STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

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The following is a small collection of stories dealing with five women, all in different situations or stages of development. In two stories, "After Dinner" and "A Catholic Education," the narrators are children, basically powerless, but beginning to observe their surroundings and the people in them, and trying to figure out where they fit in. "Graveyard" deals with a young woman stuck in a stagnant, solitary existence, who, though she sees no real way out, begins to make small, intricate changes in herself and her life to make her situation more bearable. "A Christening" and "Nests" concern women who have made definite choices as to the directions their lives would take, and are finding that these choices have led them to unsatisfying and basically lonely lives.

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Graveyard

When Cathryn was in the bathroom, coiling her hair into a tight braid, she heard her roommate and her roommate's boyfriend laughing behind the closed bedroom door. The bed springs squeaked with their movement. Cathryn turned on the faucet full blast, pinned her braid to her head, and picked up her purse. As she locked the front door, she remembered the water filling up the sink. She considered just leaving it, and saying "oh, I forgot" to her roommate tomorrow, but instead re-opened the door and went back to the bathroom. She fished the dissolving bar of soap from the water in the sink and turned off the tap, all the while staring at herself in the mirror. She turned on the cold water again, and threw her head back, and began to sing, snapping her fingers softly. The pitch of her voice was somewhere between a whisper and a scream. After a few verses of the song, she remembered about going to work. She turned the water off for the last time, and left the house.

Alone in the car, Cathryn sang at the top of her voice. It didn't matter if the car radio were on or not. At red lights, she glanced into the rear-view mirror to see how she would look singing that particular song on stage. When cars pulled up next to her, she clamped her mouth shut, and looked intently at the light, or at her hands on the steering wheel. She didn't want strangers to see her as she sat in her car, yelling to herself. It was much better to be quiet until she was sure she was totally alone and unobserved.

As she got nearer the restaurant, she checked the cars in the parking lots of the bars along the route. The number of cars in each lot indicated the magnitude of the 2:00 bar rush at the restaurant. The parking lots were mostly only half-filled. That meant that the rush wouldn't be too bad. Ahead of her,

she saw a small spotted dog sniffing through the brushes at the side of the road. The head-lights of the passing cars caught him in beams of light as he made tentative starts off the curb and into the street, then jumped back onto the grass. Cathryn laid on the horn as she passed the dog. Maybe that would scare him into going home. She watched him from the mirror until she was too far away to see him in the darkness. She felt a familiar sadness constrict her throat. She knew she should have stopped the car and rescued the dog from the traffic, and looked for identification tags, or even have taken him home with her. Having something of her own would be nice, but the landlord didn't allow pets and she couldn't afford it and there wasn't enough room anyway. There was really nothing she could do. She drove the rest of the way to work without singing.

The restaurant manager was sitting at his accustomed place at the end of the counter. A nearby ashtray overflowed with cigaret butts and his empty coffee cup was pushed to the edge of the counter. He did this as a silent message to let all the waitresses know he was ready for more and they were being delinquent in their duties by not spotting the signal and scrambling toward him with fresh coffee.

"Late again," he said without turning around, as Cathryn hurried past him to hang up her coat.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, but he didn't answer.

Cathryn came out of the back room, digging in her uniform pocket for a pen, and the girl from the earlier shift dropped what she was doing, and left for home. Cathryn opened a package of coffee to make a new pot. She heard the loud snap of someone's chewing gum behind her.

"Hi, Wanda," she said automatically.

"Do you know what this place was like when I got here?" the other waitress said. "A MESS. I'm sick of it. Every night, the same thing. No coffee, no clean tables. NOTHING. Well, I'm sick of it. And I'm gonna tell Leonard. I'm gonna tell him these girls do NOTHING."

Cathryn nodded. She opened her mouth to agree, but Wanda was off in search of Leonard, the manager, her mouth working the gum violently.

Wanda was 18 years old. She wore her hair pinned and ratted and sprayed into and elaborate Dairy Queen effect. Her hips swayed as she walked around the restaurant, talking to male customers and sliding hot plates of food onto tables, while shouting across to the kitchen "My chef's salad almost up, Ralph? Don't ring my number if the chef's ain't ready."

Wanda was engaged to a young man named George, who sauntered into the restaurant at 4:00 each morning to slouch over a cup of coffee. One morning as they had their breaks, Wanda confided in Cathryn. "I went with a lotta guys," she said over English muffins, "but when George came along," she shrugged her shoulders and smiled a little smile,"he was like a dream come true." They were going to live in a trailer after the wedding.

"Hey-y, honey," the man said, slowly putting down the menu and looking at Cathryn's chest.

"May I take your order, sir?" Cathryn said, smiling.

"Yeah, I'll have one waitress to go," he chuckled.

"That's very original, sir. Did you make it up yourself?" Cathryn asked, still smiling, her voice suddenly like acid. "That's the first time I've heard anyone say that in at least 15 minutes." Cathryn's smile had become quite small, her eyes narrowed, and she was nodding slowly as if enjoying a very subtle joke. She was intent on drawing something, or tracing something,

on her ordering pad, The man stopped chuckling. He gave her the menu and placed his order.

As she put the order into the kitchen, Cathryn heard Wanda talking to Leonard about George. She giggled girlishly while Leonard blew smoke out his nose, and while customers stood at the door, waiting to be seated.

At the far end of the counter, the other two waitresses who worked Cathryn's shift were talking and laughing as they helped each other pour coffee and carry salads to their tables. They smiled at Cathryn as they hurried by her, and Cathryn heard that they were talking about their college courses and what they were going to do on their night off. Cathryn remembered how it was to go to college, how she would fill up the margins of her notebooks with minute drawings, and then panic when finals drew near; how every notebook, every class, every semester was dutifully completed and then ticked off some schedule somewhere until the schedule was exhausted and she was suddenly grown up. She didn't go to classes anymore. All she had was this job as a waitress.

Her days began at 3:30 in the afternoons, when she was awakened by the sounds of the kids going home from the elementary school across the street, or by the two small sister, Darla and Jeanette, who lived next door and who sometimes played outside her window. The afternoon sun streamed through the windows onto the leaves of the plants lined up on the sills. She tried to wait as long as possible before going downstairs to check the mailbox. Her roommate's name was on some list somewhere, and there was always alot of mail in the box for her. Cathryn, after collecting her roommate's mail, would stand on the front walk sometimes, and survey the quiet street, warming under the over-hang of leaves from the big oak and maple trees in the front yards. Silent, watching cats, lounging on porch rails or in the cool dirt under

boxwood shrubs, would start suddenly and disappear through quick openings of screen doors. Old ladies in soft, pastel cotton dresses came out to open mail-boxes, or water geraniums, or to sit and sway slowly on porch swings. Each weekday, along with the sounds of the kids coming from school, Cathryn heard the sharp, pained barks of dogs chained to dog-houses behind garages.

She went upstairs and spent some time walking around the apartment touching things: the slick, shiny surfaces of the plant leaves, the thick weave of the couch, the uneven terrain of her own face as she stared onto the mirror. She would put on a record, and sing at her reflection, howl as loud as the abandoned animals she heard outside. If they all made enough noise, maybe someone would remember they were there.

The bar rush was trickling through the door and the tempo of the restaurant speeded up accordingly: Cathryn's tables were all filled now and she scooped ice into water glasses with her bare hands. The orange plastic-covered booths didn't look substantial enough to contain the clientele: heavy young men in letter jackets who ordered milk shakes which Cathryn had to make herself; some giggling androgynous adolescents who counted their nickles to see if they could afford to order; the inevitable covey of drag queens and their escorts, who minced to a table and ordered "oh...something feminine...do you have strawberry shortcake, honey?" Cathryn always gave the drag queens excellent service, partly to show how open-minded and accepting she was, and partly because they always left a pile of dollar bills on the table.

