling her that Uncle Jimbo had died.

She hated that phrase worse than anything, worse even than missing next Saturday with Billy. And she didn't want to think of Uncle Jimbo dropping dead in his bedroom, or Mary falling asleep in the hospital and never waking up. Surely you'd wake up when your heart stopped beating. At least for one tiny moment, surely, and think, "Hey, I'm dying."

Twelve years ago when Martha had been only five her mother had had a stroke and died. Martha wasn't quite sure what a stroke was, but it was obviously fatal. And three years before that, Uncle Boots, the uncle she didn't remember, dropped dead just walking to the grocery store, right in the street. Martha thought she'd prefer Mary's death, drifting off to sleep. She herself was drifting off now.

*

The next night, the host families took the Argentine students to the opera. Martha's father, who was a music critic, made her go to all the operas and concerts at Municipal Auditorium. She'd hated it growing up, until she met Billy, who liked opera and classical music. Somehow, she then discovered that she did too. Billy would be at the opera tonight, with Guillermo, his Argentine guest. She and Clara, Jackie and Veronica, Sonny and Miguel, Nancy and Ana Luisa and all the rest of the student hosts and guests would be there too. Martha liked Clara; in fact, if Clara stayed in the U.S., they could become good friends, but she *hated* Veronica. Back in the summer, when Martha, Billy and the rest of the American group had visited Argentina for a month and stayed with the Argentines, Veronica had had her eye on Billy. She was the cutest of the Argentine girls, and Billy was by far the cutest of the American boys, but Martha and Billy had just gotten romantic in Argentina so Billy wasn't looking. Was he looking now?

As she dressed for the opera, Martha wondered. Her uneasiness, the clumsiness in her fingers as she tried to hook her Add-a-Pearl necklace behind her neck, had to come from somewhere. Would Billy miss her on Saturday if she went to Mary's funeral? Or would he hang out with Veronica and have a grand ole time? She'd have to ask Clara to keep an eye on them, which was humiliating.

The opera that night was *La Boheme*, not the best choice for Martha's sadness. She knew this opera was her parents' "song," and that was so weird because her mother had died young, just like Mimi though with a stroke, not tuberculosis. Daddy still wore his wedding ring after twelve years and that was even sadder. Now that Mary had just died, Martha knew she wouldn't be able to get through the opera without a couple of

handkerchiefs. She opened her bureau drawer, selected two handkerchiefs and stuffed them in her opera bag, then went out into the hall to meet Clara.

Clara was not pretty but her simple black cocktail dress made her look elegant, years older than Martha did in her pale-pink, scooped-neck taffeta. Clara wore no jewelry except for tiny diamond studs in her pierced ears. Her black curly hair was scooped up in a French twist and her dark eyes and dark skin looked great with the black dress. Martha immediately felt about two years old.

“Let’s go,” she said gruffly and led the way down the stairs and out to her father’s car. Daddy had been honking, one honk a minute, for the past ten minutes.

They got to the auditorium early. Daddy had wangled a ticket for Clara right next to their usual seats, left center, right above the balcony box seats. As they sat down, Martha zeroed in on Billy’s grandfather’s box, but they hadn’t arrived yet. She murmured to Clara that she was going to the ladies room to check her hair and makeup.

“You want I should come too?” Clara asked.

“No, don’t worry about it. I’ll just be a minute.”

She tottered on her high heels down the steeply-graded stairs and through the concrete tunnel that led to the second-floor lobby. There she stopped, just opposite the stairs Billy, Guillermo, and old Mr. Sonnier would take. A minute passed; two minutes. She played with her hair, snapped the clasp of her bag. Finally, she heard him before she saw him; he was laughing that special Billy laugh where he drew breath in rather than expelled it out. She watched him come into view, his face still full of laughter and she knew that no other girl had ever had such a wonderful boyfriend. Short, redheaded Guillermo came behind him, followed by old Mr. Sonnier. “Walter,” she called him in

her mind; Mr. Sonnier was one of her father's oldest friends and she'd always heard him called Walter at home. Plus Walter was Billy's middle name – and might eventually be hers.

“Martha, my dear.” Old Mr. Sonnier – Walter – came over and clasped her hand, then placed a soft, old-man's kiss on her cheek. “Don't you look pretty,” he said. She blushed and was promptly furious with herself.

