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TALKING TO THE SEWER MAN: A COMPILATION  
OF SHORT STORIES

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MARGARET ANNE HAERENS

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TALKING TO THE SEWER MAN: A COMPILATION OF  
SHORT STORIES

By

Margaret Anne Haerens

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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ABSTRACT

TALKING TO THE SEWER MAN: A COMPILATION OF  
SHORT STORIES

By

Margaret Anne Haerens

This thesis is a set of short stories about people and relationships in contemporary America. It was written over a two year period as partial fulfillment for M.A. requirements.

Dedicated to Patricia, my mother  
and best friend.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Arthur Athanason for inspiring me to see something new. And special thanks to Dr. William Penn, a man whose encouragement and advice was the light at the end of my academic tunnel.

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## INTRODUCTION

This compilation of short stories was completed in two years, the time it took to fulfill the requirements for my M.A. degree.

If the stories have a common thread, it is the determination of its protagonist to strive for something beyond what they have, what they know. It may be subtle, and it may be unhealthy, but still, these characters try to see or feel something that means more. They may fail, or even succeed, but the effort is what makes living worthwhile.

## Valerie

"Your mother is so pretty," Angela said to Valerie over her plate of hot dogs and potato salad.

"Yeah," said Valerie, watching her mother talk to Mr. Barette from a hill overlooking the picnic.

"She sure is skinny. How does she stay so skinny?" Angela asked, watching Valerie's mother too.

Valerie leaned over her own plate which was resting in the grass in front of her, and picked at a piece of barbecue chicken. "She doesn't eat, that's how."

"I wish I had that kind of willpower. I especially wish my mother did." Angela looked over at her mother, a large woman eating an icecream cone near the softball diamond.

"I think it's the whole divorce thing too, you know, when my dad was home she used to do all this cooking, but now that she's working at this place she comes home and she's too tired half the time," Valerie explained.

"Oh," said Angela quietly. Her parents had divorced when she was only a baby.

They sat on the hill, looking over all the adults half-drunk from the keg of beer, laughing like little kids as the sun made its slow decline, leaving streaks of red and purple



above the trees.

"My mother is so embarrassing," Angela said, as Angela's mother chased Ben the messenger around the picnic table, trying to taste his snow cone.

"One year my dad got really drunk and vomited all over the buffet table."

Both girls giggled. Angela put her plate down. "Was your mother mad?"

"She wouldn't speak to him for days." Valerie smiled. Angela lived on the next block and went to her junior high school. She would have to watch what she said. Angela didn't need to know what a jerk her father was, that her mother had to put a restraining order out on him just two months ago. Then he left, just left without saying goodbye, her mother saying that it was because he didn't want to pay the child support.

She didn't want to believe that. Valerie could blame her father for many things, like passing along his thin lips, his coarse, dark brown hair, his square body. Valerie was already bigger than her mother by two inches and she was only thirteen. It was her mother, tiny and petite and strong, ultimately stronger than her father, that had to share equal blame for the messy house and empty cupboards.

"My dad lives in Arizona," Angela volunteered. "He remarried this older lady who lives in a trailer and they bought brand new Harleys." She pulled her kneesocks up.

"That's cool," Valerie said. She had never been to

Arizona, or ridden on a motorcycle before.

"Your mom start dating yet?" Angela asked.

"No," said Valerie, as if the question was the most ignorant one she'd ever heard. "My mother is too busy with this job to date. She just got a promotion, you know." Valerie was proud of that. Her mother had put in long hours once she had gone full-time, and Valerie knew that her mother had been worried about money. But with the promotion, her mother had been more relaxed, even happy.

"That's cool," Angela said nonchalantly. Her mother hadn't gotten a promotion in a long time. She wondered what her mother would have to do to get one. Her mother had been there a lot longer than Valerie's mother.

"Your mother sure is pretty," Angela said again, slower this time, and Valerie heard her and looked down the hill toward her mother once again. She was still talking with Mr. Barette, their bodies close together, watching each other as they spoke, and Valerie watched her mother's head bow as he leaned to her ear, and then her mother smiled, not an adult smile, but the kind of smile Valerie saw on the pretty girls at school when the boys came round. That her own mother would remind her of these girls, girls that made fun of Valerie in gym class and home ec, made her lay back on the grass on the hill and look up at the sky.

"Your mom works for Mr. Barette, doesn't she?" Angela asked.

"Yeah, so?"



"He's never been married. My mother says he's one of the best catches in the corporation." Angela ate the last bit of hot dog left on her paper plate. "My mom would know too. She's looking to get married again."

Valerie sat up slowly, trying to appear calm. "Not my mom. She's got bigger fish to fry." She stretched her shirt out a bit, not wanting it to get caught in the folds of her stomach.

"Whatever." Angela rose to her feet. "I'm gonna get some more pop. Do you want some?"

"Thanks." Valerie handed her glass to her and laid back on the hill. From her back she watched Angela waddle down the hill, almost slipping at the bottom, and then Angela's mother call her.

"My mother doesn't even know I'm here," she said out loud. Two young boys, around seven maybe, ran up and down the hill about twenty feet away from her. She propped herself up on her elbows and saw her mother walking with Mr. Barette in the direction of the bathroom near the parking lot.

Valerie sat up again, watching them getting further and further away, until finally she got up and walked toward the bathroom herself. She walked quickly and steadily, breaking into a trot when she reached the trees. She looked for her mother's little lavender sundress, sleeveless, and the cute leather sandals that were perfect on her tiny alabaster feet. But there were only other couples, nameless adults acting like idiots, talking too loudly, laughing too easily, and Valerie

reached the bathrooms too soon.

She walked in, searching through the woman and girls in front of the mirror, some of them smoking, laughing, gossiping, and then she gasped when she heard a very tall woman with short hair and glasses mention her mother's name, Lucy. Valerie stopped, waited, forgot to breathe, as the tall woman bent forward to butt out her cigarette and said something to a shorter lady in a long, brown skirt. Valerie turned when she heard them laugh a laugh she recognized from her crowd in junior high, a laugh she had laughed before: jealous and accusatory.

Outside, the sky seemed more vibrant as Valerie stumbled toward the parking lot. The gravel crunched under her feet, and the rows of cars stood silently as she passed one after the other.

"Valerie?" Her mother called from the next row.

Valerie turned and saw her with Mr. Barette, both shy as if they had been caught doing something that they shouldn't.

"I want to go home," Valerie said, looking past her mother at Mr. Barette, his face so different from her fathers. Mr. Barette was light, and small featured and confident. He didn't look away, even when Valerie repeated her demand, this time narrowing her eyes with warning.

"Don't take that tone of voice with me," her mother said, but Valerie just looked from Mr. Barette to her mother, not changing expression.

"We're going to start the bonfire..." Mr. Barette began.



"Jim," her mother's voice was flat, and Valerie didn't care about the damn bonfire or the damn tall woman in the bathroom, she just wanted to go home.

"I'll wait in the car." Valerie said, and walked through the row to the passenger side of her mother's car. She opened the door without looking at either one of them. She wondered where her father was. Valerie looked up, watching her mother talk with Mr. Barette, it seemed as if he was trying to convince her to stay, and she was listening, head bowed toward him, and then her mother looked up smiling like she used to do with Valerie's father when they had been happy a long time ago. Valerie held her breath as Mr. Barette reached out and touched her mother's arm, tenderly, seductively, as no man had ever touched Valerie, and Valerie began to cry, not really knowing why, feeling like an animal trapped in a cage watching the people walk by, unhindered.

## Nathan

The word got out around dinnertime; Nathan Appleman was up in the tree and wouldn't come down, even for his mother. Joey Tirone said that he was so high up that everyone was afraid the branches would break. That's all the kids on the block needed to hear- who cared about dinner when Nathan could fall and break a leg or something?

I went over there with my little brother, Tommy, and Rich. At first, Rich said it was kid stuff, and we were too old to watch some eight year-old throw a tantrum. But I felt I had to go, after all, I had been Nathan's babysitter since his family had moved in a couple of years ago, and maybe I could talk him into coming down. So Rich said it was okay; we'd only been going together for a week and he was one of the coolest guys in school.

We could see the Appleman's house from the driveway. There was a ring of kids and bikes around the maple in the front yard, and we could make out a dark shape pretty far up. It was March, not too cold, but still not spring, and Nathan had no leaves to hide him.

Even from a couple houses away, I could see that Nathan's mother wasn't outside. She had asked me to call her Janine,

but I still couldn't make myself do it; after all, I was only twelve and a half and she was in her thirties. I tried to for awhile, especially after Mr. Appleman (he said to call him David) left and moved into an apartment near the mall.

It seemed that Nathan was so high up, he'd kill himself if he fell. Nathan was small and light, but the branches up that high didn't seem strong enough for even his small frame.

I called to him, but he didn't respond.

"He's not talking to anybody." Joey Tirone was Nathan's best friend. "Not even his mom."

Rich squeezed my hand. "Oh man, he's gonna splat when he falls."

I hit him. "Shut up. He's not going to." There were a half-dozen or so kids around the base of the tree, all around Nathan's age or younger, and Rich seemed to tower above them. They watched him cautiously.

"Does anybody know why he's up there?" I asked, but no one answered. "All right, how long has he been up there?"

"It's been awhile." One of the kids answered. "All of a sudden he just ran out and climbed up the tree, and his mom was out here and everythin', but he kept crying, and she kept saying she was sorry."

I looked toward the house, and there was his mother, in the front room, watching Nathan through the window, and I don't think I've ever seen anyone look so sorry.

"I'm going to talk to Mrs. Appleman, okay?" I let go of Rich's hand.

"You want me to go too?"

I looked up at Nathan, so small and so high up. "No, that's alright," I said.

Mrs. Appleman saw me cross the lawn and was waiting for me by the front door. She looked tired, and thin, and she held a kleenex and a drink. I could smell the alcohol the minute I came into the foyer.

"Hi, Jane, as you can see, I have another small problem here." She moved in short, nervous movements.

"I'm out of ideas. I really don't know what to do." She started crying, not making any noise, only tears, one after the other. She took a drink.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Does anything really happen?" She spread her arms apart, eyes fixed on nothing, asking a question to the wall. "I'm sorry?" I asked.

She blew her nose and walked back to the window. "Well you know that Nathan's father moved out last month. It's been tough on all of us."

"So Nathan just went up the tree?"

She took another drink. Her hand was shaking, and she spilled a little on the front of her sweater.

"Mrs. Appleman?"

She half-turned, her drink swinging up near her head. "Janine, please." She smiled. "Call me Janine."

I shifted uncomfortably. "You don't have to tell me what happened, Janine."

"That's better, isn't it? It makes me feel better, anyway. It would make me feel better to tell you what happened. Although I'm not exactly sure what happened. Things start out when you're young, you know, you have all these dreams... we got married when we were only nineteen... he was so handsome then." She started to cry again, still silent. "And then he brought me here and there's a lesson in there somewhere, I know there is," and suddenly she was almost yelling, "you can never love someone enough to make them happy."

"Oh," I said, and wished with everything in me that I could leave.

"I'm sorry, you don't need to hear this," she looked over to me, it seemed as if she wanted approval, or permission, she wasn't making much sense, but I shook my head.

"No, that's okay," I said as if it were.

"Do you want to see a picture of my wedding day?" she asked. She picked up a picture off of the table next to the bar, a framed picture of her and Mr. Appleman, her in her dress, he in his tuxedo. I had seen it many times before, the both of them looking like two totally different people, young and happy and expectant.

"I've seen it, it's a nice picture," I assured her, and she put it down jerkily, as if the frame was too hot to the touch.

"And you find yourself essentially alone," she was shaking now, "helpless, really, unable to admit that you made

one hell of a mistake. Can you believe it?" And Mrs. Appleman laughed, a choking, mean laugh.

"Wow, that's awful," I said, not quite sure if I should go over to comfort her, or stay.

"There are a lot of reasons why Nathan climbed the tree." She drank again, emptying the glass and setting it down on a front room table. "Just tell me why I'm punished for the sins of his father? Why is it my fault that his father left?"

"Uh, I don't know, I don't think that you are." It seemed that she needed an answer. "Maybe you're just the closest person around, and he has to take it out on someone."

"I am the closest person to him." She said it as if she were realizing it for the first time.

"You're his mother," I said, trying to make her feel better.

She nodded. "I'm always the bad guy. Telling him to come in. Do his homework. That his daddy isn't coming home tonight. I'm always the reason, the scapegoat. Don't let that happen to you."

"I'm only twelve and a half, Janine." I said, knowing that this would make her smile, and she came over and hugged me, smelling of gin and lime, and I hugged her back.

"I'm glad that you're my friend," she said.

She looked very young, and suddenly I felt very old. "Me too," and I felt sad.

As she let me go, I heard a car in the driveway.

"That'll be David. I called him on his car phone and told

him to get his ass over here to talk to his son." She paused for a moment, taking a deep breath before opening the front door, wiping her eyes with the ragged kleenex.

Mr. Appleman was already under the tree, talking up at Nathan, and both Mrs. Appleman and I walked out onto the porch.

"I'll get a ladder and bring you down. I will, don't think I won't." He looked over to the porch. "Hello Janine, Jane."

"Hello, Mr. Appleman."

The kids around the base of the tree began to stir in the near darkness; Nathan started to climb down quickly, agilely, it was quite exciting really, watching him come down and wondering what his parents would do to him.

When he reached the ground, Mr. Appleman grabbed him and hugged him roughly. I could hear Mrs. Appleman behind me, opening the front door and going back into the house. Without really thinking, I followed her back inside. She was pouring herself another drink at the bar in the front room, and turned when she heard the door close, her eyes darting from me to the door.

"Did you see that? He just comes over here and orders Nathan to come down," her whole body was shaking and she pointed out the front window, "and he just comes down." She took a sip. "Just like that. A savior. A goddamn savior to everyone but me." And she began to cry, weeping, and turned back to the bar.

I just stood in the foyer, suddenly realizing that it was almost dark. The light from the porch fell through the front room window, illuminating the bar and the back of Mrs. Appleman's bowed head. Mr. Appleman burst through the door, one hand on the back of Nathan's neck. "Janine!" he yelled, and then saw her, but she didn't turn around at the sound of his voice.

Nathan looked up at me, wordlessly, his eyes calmer than I thought they should've been. I smiled, tentatively, wanting to reassure him, knowing that my weak smile meant nothing.

"Goddamn it Janine," Mr. Appleman's voice was a threat, "what the hell is going on here?" He let Nathan go, suddenly seeing me, "oh, Jane, you're still here."

I looked at all three of them, the light coming through the front window, and the space between me and the door. "I'm glad everything turned out okay," I said, then felt stupid. Everything was not okay, and I turned in embarrassment, opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch.

Rich was out front in the street, and under the porch lamp I felt light-headed, I could hear Mrs. Appleman yelling as the door closed, and I walked across the lawn to where Rich was standing.

"He's gonna get it, isn't he?"

I considered my answer carefully. "Probably."

We started to walk back down to my house. The kids that had been hanging around to watch Nathan were still out on the street, still high on the excitement of watching Nathan in the



tree. We could hear them yelling to each other down the block, and in the cold night air, their voices made Mrs. Appleman and her wedding picture seem very far away.

"You want to go to the 7-11 and get a Big Gulp?" Rich asked.

"I guess, but we have to tell my mother first. She'll be worried." I saw my house, the porch light on, and thought of my mother inside.

"What's going on in Nathan's house anyway?" Rich asked.

I thought of Janine, how sorry she had looked, how out of control she was at the end. I would never forget watching her from the foyer, the light streaming through the window, her head bowed.

"Nothing," I said.

## Gaining Momentum

"I'm leaving. I really am this time," she said. Pete didn't even look up to see her leave. It was less than two minutes to half-time and Minnesota was making a surge.

"Aren't you even going to say anything this time? Not even good-bye you stupid son of a bitch?" Dee stood in front of the television. "How's this?" She wiggled her butt and started to unzip her jeans. "Watch this!" She turned her back to him, bent over, and mooned him.

"Hon, if you're on your way back to the kitchen could you grab me another Blue Ribbon? And check to see if we need more 'cause Russ and Paul are coming over at half-time?" He smiled expectantly, this was usually the point she came over to slap him, or jump on him, or sometimes even kiss him.

She straightened and gave him a sarcastic smile over her shoulder. "Do it yourself, you need the exercise."

Heck, her little tricks hadn't caused him to miss any of the game. If she was in that mood this would be a long- what luck, he thought, still a lot of time left. If they could just score before going into the locker room and get the momentum back...that's all they needed, some momentum.

It was then Carter fumbled the handoff, and the Eagles

recovered the ball. Pete sat on the edge of his easy chair and moaned. "Arrrrghhh," he said even more softly, letting it roll out of his mouth. Philadelphia now had a chance to score at least a field goal.

"Oh, and you do need more Blue Ribbon. You've had at least nine or ten out of that case." Dee grabbed one for herself. Might as well, she thought, it looked like another long, boring afternoon in front of the television. And Pete just sat in that old easy chair, not even changing the damn channel. It would never change, she thought, he would never change.

Pete stood and trotted over to the refrigerator to survey the beer situation for himself. Yeah, she was right as usual, there was no way what was left of that case would last past the third quarter, not with Russ and Paul coming, especially if Minnesota was going to continue playing like this. No way. A definite beer run would have to be made.

Dee's soft footsteps came up next to him. "I'll go. I've got to get out of here for at least a little while. That t.v. is driving me absolutely crazy."

He tried to give her money but she just pushed his hand away. "No, that's all right, I'll take care of it."

But Pete didn't want her to take care of it. He pulled out a twenty dollar bill and forced it into her tiny, manicured hands. "C'mon, they're my friends. I mean, if you want to pay for it, I won't press the issue, but..."

Dee looked up at him expectantly, nodded, and stuffed the

bill into her jacket pocket and started for the door.

"Hey Dee," he called after her, "you are coming back?"

She looked at him as if from a great distance. He seemed unsure and quite alone under the bright kitchen light. She was seized with the impulse to run. "Don't count on it," she said, and managed a weak smile.