"I don't do this for a hobby," she told the busboy as she slid the money into her pocket. The restaurant was quiet and empty now, except for a few seedy-looking men in black levi's who only had coffee. The two college-student waitresses did their clean-up work and left; Wanda was leaning over the counter

and whispering at George as he stirred his coffee; Leonard changed the cash register drawer and left without a word.

As Cathryn was wiping off her tables with vinegar water, she thought she saw something moving in the spindly bushes outside the restaurant. She stopped working and pressed her face against the window. She looked across the empty parking lot at the bright neon sign blinking the restaurant's name, and heard the hollow, far-away sound of trucks on the highway, but saw nothing moving.

She thought of the story by someone about the man who went insane because he felt the passage of time whipping against his face like a wind. The constant wind drove him crazy. Maybe Cathryn had started seeing lost dogs where there weren't any, and the constant hurt was making her crazy. It's a possibility, she decided, and went back to her tables.

The early, early breakfast crowd began to gather, mostly men in gas station uniforms with patches calling them "Larry" of "Don" over their breast pockets. The counter filled up. Cathryn's feet felt like blocks of iron as she went from place to place delivering doughnuts and toast. Wanda was nowhere in sight. A group of ten clean-cut, yawning college students collected at the door. Each of them carried a small black Bible. Cathryn took their orders, mostly hot chocolate, which she delivered while they were all joining hands to say grace.

"Bless this food," one of them said. "And bless the hands which prepared it." The hot chocolate was spilling over the rims of the cups and scalding Cathryn's trembling fingers. She couldn't stand it anymore and set the cups down, quickly and loudly, reaching over the circle of hands. The customers looked up, startled, interrupted.

"Sorry," Cathryn whispered, and vanished. The morning manager came into

the building and punched the "total" button on the cash register.

"Hm-m," he said. "Slow night."

"Yes, it was," she agreed. Her relief was due in 5 minutes. The sun was coming up over the viaduct to the east, and traffic quickened on the road outside. 4 minutes...3½. The girl came in and didn't answer Cathryn's "good morning." Cathryn arranged her paid tickets in order and ignored the contingent of empty coffee cups lined up on the counter. 1 minute...30 seconds.

The girl came out from the back with her pad and pencil and Cathryn got her coat, drank a small orange juice, and left.

The insides of her eyelids felt gritty as they scraped against her eyeballs in the morning sunshine. She felt the familiar queasy feeling in her stomach that she always got after being up all night. In the seventh grade they'd called it slumber party sickness.

She walked to her car and inserted the key in the front-door lock. She would go home now and drink a cup of hot tea and wait for her roommate to leave for work. The house would be quiet then and she would sit on the edge of the bathtub and let the water run on her feet and hit her numb toes like thousands of little needle-pricks. The pain was excruciating ecstasy and she could hardly force her feet to stay under the faucet. Then she could crawl between her sheets and wait to fall asleep in the rectangle of sunshine below the window. She already felt the fresh cotton of the sheets, cool against her throbbing feet, and she heard the silence of the apartment, and of the street outside. She stopped and withdrew the key from the lock and straightened up and thought some more about the silence, how it enclosed her house and her street and her whole self inside a kind of dome. The dome itself was never lifted, never pierced. It was always there, punctured only by low organ music introducing

the afternoon soap operas and the distant barking of unseen dogs. And the sometimes uncertain rise of the voice that came from her in the quiet afternoon.

Then she went back across the parking lot and stopped at the newspaper stand outside the restaurant's front door. She fished some change from her uniform pocket and slid the coins into the slot and took out a morning paper and walked back to the car. Today, she would fix her tea and get into bed and look through the want ads for an apartment in a different part of town where dogs were welcome.

A Christening

Elizabeth bathed the baby that Friday morning in the kitchen sink. She tested the water temperature before slowly lowering the baby in; she used special soap that wouldn't dry out his skin or give him a rash; she was very thorough in rubbing all the creases in his skin with suds. She lowered her head over him, and put her mouth on his round, perfect navel. Then she lifted her head up, looked at his blue eyes, and kissed his nose. Kissing always made the baby laugh, and he kicked the water with his feet, splashing soapsuds all over Elizabeth's terry-clothed right arm and shoulder.

"Oh-h," she said, "do got Mama all wet. Do got Mama all WET."

She dried and powdered the baby, and diapered him, and snapped him into a blue flannel stretch suit. She pulled the rocking chair over to the living room window, and turned off the radio, and, settling into the chair, opened the front of her robe, and began to nurse her baby. She felt the moist, beginning buds of his teeth pushing into her skin. Pretty soon, he would start using his teeth to chew solid food, and they wouldn't have this time by the window anymore. This was Elizabeth's favorite part of the day.

The front window looked out over the parking lot of the apartment complex. She saw her little silver Opel being frosted by the snow flurries that had started to fall as David had left for work that morning. The sky over the apartment building across the parking lot was the same color as her Opel, and the air seemed silent and soft and white. Elizabeth thought walking in the air outside would be like walking through a cloud, or through a dream. She bent down to pick up the baby's extra diaper from the floor, and saw the folded-up newspapers strewn around the living-room floor, a half-filled coffee

cup next to David's chair, a dirty ashtray, and she heard the ticking of the gold sun-burst clock over the couch. She turned back to the window and settled the baby more securely at her breast. She preferred looking at the dreamy outside.

Beyond the parking lot, Elizabeth could see the crane and the steam shovel, their outlines stark and black through the foggy air. Workmen were widening the road at the end of the driveway. The machinery and the pound of its movement had been there since they'd moved into the apartment six months ago.

She watched as a woman in a leather jacket with a fur collar came out of the other apartment building and hurried to her car in the lot. The car sputtered to a start, black smoke billowing out the back. Elizabeth sat up straighter as the car backed out of the parking space and turned toward the driveway. As the car disappeared down the road, Elizabeth settled back into her chair. Her movement made the baby whimper. She patted him gently, and the baby's tender teeth resumed their rhythmic sucking.

No one else came out of the building. On warmer, sunnier days, there was a steady parade of people to their cars in the parking lot. Elizabeth usually saw mothers taking their kids to school, or coming back from the grocery store carrying brown paper sacks, or husbands coming home for lunch. But today Elizabeth had the thick cloud-like place all to herself. Instead of sitting at her window, she would have liked to be outside, to walk in the dream and let the air cover her like a comforter. Today was not like the sunny, bright days, when the parking lot and apartment buildings were alive with people; today everyone seemed to be staying inside under other blankets.

The baby was dozing now. His little body became slack in Elizabeth's arms.

Elizabeth reviewed her options. She could put the baby in his crib, and get out the vacuum cleaner. Under all the chairs lined up along the walls, the carpet was littered with little scraps of paper and lint. Elizabeth knew the small apartment living room looked ridiculous with all those chairs crowded into it. There were sturdy leather arm chairs on either side of the color television set. Dainty, white-embroidered Louis XIV chairs flanked the couch. David's mother always found chairs for them. Elizabeth always found room for the chairs. Every time David brought a new chair into the apartment, Elizabeth felt she was being advanced upon, that a few more square inches of floor were lost to the other side, and that soon she and the baby would be pinned into one corner, surrounded by hostile chairs. Or they could choose to make their stand in the rocking chair, their little patch of sovereign territory by the window.

She supposed she really should vacuum. Then she remembered the pile of laundry on the floor of the bedroom closet. She would have to gather all those clothes and drag them all the way to the laundry room downstairs. The washing machine took a long time to go through one load, and if someone else's clothes were already in it, she would have to wait. And all the sorting, and folding, and finding those socks that all looked the same color and picked up lint and stuck to each other and to David's banlon shirts.

David wanted his banlon shirts washed with Woolite in the sink. He called that "doing the hand wash." He liked his shirts wrung out carefully and hung over the bathtub to dry. His mother had done them that way. Elizabeth dumped them into the washer with everything else. One time David had gone bowling with a black sock clinging to his collar. He came home and took off all his clothes and threw them at Elizabeth. The clothes lay in a heap in the living room

for two days before she picked them up.