“*Marta, que linda!*” Guillermo gave her the double Argentine kiss and a mocking grin. He knew her finery wasn't donned for him.

“Hi,” said Billy in a quiet voice.

“Hi, Billy,” said Martha. Neither of them moved to hug or kiss.

The five-minutes-to-curtain-time bell chimed. “Come on, boys. We'd better get to our seats,” said Walter.

“Billy, could I talk to you for a minute?” Martha gasped.

He looked at his grandfather and Guillermo then shrugged. “Sure,” he said.

She pulled him over to the side of the tunnel's entrance. “What's the matter?” he asked.

“Oh, Billy, I just had to see you. I – our cook died last night.”

Billy frowned, as if he couldn't remember Martha's family even had a cook. Of course, he'd only moved into town a year and a half ago. All Martha's friends from grade school knew Mary.

“Are you upset about it?” he asked.

“Of course I'm upset. She – uh –” To her horror, to the ruin of her mascara, Martha felt her eyes fill up. “Oh, Billy!” She flung herself at his chest.

He put an arm around her back to support her, but she knew he was looking around the lobby. “Martha, come on now. It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay. He didn’t want to be here, he didn’t want to deal with her grief or even see it. He just wanted to go to his grandfather’s box and sit down and enjoy the first two acts of *Boheme*. He didn’t care!

“Martha, come on, we’ve got to go sit down. I’ll talk to you at the intermission.”

She let him steer her down the tunnel. Then he left her and went to seek his own seat. She clambered up the stairs, jumped over her father’s knees and sank down beside Clara. The curtain went up, Rudolpho and Marcello started singing, and Martha drowned her mind in a cloud of music.

*

Two days later, on Saturday morning, riding in the back seat of the sickly-green Plymouth with her father and Aunt Gladys in the front, she finally confronted what she felt. About Mary; about Billy; about Veronica and loss and first love and everything. And it wasn’t good.

Billy. She loved him, she adored him, she wouldn’t mind working her fingers to the bone for him the rest of her life, but jeez! He hadn’t comforted her at all. He’d stuck close to Guillermo and the other Argentines during the *Boheme* intermission. He hadn’t even wanted to go out for a trip around the auditorium, where they could have kissed. And last night, Friday night, at Sonny’s party, he’d danced with her and laughed and talked and drunk wine with her, but he’d danced with Veronica too. And laughed with her and talked. What would happen today on the plantation tour, when she wasn’t around and Veronica was? She hated to think about it.

“You okay back there, Martha?” Gladys asked, twisting around in her seat. Her faded, affectionate blue eyes watched as Martha destroyed a fingernail.

“Yeah, sure, fine.” Martha spit the nail out and started on the next one.

“We could have left you home, honey,” said her father.

“No, no, I want to go to the funeral. I just wonder what it’ll be like.”

“Well, Mary was a Baptist and this is a black country church. We might see some fireworks, something a bit different from Holy Name funerals.” Holy Name was the uptown Catholic church from which all Martha’s relatives had been dispatched.

“They set off fireworks for a funeral?”

Aunt Gladys laughed. Her father said, “I don’t mean literal fireworks. It’s just, this might be a really emotional funeral, so you should prepare yourself.”

Prepare yourself! There’s some bad news. Martha shriveled up in the back seat and stared out at the boring, acid-green swamps of algae lining Airline Highway. In her mind, she made calculations: Mary died in 1965 at sixty-two. That means she was born in 1903. Daddy was also born in 1903. Oh, God.

Finally, they pulled into the parking lot of Don’s Seafood Restaurant in Baton Rouge. “There’s Anne’s car.” Gladys pointed out a old white Studebaker.

“So it is,” said her father. “I guess they’re already here.”

Gladys swiveled around again and looked her in the eye. “Martha, be nice to Brad today. He’s really upset by Mary’s death.”

“Yeah, sure,” Martha said and, out of eyesight, shrugged. She thought Brad, Mary’s other white child, was an awful sissy. Brad’s mother, Anne Bergeron, had been her mother’s best friend, and the two families had shared Mary for over a decade.

But Martha always knew she came first with Mary, over Brad.