Pete watched her get into the car. She was a small, petite woman with big platinum hair. She was quite attractive really, the observation aroused him, and he walked quickly to the window to call to her, but she was already gone.

He could see that the Eagles were still trying to get in from the four yard line. The Minnesota defense was holding on, there were only twenty seconds left, Philly had spent their last time-out. Hold on fellas, he thought to himself, just hold on 'till the half, if you can do it, so can I.

He could live with three points, that made the score 20-10, not an insurmountable deficit for Minnesota to make up. He was confident, damn it, and opened another beer to celebrate. A cool autumn breeze came through the screen door and he crossed the room to greet it. The beer was cold, predictable, not ornery like his wife. She was bored, he knew that, but it was a good life, especially at times like this, when the beauty of the land was unequaled by anything you could find anywhere else. He walked outside, just to kill some time before the guys came over, and stopped at the edge of the creek that ran through his backyard. The creek eventually became a river which ran over to town, it in fact paralleled

the road his wife was taking to get to the liquor store. He could walk along the water, past the small, dirty houses like his, then past the summer cottages and cheap motels that lined the way. On the other side of the mountain were resorts and chalets and luxury accommodations. He could just keep going, past the multi-colored mountain, and into the valley. He could keep going, get some momentum, right past everything he'd known and find somewhere totally new. He could start right now. But then again, he thought, Dee would find him on her way back and probably run him over with the Bonneville. That would definitely be his luck.

Paul and Russ pulled up before Dee returned. Pete was still in his backyard, watching a flock of birds start south. He was tall and wide and solid. But his face was lined and shy and slightly smiling. He was comfortably handsome, and well-worn.

"Hey, hey, how 'bout that defense?" Russ called out to him as he got out of the car.

"Hey, hey, how 'bout it? We barely got out with our butts intact." Everyone was mildly drunk, and the autumn chill was invigorating. The arrival of his friends comforted him, somehow made him feel as if everything would be alright, that this night would live up to its promise. The loneliness that had surrounded him, the restlessness, was gone now, and he involuntarily squared his shoulders against the cool air.

"Yeah, they got the momentum back," Paul said, nodding

his head.

They all went into the house. Russ and Paul settled onto the worn furniture in the family room while Pete grabbed the half-empty case of beer from the refrigerator. He tossed a couple of bottles over the kitchen counter to them, and took another one for himself.

Minnesota was getting ready to kick off to Philadelphia for the start of the second half, and Dee still wasn't back with the beer. What if she really did take off, he thought and then quickly reassured himself. No way, she'd never go. She'd threaten until she was blue in the face, but she'd never truly go. She loves me, he thought, everyone thinks about going, but thinking and doing are two different things. He resisted the urge walk out to the driveway to wait for her, he remained where he was, he just strained to hear the car come up the gravel drive, and was relieved when he finally heard it.

She walked up to the door with two big, brown bags. She could see Pete still in the easy chair; the television was on, but he was looking at her. The living room was welcoming and warm.

Paul jumped up from the couch to open the door and help her. Pete smiled, and she smiled back. He liked the way she looked at that moment, in the doorway, away from the light. He got up, just to be close to her, and helped her with her jacket. "What'd ya get, Dee?" he asked. "Did ya get any chips?"

"Well, they were having a sale down at the Stop-and-Go,

so I thought you guys would like a change for once." She pulled a case of Miller Lite from the bag. Cans.

He stared at the case, trying to stifle the anger that was rising within him. Cans, he thought. She couldn't just get what he wanted, it had to be what she wanted. She knew he would drink anything, as long as it was in a bottle. Briefly, he thought that she had done it on purpose, mad that he had invited his friends over to watch the game. "Thanks," he said half-heartedly, and he saw her smile disappear.

"Are you going to drink it?" she asked, and she really cared if he did or not. He answered that he would, but he didn't want to meet her eyes, for a brief moment he wanted her to suffer, to feel badly about her choice, and Dee was a smart woman. She knew him, because she didn't believe him.

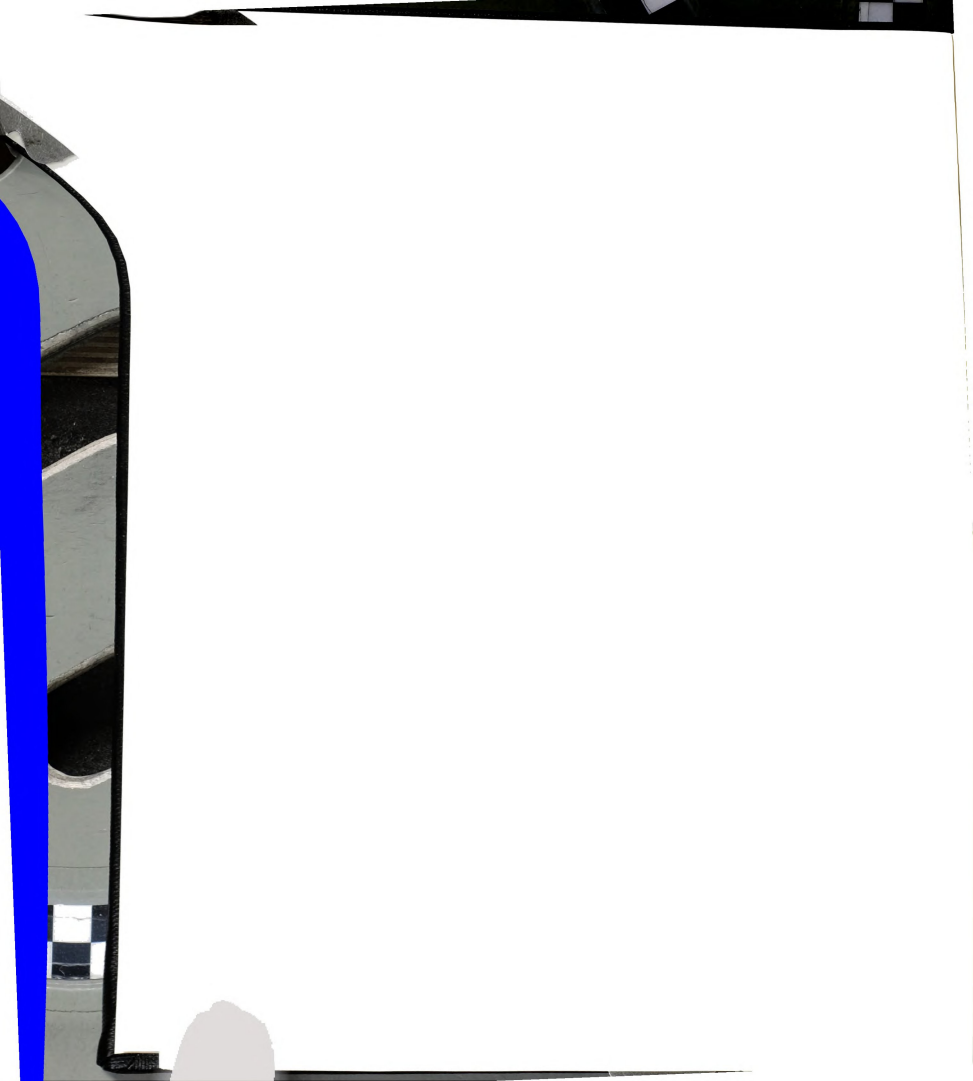
"I'll drink it Dee," volunteered Russ, and he glanced back at Pete, "I like cans. Ginnie really likes that brand."

"Yeah, I'll have some, I drink just about everything." The guys were trying to get him out of trouble, but it wasn't going to work with Dee.

Pete kept his head down, no use adding fuel to the fire, and he knew his wife was a bonfire once she got going. And she would burn all night if he wasn't careful.

"Fine," was all she said.

"Good, then I'll drink the rest of the Pabst," he mumbled, more to himself than anyone, but he realized that everyone heard him and he turned quickly to see the back of Dee's platinum head and pink jacket leaving the house.





"Shit," he said, exasperated but calm. "Why don't I learn to keep my big mouth shut?"

Pete looked over at Russ, who was staring blankly at the screen as if he were having a hard time concentrating on the game. Paul had opened a bag of tortilla chips from the bag he had taken from Dee and caught Pete's eyes. "I'd still like to try that Miller Lite," he said, and put a handful of chips into his mouth.

Minnesota was coming down the field, chipping away at the Eagle defense with short screen passes and several runs. Pete tried not to wonder about Dee, although he listened for the car. She was walking around out there somewhere, probably watching the sun go down over the water.

At the middle of the third quarter, the Vikings finally scored on a touchdown pass that Carter almost dropped in the end zone. It wasn't pretty, but they had scored. On the kickoff, Philadelphia fumbled, and the Vikings recovered and quickly converted it into another touchdown.

Russ and Paul and Pete hopped around the living room and yelled like a bunch of schoolboys. Hell, it was hard being Minnesota fans in South Dakota, being so far away from your team and all, and now they were only three points down with a little more than a quarter left.

Pete went back into the kitchen to grab one of the last Blue Ribbons from the refrigerator. From the window over the sink, he could see the headlights from the Bonneville. Dee was

in the car, he could see the small orange light from the cigarette she was smoking. He took one of the cold Miller Lite cans from the unopened case she had bought and carried both outside.

The gravel scrunched under his boots as he crossed to the Bonneville. She was sitting with her back up to the door and had the radio tuned to a country western station. The music was loud and she didn't hear him coming.

"Hey," he said, gently tapping on the window to get her attention.

She turned slowly and deliberately. Once again, he saw her face like he had a thousand times, and he liked it. In the shadows of departing light she was pretty in a way he hadn't remembered, as if nothing had come between them, and as if she could be more tolerant about things. Especially about him.

She rolled down the window a little bit more and threw out the remainder of her cigarette. Pete passed the can of beer to her and she took it with one hand and grabbed his hand with the other. She pressed her face against it. He was strong and big and safe. But Dee realized that she didn't want him to take care of her anymore and she kissed his hand, then his wrist and finally, his forearm.

Pete felt like he was being pulled into the car with her. He was uncomfortable and even scared, no, terrified, by the intensity of her affection. He knew deep down that she was scared too, and he bent down to kiss her, to grab ahold of her so she couldn't get away.

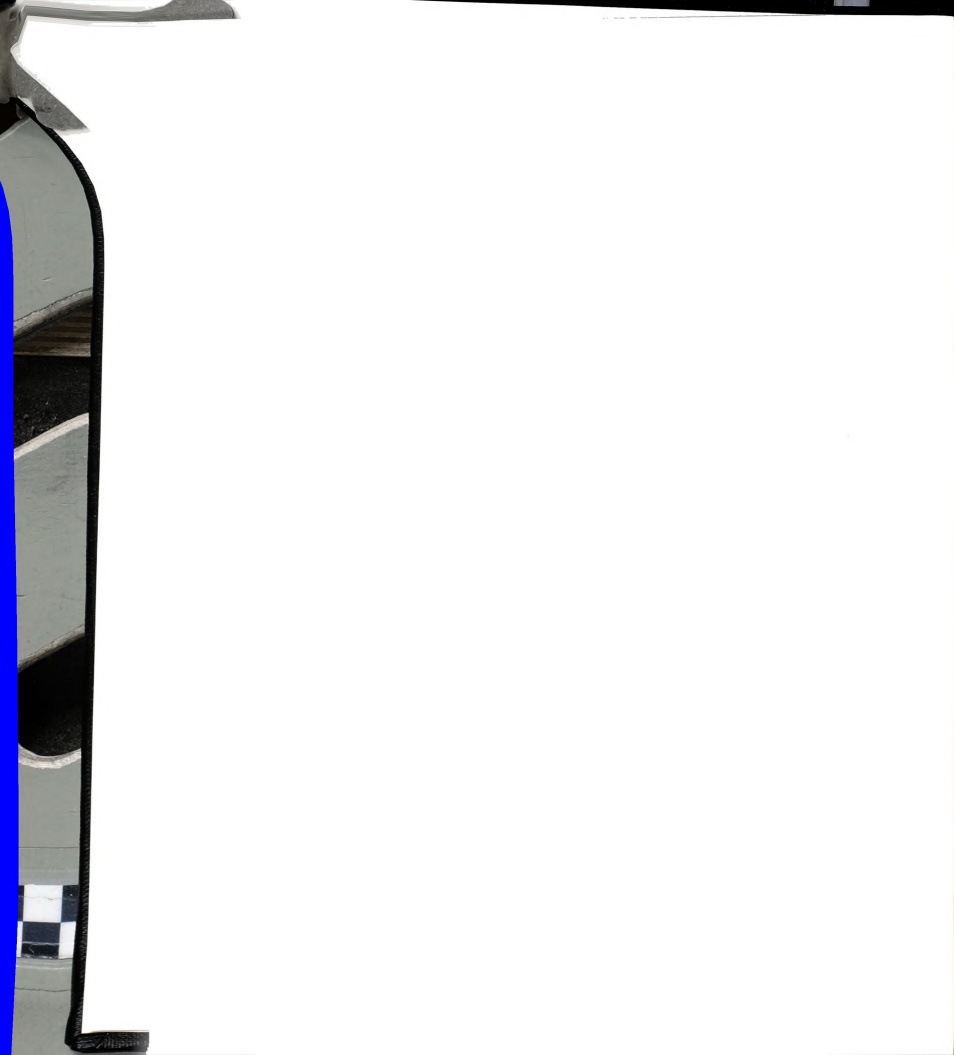
"Sometimes I just need an excuse is all," she explained, "ya know how sometimes you really want to do something, do somethin' else from what you've been doing, going somewhere you've never seen before."

"Restless, is that what you mean?"

"Yeah, that's it, restless like, that's exactly it. And I know that you don't feel that way at all, you'll be here 'til you die. Not that that's wrong or anything. It's just when I see you so settled, so happy with everything, I feel like we're two different people. I feel it then more than anytime." She dropped his hand to open the beer. The words were spilling out of her, she was gaining momentum now, there was no stopping her. And she wasn't mad, at least not at him, at least he didn't think so, and he wanted her to keep on talking as long as she wanted to. "I know you love me and I love you but we're two different people with our own lives, ya know? Not that it's not like we can't share our lives but sometimes it scares the shit out of me, everything just scares the shit out of me. I just want to run."

"But you never really go." Pete reached out with a tremulous hand and turned out the headlights.

"No, I never really go." She paused and looked into the kitchen. She could see the windowsill lined with tiny houseplants she'd grown from offshoots of others; and she saw the bare, bright light directly over the sink. The kitchen was small and yellow and glaring. "But that doesn't stop me from thinkin' about it every now and then. I'd like a less domestic



life, is all."

Pete was quiet for awhile. He couldn't accept this, he couldn't accept the realization that Dee wasn't happy with the life he had given her. And maybe it was the cool fall evening or that he was scared shitless, but he couldn't stop shaking. So, he took her hand again, this time more tightly, and felt her tiny, bony fingers intertwined with his. "Maybe all you need is a vacation. During Christmas we can go up to Canada, or we could visit your friends in San Francisco."

"Yeah, maybe that's all I need," she said quietly and drained the rest of her beer. He knew that she didn't believe that, and he wanted to say something that would make everything better, like it had been before. Yet something told him that nothing he could say would change the way she saw things. And in that instant, he felt his life drop away from him, plummeting, uncontrollable.

"Why don't you go back in. I'll be there in a couple of minutes." She looked back up to him and there were tears in her eyes. He knew, he hoped, that she would come back in in the end. She was not a woman to struggle against the odds. But she hadn't realized that yet.

And Dee was angry as she watched him hesitantly walk back to the house, she didn't want to be, but she didn't want to hear him anymore. She looked back in the window and saw him put the empty cans on top of the refrigerator. He looked back out at her and she thought, you can't see me, it's dark, and she turned up the music. She tried to remember when it had

been easy and good. It had been, and sometimes still was. But somewhere along the line she woke up and found herself in the very situation she thought she'd never be in, and she didn't know what was important to her anymore. She closed her eyes and imagined starting the car and following the creek past the mountain and beyond, she didn't have to know exactly where, that wasn't important, it was just the idea of beyond, something beyond the game, the house, the mountain that excited her. She was better than this, she thought, she used to have plans. She checked herself in the mirror, felt the alcohol hit her bloodstream, and saw her eyes, like the eyes of a drugged lion. She closed them again, startled, more afraid than before, and fought back the rising tears. When she opened her eyes, Pete was gone from the window.

Neither team had scored in his absence, Minnesota was still three points behind, but they were driving toward Philadelphia's goal.

It didn't take her long to come back in. A few minutes, actually. She immediately went to the kitchen and got another beer. He knew that she was embarrassed in front of Russ and Paul for walking out, she didn't know how to fit in and not sure if she wanted to, but Russ and Paul were too engrossed in the game to notice her arrival. She cracked the beer open forcefully, as if her force meant something, meant she could change something she hadn't been able to before.



During a time out, he went over to her like a puppy smelling another on the sidewalk: playful and apprehensive. She had lit another cigarette and threw the pack on top of the kitchen table.

He gazed out at the Bonneville alone in the dark and the moon over the trees throwing light on the creek in his backyard. "We're just short of paradise, ya know?" he said without warning and she looked over and smiled because that was something he'd said to her before, several times really, long ago. She reached out and put her arm around his back.

"Yeah, but only a little bit." She too looked out at their backyard, and he knew she was thinking about the creek and where it eventually led.

It was then that Minnesota scored to take the lead. Everyone went crazy, even Dee, she let out a yell that surprised them all.

"All they needed was momentum, that's what I told you," he said, but no one was listening.



## Breakfast

The menu was full of things that he used to eat. Most of all, he loved the omelette with tomatoes and onions. I didn't particularly like onions, but I still loved him, so when the waitress finally came, that's what I ordered. I wish that he was around. He would have been amused.

"You don't like onions," Matt said from over his menu.

"How would you know what I like and what I don't?" I lit another cigarette and stared at him as he ordered. He's losing his hair, I thought. He's losing his hair and he wears glasses. He wears glasses and he's not that great in bed.

The morning sun was bright. The reflection off of the hardened snow made it even more so, and it cut through the room in long, glaring strips full of falling dust. It annoyed me to see the sun.