It was going on 11:00 now. The baby was fast asleep, and she carried him in to his crib. She stopped at the window in his room and looked out. Through the thick downy air, she saw the crane at the end of the driveway lifting cement blocks, and the steam shovel digging a hole. Sometimes she thought she knew what it was to be a machine like a steam shovel, with someone always fiddling around inside you with handles and levers making you go up and down, day after day, grabbing dirt in your mouth and then dropping it down, and then going back for more dirt. She considered getting dressed. She considered washing her face and calling her mother.

But the laundry mound in the stale-smelling closet was still waiting. She turned away from the seductive quietness outside the window, and walked to the closet. She may as well get on with it. At least one of David's good shirts had to be washed and ironed by Sunday. David was, after all, the baby's father, and he had to look decent at the baptism. That meant she had two days to come up with something for him to wear. She wondered if David were worrying that she look decent at the baptism. Somehow she doubted it.

The baby cried all during the cermony. Reverend Aldrich made a whispered comment about recruiting him for the choir in a few years. Later, as a preface to the sermon, he made the same comment to the whole congregation, and everyone laughed. The baby's grandparents, seated in the second row, exchanged fond looks with each other, and craned their necks to get a glimpse of the baby, now sleeping peacefully in Elizabeth's arms.

After the service, the baby's parents, lugging the baby, his diaper bag, blanket and sweater, and bottle, filed out slowly. David in his neatly ironed

blue-white shirt and pin-striped suit, looked at the crowd of relatives waiting in the vestibule.

"Are we going straight to your parents' house, or what?" he asked.

"Well, unless your mother just happens to have dinner ready for 14 people at HER house."

"All-right. Just a question," he answered. "For God sake."

Elizabeth stopped walking and looked straight ahead and whispered, "All-right. I'm sorry."

"Sure you are," he said as they continued walking silently to meet the small group waiting to hug and congratulate them, and to kiss the baby awake.

Later, at Elizabeth's parents' house, the baby was too tired to sleep, and he screamed. The two families sat in the living room, sipped wine, and waited for dinner.

"Oh, Elizabeth," David's mother crooned. "Listen to the poor baby. Oh, the poor thing. Granma's coming, darling," she called from her chair. Elizabeth crushed out her cigaret.

"That's all-right, Mother," she said. "I'll get him."

She went upstairs to her old bedroom where a crib had been set up for the baby. The bottle had fallen from his mouth. Elizabeth replaced it and he sucked quietly. He wasn't quite used to drinking from a bottle.

Holding the bottle to the baby's mouth, Elizabeth looked around the room, at the curtains she had begun to embroider in high shool, but had only half finished; at the closet which now held summer clothes in long bags with zippers on them; and at herself in the full-length mirror she had installed three years ago, before her first summer in a string bikini. She saw a woman tending

her baby, ragged-edged half-circles of perspiration staining her beige dress. Her shoes, her last expensive loot from the store before her wedding, hurt her feet and made her ankles swell. She thought of the steam shovel gobbling more of the same dirt each day. She wanted to crawl into her old bed and pull the quilt up over her head, wrap herself in the blankets as if she were in the dreamy soft sky outside her window yesterday. But it was inside her apartment, on the other side of the window, where the illusion really was.

She rolled up a small blanket and propped the baby's bottle on it. He still wasn't asleep. Then she straightened her hair and went back downstairs.

At the long table, as everyone sat and digested dinner, envelopes with the baby's name on them were slipped from pockets and purses, and passed discreetly to David. Elizabeth watched as her husband opened the envelopes, and checks fell out of each one. David's brothers gave a savings bond; Elizabeth's parents opened a savings account for the baby.

After the last envelope was opened, David said, "We want to thank you very much -- for the dinner and the money. Elizabeth and I --" he rested his open palm on Elizabeth's knee "-- want you to know how much we appreciate everything you've done for us and the baby." During the course of his speech, David's hand settled on Elizabeth's thigh. She did not place her hand over his, though he gently squeezed her. As he talked, one by one, his fingers curled into a fist, and his hand could have been place on Elizabeth for want of an arm-rest.

He removed his hand to shake his father-inlaw's, and, doing so, knocked over a crystal goblet of wine. The wine spread across the damask tablecloth, deep red against the white, and, before Elizabeth could stand up, the stain dripped onto her beige dress. The bloody-looking wetness saturated the material.

"Oh sorry," David said. "Honey," he added.

"Go upstairs right now. A cold cloth is the only thing for a stain like that," David's mother advised. Elizabeth's mother was blotting the tablecloth.

Elizabeth held her dress away from her as she went upstairs. Before going into the bathroom, she heard the baby and went in to check on him. He was lying in his crib happily, his fist batting at the string of butterflies above his head. He smiled when Elizabeth leaned over him.

"Hi sweetheart," she said. Holding onto her soggy dress with one hand, she offered him her finger and he grabbed on tightly and guided her finger to his mouth.

After a minute of listening to the baby coo, Elizabeth withdrew her finger. She touched his damp, newly-baptized forehead. There was no sign or symbol there of deliverance.

Her own dress was permanently marked, and the wine had soaked through to her legs. They were sticky and wet beneath her panty-hose. She smelled of wine. She smelled of a cermony. A sacrament.

She let her dress fall and leaned her head on the side of the crib, and cried without making a sound, her shoulders shaking with each sob.

After Dinner

I hear the click of the dial as my mother turns the radio on in the kitchen. It is 6:00 now and time for the news. The radio announcer's voice rises above the clatter of pots and pans that my mother is getting out of cupboards. Drawers squeak as she opens them to bring out spoons and forks and knives. I sit in a corner of the den and listen, and watch as the darkness blots out the tress and bushes in the backyard. The house in back of ours has light coming from one window and I see Mrs. Gray in her kitchen, cooking.

Soon I will hear our garage door open, and the quiet hum of my father's car as it slides into its place; after that, I will hear the car door slam, then footsteps; the garage door will rumble down; after a few seconds of silence, the front door will give a little sucking sound as it is opened. These things will happen any minute now. The news is on. I am almost holding my breath.

This is the time when everything is suspended and waiting. School is finished and I have come home from my girlfriend's house, and there is nowhere to be but here, nothing to look at but the bricks on the fireplace and the darkness outside, nothing to listen to but the clock on the mantle and the voice from the radio. So I pick at my cuticles and scratch my leg, being careful not to put a hole through my nylons. And I wait. I wait for dinner-time; I wait for dinner to be eaten; I wait for the time when I can finally go upstairs and sit on my bed and breathe. But there is this to be gotten through first. Then I will be finished for another night.

The sound of my father's car fills up the room, and things are really beginning to happen now. The motor from the car is shut off and then the car door is closed. I look across the room at my math book and looseleaf folder that are sitting on

the table. Crumpled papers stick out from the pages of the math book and now is that last moment before the intrusion, and then the front door opens. "Hi there," my father says to the dog, who has risen from his place under the kitchen table and clicked across the front-hall to greet him. My father opens the closet door and there is the tinkle of wire coat hangers, and the closet door is closed. "Hi there," my father says to my mother when he reaches the kitchen. I hear the rustle of a paper bag and then the refrigerator's hum becomes louder and its door is opened and then the sound of ice cubes against glass. A bottle is opened and there is the fizzy sound of something as it is pored into a glass. The cover of my math book is dirty orange and peeling at the corners. There are yellow triangles and blue squares on the cover and straight red line spears though the shapes. Someone, I don't know who, wrote "school sucks" on the front of the book.

My mother says, "The furnace men will be out romorrow." My father answers, "I see," and goes into living room. I hear an envelope being ripped apart, then nothing, then papers fluttering against the hollow inside of the wastebasket. Then I hear the ice cubes tapping aginst the glass and the heavy footsteps on the carpet of the stairs. The ice and the footsteps on the carpet sound farther away. I am still waiting.