She liked Anne Bergeron though. Anne even looked like what Martha could remember of her own mother, tall, slender, darkhaired, quietly amusing and amused. Aside from physical looks, there was a serenity about Anne, despite her bitter divorce from Brad's father about the time Martha's mother had died, that Martha appreciated. She realized – or had realized, somewhere down the line – that her own mother might have been a nice person to know. As nice as Aunt Gladys, her mother's sister, or as nice as Mary.

She went into the restaurant thinking about Anne and the ease she felt in Anne's presence. And when she saw Anne, she gave her an extra-big hug. She waved at Brad and hung back from contact with him. Brad demanded so much attention. Carla, one of her high school friends, had dated Brad seriously for two years; Martha had introduced them and lived to regret it. Eventually Carla got tired of Brad's moaning and had stopped talking to him. Every time Martha saw Brad, she felt a tiny bit guilty, as if she'd pushed him off on Carla and Carla now blamed her for it.

The two families ate enormously for eight dollars apiece, a six-course meal obsessed with crawfish. Cocktail, bisque, etouffee, pie – only the house salad and the ice cream wasn't made of crawfish. Martha's father insisted on paying for the five of them. And then, at two o'clock, they were out in the whiteness of Don's oyster-shell parking lot, feeling blinded and stuffed. The adults conferred about the map to Mary's country church in St. Francisville. Martha and Brad left them to it and moved toward a clump of pine trees at the verge of the lot.

“I called Carla last night,” Brad said. “I knew she loved Mary as I did, so I wanted to tell her.”

“Oh, Brad. How well did Carla know Mary?”

“She’d met her. And she’d heard me talk about her.”

It occurred to Martha that Brad was wrong; you couldn’t communicate Mary by talking. She’d tried with Billy, she’d even tried with her grade-school friends who remembered Mary. What she could see in her friends’ minds as she talked was the idea, “This was a black servant; why are you so upset?” Of course, her friends were far more segregationist than she and her father were. And they didn’t really know about Mary, not what she knew and missed: that starch and sugar cookie smell, those glorious dishes, the fun in Mary’s kitchen and the rightness. Yram and Ahtram.

It had been over three days since Mary died and no one Martha had talked to had understood her. Of course Brad wouldn’t; he just saw Mary as an escape from his parents who hated each other. And yet – she reached out to Brad and touched his shoulder.

“I know. I feel it too.”

Brad leaned into her touch for a second, then turned aside. “No, I don’t think you do. You’ve got so many people around you and I –” He began to cry against a pine tree. “Mary’s the only one who loved me.”

She loved me too, better than you. Martha almost said it, but she couldn’t. She would never be as needy as Brad, never. Even though he had two living parents and she had to make do with mother-substitutes. Never.

She backed away, watching him cry, hating him. He had shared Mary with her and for that she hated him. To her relief, the adults broke up their huddle and the two families got back into the cars.

An hour later, they were reunited in another blinding-white parking lot outside Grace of God Baptist Church. Oyster shells had been liberally strewn in the enclosed space, and the heat, intense for February, vibrated off the mollusk surface. Martha's father drove in and parked with care. Everyone knew that oyster shells could demolish tires.

As they emerged from the cars and moved forward to the porch of the small, cinder-block church, a tall, thin black man about Mary's age came forward, hand outstretched.

"Mist' Fortier, how nice to see you."

Martha's father clasped his hand. "I don't believe I know your name," he said.

"Cletus Reynard, Mist' Fortier. I'm pastor of this church here. I want to offer my condolences on Mary's death."

"Thank you," Martha's father said, giving the Reverend Reynard's hand a firm shake. "We will all miss Mary so much." He presented Gladys and Anne, Martha and Brad. The preacher shook each hand, then ushered them into the church. Martha, accustomed to Holy Name, to Saint Louis Cathedral, to St. Patrick's downtown, found the spare building very unchurchlike. It was no larger than her living and dining room at home. There were no saints' statues in the side aisles, or side aisles at all. There was no crucifix above the altar, nor was there even a real altar, just a spare table in the center of a raised, two-step platform. Martha felt totally bewildered.

But as she moved up to the first pew on the right-hand side of the church, she realized that Mary was there too; there to her left, lying in an open coffin. Mary's skin looked grey, not Mary's warm, starch-smelling brown. She was wearing a pink frilly nightgown which shocked Martha. Her people went to their graves in Sunday clothes. Mary, lying there in a night dress was an alien, a non-person, someone Martha had never seen before. And hoped she could forget.