"Why the hell did we have to get up so early?" I squinted at him and he at me. The waitress was gone, and I already needed more water.

"Why do you have to smoke so early in the morning?" He took another sip of coffee. "You're making me sick."

"No, what's making you sick is the twenty or so beers you

had last night." I tried to flag down the waitress. "You should have just gotten stoned with the rest of us."

"No, it just makes me want to sleep. And when you stay over, that's the last thing you want to do. I thought smoking weed is supposed to make you tired." He looked blankly at me, and I at him. There was nothing to say.

Looking at him, I was suddenly very tired. I let my hand fall and rest on the table. Very tired and very bored. At least with him, him that was long gone, I was never bored.

"What are you scared of?" He asked suddenly. "Are you scared of me?"

"Do you think I am?" His slow, languorous movements discomfited me.

"I don't know anything."

Our breakfast came, and I started eating, but he just stared. He stared until I had to look up at him. The sun was reflecting off of his glasses, and his mouth was taut and straight.

"Eat your breakfast, Matt. Don't think too much, it doesn't suit you." I ate my omelette, and savored every one of those damn onions. He would have loved it.

The last thing I wanted to do was spend a Friday morning eating eggs with Matt. I never thought I'd be here period, still in school, still smoking weed, waking someone up early in the morning to have sex again.

"Done?" I asked. He had pushed his plate away and didn't look well. He got up and walked quickly to the bathroom. I



knew that he shouldn't have had eggs on a hangover, but he had this unequalled stubbornness that made him think that he could change things. That by wanting it bad enough, it would come true sooner or later.

I lit another cigarette. The inclusive light gave me a headache. I could see cars speed by on the highway, fast and silent, far away. The snow sat in dirty, icy drifts in the parking lot. A young, blond girl in a black leather jacket wrenched her arm away from a short, dark man in a light trench coat. She yelled at him in hysterical, desperate spasms. Finally, she stopped and awkwardly lit a cigarette. The man just watched her, he seemed quite a bit older, and then his mouth moved, slow and constant, and she nodded and cried some more.

Hey, don't listen to him, I thought. He's handing you a line of bull. Don't buy it. But she was. As a final defensive maneuver, she turned away from him toward my window. Look at me, I demanded silently, but her eyes remained downward. I could see the dark roots of her hair, the streaks of mascara under her eyes. She kept the cigarette close to her mouth, almost as if she had to stop herself from saying something.

I wondered what he was saying to her. He was calm and olive and confident. His body took up miles of sidewalk, it was as if he blocked out the sun, and when she lifted her head and squinted expressionless at me, I knew he'd won.

She righteously faced him again and he stepped forward to retrieve her.

"Hey, what's up?" The girl in front of my booth had bobbed, brown hair, no makeup, purple denim jacket. What's her name, I thought peacefully. After all, she didn't know mine. Jack's apartment, I suddenly knew where I knew her from, she was Jack's old girlfriend, for Christ's sake.

"Hey, how've you been?" I asked tentatively. "How's Jack?"

"I just saw him the other day, actually... he's still living over on Linden. I haven't seen you in so long..."

"Yeah, since last summer, it's been a long time," I said and looked quickly for the blond in the parking lot. She was gone.

She sat down halfway, one leg leaning on the cushion of the booth, one still standing. "You remember Art Fair, when Jack and Jake and who else? Was it Tamara?" She tilted her head up, as if the ceiling would help her remember, and her memories made me warm, her voice suddenly made me happy. We'd had some good times together, this girl and I, and most importantly, she knew Jon, him, and her memories made him real once again.

"Tamara and Carol." I said, and smiled, wishing anything I would recall her name.

"That's right, you're absolutely right," she was excited now, "they all went to that farm in Saline and you and I and Eric Robinson..."

"Rabbi! I haven't thought of him in ages!" And it came back to me, I felt the rush of being there, being drunk on

Jack's porch, waiting for Jon to come back.

"I never thought we'd get out of that, trying to get the cops out of there before they all got home." She nodded her head, pleased, and leaned back into the booth.

"No, I didn't either." It was as happy as I'd been in months. It was the ghost of another life.

She zipped her jacket. "You know Rabbi moved to Chicago?"

"With Jon, yes, I know," I said nervously, we were approaching sacred ground, something that belonged only to me that she was demanding to see. The smile left my face.

She said simply, "Jon hasn't moved," and it was as if every muscle in my body wanted to jump, but they didn't, I just felt my eye twitch and my face get tingly, and then she knew that I didn't know, and I kept staring at her, she was dying in front of me, she was wishing that she never came over. I bet she would never do this again.

She squinted at me. "This is really weird." She paused, and I fought the impulse to reach over the table, grab her jacket, and shake her. "He's living over at Graham's apartment, since probably about a month ago."

I searched every inch of her face, her clothes, her body. I waited.

"Yeah, man, that's fucked. I asked him how you were and I swear... he said that you guys broke up after he was arrested that last time, but that he'd seen you and you were fine. He was in bad shape, stoned, yeah, maybe even acid, but I swear, that's so weird." She stared blankly out into the

parking lot and shook her head. "You know that he stopped dealing, don't you?"

Matt came up behind her and stopped. She sensed him and turned, getting up from the booth. "Hey," he said, and she nodded, perhaps they knew each other, did it really matter? It was if I'd forgotten to breathe.

"Well, I'll see you," she said, raising her hand to wave, still confused. Without thinking, I raised my hand too, and I waved, my fingers closing inward and outward, like a little girl. I watched her leave, walk out to her car, carrying her secrets with her.

"How do you know her? She used to go out with a friend of mine." Matt looked at me expectantly, drinking the rest of his water.

"Jack Wesner." I answered, and I saw him, his face hit full by the light, sickly and pale. "She used to screw Jack Wesner."

"Oh. Well, she used to screw a friend of mine too." He was staring again. "What a small world," he said, tired and quiet.

I lit another cigarette. "Yeah, what a fuckin' small world." And I was happy, content really, knowing that Jon was somewhere close. I could call around, make discreet inquiries, he had a lot of friends, and I could search them out, find them, they'd tell me. I exhaled, and let the smoke wrap around me, let it hit the window and bounce back at me. It danced and cut the sunlight in spiral, upswept movements. It rose to the

ceiling and I inhaled and exhaled again to feed it. He did stop dealing, I thought, felt my face warm, and said it to myself over and over: he stopped.

"Hey, you're really making me ill. I mean it. I was just in the bathroom. So cut it, okay?" Matt was mad, his forehead wrinkled slightly, and his voice had that disappointed tone.

I pushed the bill to him. Eight dollars and forty-six cents. It wouldn't break the boy from Oak Park. I knew that he didn't understand me and sometimes he didn't like me at all. But it didn't matter. None of it did, it never did.

The cars still flew by on the highway. I looked one last time for the blond girl and her boyfriend, but they were gone, long gone, gone to find another parking lot in another town to replay the same scene. Or maybe she'd get away this time.

The sky was winter blue, light and vivid, and the sun was still bright and annoying. Matt followed me out of the restaurant and put his hands on my shoulders.

"So, how about a nap?" he asked. "Just no sex. I'm totally ill."

"Then go home." I stopped in front of his car.

"No way. What are you going to do?" He shielded his eyes with his hand.

"I'm going for a walk." I took a deep breath of the mid-morning air. He was really quite handsome, I thought, and dismissed the urge to kiss him goodbye.

"Okay. I'll call you later."

"No, don't. I won't be around." I kept walking backwards,



carefully setting my feet down and watching him watching me.

"Oh, okay. Whatever." And he wanted to ask me why, he wanted to ask me a lot of things, but he knew that I wouldn't answer any of them, and I waved at him, fingers extending and distending like a little girl.

I turned, and followed the road that paralleled the highway back to campus. It wasn't very far and not very cold. I took another deep inhale and exhale and felt a passing car give me a tailwind. I started to run, it felt great, I was really out of shape but my heart swelled. I ran toward town where he was. I didn't know where, but he was somewhere here and I would find him, and the girl in the parking lot flashed through my mind quickly, the girl being pulled back into the car by her boyfriend, but I dismissed it. She went because she wanted to. Maybe she had to. Things like that happened all the time, I thought.

It didn't take long before I stopped and lit another cigarette. I'd get there, I thought, I don't have to rush.

## Of Ruthie and the Real World

"So she's really going to make a go of it this time," I asked, "you're saying that she is really ready?" I took the drink from my mother's hand and took a big, wide gulp. "This whole thing with Cameron, living with his parents and all, happened pretty quick. She might have another relapse or something." I pressed the cold glass against my forehead and watched her eyes follow it. "She's still pretty fragile, you know," I said slowly.

"I know, I know, you just can't give her any credit, can you? Ruthie is your sister, I think you'd be happy for the progress she's made." She let her eyes wander from the drink to my face. "There's something you can do."

She wants this drink, I thought, it's killing her. I took another quick gulp and watched her watch me do it. She crossed from the kitchen into my living room.

"What?" I asked half-heartedly. It was coming up on noon and the heat was just unbearable. I had drawn all of the drapes, but the sun had still found its way in slits and unprotected corners. I could feel the sweat in the small of my back and the tee shirt I was wearing stick to it.

"Come with me to the Clarks house." She sat down in Ted's

old chair, but just on the edge. "I was thinking it would ease the transition for her if we spent the first weekend there."

"I dunno," I said, then drank the last of her gin and tonic, taking an ice cube to chew on. "What do the Clarks think about this, mother?"

"You know, if you wanted a drink, I would have made you one." She got up and took the glass from my hand.

"No, it's not even noon yet, I just wanted some of yours," and I smiled as she poured two drinks, both very strong.

She gave me the cold, full glass. "We'll leave on Friday. Early. It's not like you have anything to hold you back anyway." She raised her glass to her lips.

"Nothing to hold me back," I said, letting it roll off of my tongue. I closed my eyes and felt the alcohol hit my bloodstream. "Nothing to hold me back," I repeated, smiling.

After Mother left it became another long afternoon of gin and tonics, which merged into an evening of gin and tonics. In the ebbing heat of late night, I sat at my word processor and composed yet another letter to Ted. Once again, I detailed his betrayals and faults: the closing of our joint bank account; moving out, leaving me with an apartment I could never afford but never wanted to leave; taking my favorite flannel sheets; and finally, the recent restraining order he had the court deliver. I stopped after an hour and took some aspirin with the last beer I could find in my refrigerator.

I dialed his new number, the one I had conned his personnel manager into giving me, and listened to his answering machine. My clock read 2:34.

"I know that I'm the last person you want to hear from," I started, haltingly, and stopped. I began to tear the beer label off of the bottle. "Just an update, in case you're interested: Ruthie going to make a go of it in the real world. You always had a soft spot for my sister, just thought you'd want to know. She's getting out of Glengale. Finally." I laughed at my own slurred, slow words. "She's moving to Wisconsin." I sat with the phone in my hand for a minute before placing it on its cradle. As soon as I hung up I realized that I forgot to tell him that I loved him.

Mother and I went to visit Ruthie that Thursday at Glengale, which was about forty miles north of the city, close to the Wisconsin border. She'd been there for almost a year this time, after a series of incidents, one of which was threatening to jump off of my apartment building. Of course, she had no intention of going through with it- Ruthie was always afraid of death.

Ruthie was wearing colors: a yellow oxford and a long, white skirt with large green, yellow and mauve flowers on it. Her hair was still short and very dark with streaks of premature gray, held back with two barrettes. She looked very young, and yes, peaceful.

"I just felt like color," she explained. "I never feel

like color, so I decided to go with it. That's something my therapist has been working on with me, going with it I mean, I shouldn't feel guilty about feeling bright and even pastel." She paused to catch her breath, and then gave me an apologetic glance. "I suppose it's a cliché that colors can be a metaphor for life."

"Umm, well, not always," I started.

"Well, you're the writer, Patsy, you probably think that that's stupid," she said, clipped, suddenly losing her smile.

"Patsy doesn't know everything dear. And if you feel like colors, than by all means..." my mother started, supportive and slightly befuddled.

I had the urge for a drink. "Does this mean that you're getting rid of all your earth tones and black stuff?" I asked, preparing for censure, "because I call first dibs on your black trench coat." I smiled at Ruthie, and she smiled back, an unexpected and honest grin that took me by surprise.

"Maybe. Maybe I'll just give it to you to shut you up." Ruthie sat down on the bed and put a stray strand of black hair behind the barette. "Don't get me wrong; I know I'm not cured. It's more like how I've learned to handle my depression."

"Revel in it." I added. "You used to almost take pleasure in your depression."

"Patsy, really," Mother protested.

"No, she's right." Ruthie crossed her arms in front of her. "I reread that article you wrote for Cosmopolitan a few

years back and you made that point very succinctly."

"Thank you, Ruthie." I wondered if she was stoned.

"I'm going to find some coffee," Mother said. "Anybody want some?"

"Have you been doing any writing lately?" Ruthie asked.

"Okay," Mother said, "ignore me. I'm going." She looked from Ruthie to me, exasperated, then left in search of a coffee machine.

"Yeah, I've had to. I need the money." I said. I glanced toward the empty doorway and lowered my voice. "Thank God she's gone."

Ruthie laughed. "Has she been riding you pretty hard?"

I nodded. "And I don't want to talk about it, I want to talk about you, you must be so excited."

Ruthie walked over to her bedside table. She lowered her head, and picked up a set of silverware from her dinner tray. "I'm all packed," she said, her tranquil tone slightly forced.

"Are you stoned?" I asked.

"Nope." She took the knife and began to play with the remains of her dinner.

"Then what is it?"

Ruthie gathered her skirt with her free hand, bunching it up near her waist. She had several dark bruises on her bare leg. "I'm not sure. Desperation, perhaps. The feeling that if I don't make a go of it now, I never will." She pushed her meat even further to the edge of her plate.

Her room at Glengale was almost empty. Only her plants

remained on the sterile white windowsill. A car alarm went off somewhere outside her window. Ruthie sat down on the bed.

"You'll make it," I said. "I'll help you any way I can." I felt like crying.

Ruthie pushed the tray to the edge of the bedside table. "I wish someone would get that damn alarm," she said, absently.

It took us an hour and fifteen minutes to ride up to Beloit Point, Wisconsin the next day. I'd met Cameron at Glengale several times, but had never met his parents. Mother, of course, knew the whole family. I'd noticed that they were even on her speed-dialing list. I was glad that she volunteered to make the drive; I just wasn't up to telling her I'd been taking the bus to her house all this time. I had to sell my new Ford back in May because I couldn't afford the insurance and parking.

Late summer is beautiful in the Midwest. The Clark estate sat right on Lake Michigan, framed by comfortable trees and well-fertilized lawns. It was a big, portentous thing, an intimidating blacktop driveway, white stucco exterior with Swiss chalet designs. I began to think that Ruthie had it made, that she was well-hidden, she could make it here.

Cameron's parents came out onto the porch to greet us. Oliver and Karen Clark looked like very nice people; successful, genial, attractive, boring.

Mother self-consciously touched her hair as we presented

our gifts: an awkward, but very expensive basket of fruit, cheeses, and gourmet goodies wrapped in yellowish, crinkly foil; and my contribution, an economy size of lemon-flavored vodka. It had cost a pretty penny, but luckily, my mother volunteered to pay.

"Thank you," Karen Clark said, "we don't drink, only a glass of wine on holidays and special occasions, but we like to keep a well-stocked bar for our guests." Both she and Oliver Clark looked at me a little strangely.

I knew right then I'd hate them.

"We just love Ruthie," Karen Clark said, gazing across the lengthy, magnificent dinner table at my mother. "She is a very special person."

"Yes, she certainly is," her husband concurred. "And we're looking forward to having her in our home." He raised his water glass. "To the start of a new life for all of us."

I drained my glass. I had already been fortified with my third vodka and water, and the candlelight, along with the meal, had given me a fever. I felt the flush in my cheeks. Everything was very vivid, and close. I should stop drinking now, I thought. I need to go to bed early, I need to be sober for Ruthie. I felt my eyes water.

"Do you need something, Patsy?" Karen Clark asked me across the table, expectantly, a bit condescendingly, I thought, and I wanted to tell her, yes, I need your help too, I need your house, I need a place to hide and as long as



you're hiding my sister, I need someone to help me, but I just met her eyes across the table.

"How about another drink, please," I said smiling, catching the disapproval in her eyes, then across to my mother, eyes downcast in embarrassment. I could feel my chest tighten and nearly strangle me.

After the fourth drink, the rest of the night was a blur. I remember speaking with Cameron for a prolonged period of time, talking about Ruthie as a kid: the time she had been caught shoplifting at the Supermarket; the time she had been arrested for throwing things out of her apartment window in Chicago; and when I had to drive up to Madison, Wisconsin, where she was trying to finish up her undergraduate degree, because no one had heard from her in weeks. Her apartment manager and I found her in her closet, malnourished and crying. That had been the first time she had been committed to Glengale.

The guest room at the Clark estate was so hot and humid that I stumbled down to the kitchen in my nightgown.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Mother paced up and down the kitchen.

"I thought you went down to Glengale to pick up Ruthie." I opened the refrigerator door and carefully laid down on my back in front of it.

"It's almost noon. They'll be back in an hour." She

rifled through her pockets for a cigarette.

"Mother, why didn't you just go with them?"

She lit it with a shaky hand. "I was concerned about you. The way you acted. You wouldn't stop talking. And then you just put your head down, and," she inhaled deeply, "that was it." She paced up and down next to my head.

I tried to remember, but I couldn't remember but fleeting images and details. My brain was about to explode.

"Stop," I begged. "Your footsteps are giant anvils coming down on my poor, defenseless head."

She had no sympathy. "I cannot believe you drank that much. Frankly, I am so embarrassed. I told Karen and Oliver that you haven't had a job in months and you're being evicted from your apartment."

"Oh, geez, ma, why did ya have to go tell them that?" I pulled my nightgown over my knees. "It's none of their business why my life is going down the toilet. Is in the toilet."

"Did you have to drink that much?" she asked.

"Yes, I did have to drink that much for your information." I squinted up at her and grabbed her passing ankle. "All that talk, that love talk, the new start pep talk, it was starting to make me sick, and I had to drink so much that I wouldn't get up and shove that corkscrew through their vulcan hearts." I gave her my best mischievous smile.