Last night, in my sleep, I was by the water agian. The water is a familiar place. I know where I am in my dream, I have been there many times. I am behind a high brick wall which separates the water place from the gravel road which leads to the high school. The river cuts through a little patch of forest behind the wall, and someone built a creaky wooden bridge across the river to the grassy bank on the other side. There is a little island in the middle of the smooth, tranquil water and you can hear the rush of water from the dam. We don't go down to where the river widens almost to a lake and where the water is fifty

feet deep. In the winter, we ice skated to the dam, a forbidden place, and saw the bubbles in the water and the icicles and rusty-looking ice hanging from the the iron girders across the top of the dam. In the spring, fall, and summer we stayed at the part where the bridge and the little island are, and we made a bridge of our own from twigs and stray floating boards, and we teetered across to the island to explore. We were like Indians in the wilderness as we walked through the silent forest, and we searched the shallow clear water for turtles or goldfish, and we talked in very quiet voices. That is what we used to do. On a Saturday afternoon sometimes, or after school, my friends and I would decide to walk down the gravel road and stop halfway to the high school and climb over the brick wall and enter into that other world by the water. We never talked about going there before we went, or after we had been there; it was a ritual journey, one that we never discussed at school, or with other people, or even with each other. One time in spring, the mud around the water reached out and sucked in Judy Martin's loafer and she hopped on one foot and cried as her loafer floated slowly away. It was a practically brand new loafer and now she would gave to tell her mother where it got lost. But since we started junior high school, we don't go there anymore. Our neighborhood life and our school life must be the same now, because we are teen-agers and certain things are expected of us: we listen to records and go into town on Saturdays to look at clothes and we have even smoked an entire pack of my mother's Kents outside Woolworth's one day. Last Saturday, my mother asked me if I was really planning to go out and play without having my lunch first, and my girlfriends, waiting for me at the door, heard her, and they laughed and laughed. So we don't play any more, and we don't go by the water anymore. But I still go there by myself in my sleep, and I am thinking of my dream when my mother says from the kitchen, "It's ready."

I stand up and go into the bright kitchen. There are three places set at the round table, the white dishes sitting on ruffled gingham place-mats, and there is a thick candle in the middle of the table. My sister's place, the fourth chair, is empty because she lives at college now, and the candle is not lit. I sit in my place in front of the window and my mother goes to the living room door and says, "It's ready" again. My father pretends to be startled at her voice and looks up. Then he slaps the pages of the paper together and jams his feet into his slippers and almost runs to the kitchen. But my mother has already turned back toward the table, and she doesn't see him.

"Hi there," my father says to me as he sits down right across from me. My mother sits between us. She opens my baked potato and puts butter on it.

"Hi there," I say, and I begin to shovel food into my mouth. My knees are pressed together and I sit right on the edge of the chair. I don't look up from my plate, but I know my father has started eating because I hear the soft salivary smack of his lips as he chews. I try to eat with one hand covering my left ear so I don't hear his eating noises, but my mother tells me not to eat with my elbow on the table, so I take my hand away. I drink milk before I am even finished chewing a mouthful of food. The only sounds are my father's eating noises and the voice from the radio telling about the stock market prices.

"How was school today?" my mother asks me.

I say, "It was OK."

My father says, "The slaw is very good tonight." That's what he says every time my mother makes cole slaw. I think maybe a long time ago, my grandmother must have said, "The slaw is very good tonight," so now my father says it whenever we have cole slaw. My mother smiles a very tight, very quick smile. When my father has gone back to looking at his plate and chewing, my mother stops smiling,

but she still looks at the top of my father's bowed head. You can see his pink scalp shining through between the little black spikes of hes crew-cut. Then my mother turns to me and says to stop gulping.

Dinner is over very fast at our house. When one of my girlfriends tells me she'll call me after dinner, I know the phone won't ring for at least half an hour. The first time I ate at my friend Joanne's house, I was finished eating in five minutes, and I had to just sit there and listen to Joanne's parents talk to each other and to Joanne's brother and to Joanne. While I listened, I lined up all the slices of olives left in the oily bottom of my salad bowl into a straight row. I was very careful to straighten them up neatly with my knife, and when Joanne's family saw what I was doing, they all stopped talking and laughed, and Joanne's father gave me the big wooden bowl that had the leftover salad in it so I could line up all the olive slices in that bowl, too.

I stand up and take my plate to the sink. "You want dessert ?" my mother asks. I say I will have it later and I go back into the den by the fireplace. My mother and father keep eating, and I hear their forks scrape against their plates and the man on the radio begins the automotive report.

Now I am waiting again. One part of the night is finished, but the worst part is coming. I look at my math book and wait for my father to finish eating. After I hear his chair scrape against the floor and after the squeaky sounds his leather slippers make on the kitchen foor have disappeared, and when I hear the rustle of the newspaper as he opens it again in the living room, I pick up my math book and unfold the paper on which I've written tonight's homework assignment. My mother has stopped collecting the plates and the pans and is rinsing them and loading them into the dishwasher. The dog stands by the dishwasher and his jaws snap on the scrapes she sometimes throws him.

The living room is dark except for the light by my father's chair. The carpet is soft under my feet as I walk the length of the room to where my father sits. The tall floor-lamps and the wing-back chairs throw long shadows on the white walls and the room is quiet as a cave. My father tries to conserve, so the thermostat is always turned down, and there is a cold draft chilling the room. I stand by my father's chair but he doesn't look up until I say "I'm doing page 85 tonight." He looks up immediately and says heartily, "Well, let's have a look." He reads the problems on the page and the paragraph that is supposed to explain how to do them. My father smells like he did when I was a little girl and my sister and I used to sit on either side of him while he read us a chapter each night after dinner from books like Alice in Wonderland and The Swiss Family Robinson and Black Beauty. We used to lean our cheeks on the thick weave of his shirt sleeves and watch his finger skim over the words and listen to his low voice. Then one day, I don't remember when, he stopped reading to us, and now my time before bed is spent waiting. But he still smells the same, like Old Spice shaving lotion and Gordon's Dry London Gin and starch. His breathing makes little whistling noises in his small nose; I never noticed the whistling when I sat next to him while he read. I switch my weight from one leg to the other while he reads the page in my math book. Then he shuts the book and hands it back to me and says "Good luck." He says it in a jovial friendly way and I look up from the arm of the chair which I have been studying and am about to answer him when he gives me a short sneery smile and then his face goes blank. Already I feel tears behind my eyes, but I take the book and sit on the couch and open the book to page 85. Now it is here, the awful time I have been waiting for since dinner. The page is covered with X's and Y's and parentheses and question marks and "equal" signs. I write my name and the date at the top right hand corner of my paper, and then a

"Number 1" further down on the paper, just outside the thin red line that runs from the top of the paper to the bottom. My heart is beating fast, and I wish I was done with my math and was upstairs, I wish one of my girlfriends would call me, I wish my mother would come out of the kitchen and tell me I don't have to do this, I wish I understood the associative principle. I wish I knew what X equals.

I try to cover up one ear with my hand like I did at dinner, but it's hard to write and balance my paper and book with one hand. So I have to listen to my father whistling through his nose. To help me concentrate, my mother has turned off the radio in the kitchen, so I hear only whistling breathing and the swipe of my mother's dish-cloth as she wipes off the counter, and the thump of my own heart. I write numbers in the margin of my paper, and try to whittle down the jumble to just one number, the right one, the one that fits, the one that X really is. I find one that seems feasible, and I write it down and erase the other numbers. The lights go off in the kitchen and my mother comes into the front hall. She puts on her coat and scarf, gets the dog's leash, hitches him to it, and opens the front door. I hear a match strike as she lights a cigaret, and I feel the quick rush of chilly fresh air that comes in before she closes the door. I long to be rescued. I inch further down the couch to get as far away as I can from the whistling noises from the corner. I have finished one problem.