"Martha! And Mist' Charles, and Miz Gladys!" An elegant woman, slim in a well-cut black suit, came over to their pew. She clutched hands with Martha's father, brushed cheeks with Aunt Gladys, and hugged Martha with Mary's own exuberance. During the hug, Martha remembered her – Mary's daughter, Mary Alice, who lived in Lake Tahoe as the housekeeper of a millionaire. It always used to amuse Martha that their cook spent her vacations in a glamorous place like Lake Tahoe, when all her father could afford was car trips to the Smoky Mountains.

"How are you doing?" Gladys asked kindly.

"Oh, you know." Mary Alice touched a black-bordered handkerchief to her perfectly made-up eyes. Martha stared; she'd never seen a funeral handkerchief before. Lots of things she'd never seen before, nightgown on corpses. . .

"I get teary from time to time," Mary Alice went on. "But Mama was so sick –" She broke off again, dabbed her eyes. "I'm okay now. And doesn't Mama look beautiful?"

"She sure does, just beautiful," Gladys echoed in a tone of voice that tried not to mean just the opposite. Mary Alice didn't notice.

“My brother Albert came,” she said, pointing to the front left-hand pew. Martha craned her head around and recognized Mary Alice’s broad-shouldered husband, Tom the millionaire’s chauffeur. Next to him sat a pitifully-thin black man in a brown suit. In contrast to Tom’s erect posture, this man sat hunched over, staring at the floor. His face didn’t look a bit like Mary’s, though Mary Alice’s did.

“Mama would be so pleased he could come,” Mary Alice said. “And also that y’all came. Thank you.” She hugged Gladys and Anne briefly and crossed the center aisle to her own pew. Tom put his large arm around her shoulders and the two of them sat straight as a row of pins, waiting for the service to begin.

From the back of the church, an organ started up. The congregation stood and began to sing as the minister came up the aisle. Martha didn’t recognize the hymn; it was Baptist and she only knew Catholic hymns, but the people seemed to know it by heart, even to the harmony. Bass voices rumbled below the melody while the sopranos soared. Something about being in Jesus’ arms, safe with the Lord. She turned around and stared; the whole congregation was swaying on their feet, keeping time with bodies and shoulders. Tears pricked Martha’s eyes. This was both sad and lovely.

The pastor paused at Mary’s open coffin and peered in, as if to ask her a question. He stayed looking at Mary for a long time, a long, long time to Martha. What was he doing? Making sure she was really dead?

“Oh!” Martha covered her mouth. She was appalled to think she’d almost laughed out loud. Beside her Brad was crying soundlessly. Finally the reverend moved on to mount the raised platform. He turned to the swaying congregation, raised his arms and joined in the song with a rich baritone voice.

Now Gladys was sniffing. Anne scrambled in her purse for a Kleenex. Brad gave an open sob. Martha squeezed her eyes shut; she was not going to cry. Not, not, not! She opened her eyes and stared at the floor; linoleum, just like her kitchen.

The voices trailed off; the organ stopped. The pastor stopped singing too, but his arms remained up in the air, like Moses in Martha's Children's Bible.

"My dear brothers and sisters, and our honored guests, we come together in this sad time to bid farewell to our sister in Christ, Mary Stevenson –"

Martha stopped listening; she never listened to sermons. There was too much else to think about. Mary's son, for instance; she'd never known Mary had a son. Mary had never talked about a son, though she mentioned Mary Alice a lot. Maybe because there was something wrong with him. He certainly looked like it. She glanced around Aunt Gladys's comfortable bulk to stare at the other pew. There sat Mary Alice and Tom, upright and attentive, and there sat Albert Stevenson curled in upon himself, his face to the floor. He looked sick, like someone with a bad stomach ache.

"And so, my dear brothers and sisters, we come to the Lord confident he has taken Mary Stevenson into his loving care. The minute Mary arrived on God's threshold, He opened His arms wide, wide, and said, 'Come in, Mary. Come in, my good and faithful servant.'"

Brad let out another dry sob. Albert Stevenson bent nearer the floor. Martha felt the lump in her throat dissolve into tears in her eyes. Oh, God, she didn't want to cry like the wimp Brad. Or that awful Albert Stevenson, whose own mother wouldn't even talk about him.