She didn't go for it. "They happen to believe in Ruthie..."



"So do I ma, so do I, it's me I don't believe in anymore.." For a second, I thought if I'd confide in her I'd shut her up, she would see, she would help me, but she only shook her head from way above me.

"Patsy, for cripes sake. You..."

"It's Christ's sake, ma. Not cripes." I should've known better. Mother had one emotional cripple, it took years for her to accept Ruthie for what she was. I was the strong one.

She looked down at me, startled. "I don't like to swear, especially to take the Lord's name in vain. Not like you, anyway. Now let go of my ankle."

"Mother, you know I don't believe in God, and I like to swear." I let her ankle go. "For Christ's sake, look at me, my whole life is a swear word."

"Oh, not that atheist crap again." She walked over to the well-stocked bar and poured herself a finger of whiskey. "What do they have with this?"

"Water. And in some circles, crap is considered a bad word."

"That's not the point. Your behavior last night is the point. They probably thought you were crazy, all that talk, that dirty laundry about Ruthie and you."

I rolled over onto my stomach. The cold air felt good on my back. "All they did was look at me, with those watery, placid eyes, absorbing it all. They're pod people." I propped myself up on my elbows. "No wonder Cameron was a drug addict."

Mother handed me the drink. "He's such a nice boy, he

really cares for Ruthie." She had a warm, optimistic glow, and I began to suspect that this wasn't her first whiskey.

"Yes, he definitely does, but is that a good thing or bad thing in the long run?"

She just pointed at my drink. It felt as if the roof was coming down on my head as I sat up to take an endless, warm draught.

"And why did you have to make all those phone calls? I hope they were collect..."

I brought the glass to my mouth once more as the room started to spin.

Cameron was the first out of the car, tall and lanky, dressed in baggy brown shorts and white tee shirt. "Patsy, didn't think that you'd make it up this morning. You were looped." He smiled.

I had showered, grabbed some cereal, and at least felt like I could hold my head up on my shoulders. "Yeah, sorry about talking your ears off last night Cameron. I can be a real drag when I'm suicidal."

"Don't talk like that," he said, suddenly serious. "It's not funny."

Oliver Clark began taking Ruthie's few suitcases from the back of the Blazer. I could see my sister in the backseat, looking through her purse.

"Sorry, Cameron," I said. "Like I said, I'm a real drag."

Mother came out onto the porch, slightly drunk. "I've got

lunch ready, I made sandwiches! "She said, her nose red, smile wide, dishtowel in her hand.

Karen and Oliver Clark looked at each other, worried. "Thank you," Karen said loudly, too loudly, and I smiled, smiled at Ruthie emerging from the car, dressed in belted black shorts and a subdued brown top.

I walked over to the car and hugged her. "Colors as a metaphor for life," I whispered in her ear, laughing and she laughed too, for I had on grey sweatpants and a black blouse. She was beautiful, I thought, beautiful and fragile, and I carefully hugged her again.

"I made sandwiches," mother said again, this time walking toward Ruthie, and I retreated into the house, suddenly hungry again.

"Do you need some aspirin?" Ruthie offered me the bottle. "Wine always gives me a headache."

"But that's red wine. This is white." I studied the label. "It has something to do with the mold factor."

Ruthie looked out the window. "It's always that damn mold factor." We were standing in the Clarks' kitchen, up against the ample counter. The kitchen was warm, resplendent in shades of brown, and the only room in the whole house that wasn't too cold or too warm.

"I guess you can give some more of that aspirin. I've still got that hangover." I followed her gaze, scanning the backyard beach. Karen Clark and mother were lounging in lounge

chairs, mother doing most of the talking. Oliver Clark and Cameron had gone for a late afternoon boat ride on the calm, gray lake. So Ruthie and I were alone, basking in the tired sunshine streaming through the kitchen windows and drinking a pretty good white wine.

"Yes, I heard about the vodka incident." She handed me a couple of coated tablets. "You shook things up a bit."

"Good," I said, filling my glass. "They deserve to be once in awhile." I took a drink and examined the thin wine glass. "Maybe we should just get beer glasses for this wine."

"Maybe we should just get high," she said, smiling mischievously. "You got anything on you?"

I grabbed the bottle back self-righteously. "No...let's just get rip-roaring drunk. How does that sound?"

It was the first time she had smiled all day. "Let's get drunk for all the wrong reasons, but wait, are there any wrong reasons?"

I laughed, and took another gulp. "I don't think so, but then again, I'm the one with a drinking problem." I watched for her reaction.

"Do you really have a drinking problem?" She looked and turned toward me. "Or is this just symptomatic of a much larger one?"

"Don't you think that alcoholism is a big enough problem?" I put down the wine with shaky hands and grabbed a heel of French bread from the counter. I took a small bite. Outside on the beach, Karen Clark stood on the edge of the

water, letting her feet get wet, shielding her eyes with her hand, looking for her husband and her son somewhere on the lake.

Ruthie spoke softly. "If you realize that you have a problem, that's the first step, isn't it? Can't you get help?"

"No." I paused, taking another bite of bread. "I don't need help."

"I always thought that you were the stronger one, that you had life by a string. Confident. Able. I guess it's just hard for me to realize that you're not okay." She was quiet, nonchalant, and she switched the wine from one hand to the other.

I washed the bread down with wine. "Well," I started calmly, my hands still shaking, "it's all a matter of focus. You've got to concentrate on short-term goals, like what you're going to watch on television at seven o'clock, and what kind of sandwich you're going to have for lunch." I paused, gathered my courage, drained my glass, "only by focusing on things in the short-term can you virtually ignore the bigger issues like being evicted from your apartment, like not having a job in six months, not being able to write a decent sentence even, being forced to sell your car and live with your mother. A mother that isn't happy with anything you do."

"Patsy," Ruthie said soothingly, and put her hand on the small of my back.

"You see, Ruthie," I continued, for if I stopped now, I



would never, ever start up again, and Ruthie was the only one that ever listened to me anyway, "I have that ability to ignore the big things. You never had that knack, that absolute gift, and as a result, you've had your problems. I would never be expected to have any kind of problem, even after Ted left me I pretended everything was alright, even though he left me because I was no good, you see, and I couldn't accept that."

"What do you mean?" she asked, and from her voice I knew she knew what I wanted her to know, that I was in trouble, and I needed someone to see it. In the backyard, Mother had gotten out of her chair and was walking to the house, empty liquor glass in hand.

"He took out a restraining order three weeks ago. I've been calling him, you know, when I've been drinking a lot, and he's changed his number a couple of times but I've gotten it again. He has proof, I guess the cops told him to turn over the message tapes to them."

"Are you kidding?" Ruthie was looking at the side of my face, horrified, she knew now, someone knew, and the weight of it began to lift.

I heard the screen door open, and mother's voice calling for Ruthie.

"And I don't even remember a lot of them." I said, hurried, but solemn, wanting the full effect of this to sink in for her. Outside, Cameron and Oliver Clark were nearing the dock, Cameron was ready to throw out the line to his mother.

"Damn," I said, it was too soon, they were all coming inside to start preparing dinner, and I hadn't told her everything I wanted to tell her, things that only she would know, would understand, only she could help me. I knew it all along, that she was my best friend.

"You girls drink too much," I heard my mother say, and I felt my chest constrict and suddenly the glass was in shards in the palm of my hand, and my face hurt. Ruthie was screaming, and I thought, why is Ruthie screaming?

I looked down at my hand and it was red, it took me a few seconds to realize that it was my blood, and I was thinking, I still had things I had to say. "Damn," I said aloud, but my voice was tinny and far away, and I looked out the window to see Oliver Clark running and he stopped as he saw me, shocked, and it was then I felt the room start to spin slowly, almost carefully.

Suddenly, Karen Clark was behind me, grabbing my hand, taking the glass embedded in my skin out piece by piece, it was then I saw the blood drip from my face onto my blouse, and I was faint, and I knew that everyone was going to know now, I couldn't hide it, they couldn't ignore it anymore, and I felt relief knowing it was out of my hands. Thank you, I tried to say, thank you Ruthie, but my mouth wouldn't work, and I let my eyes close, closing to the real world, hoping I wouldn't hit my head on the way down.

## The Sewer Man

I remember that morning distinctly because it was the day that I saw the man kiss the sewer grating on the way home from class. At least it looked like he was kissing the sewer grating, his butt high up in the air and his mouth down low. He remained stationary until I walked up behind him, the din from Somerville Ave. hiding my approach, and didn't flinch when I asked him if he was okay.

"Shh," he motioned, and pointed down. His small brown eyes darted from the sewer to me, and then to an older woman walking by, bundled up against the unusually cold May day.

"What?" I asked. Maybe there was maintenance going on in the innumerable underground Boston tunnels. Or maybe it had something to do with the subway, or rats, or something else that would captivate a young man on the middle of a Saturday.

"It's the voice of God," he said, and I realized that I'd have to stop by the liquor store before going home to face Seamus.

Seamus was right where I left him, on the couch in front of the television. His tall, lanky frame juttet in strange directions, trying to fit between the confines of the arms. I

couldn't see his face; he was all hair, long and black.

Our small, upstairs apartment smelled like cigarettes and incense. I could hear Seamus moving around on the couch, sitting up, lighting another cigarette, listening to me in the kitchen putting away the six pack of Bass I bought at the liquor store on the corner.

I opened one immediately, before he could come in and we would argue about whatever was available, and I sat defeated at the table. The beer was cold, refreshing, and I wondered where the sewer man was, where they had taken him. I took deep breaths, feeling my stomach do flipflops, reviewing some of the exercises from Art 132: Introduction to Oil Painting-Landscapes. Stroke, I thought, stroke, as I listened for Seamus on the other side of the wall.

He was watching cartoons- I could make out the nasal whine of Tweety Bird from the television. If he could, that would be all that he'd watch. They didn't show six hour blocks of animation back in Ireland. That was one thing he'd miss about America, surely not his job as a bartender, not being just another Irishman in Boston, not being away from Galway, not living with me. No, after our year together he probably wouldn't miss me.

He came in, unshowered and unshaven, and opened the refrigerator without looking over at me. I looked from him to the window, out at the large, majestic Somerville homes, all split up into tiny apartments. I took my cigarettes from the pocket of my blazer and lit one, quickly, secretly, watching

the smoke rise and twist away from me. Talk to me Seamus, tell me something nice for once, I thought. You bastard.

I heard him close the refrigerator, open the beer and then the cupboard above the sink.

"Where are the aspirin?" he asked. I could see him looking at me from the corner of my eye.

I watched a small bird fly from one tree to another. Why would any bird live in the city when they could live on the Cape? I wondered if the bird knew that the city was dirty, too populated, that there were better places. Did the bird dream, like Seamus did, of somewhere quiet, of home?

"The bathroom," I answered absently. I didn't want him to think that I cared why he needed them, because I knew why, the same reason he didn't come home until five in the morning, the same reason why he didn't sleep in my bed but on the small couch that gave him backaches. It was because he was drinking, drinking with the other Irish bartenders and customers. That was why his accent was getting thicker, his stories getting longer, his eyes more distant when he finally got home to me.

It had been a month before that he announced he was leaving, leaving Boston, leaving America, leaving me. And I was glad, not because I didn't love him anymore, but because I brought him here and he wasn't happy. Since then, I had found out that I was six weeks pregnant. I found out the same day he made plane reservations back to Shannon, then back home to Galway.

He stood in front of the sink and held his head in his

hands, wanting me to ask him what was wrong, why the headache, why he didn't come in to our bed and wake me like he did in the beginning, bumbling and funny, stinking of cigarettes and whiskey, waking me to make love or at least try to before we both fell asleep as the sun was coming up, both exhausted but happy in love. Then at some point I woke up in the morning, Seamus asleep on the couch with the television on. There had been no announcement, and I placated myself with the thought that he didn't want to wake me, that I had to work and go to school, he was homesick- but that he didn't blame me. No, I knew that Seamus loved me more than anything.

So he stood in front of the sink, head in his large capable hands, waiting for me to acknowledge him, and I asked him gently, headache? And he nodded, eyes closing, perhaps in victory, his strong body helpless against yet another hangover, and I got up, fully capitulating, walking to the bathroom with purpose.

Later that day, not that much later really, Matthew came over with some weed and I made spaghetti. Matthew was my brother, but was more my friend, and grew marijuana in his apartment. What he didn't use he sold at a modest price, enough to pay his half of the rent anyway, and was generous especially with family.

So we sat in the other room in front of the television and watched the NBA playoffs, Detroit v. Chicago, and took bong hits all afternoon, only moving to go out for more beer

and cigarettes at half-time.

"Guess what happened to me today?" I asked well into the third quarter, when Detroit was in control of the game and Matthew couldn't stop talking about some girl at his new job at the movie theater in Allston.

"I came over and saved the day, that's what," Matthew said. "I've saved the day once more."

Seamus sat up long enough to light another cigarette. "This is a vain one, your brother. He talks to much, Moira."

And I looked at Seamus from the floor, knowing that he meant that I didn't talk enough, and reached out until he handed me his cigarette gently, letting his hand touch mine. I brought it to my lips slowly, inhaled, thought of smoke and the fetus inside me, and quickly exhaled.

"Headache gone?" I asked, all defenses suddenly down, watching his beautiful face, his green eyes, his full mouth.

"Aye, finally," he answered, and smiled at me, and for just a second, I wanted to tell him about the pregnancy, but Matthew was there. I knew it would be wrong anyway. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew that I couldn't tell him to keep him here. I couldn't spend a lifetime of Seamus sleeping on the couch, of him coming in at five in the morning, wishing he was somewhere else.

So I let the moment swell and pass. I grabbed onto his calf, gently, and smiled back up at him.

"I can't believe that you're leaving tomorrow," Matthew said, nonchalantly, and I looked away before I felt the

despair rise up again, the despair I was becoming accustomed to, and I squeezed his calf a little harder.

"I think the pain has come back again," Seamus said, laughing, and I turned toward the game before I started crying.

"No really, you won't believe what happened to me today," I said again, this time a couple of hours later, still on the floor in front of the television, game over. There were a few more people in the room, Dennis and Felicia, a couple from down the street. At least they had brought their own beer.

"I bet that I'd believe you," said Dennis, smiling, putting his hand on Felicia's knee.

I watched them from the floor, warm and safe, the waning light cast shadows on the couch and the table, covered with empty bottles and full ashtrays.

"What happened to you today girl?" said Matthew eyes fuzzy over his cigarette, his voice patronizing.

"I called the police on a crazy man," and I laughed, letting them think that it was that easy, that simple.

Seamus rolled over, eyes closed, half-asleep and half-interested. "What does that mean?" he asked.

"There was a man on Somerville Ave. that told me heard the voice of God coming from the sewer in front of Anthony's Pizza. So I called the cops. It didn't look like he was about to leave anytime soon." I rolled over onto my back; the ceiling seemed far, far away.





"What did the cops do?" Matthew asked.

"Took him away. Seems that he walked away from a group home near Davis Ave. and hadn't taken his medicine in some time." I began to laugh, feeling weak and dizzy, everyone's eyes on me. "He was pretty loopy."

"God's voice coming from a sewer," mused Dennis. "How appropriate."

"Was he certain it was God?" asked Felicia, and I saw her hand flick across her face, moving her blond hair from her eyes.

"Blasphemy," said Matthew, rising to go to the bathroom. "Anyone need another beer?"

"What did God say to the poor man?" asked Seamus, suddenly awake, placing the palm of his hand on my forehead as if he were taking my temperature, and I felt the pressure of his touch and calmed.

"Help," I said soberly. "God asked him for help. He didn't like being at the bottom of the sewer."

"Excellent," said Matthew from the doorway. "I don't blame the poor bastard."

"Matthew," I called out to him, closing my eyes and remembering the sewer man's eyes from the backseat of the police car, knowing and determined.

"What?" he asked, annoyed.

"Get me another beer, will ya?" I asked, opening my eyes to see that nothing had changed, and that the ceiling was still very far away.

"Oops," said Seamus, laughing, stumbling into the bathroom and gently knocking me against the sink. "Sorry."

"Watch it," I said, not a warning, but an invitation, and watched him in the mirror, fresh from the shower, hair all slicked back as if greased, eyes bright from the beer. I applied my makeup languidly and thought once again of my art class. He watched me with growing interest.

"That's nice," he said.

I bent over a bit more, let my behind out, watching him watch me. I felt the tightness of my sleeveless black dress. Seamus came up from behind, put his hands on my hips and pressed himself up against me.

"How bold you are Mr. Kelly," I said, letting him move me from side to side, bending over even more to increase the pressure, watching his eyes cloud over, his head finally fall back, his eyes finally close.

"Do you like me in this dress?" I asked, knowing full well that it was his favorite but playing the game anyway, putting the eye pencil down and steadying myself against the counter, quickening the movements.

"Aye, even more out of it," he said, voice hoarse. He bent over, still pressed up to me, kissed my upper back, my neck, around to my ear.

"Oh boy," I said, feeling control slip, the alcohol and desire blurring the room, his face. I moved his hand from my hip to my breast.

"I'm crazy with you," he whispered, and I had to close my

eyes with the urgency of the need, feeling his breath in my hair, his movements with purpose.

"Matthew's still here," I said.

"I'll tell him to go," he said, catching my eyes in the mirror, face flushed, the front of his hair falling over, only to be pushed back. He separated himself from me reluctantly, leaving to find Matthew quickly.

I straightened myself, feeling desire move around and finally wash over me. I could hear their voices in the other room. Please, I thought, come back, come back, come back. I couldn't stand the sight of myself waiting, waiting for him, and in one jerky movement I stepped forward and shut the light off. I stood in the darkness, listened to their voices, at last the door slamming.

Waiting for his determined footsteps, his formidable frame blocking the doorway, his rush to me, arms around and lifting me above him, so happy to even be near him, to know that he wanted me. Sitting me on the counter with a groan, kissing me hungrily, pushing my dress up and my underwear down, breathing, moaning, suddenly clearing his throat, kissing me again.