Last night when I was dreaming, I walked down the gravel road and climbed over the brick wall and I saw the water, stretching out green and smooth. There were blue mountains far away in the distance, and the air was moist and a mist rose from the stream. I took a stick with me and poked along the edge of the water and everything was still and silent and very beautiful, just like it was on that spring day before we became teen-agers when Judy Martin lost her shoe. I could

have laid down right there and let the mist cover me and never gotten up again. I felt that way even though I was sleeping already. I never wanted to climb over that brick wall.

But then I turned around and looked over the wall and I saw more water across the gravel road, a different stream that I had never seen before. I thought that even though it was different water, it would still be predictable and easy like my water, so I went back over the wall across the gravel road and stood by this unfamiliar stream. And it wasn't peaceful and lovely like my stream; over here it was just like prehistoric times, all dark and steamy with primeval ferns and conifers lining the banks and bubbles of mud rising from the muddy water and snapping in the cloying dark air. It was just like you see in a book about dinosaurs. The sky was low and brooding and the boiling stream was clogged with strange hairy fungus and growths like lichens floated on top. And who could tell what unknown slimy things slithered beneath the surface. It was awful and foreign and I wanted to get back across the street, but this water oozed up and took hold of my feet and I was stuck in it like it was a smear of Lepage's glue. The mud below me gave way and I was sitting in that sticky inky molasses, and I didn't know what I was touching, things appeared in my hands and then slipped through them without me ever really feeling them. I heard a slurping sound behind me and felt the brown water rise in a lump under me and it was making me move with it, scoot over the slippery mud on the bottm. I was just like Judy's Martin shoe, a vessel in the filthy, fetid unknown water, and I had to go where its slow lumbering current took me. The surfaces of the plants along the bank were so rubbery and slick that I couldn't grab hold of them to stop myself. I was surrounded by this ugliness and I couldn't breathe in the thick humidity and when I woke up this morning, it was just like I was still mired in that swamp all day, as mute and

trapped as a dinosaur in a tar pit.

My mother has come back from her walk. She has given the dog a milk-bone and has gone into the den to begin her evening. I hear low voices coming from the television and the sound of hands clapping. Then there is a burst of banjo music. I think she is watching "Bonanza." I have almost finshed the ten math problems. My paper is smudged with erase-marks and has lost its crisp whiteness. I go faster now, the end is near, and I'm no longer really concerned with what X is. I just want to be finished. My father has gone to the kitchen twice for gin-and-tonics and once to the bathroom. My shoulders are tight and I try not to look at the clock or listen to the television. I come up with what looks like a right answer and I write that number down. I have to do this. It is algebra and you have to do algebra when you get to junior high school. I am almost failing math and I am not supposed to fail anything. I have never understood numbers or how to get them to come out right, or just what you're supposed to do with them. It's like numbers are a sort of Japanese code which I cannot crack, but which other people speak normally. I have finished the page. I sit back for a minute and rub my stiff fingers and the throbbing place on the middle finger of my right hand. The lump is there because I have been holding my pencils too tightly ever since the first grade.

I stand up and take the math book and the paper to my father's chair and I say "I'm finished." He puts down the Rand-McNally Atlas he has been studying and selects a pen from his pocket. I think he saves up pens just to use on my papers at night. This is the worst part of the whole night. Every time he makes an "X" near a problem, I sag a little bit. I want to pick up the book and throw it through the bay window, I want to stomp on my paper and break his pen in half

over my knee. "You're too careless," he tells me and hands the book and paper back to me. I can feel my eyes becoming wet. There is nothing I can do. I take my work back to the couch and I wish I were anywhere except in this hushed living room. I do not belong here, this is not my territory. I don't know what to do with these numbers that I haven't already tried. I hear my mother change the channel on the television, and then I hear the scrape of the fireplace curtain as it opens. She is going to make a fire to keep off the chill, but there is no help for me. My hands and my armpits are clammy as I begin to write again the problems I got wrong. The clock keeps ticking. There is no noise in here except what comes from my father's adenoids. I will never escape from the living room.

When the clock strikes nine times, my father stands up and switches off the light by his chair. That is my signal that it's all over and I do not have to wait anymore. I have been doing these math problems for over two hours. There are tears on my cheeks, but I do not make any noise. I do not sob. I cannot get the last problem right; I go over and over those same hateful numbers and signs, but they never change, and I have to deal with them as best I can, but they don't yield an inch. My hands are soaking wet.

"That's all for tonight," my father says as he passes me. I wonder if he knows that I am crying. Then he walks upstairs and I hear the door to their bedroom close softly. After he is gone, I push the math book to the floor. It makes a muffled noise as it hits the carpet and I jump a little. I have lived through another night. The next two hours are mine. I stretch out my legs and yawn. I yawn so hard my jaws crack. When it is quiet upstairs, I pick my math book up and put it on the desk. Then I go upstairs to my room. I almost skip on the way down the hall.

The first thing I do in my room is close the door. Then I lie down on my firm mattress and close my eyes. This is the bed my parents used to share: it is wide and has a headboard of heavy oak wood with little cut out places carved in it, and little knobs on top of the posts. My parents put this bed in my room when we moved to this house; in their room are the two narrow twin beds my sister and I used to sleep in when we shared a bedroom in the other house. Joanne and her mother have told me about sex and what grown-ups use beds for and I wonder if this is the bed where I was started. The quilt on my bed is embroidered with red cross-stiches which my mother sewed every night last winter while she watched television in the den. I have my collection of stuffed animals arranged on the bed. I used to have names for all of my animals but now I don't call them by their names. However, in the "Seventeen" magazines my mother buys me so I will know how to be a teen-ager, there are pictures of teen-agers' room with stuffed animals in them, so I know it is proper to have my collection still on my bed. The only thing I can't do is play with them.

While my eyes are still closed, I think about boys that I know and how maybe one day I'll know what to do with my hair to make it look the way it's supposed to, and one of those boys will call me up and ask me for a date. I can't imagine being somewhere alone with a boy. I've never known any boys except for my father, and he doesn't count.

I get up and go to my record player and get out my new "West Side Story" album. I have just seen "West Side Story" and I think I would make a good Maria. My mother bought me the record and I listen to it every night. I pick up the needle and put it down where "I Feel Pretty" starts. I have to keep it turned down very low, but that's all-right. I don't want them to hear me anyway when I stand in front of the mirror over my dresser and mouth the words to "I Feel Pretty."

When there is nobody home but me, I really sing the words out loud, but at night, I only pretend. I use my hands to show how happy I am when I'm singing and I act like I'm running around the room just like Maria did in the movie. My mother told me that unfortunately Natalie Wood really wasn't singing those songs. That was disappointing, but she was so pretty and she loved Tony so much. But I would make a much better Maria because I would not only cry when Tony gets shot, I can sing, too.

After I finish the last song on the record, and I note that there really are tears in my eyes, I turn the record player off, and open my closet door and think about what I will wear to school tomorrow. I have pleated skirts, and kilts with big safety pins holding the two flaps together, in all different colors and plaids and I have Cepezio shoes in black, and brown, navy, yellow, and red. My mother buys me clothes all the time. All my skirts have cardigans or pull-over sweaters to go with them, and I have button-down oxford-cloth shirts and print blouses and blouses with tucks all the way up the front and buttons in the back. Every school night I stand in front of the closet and try to figure out what combination of colors and prints and skirts and sweaters will come together perfectly when I put them on, and make me eligible to receive some of the wonderful things that other people, other girls in my class, seem to get, and which I should have, too.

I think it's kind of like my gym locker at school. If I can just get the numbers right, if the different parts of me just fall into place, then things I can't see and don't understand will fall into place as well, and a magical door will open and all sorts of thrilling things will fall out and lay at my feet, and I can pick and choose which treasures I want. I think that's why my mother buys me clothes. She keeps trying different colors and different styles and different stores to come up with the neccessary combination. Or maybe it's like trying to

figure out what X equals in algebra. Finding the right value for X and plugging it into the equation will make everything neat and balanced and I will be what I'm supposed to be, I will be a teen-ager, I will join things and go places and spray my hair and learn new dances to try at the sock-hop and snap my chewing gum while gossiping in the girls' bathroom about how far I have gone. The only puzzle is figuring out what will make me come out right, what permutations will make the door open for me, too. I am my mother's algebra problem.