Thank God, the preacher was winding down. But, wait, what was this?

“And so I’ve asked Mary’s employer, Mistah Charles Fortier, to say a few words in her honor. Mistah Charles?”

Daddy rose from the pew and moved up to the platform. He turned and faced the congregation, hands clasped before him. Martha was proud of him standing up there. It couldn’t be easy.

“Thank you, Reverend Reynard. I’m honored to be asked to speak.” He took a breath. Only Martha could tell he was a trifle nervous. “When my dear wife Ruth died twelve years ago, Mary came to me and said the most comforting thing anyone could say. She said, ‘Mistah Charles, I want you to know what a great lady Miz Ruth was. I never heard her speak an unkind word, not to me, not to anybody.’” He paused again, and that was when Martha lost the battle. Tears filled her eyes and spilled over, down her cheeks, plopping to her lap.

Through a fog, she heard her father say, “It takes a gentle soul to recognize another one. Kind people appreciate other kind people. And so, I say to you today, that Mary was the kindest, gentlest soul in the world. She treated my daughter Martha and Brad Bergeron, the two white children she watched over, like a second mother. She was kind, she was faithful, and I have no doubt she is now in God’s hands. God bless you and keep you, Mary.”

He came down from the platform and went straight to the coffin. He actually touched the corpse, tracing a cross on Mary’s forehead. Martha couldn’t believe it.

Her father sat down. Gladys squeezed his hand. Anne sniffed and said, “That was beautiful, Charles.”

“Thanks,” he said gruffly and cleared his throat. Martha only cried.

“And now,” the pastor said, “let’s have a hymn. Let’s sing of that Rock of Ages, that rock that Mary clung to, that rock that we ALL must cling to. Up, now, on your feet, and let’s sing Mary into heaven.”

The congregation sprang up. The two white families rose a bit more slowly. They all knew this hymn, even though it was Protestant.

It started slowly, the first few verses; Martha expected it to stay that way. For a few seconds she forgot why she was there, why she was crying, as she listened to the baritones and the sopranos blending and weaving. Then the pace accelerated and the clapping began, a syncopated sound that seemed to drive the voices. The little church was too small to contain whatever spirit was running through the congregation. Martha began to enjoy it, as pure music, pure rhythm. Then a voice shrieked out of register from the back of the church. There was a scrambling noise and – oh, my God, Martha jerked around just in time to see a fat woman in a navy dress sink to the floor.

And the congregation just kept on clapping and singing. The fat lady was in the aisle, moaning and writhing and shrieking out words impossible to understand. Then another scream and another woman fell to the ground. This one spoke in English at the top of her voice: “Oh. Mary, Mary, Mary. Oh, I see Mary, Mary, Mary and Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Yes, He’s got his arms around Mary, Mary, Mary.”

“Hallelujah!” shouted the Reverend. “Mary’s in Heaven!”

The white families had jumped up at the first shrieks. They stood together at the head of the aisle and watched in horror as two more women sank down with unearthly shrieks. Four down, and now from the right-hand front pew, Albert Stevenson tumbled to the ground and started to shake all over.

“Daddy! What’s going on?”

Her father looked bewildered. “I don’t know. Maybe they’re speaking in tongues. And I think Mary’s son’s having an epileptic fit.”

“Wha—”

“Shush. We’re visitors. Come sit down.”

Martha shushed but stayed where she was. The shrieks began to subside, the clapping slowed, then the hymn ended as softly and mournfully as it began. Several of the women began to rise from the floor, helped by their neighbors. Martha saw the fat lady in navy brush the back of her skirt.

“Reverend!” Mary Alice called. The pastor crossed over to Mary’s family and stared down at Albert’s contorted body. His back arched; it looked as if he was only supported by his heels and his head. Martha couldn’t see his face.

“Is there a nurse here?” the Reverend said, straightening up. Plainly, Albert’s fit was different from the women’s activities.

“I’m a nurse.” A tall, heavy woman pushed her way to the front of the church.

“Oh, Sister Carmichael. What can we do for him?”

She squatted next to Albert and started to pull at his face. “Doesn’t look like he’s swallowed his tongue,” she finally said. “He’ll come out of it in a minute.”

And he did. As simply as that, Albert stopped jerking around and lay still. The nurse spoke to Mary Alice, “I’ll look after him. Y’all go on with the funeral.”