I wanted to tell him no, I wanted to be on the ground with him on top of me, inside of me, feeling his weight move, his hips spreading my legs, but then he was inside of me and it didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered anymore.

At the restaurant I moved around in my seat, trying to



get comfortable, savoring the soreness, smiling with the knowledge it would only get worse later. I could smell him on me.

"So Matthew'll meet us at ten, yeah?" I asked.

"I reckon. He said he would." Seamus kept eating, one mouthful after another. "Your brother can be a real pain."

"Oh, yeah?"

"He didn't want to leave. He knew why I wanted him to go." He looked up, seemed almost embarrassed. "He tried to give me a hard time."

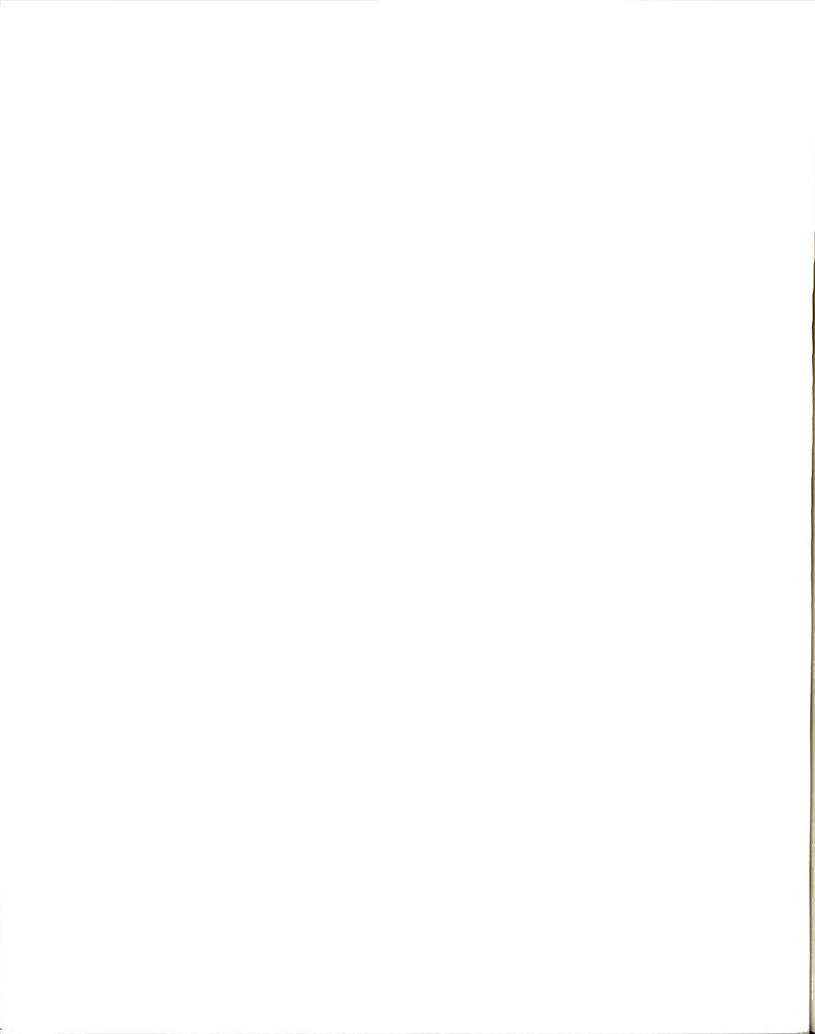
He ate silently. I watched his eyes, his mouth, his large capable hands. I was overwhelmed with his beauty, overwhelmed with his power, and I bowed my head, shielding my eyes with my hand.

"He's thinking of coming over to visit in the fall," he said, his voice dropping off, realizing he was leaving in less than twenty four hours, letting it drop like the last flakes of a snowstorm.

Stroke, stroke, I thought. Brushstroke from right to left, top to bottom. But it didn't work this time, and I saw a tear fall onto the white tablecloth leaving a small, wet spot.

"I'm sorry," he said.

I tried to tighten up, to regain some semblance of control, but it was like giggling- once it started, it was impossible to stop. Another spot, and then another, and I wanted to tell him not to be sorry, well, only if he wanted to, and I hated myself for crying and spoiling our dinner, our



wonderful evening out.

"Please, darling, don't you know? I'm sorry." His voice was soothing, useless.

"No, I'm sorry," I said. I got up clumsily, knocking the table as I left.

"Moirira," he called after me, but I was already walking purposefully, looking around for the ladies room, trying to avoid the curious eyes of other tables. Calm, calm, I thought, keep calm.

The ladies room was empty, silent, a refuge. I took the first stall, locked the door, and rested my forehead against the cold of the bathroom tile. The tears had stopped. I let myself inhale, then exhale. Calm, I thought once again. Remember the trip to Seattle, last summer when everything was new and he never thought about home? Everyday was a holiday, no end in sight. Remember those days and it would all be better.

I tried to remember the first time I met him, St. Patrick's Day in Dublin the year before. I had been drinking all day with the other exchange students at Trinity, groups of students and tourists all packed together in the college bar. And then I saw him on the periphery of the group. I was on the inside, looking out at him, his hair shorter then, wearing a brown jacket with a wide collar. He was drinking pints at an alarming pace, smoking Dunhills with gusto. What first struck me was his eyes, green with long black lashes, his look at first hesitant then confident, and I waited placidly for every



one of them.

Then everyone stumbled to the Van Morrison concert outside in the square, outside in the constant, methodical rain. I kept trying to get close to him. Sharing a bottle of cider with Deirdre, I caught his eye, again and again. I remember thinking, if only he would talk to me, then suddenly he did- just a simple, magnificent word.

"Hello," he had said, and then he smiled, and I knew my life would be changed forever. Was it supposed to happen like that? To see someone in a crowd, to hear one single word from their mouth, and to know. To know that your life was changing and you were helpless in the face of it.

Van Morrison only played five songs, but by the time he walked off the tiny wooden stage in a huff, in the pouring rain, I was in love and my future was inexplicably changed.

"Help," I said out loud to the empty stall, to the empty restroom, and I began to cry, one tear after another, making no sound, like a light fading from view.

We took a cab over to Corrigan's Pub in Allston. Seamus wasn't the only immigrant Irishman or Irishwoman working behind the bar; Corrigan's was fully staffed with the authentic thing. As a result, it was one of the most popular pubs in town. Every first generation or second generation Irish, or those who just liked to drink around the Irish, especially the formidable college crowd, came to Allston and packed the place.

When we arrived, there was a line that stretched around the front and into the parking lot. It had turned cool, and I pulled my blazer around me as we walked the length of the building to the back entrance. I was overdressed and overdone, and I felt self-conscious. Seamus protectively put his arm around me as we jostled up against each other, and I thought, how ironic, we're out of sync.

"Hello Seamus, wasn't sure if we'd be seeing you tonight," Corrigan said at the back door, holding out his hand for him, then me. "And how is your lady tonight?"

I bristled, more at the thought of being referred to as anyone's lady than at the patronizing tone in which he said it. He was from the old school, an old Irishman who had come up the hard way and believed in the hard way with his whole heart. He appreciated women the old-fashioned way, as little girls or as mothers, and everything in-between was perplexing. So, I think that he decided to treat me as a little girl, just to be sure.

"Fine," Seamus said, maybe sensing my discomfort. Maybe he was considering my crying jag at the restaurant or my reticence on the cab ride over. I decided to just smile.

"Your father's here," he said to me, almost as an afterthought, and I fleetingly thought of the sewer man, peering down through the sewer grating for something that wasn't there. I smiled at the connection, proud of myself. The sewer man was an apt comparison to my father.

"I suppose he's drunk?" I asked, just happy that he was

there, happy that I'd have someone to drink with tonight as Seamus made his farewell appearance.

"You know your father Moira, he's a good man but he likes his whiskey. "Corrigan smiled, and Seamus and I smiled back, as if sharing a secret. Suddenly, I hoped that it was a good drunk, a buy another round drunk- not his how I wish I was back in Ireland tirade that indicated he had been drinking for days already, his body sick of the alcohol and of him.

"Oh yes," I said, "I know it well." I looked around the storage room, the kegs, the half-empty cases of alcohol, the peeling paint. It was hot and sticky in the bar, I could feel the humid air coming through. I looked at Seamus expectantly.

"Is Matthew here?" he asked, but Corrigan had already turned away, so Seamus grabbed my hand and we walked though the double doors carefully.

Someone immediately called for Seamus as we entered the bar, a man's voice, and he let go of my hand and put his quickly into the air above his head, a greeting to whoever it had been, and I looked for anyone, anyone I knew. Seamus would be off soon, talking with his friends, and I didn't want to be part of that. I didn't want to hear how nice it would be for him to be back in Galway, how nice it would be to see his family, to drink true Irish beer, to see Galway Bay once again. I didn't want to hear the goodbyes, not before I had to say them myself.

I followed him up to the bar, his arm up once again, ordering this time, and I felt the sticky heat surround me,

overwhelm me, and it seemed as if the crowd of people were closer and brighter than I remembered, I looked around for a place to sit, panicked. Relax, I thought, don't pass out. Whatever you do, don't pass out here where half the bar knows you.

I leaned up against his strong back, feeling the fabric of his shirt, and I closed my eyes. He was fumbling in his pocket for money, the muscles in his back working. I could hear the conversations around me, the mix of accents, I could smell of beer and cigarettes, and I thought of my own breathing. When I opened my eyes it would all be okay.

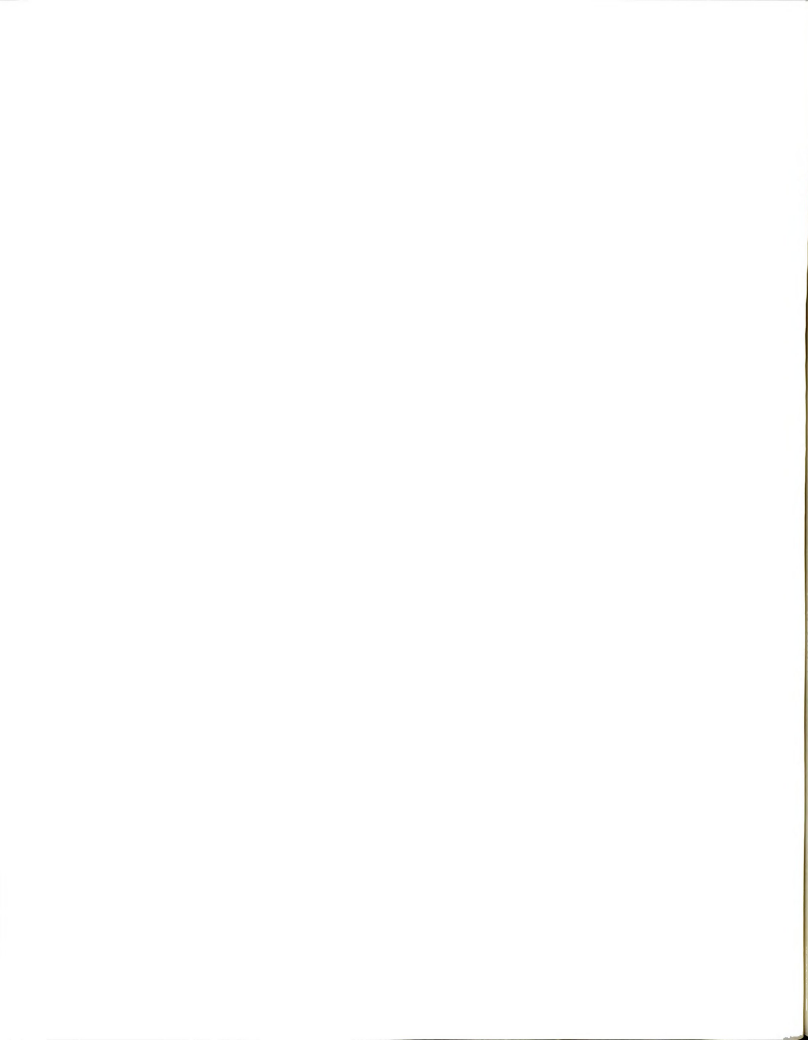
"Your money's no good here," I heard Corrigan say, and then Seamus' half-hearted attempt to protest, only to be met with groans. I opened my eyes as Seamus leaned forward to get the pints.

"I was wondering when you two would get here," Matthew said from behind us. "I thought that you'd end up blowing it off, considering it's your last night here." He clapped Seamus on the back.

The room was still bright, the pint cold, my brother's face too large. I drank quickly, hoping the beer would give me courage, equilibrium, oblivion. But it was just beer, and every minute around Seamus hurt like a strong pinch on the arm.

"Is dad here?" I asked.

"Yeah, he's by the darts with Mr. Anderson and Paddy Mack." Matthew drank from his own pint, then grabbed my



shoulder with his free hand. "And this is a surprise- he's faced. Completely. But it seems like a good one."

I looked toward the dartboards, seeing the usual group of old men.

"Does he know that we'll be here?" Seamus asked.

"Yeah, I told him. "Matthew said. "I don't know if he's retaining information at this point, but I told him."

"Maybe I should go find him," I said, still queasy, wanting to sit down somewhere, knowing that my father would give up his seat no matter how drunk he was.

"You alright?" Seamus asked, concerned, and with his free hand brushed a piece of hair back from my face.

I looked up at him, suddenly angry at the futility of the question. Someone bumped into me from behind, knocking me forward and spilling a bit of my beer. I felt the frustration rise, boil over, and I steadied my hand. Don't let it show, I thought, don't let it show whatever you do.

"Steady," I heard Matthew say with a laugh, and for a fleeting moment I wanted to toss the contents of my glass in his face. He didn't know anything, he was my brother but Seamus' friend, and the peacemaker of the family besides. If it suited Matthew to believe that drinking was just a harmless pastime, he believed it. If it suited him to believe that he was too smart to be caught selling weed, he believed it. If he wanted to believe it, everything was okay.

I felt Seamus' hand on my arm and I deliberately pulled away. His gesture was to steady me, to comfort me, to possess



me. A perfectly acceptable gesture between two lovers, except that one of them was getting on a plane the next afternoon to go home, leaving the other alone, alone and pregnant.

"I'm fine," I said sharply, a bit too sharply, and I knew if I looked up at him I would be lost, so I turned quickly and began to make my way through the crowd of people near the bar to the dartboards in the corner.

There was a crowd of people near the dartboards, some sitting and some standing, and when I saw his old friend Paddy Mack sitting on a stool, smoking a cigarette, I knew that my father was not far away. It was near impossible to get to him, with tables too close together and people standing in between them anyway, so I stood at the periphery and watched a young woman throw darts. She was very good, much to the consternation and amusement of the older men that frequented the corner, and with every toss she'd raise both arms up into the air. That's great, I thought, she celebrates every throw. She's saying fuck you. I searched the area again, thinking that my father would love it, he would be the first to cheer her on against his buddies. He always loved an underdog.

Then I heard him behind me, laughing nearby. I closed my eyes and listened, bringing my beer up to my lips, concentrating on his voice. When I was much younger, I thought that everything was okay when Mick Maloney laughed. Every crisis, all the problems- his marriage to my mother, his alcoholism, his homesickness- meant nothing when he threw his head back and laughed. But, of course, nothing ever got



solved, yet he was still laughing, and I listened without bitterness.

"Here she is, my girl," I heard him say before he picked me up off of the ground and twirled me around. I attempted to keep my beer steady.

"Hello, Mick." He kept turning.

"What do you have to say for yourself, girl?" he asked.

"I say, put me down." He stopped, but didn't put me down. I could see Mr. Anderson, his friend from the housing authority, watch us with calm eyes.

"Where are your manners?" His words were slurred and slow.

"Please, Mick. Please put me down." I felt the room spin and thought sarcastically, excellent, that was just what I needed. I felt my the inside liner of my blazer stick to the top of my back and arms.

He put me down, finally, and I let the room slow a bit before I turned to greet him. He was grizzled, grey hair uncombed, a significant growth of a beard. He was a short man, around five and a half feet, with big shoulders and a big chest. When I was little, he used to tell us stories about the fishing boat his uncle had, and how as a teenager he used to work alongside his father and his brothers in Connemara, north of Galway. I can remember being very proud of him being a sailor. But it was his eyes of pale green, almost grey, that were his most striking feature. Matthew and I had inherited the nondescript hazel of our mother, a nice color, but not as

nice as his.

His beautiful eyes were watery and unfocused, and looked around me, confused. "Where's your man Seamus?"

"Somewhere." I said, reassuringly. Seamus was one of my father's favorite people in the world, and he cried when I told him that Seamus was going back to Ireland.

"Hello Moira," Mr. Anderson bellowed, thrusting his hand out for me to shake.

"Good to see you sir," I said, grasping it tentatively. He had the type of hands that were always clammy.

"Come sit down." Mick turned me around toward the group of people around the dartboards, toward his oldest friend Paddy Mack, and where there had seemed no room a minute ago, there suddenly was plenty. My father had a way of making things happen.

I sat down at the table and took my blazer off. I was sweating from the humid heat, the proximity of people around me, and I wished that I had a rubber band or a barette to take the hair off of my face and the back of my neck.

"So your man is leaving tomorrow?" he asked, sitting down next to me.

I nodded, taking another drink from my beer. I didn't want to talk about tomorrow anymore.

"Do you two need a ride to Logan then?" he asked, sounding more lucid than before. There had been times that I had wondered if he sometimes pretended to be drunker than he was, to catch people off-guard, to say things that people



would write off because they thought he was really faced. He never blacked out like other alcoholics did, he always remembered what had happened the night before, much to the embarrassment of his friends at the bar. And he never missed work because of his drinking; even after a lost evening he would get up the next morning as if nothing had happened. For him, it was a matter of control.

"No, Matthew is dropping off his car tomorrow morning." I put my glass down on the table.

He asked if I wanted another one, and I nodded vigorously, maybe too vigorously, because he leaned over and put his hand over mine. "Things'll get better you know," he said.

"Really?" I asked, unbelieving and perhaps a bit patronizing.

He gestured to the barman for another round. "What are you going to do then?"