Standing in front of the closet, I remember a time when I was five or six years old and standing in the kitchen of our old house. I was standing by the stove and I was so little I couldn't see the top of the stove where the burners are. It was summer and I had on shorts and tennis snoes and my hated baby stomach was sticking out in front of me. My sister and her friend Gail came into the kitchen while my mother was giving me a paper cupful of lemonade and they announced that they wanted to see the movie "Godzilla."

"You want to see that?" my mother asked. Then she said, "Cathy wants to see "Cinderella," don't you?" Then they all looked at me and waited for me to answer. I had seen pictures of the outraged monster Godzilla in the movie section of the newspaper, as it towered over the skyscrapers and showed its fangs and terrorized the city. But I'd also seen pretty, sweet Cinderella, balancing a little blue-bird on her finger while gazing into the eyes of Prince Charming.

"What do you want to see, Cathy?" my sister asked me. "Cinderella or Godzilla?"

I thought for a minute more and then I answered, "Both."

And now it occurs to me that I will keep trying to be Cinderella, have tried ever since that summer day, to sneak in somehow to that enchanted realm where other girls reside, keep on spinning that lock until the door to that safe place

opens for me, too. My mother is my silent partner, we are in cahoots as we search for the combination, the value of X that will let me fit neatly into the problem. I will finally decipher those hieroglyphic characters, I will break the code, and my life, the one I should want, will really begin. Out from behind the door will come my Prince Charming, he is the reward for our diligence, and we have love scenes like Tony and Maria and my voice is sweet and high and the birds and the animals of the forest love me and anything I want I can have just by smiling my lovely shy smile and slipping an ethereal glass slipper on my slender lily-white foot. It is a life of harmony, my prince and I are in tune like Natalie Wood never was with Richard Beymer. My mother folds her hands and smiles benignly: her work is done, I am created, and she returns to her den to sit contentedly beside the fire, hooking a rug for me to lay down in my little love-nest. All the plaid skirts and Capezio shoes she has bought me will have been worth it: my life is solved and the equation balances.

But I wonder what happens if I never do come up with that wedge which will pry open the door. Or what if the door does open, but it's all a fake and a lie and I don't want any part of it and I want my own self and my own life back. It doesn't add up, the product is all wrong, and the only thing that remains to be is Godzilla. The glass slippers explode into pieces as I grow and burst out of my kilt and become the outraged dinosaur, rising up from my dismal swamp on the other side of the brick wall to let them all know who I really am and what I really look like and how I really feel. I strike fear in the hearts of the townspeople, I kick over their buildings and snap their power lines with two of my pincer-like fingers. I sap their strength and they run from the sight of my ugly scaley head, my bulging green eyes roll in their sockets and I am roaring and howling down the streets. They want to shoo me out of the way, they want me

back in my swamp to sink silently below the surface without a ripple. But they have taken things away from me and given nothing in return. I won't let them forget me. I refuse to be quiet. I am tired of being quiet.

From the bedroom down the hall, I hear the low thunder of my father's snoring. He is not quiet. Even his sleep permeates the house, and comes into my bedroom where I go to be alone. When I was little and we went on vaction and all slept in the same hotel room, I don't remember his snoring so loud. It used to be a kind of comforting sound.

I decide to wear a blue and green plaid kilt that has a matching blue cardigan with wooden buttons. I will wear knee socks tomorrow since I wore nylons today. Such details are important to remember when selecting an outfit. I take my flannel nightgown from the closet and on my way to the bedroom door, I stop at the window and look out. I see my friend Joanne in her house next door. She is standing in front of the sliding glass door that leads from her den to the patio. I stop to watch Joanne and she suddenly claps her hands and begins to do the motions of a new cheer she must have learned at cheerleader practice this afternoon. Joanne and I tried out for cheerleading together, and when the judges called Joanne's name, I remember the exultant little hop she made as she ran to the front of the gym with the other winners. Joanne is looking at her reflection in the glass while she cheers, just like I looked in the mirror while I was singing. But Joanne is a cheerleader and her life at school is taking over her neighborhood life. But I suppose that is bound to happen if you are a cheerleader.

As I turn away from the window, I see from the corner of my eye Joanne's hands, held straight out in front of her, come together to clap. Something in that pose arrests her movement, and she stands just like that, arms held stiffly straight ahead and palms flat together, for a half second and she seems to be

pointing right at me. She is standing in just the same way that Maria stood at the end of "West Side Story" when she grabs the gun from Chino and in her anger, holds it shakily in front of her and wheels around to point her gun at the assembled Sharks and Jets and they all gasp and step back, frightened by her grief and her gun and her power. She has the weapon now. She is in charge after she has seen her lovely dream of life with Tony die on the playground under the basketball hoop.

Joanne completes her cheer and I stop watching her and take my nightgown to the bathroom. I have one hour left to be awake. I hear the television from downstairs and the flames in the fireplace are crackling. I change into my nightgown and think about when I will have time to copy over my math homework before 4th period. Then I pick up my basket of pink hair rollers and my hand mirror, and run a brush through my hair. I will go downstairs into the warm den and watch television with my mother while I set my hair for tomorrow.

A Catholic Education

We knew we were different. We could tell just by stepping into our friends' houses and looking around at the walls. The walls at our house were not decorated with photographs. We had oil paintings on the wall, and clocks, and pictures of birds. No people stared out at us as we played parcheesi or ate dinner or read Nancy Drew mysteries. But all up and down the street in other peoples' houses, on dressers, on television sets, or sometimes on walls, were pictures of fat, pasty-faced babies in fluted white organdy gowns being held stiffly by priests outside church doors on rainy mornings. We didn't even have a cross in our house, or a portrait of a bearded, sweating young man with thorns arranged on his head. Other people had velvet-matted photographs in gilt frames of their mothers, thin and long haired, standing outside church, or in front of a long table, in long gowns not unlike the Christening gowns in the baby pictures, their fathers standing stiff and pale nearby, sometimes sucking a cigarette for dear life. But our parents had only one wedding picture, and it was pasted in a a soft leather book that was kept inside a desk drawer. The picture showed my mother in a short dress that looked like it was yellow, and a wide hat with flowers on it; my father, who at least held a cigarette like the other fathers, wore a tan suit and a print tie and brown shoes. My father was Catholic. My mother was Methodist, a Protestant. They weren't married in a church. The wedding picture had no frame or little velvety tripod that helped it stand up. You could see my mother's legs in the picture.

So we weren't like Eileen Fitzpatrick or Cheryl Kudla, who marched to school each day wearing plaid jumpers and beanies, and carried long strings of beads with crosses on the ends, and who seemed so holy that they would have been perfectly comfortable sharing their Mrs. Paul's Fish Filets with choirs of angels and hosts

of priests every Friday night. On Sunday mornings, they would be dressed up by 9:00 and had to stay close by their own front porches so they would be ready to jump into the back seats of their cars when it was time to leave for church. We went to public school, and for a long time we didn't even go to church.

Then one Sunday, we had to get up early like on a school day. We didn't stay in our pajamas to have the funnies read to us; instead, my mother dressed us up and we all got into the car and my father drove along unfamiliar streets to a large building full of people, also dressed up, who knelt, stood, sat, sang, spoke in a mysterious lnaguage, and hid their eys at appropriate times, as if on cue from above. Everyone watched a little bald man in a robe walk around in front of the big wooden cross hanging from the ceiling all the way down to the floor. The man mumbled strange words and lifted things up from a long table and spread his arms out wide while he mumbled. This was going to church. It was called Mass.