But somehow, it was hard to regain the funeral tone after all the excitement. The pastor made a few quiet remarks, then Mary’s coffin lid was lifted above her by the undertakers. Reverend Reynard announced that the burial would be private and thanked

the congregation, along with the white families, for coming. Mary Alice hugged them all, then they left the church, to Martha's great relief, and walked out into the shell lot.

When they were out of earshot of the country Baptists, Martha's father made the statement which would be her chief memory of the funeral, apart from Mary's corpse.

"Now I understand the Nuremberg rallies," he murmured half to himself.

Martha stopped and spun around. "What did you say?"

"I said, now I understand the Nuremberg rallies. You know, the Hitler rallies with thousands of people yelling heil Hitler and giving the Nazi salute."

"Daddy –"

He looked shaken. "I really don't understand that sort of thing," he said.

Understand what? Emotion? All a World War II veteran can turn strangeness into was Hitler?

They climbed into the cars. Quite without expecting to, Martha cried all the long way home. She didn't cry for Mary, her Mary, Yram with the round body and the warm hands and the yeasty, gumbo-y smell. No, she cried for this new, unexpected Mary, the one she'd never known, the Mary who had a hidden epileptic son, who was used to people being buried in their night clothes, who worshipped in a church where they fell to the floor and talked gibberish, and never let on that she couldn't read and write. Which was why she'd never written down the gumbo recipe when Martha asked her to, and now Martha was going to spend the rest of her life trying to reproduce that gumbo.

Her tears began to dry up as they crossed the Bonnet Carre Spillway. Daddy and Aunt Gladys in the front seat had let her cry and hadn't said a word about it. They hadn't said much of anything to each other either; both were too shook up, it seemed.

Martha wondered if she'd tell Billy and her friends about Mary's funeral. Somehow, she didn't want to talk about it, and she knew it would never get mentioned again in her house. Later on that evening, at another party for the Argentines, she and Billy stepped outside for a breath of air. He took her in his arms, saying, "I missed you today. The plantations weren't fun without you."

"I missed you too," she sighed and waited for his kiss. That was all Billy needed to know.

VITA

Marie Dufour Goodwin was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on June 8, 1947. She received her primary and secondary education in the private schools of that city. In 1965 she entered Tulane University where she studied history, French, and English literature. She spent her junior year in Paris, France, studying at the Sorbonne. She received her undergraduate Bachelor of Arts degree in 1969, graduating *um laude* with a concentration in European history and a double minor in French and English.

Ms. Goodwin entered the Department of French at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1971. She accumulated over seventy hours of graduate credit, but left without obtaining an advanced degree. She entered the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Louisiana State University in Fall 1999 and anticipates obtaining this degree at Spring Commencement 2002.

Her academic honors include a full tuition scholarship to Tulane University, 1965-69; a National Defense Education Act fellowship at Vanderbilt University, 1971 to 1973; a Graduate Teaching Assistantship in the Department of English at Louisiana State University from 1999 to 2002; and a Graduate Enhancement Award for the same dates.

In 1982, Ms. Goodwin moved to New Orleans and began teaching high school French. She taught at Mercy Academy, Carrollton Presbyterian School, and Mount Carmel Academy, the latter for fifteen years. During this time, she taught four levels of French, as well as teaching World History for three years. In addition, she completed the necessary education courses for Louisiana state certification in high school French. At

present she holds a lifetime teaching certificate from the Louisiana Department of Education.

From 1979 to 1981, Ms. Goodwin worked as a part-time line editor and translator (French to English) for Thomas Nelson Publishers in Nashville. Between 1990 and 2002, she served as an editorial assistant and fiction reader for the Ahearn Literary Agency in New Orleans, also on a part-time basis. Ms. Goodwin has also done freelance reading and editing of manuscripts from 1997 to 2002.

While at Thomas Nelson Publishers, Ms. Goodwin published two articles, “The Leper” and “The Passover Seder” in *The Bible Almanac*, 1982. In 1989, Ms. Goodwin published a young adult novel, *Where the Towers Pierce the Sky*. This work was published by the Four Winds Press, a subsidiary of Macmillan.

At LSU, Ms. Goodwin has taught seven semesters of English 1001 (freshman composition) and one semester each of 1002 (argument) and 2005 (short story writing).