"Nothing I can do." I said, calmly, suddenly feeling pretty good despite the heat and claustrophobia, looking my father in the eyes, seeing pity and picking up my beer to take yet another drink.

"You can give him a reason to stay," he said.

I could tell him that I was pregnant, I thought, that would be a damn good reason for him to stay, but dismissed it, thinking of my father.

"If you had to do it over again, you wouldn't stay." I said. I knew that I was approaching untenable ground. He had

spent his whole adult life wondering what life would've been like had he stayed in Connemara, still on the fishing boat with his brothers and cousins, instead of leaving at eighteen and meeting my mother, having two kids, working his life away in the city, complaining and drinking until his wife finally left him for an older man that worked in the deli on the corner.

"I don't know about that," he said.

"C'mon, Mick, everyone here knows that you'd go back in a second." I finished my beer and slammed the empty glass on the table sharply. "You're not going to try to tell me that you don't have regrets."

"I don't regret you, or your brother." The round came and he searched for money in his baggy, black pants.

I took out a ten dollar bill. "Let me worry about this round dad." I said, and handed it to him with a trembling hand.

He nodded. "So am I the reason why you won't ask him to stay?"

I considered the question carefully, avoiding his pale grey eyes, getting up the courage to answer. I felt like I was in the bottom of a hole, looking up, trying to ask for help- but no words were coming out.

But my father was the sewer man, up at the top, listening when no one else heard anything. Did he need me to say it? Didn't the question answer itself?

"Seamus and I are two different people. And so are your



mother and you." He sounded quite sober now, and as he raised his glass to his lips I looked into his eyes, dry and earnest, and I shook my head heavily.

"I know that." I took a deep breath. "But if I have to give him a reason to stay, I don't want him. If he needs a reason..."

Mick let it dangle, unanswered. He looked over my shoulder at the dartboards, smiling. "Did you see that woman play?" he asked.

"Yeah, she's good." I let my eyes wander around the bar until I found Seamus, the most handsome man I'd seen all night, and I held my breath. I would remember him just as he was that moment, smiling, head back. And then he was looking over at the dartboards, looking for me, and it thrilled me. I waited until he found me and I smiled, full and yearning I could see it in his eyes: love.

And then he turned away, as if he had revealed too much, but I continued to watch him, knowing that he could feel my eyes on him. I thought, what are you thinking, Seamus?

"What if your man decides to come back?" my father asked.

"He won't," I said, finally turning away from Seamus. "I can't consider that as an option at this point."

He began to scratch the coarse hairs at the back of his head, a sure sign that he had something on his mind. "All I'm saying is don't close the book on him. That boy loves you, we both know that, although God knows why."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I said, knowing





what he meant, knowing that he was right, but needing to hear it anyway.

"You sure don't make it easy for him, that's what I mean. You could try a bit of kindness, of tenderness, some sweet words sometimes."

I took another drink. I wanted to tell him that at this point, words didn't mean too much. Words were just sounds, they could never fully express the feelings you have. Sometimes just by saying it out loud, you lost a little bit of it, but I stopped before I said it, realizing that I was nothing but a hypocrite. I wanted to hear those words from Seamus, I would die to hear those words, but he stopped saying them when he realized he would never hear them from me.

"It doesn't take much," my father said. "That's something I learned too late in life. I don't want you to make the same mistake."

I looked out into the cigarette haze but couldn't find Seamus, he was gone from where I had seen him before, and I raised my glass again.

"Toast," I said.

My father raised his glass. "To what?"

"To silence. Silence and betrayal." I said, smiling sadly, knowing I was the dope, wondering if I could climb from the bottom of the hole before Seamus left the next day.

It was late, I was still sticky and definitely drunk. I wanted to stay in the corner near the dartboards and just



watch Seamus and Matthew up behind the bar. He was having a good time, but I knew that he was concerned about me, and occasionally I would go back up to the bar to get a drink and let him know that I was still there, that I was okay, that I knew he was there.

But I was comfortable in the corner. Too many people knew that Seamus was going home tomorrow, too many people were wondering why he was leaving me. My reasoning was, if I could effectively hide, they would let me be.

There were too many questions, questions that I didn't have answers to. So I sat in the corner, away from my father, away from my brother, away from my lover.

"Don't let it get to you," Corrigan said. He was bussing tables near me, and I looked up at him with a smile.

"I'm alright," I said.

"You haven't been paying for those, have you now?" he asked. "You need the drinks more than Seamus does."

"Maybe not," I said, and I thought of the pregnancy. That's another thing I'd have to deal with at a later time.

Corrigan approached me hesitantly. "I shouldn't be telling you this Moira, but, I've known you since you've been a wee one and it may ease your pain."

I tried to focus on what he was saying, to anticipate it, but instead, I sat back and waited. I felt my legs start to shake.

He started again, looking around to see if anyone else could hear. "Tonight Seamus asked if there would be a job open

after Christmas. He's thinking of coming back."

I let my drink sit. I was past pride. "Really. He never told me that." I sat, still, letting it sink.

"I thought you ought to know." Corrigan began to turn away.

"Thank you," I said after him, as much as an afterthought than anything else. I sat silently, legs shaking, finally raising my drink once again.

"You've been a very patient girl. Do you want me to get him over here?" my father asked, eyes glassy and watery once again.

I shook my head. I was content to sit and let people come to me, only getting up to go to the bathroom and back. Seamus had been over a couple of times already, the bar was officially closed, but on special occasions, Corrigan let the customers out and friends stay. So we sat, still drinking for free, and with most of the people gone I could see him from across the room, moving fluidly, animated, happy- like he was when he first came over with me a year ago.

"Why don't you go over and get him?"

"Didn't we go over this earlier?" I asked, and leaned back in my seat. I thought of what Corrigan said and almost smiled. "Let it go, Mick. He'll come get me when he's good and ready."

He stared at the dartboards still behind me, now unused, finally getting up, exasperated, fishing around for his dart



set in the pocket of his shirt.

I stood under the showerhead, letting the cool water wash over me. I knew that Seamus was angry; on the cab ride home his voice was strained and sharp. He had come over to me after almost everyone, including Matthew and my father, had gone, and had just gestured, a pugnacious wave of the hand. He would never yell, that wasn't his style, but that wave of the hand told more than any verbal diatribe ever could. So I had just left with him, waving to Corrigan and Andy behind the bar, not smiling, not speaking. There was nothing really to say anyway.

I let the water run for a few more minutes before I turned it off. I would only have to face Seamus on the other side of the bathroom door. It would be impossible to not say anything to him at this point- but to just go to bed would be to get up in the morning and face the day that he was leaving.

I wrapped a robe around me, still drunk. It wasn't a good time to say anything. I was emotional, I was liable to say things that I didn't want to say, not until he made a decision either way. If he left, I wouldn't stay pregnant and he would never know. If he stayed, I'd tell him.

I felt better. The smell of the bar, the sweat, it was all gone and I opened the door to an empty hallway. I heard him in the kitchen, moving around, then the sound of a bottle opening.

"Seamus?" I called, walking toward the kitchen. He was at the counter, opening a bottle of wine from the refrigerator.



"Let's have a toast," he said, turning to me, holding the bottle above his head.

"It's three o'clock in the morning," I said, and pulled the robe tight. He was taut, visibly angry, and with a lurch he came toward me, weaving across the kitchen.

"No, we have to have a toast dear," he said, and I realized that it would be better to let him go. He poured the wine into two waiting glasses sitting on the table, spilling wine before setting the bottle down. I took one carefully. He raised his high above his head.

"To you," he said with a bitter smile.

"Okay, to me."

He drained the glass and grabbed the open bottle to refill it. "To you getting what you want."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Seamus leaned up against the table as he poured himself another full glass.

"I'm not going to play games, Seamus," I said, and put my glass down gently.

"I'm going tomorrow. That's what you want now, isn't it?" he asked.

"Is that what you really think?"

He stepped away from me. "Then say it. Say that you want me to stay." His voice was calm, but challenging, and I felt myself instinctively put my hand over my mouth as if to block something from escaping. "Say it," he said again.

I stood and watched him in the kitchen, his body shaking





with emotion, and I felt something inside of me go cold. I opened my mouth, but then closed it and shook my head.

"Your decision was made a long time ago." I felt my words hang in the air between us, until Seamus turned away from me.

"Is that what you think?" he asked in a defeated voice.

I didn't answer, only turning away when I realized that he couldn't face me, walking to the bedroom and closing the door.

Lying in bed, I could hear him still moving around in the other room. I knew that he wouldn't come in the bedroom after me, not until he was sure I was long asleep, so I stared up at the ceiling, wishing I could at least cry. That would make me feel better, or worse, instead of the nothingness that I was feeling then. And I thought about him standing under the light in the kitchen, unable to meet my eyes, in so much pain that he turned away. Maybe I would ask him tomorrow. Maybe I would open my mouth and make everything work, or better yet, I'd wake up and he'd tell me that he decided to stay because he couldn't stand the idea of leaving. And of course, we'd live happily ever after, with baby, Seamus never regretting his decision to leave Ireland and his family to make his future with me.

What a strange day it had been, I thought as I began to drop off to sleep. It started off alright, with art class- but then that sewer man. I had almost forgotten about him. It had been an omen, a curious, foreboding omen, finding that man



kissing the grating, watching the police put him in the car. He was convinced that it was God in that sewer, that God needed someone to hear him and help him and wasn't it ironic that I had felt that I had been at the bottom of that sewer all day, mired in my own emotional filth, whispering for someone to get me out. That is ironic, I thought, everything fading into sleep, except no one is bending over the grating to hear me. They're just walking by, somehow hearing only silence.

At first, his face was fuzzy. My eyes felt almost swollen shut so I kept them closed, just feeling his hands all over me. He didn't say a word at first, just touched me, then he brought his head down and kissed me, my face, my neck, my stomach. I kept still, half-asleep, hungover, remembering only when he was already on top of me that he was leaving, and what had happened the night before. And then I was awake but kept my eyes closed, trying to remember how it felt for him to be on top of me again, maybe for the last time, and the thought made me move more intensely, the pleasure building, the emotion escalating.

"Look at me," he said, and opened my eyes with his fingers. I saw his face, that he had been crying, I saw love in his eyes and knew I would cry, I began to shake, and I thought that I could ask him but then he gasped and thrust, his head dropped to my shoulder, breath uneven and I looked up to the ceiling.



"I love you," he said, still trying to catch his breath.

"I love you," I said back, holding him tight, but knowing that I'd have to let him go. He still had to finish packing.

At the airport, at his gate, I was surprised at how calm both of us were. It was only when his flight was called, the point when boarding began, did I really believe that he would leave. Somewhere inside of me, I held onto the hope that he would never get on the plane, he'd turn around and profess his love, but when he grabbed his case, I knew for certain he was already gone.

"This is your last chance," he said, everything inside of him contained in tiny packages, wrapped up nice and neat.

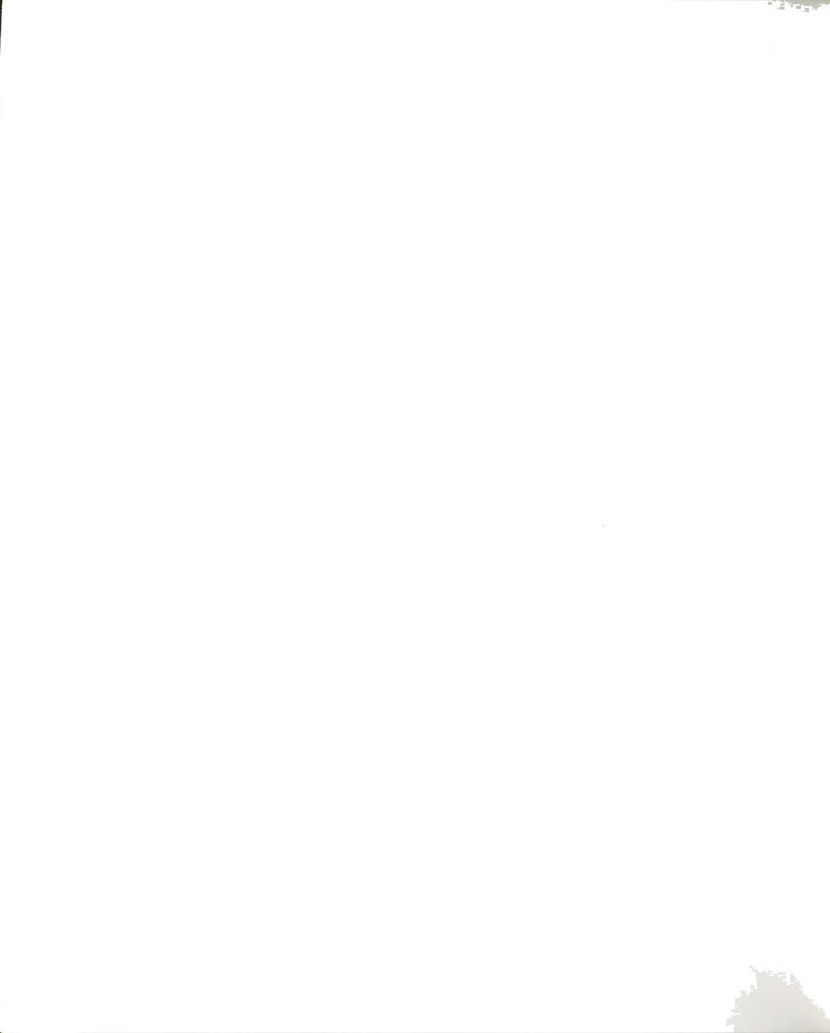
I smiled. "And yours," I said.

"Maybe I'll come back after Christmas, I've been thinking." He pulled his case closer to him.

"Maybe I'll be here." I looked sadly at him, wondering what the months in between would do, how things would change, wondering whether I'd see him again, or if this goodbye meant nothing but a minute in time.

"It would've been a lot easier if you'd asked me to stay," he said, and I just nodded. It would have been easier, but what did that mean, easier? So I kissed him and let him go, let him turn away and walk into the doorway that led to the plane that was to take him home. And when he was gone, I let myself cry, not only for me, but for him, for my father, for what could have been our baby, for the sewer man listening

for something that was never there. I watched the plane pull away from the terminal and felt relief.





## The Gallery

Usually she was the wife. Today she was the connoisseur of art, an astute aficionado, and she walked confidently into the gallery. It was spacious and bright, and she examined the expanse with a cursory glance. The gallery was full of people, well-dressed, attractive people, sipping opening night champagne, milling from piece to piece. Elizabeth could feel her hands shake as she took off her coat.

"Let me take that," Mitch said from behind her, and grabbed the coat with one hand. Tonight Mitch was her date, she thought, not her husband, no, he was just her date, and it could very well be that she would let someone else take her home tonight. If only Mitch didn't live with her, she thought, if only Mitch wasn't here.

Elizabeth loved art; or perhaps it would be better to say that she loved the idea of art. To steady her hands, she grasped her purse. She felt Mitch give her a slight shove, a bit more than a nudge, and she took a deep breath and stepped further into the gallery.

She heard someone call, "Mitch!", and a woman approached him, smiling, embracing, and Elizabeth knew instinctively that this woman had slept with him. They had been separated for

almost a year and had only gotten back together three months ago, they had an understanding, and she tried to keep this in mind as she searched the room for the man with the champagne.

"Darling, this is Teisha," Mitch had a hold of her arm and almost physically turned her, "she sent the invitation."

"Hello," Elizabeth said, "and thank you, this showing is is..."

"Wonderful, " Mitch finished.

Her husband was tall and handsome, although too hairy, and the woman was dark, her face uneven and pale, but she'd look good in the dark, Elizabeth thought, and she watched them make small talk. How strange, they had been naked and sweaty together. The thought amused her, and she laughed.

"You're in a strange mood tonight," Mitch said, and Elizabeth thought, you're damn right I am, you'd better watch out.

"Watch out Beth!" Teisha warned, and Elizabeth slowly turned to mercifully find the champagne man ready and waiting.

"It's Elizabeth," she said, smiling as if she had smelled something horrible but didn't want to embarrass anyone, "not Beth." She took a sip of her champagne, turned and glanced at the nearest painting. A group of three people were in front of it, two women and a man, and she watched the man touch the elbow of the woman next to him. There was something vaguely familiar about him, his movements, something soothing even. She watched him laugh, tried to get a good look at his face, but he didn't turn around, and she found herself admiring his

broad back and wondering how it would be to run her hands across its width. Where do I know him from, she thought, how do I know him?

She turned back to her husband; she hadn't been missed. Elizabeth noticed with a jolt that his hand was on Teisha's elbow, not sensually, but almost possessively, and she drained her champagne glass.

"Excuse me," she said with a forced cheerfulness, "I'm going to walk around."

"You want me to go?" Her husband asked, obligingly, and she shook her head, no, stay, don't worry about me, but he had already turned back to Teisha, his hand now on her upper arm. I wonder how I'll manage to ask him for a divorce, she thought.

She found another champagne man, unburdened him of a full glass, and began to examine the paintings along the nearest wall of the gallery. She soon realized that she was spending too much time at each painting, as if waiting for something to happen, and she wasn't keeping up with the flow of the other beautiful, articulate people. She listened to their comments, nodding along with some, carefully considering others, and even rolling her eyes at a few. After another glass of champagne, she began to see herself as self-contained.

She looked around suddenly for her husband, and found that he and Teisha had been joined by two men, one very short and stylishly dressed, the other very tall and thin. The men should have made her feel better, but she felt nothing but



mild curiosity, and that realization made everything bright: the lights, the brushstrokes on the paintings, the champagne glasses, even the wedding ring on her finger.

Elizabeth walked a bit to her right, stood in front of the last piece on the wall, and thought she would cry. It was a simple painting, a slash of reddish-brown the focal point, surrounded by the play of grey, like crystal, or even ice, she thought, and it was vibrant, powerful. Others walked by behind her, approved and disapproved, evaluated and corrected, criticized and noted; they were fools. This is beauty, she thought, this is it. She rarely came in contact with beauty, and it was as if it had grabbed her by both elbows and shook her.