Thereafter, though the wedding picture still stayed in its book inside the drawer, and we still had no crosses or statues around the living room, we visited church each week. My mother must have gone with us to Mass the first time just to help get the ball rolling, because now we let her out at her church (which was much prettier than our church: red brick with pillars and a nice tall white steeple; ours had a flat white top like on a toilet), and went with our father to St. Gerard's. Our Mass was shorter than her church, so we waited in the car to be the first one to spot her in her bright red coat when the tall doors finally opened. My father went to Cunningham's to buy "The New York Times." Then we went home to watch "The Shirley Temple Theater" and eat peanut-butter and bacon sandwiches.

This seemed like a satisfactory arrangement for all concerned, and going-to-church became part of our routine, and we too were dressed and ready early each Sunday mornig. Then another ecumenical question arose from somewhere, probably

from the same source who suddenly decided that church was important, and Catholic church the most important. Even though we went to public school, it was time for a little Catholic education.

So, after school once a week, we either walked or were driven if it rained, to St. Gerard's, and we went into the school part, and sat in Catholic desks and listened to a nun. Nuns were ladies who wore wire glasses like a grandmother, and long black outfits like the Middle Ages people in Social Studies. We called them "Sister" instead of "Mrs." like at our school.

St. Gerard's had bigger rooms than McKenny School and the windows went all the way to the floor. Above the bulletin board was written in construction paper letters PRACTICE + PERSERVERANCE = PERFECT PENMANSHIP. There was that young man who I knew by now was Jesus, hanging on his cross below the clock. There were bookshelves with begonias on them, and green blackboards. By the polished wood door, on a little pedestal stood the kindly Blessed Mother, Mary, her plaster robe the color of cornflowers, and her sweet white face looking serenely out over the rows and rows of desks. Everything was clean and very bright in the florescent light as the sky grew dimmer outside. I thought it was beautiful.

The tops of the desks opened, and you could see perfect Catholic paste and pencils and rulers lined up in straight lines, and note-books full of examples of perfect Catholice penmanship. I sat at a different desk every week and waited for my chance to explore the mysterious reaches under the desk lids. Ofcourse, Sister became enraged if you opened one of the Catholic desks, so I could only steal glances through a quick slit. But it was lovely, especially as Christmas drew near, and outside the snow fell in the fading light, and inside Sister brought out a circlet of pine greenery with four tall immaculate candles rising from it. She said it was an Advent Wreath. The four candles represented the four weeks up until

Christmas. During Advent, you were supposed to make a sacrifice and give up something like Tootsie Rolls or "Little Lulu" on TV; but in return you got to light one candle each week, and the flames reflected in the long window, and the snow came down, and you could see the headlights of the cars carrying everyone's father home from work. And Sister led her little flock of public schoolers in singing "Silent Night" in our high, squeaky, bleating voices. I watched her as she waved a pencil in time with the music, a lady dressed in robes just like the statue by the door of Jesus' own sweet mother and she was smiling a beatific smile just like Blessed Mary. Being in that candle-lit room, singing about the holy virgin Mother who had held and kissed her own sweet little baby, remembering the pleased look on Sister's face when I told her I had given up Baby Ruth bars, thinking that my own mother was probably sitting in the car in St. G's parking lot waiting for me to come out, was a wonderful thing. I began to see, as "Silent Night" ended and we got into our coats and leggings to say a final prayer before leaving, that not only was I my mother's child, I was Sister's child, and Blessed Mary's child and maybe even God's child. By being a Catholic and going to Mass and saying the prayers, I was making all my parents happy.

After opening our Christmas presents that year, we didn't have much time to play with them because of Mass. I had never been to church on Christmas before, and the inside of St. Gerard's was packed with people who came to see the fat pine tree decorated with big red lights, and sing Christmas carols, and give a quick kneel in front of the little barn that was set up where the small alter dedicated to Blessed Mary usually stood. The little barn had straw on the roof and statues inside its one doorless room of Blessed Mary, kneeling over her little plaster babe, and Joseph, Jesus' nondescript father who I think was a carpenter, and

some animals and shepherds and a large tin-foil star was suspended over the barn. The barn was as big as a playhouse, and I could have stood up in it, if I had been allowed to go up the center aisle and climb into the barn and sit down next to Blessed Mary. Back at home, my mother had set up, on a strip of cotton that looked like snow, a miniature barn so small it could have been a doll-house, and we had our own Blessed Mary and Jesus and donkeys and sheep. One shepherd carried a plaster lamb across his shoulders as he came forward to view the babe. His legs looked like he was really walking. Between playing my new horse-racing game with my sister, and looking at my new books, and changing the clothes on my new baby doll, I would go back to the little barn under the Christmas tree, and move the shepherds around, and wind the key in the back of the barn that made it play "Silent Night", and I touched Blessed Mary's smooth face. I stayed on the floor by the barn until it grew dark outside and time to turn on the Christmas tree lights and the glasswax Santa Clauses and snowmen we'd applied to the front window were bright against the darkness, and it was time to eat the turkey my mother had fixed. Blessed Mary had never been in our house before; it was almost like having her come over to eat. We finally had statues in our house like Eileen Fitzpatrick did, and like our classroom at St. G's, but after Christmas, Jesus and Mary and the sheep and the camels were put into a cardboard box and stood in the basement with the other ornaments.

In frozen January, after the Advent Wreath and the red-and-green paper chains had been taken down from our classroom at St. G's, Sister handed out small, slate-gray paperback books with a picture of a angel etched on the cover. They looked like small, thin tombstones. Sister said they were called "catechisms", and they had prayers printed inside, stamped in black letters.

Since we could all read by then, we began to memorize. We memorized "Hail Mary, full of grace," and "Oh my God, I am heartily sorry," and we memorized about the seven blessed sacraments, and about who made us, and why.

We were preparing to make our First Holy Communion in the spring. Sister said Holy Communion was when you received the body and blood of Jesus Christ, but I knew it was when you got into a white dress, a stiff white dress with a crinolin slip like my mother never let me wear, and a VEIL, and if you weren't too tall, you got matched up with a boy in a tie and white shirt, and you marched down the church's center aisle together, and pretended you were a bride. Then you and your groom -- oh, I hoped I could have a groom -- knelt at the altar rail and stuck your tongue out at the priest, and he place a thin tasteless cracker on your tongue. You couldn't chew it; you couldn't rub it up against the top of your mouth. You had to let it dissolve on your tongue until it disappeared. That's why the toungue is the most sacred part of your body. Sister said that if you dropped the cracker on the floor, you had to run and call Father to bless it. She said that if communists came, all good Catholics would get to the church, and save all the unbaked crackers from the communists. The first thing communists would do, she warned, was storm the churches and destroy the crackers, because communists hated God.

One Tuesday, we were deeply into "An Act of Faith," reading out of our gray books, when Sister said, "Oh, excuse me, boys and girls. I must ask you a question. I'm sure all of you were baptized when you were little babies like good Catholics, but I must ask if there is any little boy or girl in our class who has not been baptized." She said it with a smile on her face as if it were the silliest question anyone had ever asked. Everyone else shook his head.

I felt my whole body go red and hot as I raised my hand. Sister spotted it.

"Little girl, you mean you HAVEN'T been baptized?" she asked, still smiling.

The other kids in the class turned to look at me, as if their heads were attached to whips that had cracked at just that second. Those who sat far away from me half-knelt on their desk seats to catch a glimpse of the infidel in their midst.

"No, Sister," I whispered.

"And what is your name?" I told her my name. She flipped through a stack of white cards on her desk. She stopped at one of the cards, looked at it for a few seconds, then nodded her head. While she did this, I smiled inanely at all the solemn faces watching me. Sister's smile was just like mine when she said, "Why, you can't make your First Holy Communion until you are baptized. I hope you will ask your Daddy to arrange your baptism very soon. Will you do that?"

"Yes, Sister," I whispered again.

"Very well. Who will make and "Act of Faith" for us? Stand, please." Sister was on to something else. The class settled back in their seats and Jerry Franchi stood and began "I believe in God, the Father Almighty."