"Quite a few guys from my firm are here," Mitch said from behind her, but his sudden appearance didn't startle her, it seemed as if he was speaking from far away. "How're things going on your end?"

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" She asked, and briefly wished that he would put his arm around her. Just to feel someone, she thought, and closed her eyes.

"Yeah," he said, "it's alright," but he was already looking around for someone else, there was nothing to say to her, not really, nothing that would make a difference to either one of them.

"I want this painting," she said.

"We don't need a painting," he said, as if the thought of her wanting anything exasperated him.

"I didn't say we, I said I," she felt as if the brightness of the light on the painting was blinding her. "I said that I want this painting."

"There's Alex," his arm went up, signalling, and before she could say anything else he was gone.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and stood up as straight as she could manage. I'm sick of standing up for myself in this marriage, she thought, I'm sick of being the only passion, the one that thinks beyond myself. I must get out of this marriage or I'll just come apart at the seams, I'll bust into a thousand small sharp pieces.

She bent over to read the information card next to the painting. Blood on Ice, it said, by Louisa Daman, and it would sell for five hundred dollars.

"I feel like if I reach out and touch it, I'd break this glass or whatever this is, you know, it looks so fragile." And as if to illustrate, the familiar man, the one she had seen earlier at the entrance, tentatively reached out, his hand half a foot from the painting.

"Yes, it's well-done." She stared at his face, and she knew for certain that she did know him. The familiarity centered on the eyes, more brown than green; this man had a thin, yet kind mouth, and distinctive hands. Large, comforting hands, she thought, as he dropped his arm and focused on the piece.

"I like the juxtaposition of precision and the, ah, violence of the slash here." His arm went up again, but



dropped almost immediately. He looked to her for approval.

"A metaphor for the human condition," she said, smiling, because he had the same question in his eyes, he recognized her, but didn't know from where, and his arm came up again, this time to point at her.

"We know each other." He said simply, and she liked that. If he had put it in the form of a question, she would have screamed.

She nodded.

"You were in the creative writing class over at the Community College about a year ago." He waved his hand and nodded with satisfaction.

"Yes, yes," Elizabeth was relieved, "yes, we went out for coffee that night."

"That's right, at the cafeteria." His head stopped and his eyes focused. "And you never came back to class after that night."

She kept nodding and smiling, for she remembered the kiss he had given her after walking her to her car; it was a small one really, but just enough to scare her, and she had decided to drop off her final story instead of coming to class and running into him again.

"Elizabeth," she said, offering her hand.

"I remember," he was nodding again, and he shook her hand slowly. "I'm David, in case you don't."

She held his hand a bit longer than necessary. I see what I was so scared of, she thought.





"So, was that your husband? I seem to recall that you were separated, you were thinking about getting a divorce."

"Yes." She dismissed the guilty urge to scan the room for her husband. "We decided to try it again."

David looked back at the painting. "So that's why you didn't come back." He laughed. "I was hoping that you'd at least call."

"I wish that I had, believe me. Things were just too difficult at that point." She avoided his eyes. Please, she thought, please don't leave.

"You don't look very happy, Elizabeth." He said it softly, intimately, and she wondered how she could have forgotten him. He was just like this, probing, and when she was out with him last year, right before her reconciliation with Mitch, his questions discomfited her, upset her even. But now, even in front of a gallery full of people, she was aroused, ready, and she met his eyes.

"If I had to do it over again, I would," she said.

"What would you do differently?"

"I wouldn't have gone home alone that night." She watched his eyes widen, felt the adrenalin rush, the room brightened once again, and she heard herself finish, "and that's just for starters."

"You might have to tell me more," he said, and as if in slow motion, he reached out and steadied her.

"Truth." she said, but he didn't understand, and slightly off-balance, she said, "I will tell you about truth and

beauty."

He stood before her, tall, broad-shouldered, handsome: she wondered when his hand had left her arm. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card.

"I hope that this doesn't seem cliché, but here's my card." He offered it, she took it, and put it into her small purse. "If you call me this time, I'll.." (and he smiled) "buy you this painting." He bent over quickly to find the price. "It'll be worth it."

"I don't want you to buy the painting." She stood and looked at him carefully. His mouth suddenly seemed too thin, too repressive. The thought of him buying it filled her with disgust.

"It was just a joke," he said, and then his brown eyes were looking over her shoulder and she jerked around, seeing the woman he had been with before over near the entrance.

"Call me," he whispered, "this isn't the place, I'm with someone," and she closed her eyes.

"I'm a different person from what I was then," she said, but he was already gone. She touched her lips, and opened her eyes. Mitch didn't love the painting, and David just pretended to, a ploy to pick her up in front of his girlfriend, no one in the room loved truth and beauty as she did. She felt a surge of emotion, as if she were going to cry, and she took a deep breath. Whatever her marriage was, whatever her encounter with David was, it wasn't truth and beauty.

Mitch wasn't around, but she wouldn't have cared if he



was standing right next to her; in fact, a confrontation was exactly what she needed. I'll tell him after one more drink, she thought. I'll tell him about truth and beauty. I'll tell him that to stay with him would be to betray it, and to betray it would break my heart. One more glass of champagne and I'll kick his ass.

It all happened so fast, she thought. Isn't it amazing how the course of one's life can change in the blink of an eye? She looked around quickly for the champagne man, couldn't find him, and turned back to the painting. It's beautiful, she thought. Elizabeth opened her purse and looked through her wallet. She took out the business card, and threw it in a nearby bin. I wonder if I have my credit card with me; I'll buy this damn thing myself, she thought, still a bit drunk.



## Cristina's Mother

It was the fall of Cristina's eighth year, and her father was very ill. She knew that he was very ill, because he laid on the couch, day after day, and never went to his job at Ford anymore. Her mother talked in hushed tones to her aunts, shielding her mouth with her tired hand when she talked on the phone.

Cristina wasn't allowed in the family room to watch her afternoon cartoons anymore; instead, her mother told her to go outside and play. Her mother would wait at the door and take her schoolbag, and turn her right back around.

"Please, Tina, your father needs some time to rest," she would say, and put her hand on her head to comfort her. Cristina wasn't a little girl anymore; she knew that her father's illness was serious. So instead of arguing, she would nod and give her mother her blue canvas schoolbag. Because of her father, her mother was very unhappy, and often forgot about Cristina and her brother Antonio. He was only three years old and couldn't go to school yet, but most days Cristina's mother would send Antonio out to play with Cristina and her friends when she had been home for a little while.





Her father's illness seemed to last forever. In early November he got up off of the couch and went into work for three days straight. On the third day, a man named Martinez dropped him off and talked to Cristina's mother at the curb of their house. Her father walked into the family room, and started to cough, not like he had always coughed, but differently. These shook his whole body. Cristina stood in the hallway and saw her father take out a bunched up handkerchief from his pocket and hold it up to his mouth. When he took it away, she saw the black phlegm that remained.

He went into the hospital a few days after that. Cristina came home from school and he was gone, even the blanket that never left the couch was gone. Only her aunt Maria was there, nervously pacing the kitchen floor and talking Spanish into the phone.

"Where are my father and my mother?" Cristina asked.

"Tina's here," said her aunt into the phone, and pointed to the kitchen table. There were several store bought pastries on it, but Cristina did not move.

"Where's Antonio?" she asked.

Her aunt covered the mouthpiece with her hand and waved her away. Cristina crossed to the table and took a bite from an apple tart.

When her mother came home later that night, Cristina could see that she had been crying. Immediately, she went over



and took her purse. Her mother stood in the middle of the family room, almost precisely where her father had stood just a few days earlier, and covered her face with her hands. Aunt Maria came over and put her beefy arms around her.

"Is he dead?" asked Cristina, feeling very small and alone.

"No," answered Aunt Maria, "but he is very sick. He has a problem where he breathes," she pointed her heavily ringed hand to her chest, "in his lungs."

"Oh," said Maria, and sat down on the worn brown chair next to the hallway. She knew exactly what her aunt was saying, and then meant her father would probably die. The thought didn't seem very real to her.

Her mother took her hands from her face, and Cristina was surprised by the violent wave of anger that followed. Her mother moved quickly, first to the end table where her father's cigarettes sat. She grabbed them, then checked under the couch where another full pack waited. She was a tidal wave, moving in and out of rooms, checking drawers and closets. Aunt Maria's impassioned voice followed, but her mother was not to be quieted.

Cristina sat in the front room. I hope she doesn't wake Antonio, she thought, and gazed at the long strips of light on the carpet that came from the streetlights outside. She got up and stepped in and out of the light, listening to her Aunt Maria talk Spanish, and her mother's frantic movements tear the bathroom apart.



Finally, her mother had finished, and nearly a dozen packages of cigarettes were placed on the kitchen table next to the store bought pastries. They all looked at the compact boxes, some open and some not; Cristina watched her mother's face lovingly.

Aunt Maria sighed and pulled up a chair for Cristina's mother. "You must eat something," she said. She had been crying as well.

Cristina looked at her Aunt, having never really thought of her as her mother's sister like she was Antonio's sister, and then she looked back to her mother, still watching the cigarettes.

"We have beef stew," Cristina said, and her mother turned around as if it were the first time she had seen her. She reached out and kissed her, holding her very close.

"You must go to bed now," she said, in her stumbling Mexican accent, "and I will tuck you in."

Cristina took her mother's hand and led her mother to the room she shared with her brother. Antonio had slept all day, the sleep of a little boy that could sense tragedy and wanted to avoid it. As she changed into her nightgown and climbed into bed, she asked her mother what was wrong with her father.

Her mother pulled up the thick patchwork blanket and kissed Cristina on the forehead.

"I'll take you to see him tomorrow," she said, and Cristina reached up to touch her thick, silky black hair.

"Okay," Cristina answered, and thought about her father as her mother crossed the room to Antonio's small bed by the door. She watched her mother's broad back bend in and out of the light as she kissed Antonio, and Cristina realized her father must be very sick. But he would not die, because he was too strong of a man for that, he was solid like the Bible that sat next to his bed and the thick arms that worked on the line and held her mother on the porch just last summer. So Cristina took comfort in these thoughts, and she fell asleep to her mother and Aunt talking quietly in the other room.

From that day on, it was one relative after another for the three weeks that her father was in the hospital. She wasn't allowed to see him after all, it was explained to her that her father was in intensive care and couldn't have her there. So Cristina sat with the endless circuit of aunts and uncles and cousins that took the bus or drove their cars over to the house and she ate a lot of food, homemade mostly, and listened to a lot of hushed conversations after she had gone to bed.

When he came home, they were all there, and Cristina just wished that they all would leave. Her father emerged from her Uncle Pedro's sedan, and Cristina couldn't believe that he was the same man that had entered the hospital.

He walked haltingly up to the house, looked assertively at everyone on the porch until he found Cristina and Antonio.

"My Tina," he said and she walked to him, slightly



afraid, wanting to be gentle. He put his arm around her and started to walk up the steps, one at a time, waving Uncle Pedro away and reaching out for Antonio. Cristina's father bent down to pick up his son and he started to cough, the same wracking noise that she had heard before, and he withdrew from Antonio like a turtle into his hard, green shell.

Cristina glanced up to see her Aunt Maria look down at the ground, then make the sign of the cross furtively. Cristina's mother stood by her husband's side and put a hand on his back as if she was trying to prop him up.

It took a long time for him to enter the house. Cristina didn't enter with him, all the relatives followed him in and forgot about Cristina and Antonio outside on the porch. Antonio sat down on the worn brown couch and swung his legs back and forth. Cristina looked over his head through the front window, where a bunch of her relatives stood, concerned about her father. She could hear him coughing.

"Papa's sick," said Antonio, but did not look at her. He watched the kids across the street play Red Rover, and Cristina followed his eyes. It had been the first time that Antonio had said anything to her about their father, and she went over to him on the couch and put her thin arm around his tiny shoulders.

"It's something with his lungs," said Cristina knowingly. She didn't want to say the word, because even someone as young as Antonio knew its severity, and she felt like if she could protect him, she should. She would have to be an adult,





especially if their mother had to take care of their father; it wouldn't be all bad, she thought, she'd just help out wherever she was needed.

She reached into her pocket looking for money and found a few pennies. The porch seemed very wide and was littered with windblown dirt and fall leaves. During the summer, Cristina and her father had repainted it, she had actually been his helper, and she was proud to do so in her special work clothes and hat. He had been very happy to have the porch done.

Everything will be okay, she thought. They would paint the porch again in the summer, just like the last. All he needed was rest, and love, and prayers. Cristina would make sure he'd get all that, and stay away from cigarettes, and she'd be very quiet, a good girl. She felt better that day, and watched the sun fall in the sky as her relatives talked inside.

Thanksgiving came and went. Cristina went over to her Aunt Maria's, just as her family had always done, but this time they set up a couch for her father. As the rest of the relatives ate at the big, long table in the living room, Cristina's mother shuttled back and forth from her husband.

With the beginning of December, Cristina's father seemed to feel better. There was no talk of him going back to work; instead, her mother announced one surprisingly warm day that she was going to work. There had been a talk about how

Christmas was going to be less than last year, and about how they should be happy just to be all together.

"Does this mean I won't get any presents?" Antonio asked.

"I want presents."

Cristina had never seen her mother so angry. She gave her brother a warning look. He put his small hand on the back of the kitchen chair.

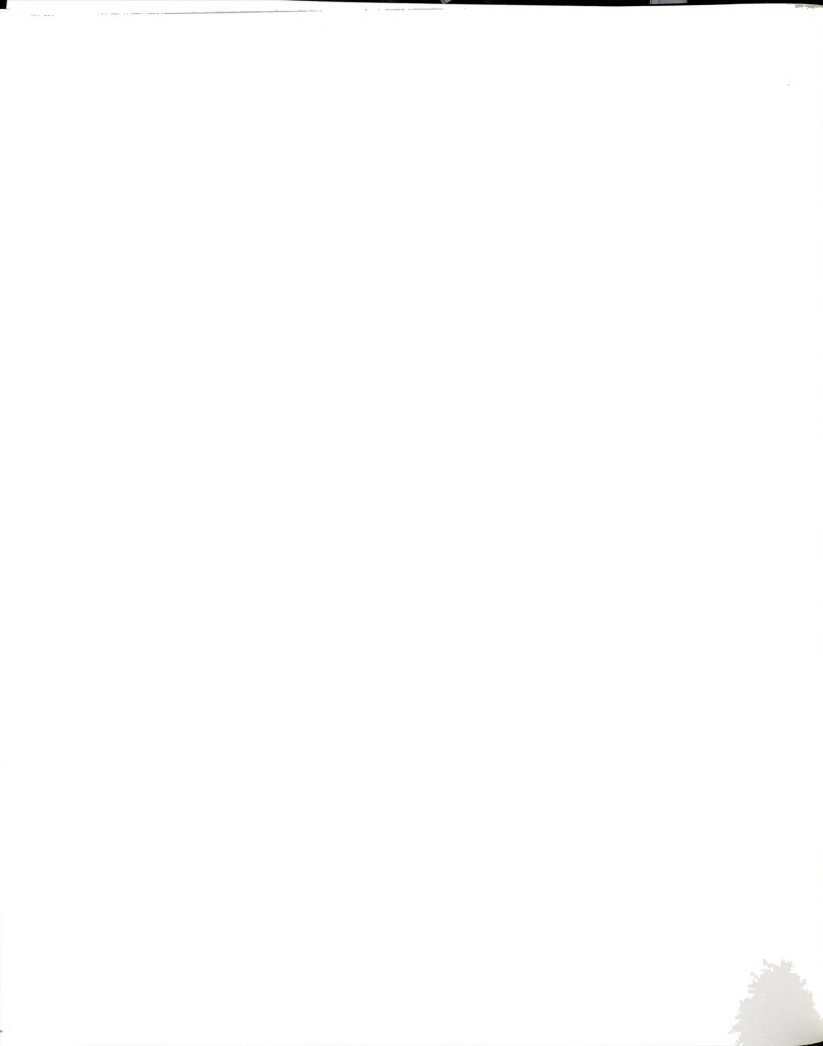
"I have to go work. Do you understand that your father cannot work anymore? You will be happy with what you get." She struggled to hold back the tears.

"Thank God for insurance," Aunt Maria added. She was there everyday now, helping her sister take care of her husband.

"But he's feeling better. He's walking around. Why can't he go back to work once he feels better?" Cristina was confused. Her father spent most of the day off of the couch now, and he looked stronger.

"Listen to me." Her mother lowered her voice to a steady, fervent whisper. "Your father will never get better. He will never go back to work. That'll be the way it is from now on," and by the end, she was crying. Aunt Maria put her hand on her elbow and Cristina's mother stopped talking.

Antonio started crying then, loud, frightened sobs that made his mother whirl around as if kicked. He clutched her leg, not ceasing in his crying, and Cristina looked out the kitchen window at the house next door. It was yellow and solid. She looked at her mother and brother, both crying, her



mother trying to comfort him, and she wished that she was young like Antonio. She didn't want to believe that her father was dying, that something so sure could suddenly be gone, could wither away and die. Her mother was wrong- Cristina would just pray more, be a better girl and things would go back the way they were. Her mother had to be wrong.

Her mother started her job as a seamstress for a large department store downtown. She had a sewing machine at home, so they converted one of the tiny rooms upstairs to a sewing room. During the day, Aunt Maria would come by to check on Cristina's father and wait for Antonio and Cristina to come home from school. Sometimes she would take them shopping at the supermarket. On those days, she'd also cook dinner.

Her mother was always tired now, coming home on the bus with dresses and suits from her job, and disappearing after dinner to work in her new sewing room. Cristina would clear the table without asking. She also learned how to put away laundry, vacuum and dust. She kept Antonio quiet. Her father encouraged her, playing games with her when he felt good, teasing her Aunt Maria and letting Antonio sit on the couch and watch the news when it came on in the early afternoon. They would wait for her mother to walk down the street in her thick winter coat, carrying her work with her.

It was the Friday before Christmas and Cristina walked home from school, feeling very happy. She had two weeks off, two whole weeks to spend with her father and mother. She



planned all things she would do for her father, things to keep him happy, special snacks she could make. It had been snowing since the night before, and the school had let them out early. Antonio didn't have school at all. She cut through the alley, a shortcut she usually avoided. Older kids that belonged to gangs often hung out there and would sometimes cause trouble for anyone that came through. Cristina's mother made her promise never to walk in the alley. But today was different, and the snow made everything seem so clean and new.

She swung her blue canvas schoolbag carefully, for inside she had the presents she had purchased at the Santa's Helper Store the school had provided: a silver thimble and pair of scissors for her mother; a thick coloring book for Antonio; a pink feather duster for her Aunt Maria; and a set of watercolors for her father. It had cost her five dollars for all her presents, but she knew the greatest present she could give would be the part she played in her father's recovery. No one noticed what a good girl she had been, but that was okay. It would all be worth it when her father went back to work for good.

She came to the back of her house. The back gate was open, and she trudged her way through the tall, thick mound of snow. Aunt Maria's car wasn't in the driveway, it was empty, and Maria crossed the small backyard to the back porch.

Right before she opened the heavy back door, she heard her father cough, a deep, prolonged hacking that came from outside the house. She stopped to listen. Her father had not





been outside since Thanksgiving, he was too sick for the cold air, and Cristina knew immediately that something was wrong. She quietly descended the back stairs and walked to the corner of the house. The coughing stopped. She peeked around the corner carefully.

Her father stood against the side of the house, wearing a winter parka that was now too large for him. She saw him exhale smoke before she saw him actually bring the cigarette to his mouth, slowly and determinedly, and inhale long and hard. He stood there motionlessly for a moment, not exhaling, now moving, taking the cigarette from his lips, but then keeping it only inches from his mouth. Then he exhaled again, and something caught in his chest and he coughed; he waited patiently until it passed, and put the thin, half-finished cigarette back in.

Cristina walked to the back porch as silently as she could. She sat on the back porch and watched the snow fall. She opened her mouth and tried to catch snowflakes. This is not happening, she thought. I have imagined the whole thing. If I stay here a minute, I can go into the house and wrap my gifts and he will be on the couch, just as he always is, and we'll watch the evening news and maybe when Aunt Maria comes we can make hot chocolate. We'll put the tree lights on and watch the snowfall. She picked up a handful of the powdery snow and threw it as far as she could. It didn't go very far, just split up into individual flakes, blown by the crisp wind back into her face.



Cristina heard the front door close and knew that her father had gone back into the house. She sat there, brushing the snow off of the stairs, finally putting a handful of it in her mouth. What would her mother think, she thought. I must never tell her. It never happened. She remembered her mother the night her father had gone in the hospital, the night she had rounded up the cigarettes and thrown them all away, and Cristina knew that this would kill her mother. She would never tell.

After a few minutes, she got up and opened the heavy back door. She took off her wet boots and put them on the back porch, along with her coat and leggings and mittens. She couldn't reach the hooks, so she left them on the floor of the back porch to dry. She opened the door to the back stairway and kitchen entrance, and found her father at the kitchen sink, washing his hands with dishsoap.

"Tina," he turned to her, "how is my girl?" And he continued to soap his hands at the sink, his emaciated frame leaning against the sink for support, and she went over to him and hugged him around the waist, loving him, smelling the smoke in his clothing and hating him, feeling the thinness in his legs and pitying him, finally wiping her tears on his pants.

He stood still, his body shaking a little bit, until she stepped back from him. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," she answered, and stepped back again. "Nothing." Cristina looked up at him, looked into his large



brown eyes and walked past him to her bedroom. She closed the door and laid down on her bed, not coming out until she heard her Aunt knock on the door for dinner.

Cristina did not play games with her father anymore, but nobody noticed; shortly after New Year's Day he went back into the hospital. Her mother was never home anymore, she went straight from work to the hospital, so Aunt Maria picked up Cristina and Antonio from school and brought them to her house closer to the suburbs. It was there that they had dinner and did schoolwork until their mother came, sometimes as late as eight or nine o'clock at night, and they all went home.

One day in late February, Cristina and Antonio waited outside the school for Aunt Maria, but she never came. They walked home silently, it was bitterly cold, and it wasn't like Aunt Maria to forget about them. They walked down their street quickly, Cristina's eyes looking ahead for their house. She saw it suddenly, Aunt Maria's car was there, Uncle Martino's car too, and a few others that she didn't recognize. She knew right then that he was dead.

As they neared the house, Cristina's mother came out onto the porch, already dressed in black, face red and puffy from crying, and Antonio broke from Cristina's side and ran up the porch. He already knew.

Cristina stood on the front walk, steady, and thought that it all was like a dream, her mother and brother were very far away, and her schoolbag felt very heavy. The wind was very



cold, and she wanted more than anything to go into the warm, inviting house, but she didn't want to pass her mother and her relatives because she was ashamed. Ashamed that she could not cry. Ashamed that she was not sad. Ashamed because she saw him that day, on the side of the house, and she knew that they could see it on her face.

She walked in behind her mother, eyes down, her relatives right in the family room, and she walked past the kitchen where her Aunt was putting lunchmeat out on a platter, and into her bedroom. She put her schoolbag on a chair, along with her jacket and leggings, and took her boots off one at a time. She could hear Antonio crying and voices comforting him, and she laid down on her bed and wished that it was all over.

After her father's funeral, Cristina and Antonio would come home from school, where Aunt Maria would be waiting, and they would wait for Cristina's mother to come home from her job at the department store before sitting down to eat dinner.

Time passed quickly that winter. The days were short and cold, and they spent a lot of time indoors. One day in early March the weather warmed up enough to melt the snow that had been on the ground for weeks. Cristina decided to get her bike out of the garage, where it had been stored since early fall.

Cristina's family didn't own a car; instead, the garage was used for storage and her father's workbench. It hadn't been opened since his death, and she felt the cold, stale air as she opened the uncooperative door. Cristina's mother had





given her husband's clothes to charity and other family members soon after his death, and the smell of grease, the presence of his tools, the helmet to his old motorcycle overwhelmed her when she stepped into the garage. A pair of his old, dirty gloves sat right in the center of the workbench, and she tentatively picked them up. Underneath, hidden by them, was an open pack of Pall Malls.

Cristina stared at them for a minute. Only a few left, she thought, he smoked almost all of them. She put them in her pocket and walked out of the garage, closing the door behind her. She walked up the back steps and through the back porch to the kitchen, where Aunt Maria was preparing dinner.

She stared at her Aunt until she turned around. "Will God punish you if you can't forgive someone? I mean, is it a sin?" She watched her Aunt wipe her hands on her apron, then asked, "Will you go to Hell?"

"Hmm, well, that's not an easy one. To be a good Christian, you must turn the other cheek." She turned back to the frying pan.

"But what if you can't? What if you've really tried, but you just can't do it?" She fingered the pack of cigarettes in her coat pocket. "How can you do it?"

Her Aunt turned to her and smiled, and gathered her long, black hair in a ponytail with her hands, then reached into her pocket for a band. "Did you get into a fight with one of your little friends?"

Cristina hesitated, then nodded.



"Well, you have to ask Mother Mary to intercede for you. You must pray. We pray to the Virgin because she is the Mother of Jesus, and she will hear us and help." Aunt Maria opened the oven and checked on the browning potatoes and peppers. "Oh, and you should do it before Easter."

"Why?" Cristina asked. Easter was only a few weeks away, and that wasn't enough time.

"Jesus is resurrected, and we are reborn. You can't be reborn with anger in your heart. Put yourself in your girlfriend's shoes and try to understand." She began to cut up tomatoes, big, juicy ones, and offered a slice to Cristina.

"Even if this person brought it on themselves?"

Her aunt nodded.

"Thank you," she said, taking the tomato and putting it in her mouth. Her fingers played with the plastic on the cigarette pack.

The next day, Cristina went over to the church. It was a very old, beautiful Catholic church, only a few blocks from where she lived, and she opened the tall door with both hands. The church was spacious and dark, the muted afternoon sun dully lit the stained glass windows.

She knew where the statue of the Virgin Mary stood, to the left of the altar. She walked down the aisle and looked at it. The Virgin Mother stood, robed in light blue, her head covered by a cream colored veil, her arms crossed in front of her and her eyes loving and peaceful. Cristina knelt in front

of the statue, and bowed her head.

She stayed there for a minute, doing nothing, hoping that the Virgin Mother would come to her, would know her, and she would hear her voice in her head and all would be okay. But nothing happened, and she raised her eyes to the statue once again.

She heard a commotion behind her, and she stayed perfectly still. It was above her, first a man's voice, then boys laughing, and finally voices warming up. It was the choir from Notre Dame. Damn, she thought, and then looked up to see if the Virgin had read her thoughts. But there was nothing.

The choir started to sing, an Easter song, and she recognized it even though it was in Latin, and suddenly Cristina knew it was an omen. She closed her eyes and prayed, help me Virgin Mary, help me, and she heard the choir so beautiful, and she felt tears coming to her eyes, help me, I want to forgive him, and her heart hurt, everything in her cried out, I want to forgive, I have to, need to, be forgiven. And the music got louder, and her heart beat faster, and she begged, forgive me, forgive me, forgive me...

The choir director's harsh voice rang out through the church, and the music stopped. Cristina could hear herself breathe in and she held her breath, please, she thought, please don't go, and the choir director was yelling at someone, and she could hear every word, and she sharply opened her eyes, she was still in the church, and with an exhale of breath she realized that the moment was over. The Virgin Mary



was just a statue with a chip in its base. The choir started the song from the beginning. She got up and wiped her tears, cold and bitter, and she started shaking. Nothing had changed, she thought, nothing. She was not forgiven and she would go to hell.

She fingered the pack, still in her pocket, and for a second, she wanted to kneel down again, she had to have absolution, she had to do penance for her sins, she couldn't leave without it, but she looked once again at the statue and knew that she wouldn't get it, not here, not anywhere, and she walked away reluctantly from Mother Mary's loving, comforting eyes.

The day was gray and blustery, and the cold hit her as soon as she left the safety of the church. She stood at the bottom of the steps, her eyes getting used to the light, and she thought, I will never be the same again. She put on her mittens. The tree next to the steps swayed in the breeze, and the first signs of life were budding. Cristina took the cigarettes from her pocket and walked to the trashcan by the curb. Cars passed by quickly, splashing water from the street onto the sidewalk. She took the cigarettes out, but instead of throwing them away, she held them over the trashcan with a steady hand. She thought of her father on the side of the house, coughing, dying, smoking, the porch that wouldn't be painted this summer after all. No, she thought. I'll do it myself.

Cristina put the full packet of Pall Malls back into her



pocket. She walked down the street towards home, trying to think where she last saw a pack of matches.





## Sea Turtles

He was already in our corner of the bar, reading a tattered paperback held up to dusty light streaming through the windows. I anxiously adjusted my bra before he caught sight of me.

"Hell, Katie, where have ya been?" He hadn't even looked up.

"Work," I answered. "I hope that you haven't been waiting long."

I signalled to the waitress as I sat down. I ordered two drafts. She waved in recognition. It looked as if he'd been there awhile, but hadn't ordered yet. Perhaps he was just waiting for me to arrive; a more realistic view would be that he was waiting for me to pay.

"Sometimes I hate people," he said suddenly. "Look over there, at that young man trying to pick up that woman." He pointed over to the bar. "Doesn't he realize how conspicuous he is?"

"You used to be him, at one time," I reminded him. I pulled out a five as the waitress set down the beer.

"That was a long time ago. Long before I realized everything beautiful in this world can't last." He raised the



glass to his mouth and half his beer disappeared. "That's why our love is so special."

"Special," I repeated, and signalled the waitress for two more.

He took out a flask from his coat pocket, sluggishly unscrewed the cap, and offered it to me. I took a shot, felt the burn and involuntarily winced. I passed it to him, and as he raised the flask, I tried to see the strength that had once drawn me to him.

"Hey, you have to buy liquor in this here establishment," the waitress interjected, back with our drafts. "You're not supposed to bring your own."

"I apologize, Madam," he said. "Would you believe that it's medicine for my intestinal tract?" and he smiled.

"Naw. And I've got my eye on you." She pointed a long, threatening finger at him. "You should be ashamed." She turned to me. "And why do you hang out with this guy?"

"Sentiment," I answered, and took a voluminous gulp. "Why don't you bring us two shots of tequila, no salt, no lime."

She got a concerned look. "Okay, but I think he's a bad influence on you."

"Oh," I added, "and a couple a more drafts." I smiled and pulled my hair from my face.

"I like that lady," he said sarcastically as she left. He'd almost finished his second beer. "She's got a certain something." He shifted to survey the whole bar.

I started my draft. "What do you see?" I asked him.



"A roomful of sharks," he answered, and as he shifted positions again, I could smell bad alcohol and body odor.

"Sharks?" I asked.

"People are like fish. No really, everyone in this bar is really a fish." He turned to look at me. "You, you are something kind and beautiful. Maybe a sea lion, or a dolphin."

"I like that." I readied my money as the waitress approached once again.

"Anything else?" she bent down, bringing her head closer to mine. I shook my head and drained the rest of my glass.

"What if we refused to pay?" he suddenly asked.

Her hair shook angrily. "I'd throw your sorry butt outta here," she said. "Wanna try me?"

"No, you just proved my point," he smiled. She took my money, turned her back on us, and stalked back to the bar.

"She's a shark. She has to be, you see?" He looked intently into my eyes. His were cloudy, drunk, pained.

"Then what are you?" I asked, and raised the tequila in a toast.

"A sea turtle." He caressed the shot glass lovingly and slowly drank the shot. "I saw a documentary on them. They start out as eggs on the beach. People search for the eggs and smash 'em or sell them. If they're lucky enough to hatch, they have to scramble to the sea." He bent over the table, and his foul, dead breath swept over to me. "They have to run, because they're prey to birds and people and crabs. Crabs that wait under the sand and pull them down underneath." His chin



started to shake and I knew he was about to cry. "And when they get there, after all that struggle and desperation, they're prey to other stuff: fish, sharks, whales, all kinds of sea creatures. Leviathans."

He started to weep, convulsively, and he bowed his head. I could see the waitress point him out to the bartender across the room. I reached across the table to steady him, but he was oblivious to me.

"They don't stand a chance," he cried, louder than he'd intended, and I sat back and took a drink of my beer.

"We'd better go," I said.

He got up, still crying, and got his bags together. His tattered paperback went into his pocket. I left a tip on the table and followed him out into the crisp, dark fall air.

We stood just outside for a minute. He stopped crying, and put his bags into his cart.

"Do you have somewhere to stay tonight?" I asked.

He nodded, and looked up at me sadly. "You are so lovely," he said, and wiped his nose with the sleeve of his coat. "Same time next week?"

I nodded and took a twenty out of my pocket. I put it in his hand. "It's getting cold," I said.

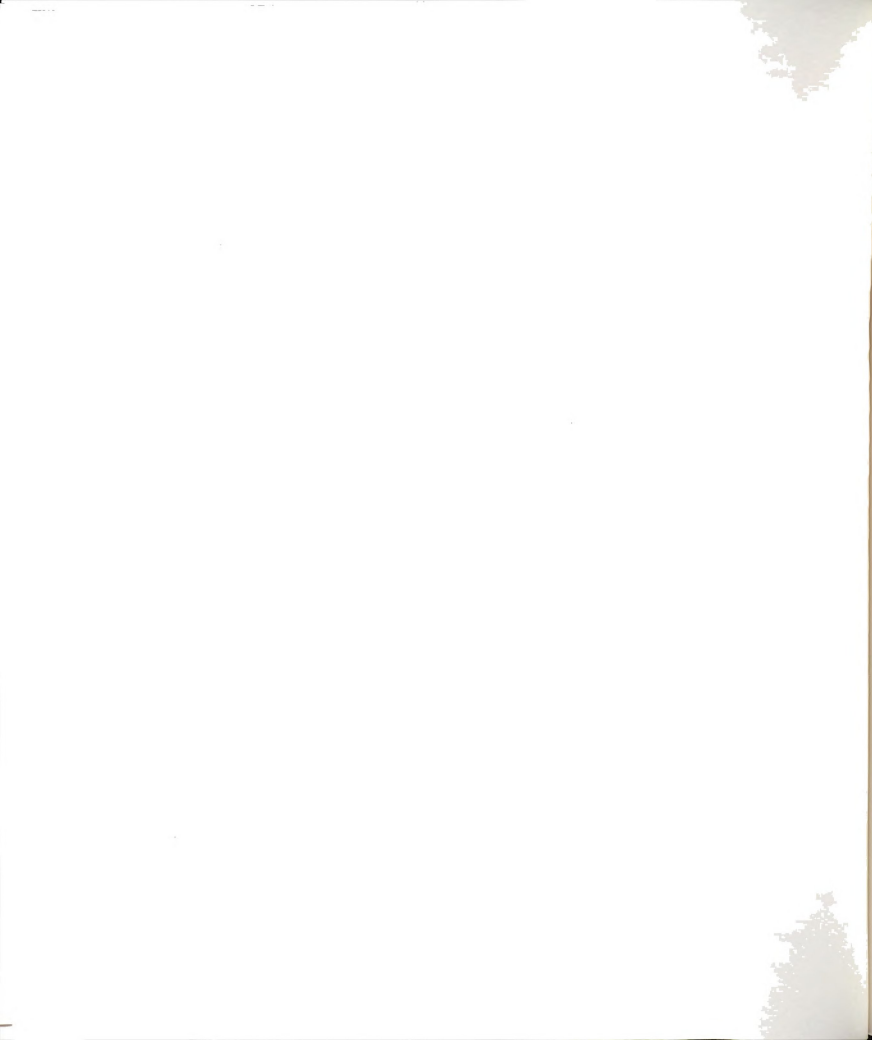
He held it a minute, thanked me, turned, and led his cart down the street. I watched him, trying to see him as he once was, but I couldn't. He was what I had always known him to be, a sea turtle with a soft underbelly, and for a fleeting moment, I had a compulsion to follow him. Follow him into the





mouth of the night. But all at once, he was gone, swallowed whole.

I took a deep breath and exhaled, and watched my breath disappear into the air. I walked back to the bar, opened the door, and embraced the warmth inside.





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