I was glad no one was looking at me anymore, because I was crying. It was disgraceful to cry at school, but I couldn't help it. Everything had fallen to pieces. I had thought I was being a Catholic like I was supposed to be, but someone had neglected this one little detail: baptism. No wonder there were no pictures of me or my sister all wrinkled up and tiny and squalling in our long white dresses. The pictures didn't exist because we hadn't become Catholics in the right way: we'd sneaked through the back door when nobody was looking. I looked at the statue by the classroom door and Blessed Mary looked like she was still smiling at me like I was her special child, but Sister had turned away from me and was concentrating on Jerry Franchi. I thought maybe if I reminded her that I hadn't

had a single Baby Ruth bar for the entire four weeks before Christmas, then all would be forgiven, and she would look at me with that pleased expression again. I wanted Sister to know that I said my prayers every night while lying in bed, but then I remembered you were really supposed to kneel on the floor to pray, so I decided to say nothing. I wanted to die right then and there, but I knew from reading in my gray book that since I wasn't baptized, I'd never make it to Heaven at all, just to Limbo, with a lot of dead babies and little kidergarten kids, and I would never meet Jesus or his mother. That's what it said in our catechisms.

In fact, those little gray books held a lot of unsettling information. They said Catholics were God's favorite kind of people and they would go to Heaven and be with God and all the angels, provided they kept all the sacraments. That was fine for Catholics like me. But one day, someone asked Sister, "Won't Protestant people go to Heaven? Doesn't God love them, too?"

And Sister answered, "Well, we must feel very sorry for stupid people like the Protestants, and we must pray for them."

My mother was Protestant. She went to church every Sunday, just like we did. I thought about my mother, how she sat next to me at the dinner table every night, and how she would sit for hours and help me cut out my paper dolls, and about how sorry I felt for Karen Hodensack at Brownies because she didn't have a mother. And my mother was funny, too. Just that morning it had rained a cold, drizzly rain, and my mother had driven most of the public schoolers on the block to school. She saw Nelson Turnage, who lived across the street, walking in the rain with his head down and his collar turned up, and she stopped and asked if he wanted a ride, and he said no, thanks, and then my mother, rolling up the window and driving off, said, "What does Nelson think he is? A duck?" I roared with laughter.

Now here was Sister, in her softly rustling robes and her clicking beads and

her wedding ring that said she was really married after all, only to Christ, and she was telling me that my mother was stupid. I wondered if my third mother, Blessed Mary, sitting on her little pedestal, thought my at-home mother was stupid, too. I couldn't believe it, but Sister was married to Christ, and she must know some inside information that the rest of us didn't. And Sister should know what was the truth and what wasn't.

I worried about it for days, almost afraid to look at my mother in the face, afraid she'd be able to tell I was wondering if she was really stupid.

I never did ask my father about being baptized. I assumed I would be the only one who couldn't make her First Holy Communion, or have a veil, or a groom. I could see myself in line with the others, ready to shuffle silently into church, and then being yanked out of procession by the thin, veiny bluish hand of Sister. It seemed only appropriate, since I wasn't a real Catholic, like everybody else. I had no proof, no pictures, no statues.

My father did arrange for my sister and me to get baptized, in a private little ceremony afterschool one day. We were touched with water on the forehead and the priest said a few words and we understood we had been baptized. Now if we were killed in a car crash on the way home, we'd make it to Heaven after all. I could make my First Communion.

The day before Holy Communion Day, my mother told me to get into the car, and she drove me to a little store that I had never been to before. Inside the store were shelves and shelves of statues of Blessed Mary, painted and glazed, or dull plaster for do-it-yourselfers to complete; statues of Jesus; statues of a man in a brown robe with a rope belt and sandals, surrounded by birds and squirrels; pictures and portraits of every size of Jesus with his thorns, or hanging all bloody on his cross, or swooning in Mary's arms or as a small child in Mary's lap.

There were rows and rows of books, black books with ribbons coming out of the closed pages and huge leather books with gold lettering and gold edging on the pages and, in a glass-enclosed counter which my mother led me to, were beautiful crystal and pearl rosaries with gold and silver crucifixes on the ends, and, arranged among sprays of cloth lilies-of-the-valley, Communion missals. I was to choose a missal and a rosary. Apparently, my father had commissioned my mother to come to this store and buy me the necessary equipment for the big day. After an orgy of deciding and thinking, of turning the pure little books over and over in my hands, after examining every engraving, every purple ribbon, I decided on a white book with a swirly mother-of-pearl cover and a real gold cross on the inside front. I picked a rosary of white pearls held together by gold links. The rosary was almost as long as I was, and I didn't have the slightest idea what to do with it, but it was mine. All Catholics had rosaries. Here at last was the proof I needed.

While my mother was paying the cashier, I wandered among the statues. I wanted one of my own, to take home, so Blessed Mary could live with us and see that my real mother wasn't stupid just because she was Protestant and just because Sister had made a mistake and said so. I wanted to have a Mary that smiled at me like the one at St. G's. I decided to ask my mother to buy me a Mary, but when I joined her at the cash register, I heard her say to the cashier, in a very low voice, "I don't know what all this silly stuff is for." Then she closed her purse and took my hand and led me out to the car. I didn't have a chance to ask about a Mary. I decided not to. It appeared that Blessed Mary wasn't welcome in our house except at Christmas. And Sister thought my at-home mother was stupid and was going to hell. My three mothers hated each other and were locked in a very quiet, secret battle to see who I would really

belong to.

The only thing I didn't like about going to communion was you couldn't eat first. Your body had to be pure and clean to let Jesus in. You could only have water. But you got to stand up with the grown-ups at Mass, and file solemnly down to the altar, and kneel down when it was your turn, and Father came to you with an Altar Boy beside him, and you stuck your tongue out, and did it. The Altar Boy carried a little gold tray with a handle on it that he put under your chin when you stuck your tongue out. That was just in case of emergency, so if the cracker fell out of your mouth, at least it would land on the tray instead of the floor. We went to communion almost every Sunday.

It was spring, and the sky stayed light even after we left St. G's on Tuesdays. Soon, summer would start, and we wouldn't come here until September. I had all my prayers memorized, and, along with my pearl-covered Communion book, I had a black missal, which I took to Mass with me. A missal had all about what you did during Mass, and a red ribbon to mark your place, and other, different-colored ribbons for different days that were supposed to mean something, but I never knew what. It was enough for me to know when to sit and stand and when to go to communion. Everyone had a missal.

One afternoon, shortly before school ended before the year, our classroom door at St. G's opened, and Father walked in. The class jumped to its feet and shouted, "Good afternoon, Father!"

Sister smiled proudly and said, "Good afternonn, Father. What a nice surprise." Her face was almost splitting in two with her smile.

"Good afternoon, Sister," Father said. "Good afternoon, boys and girls." We all sat down. Everyone knew that having Father come into your room was like

having God himself step in to hear your Act of Contrition. We sat up straighter in our Catholic desks. Sister's outfit rustled excitedly as she walked to the door to greet Father. We were thrilled.

Father began to talk. He asked Jerry Fanchi, "Young man, did you go to communion last Sunday?"

Jerry leaped to his feet. "Yes, Father," he almost yelled.

"Fine. Fine." He picked out Debby Gill. "Young lady, did you go to communion last Sunday?"

"Yes, Father," said Debby. Her voice was sweet and satisfied.

His eyes landed on me, sitting all the way over by the windows. It seemed like he knew I hadn't been to communion. I was caught. My mother had poured me a bowl of cereal early last Sunday morning, and, after I'd crunched the last spoonful, I remembered how impure it was making my body. So I didn't go to communion. Instead, I sat and watched the slow procession up to the altar, and I watched the people come back, and kneel down, and hide their eyes while they had private talks with God. But I almost always went to Communion. I just forgot, and tasted of the forbidden Cheerios without even thinking.

"Young lady," I heard Father say. My head was turned away from him as I stared at the lawn outside. The shadows of the trees showed thick buds on the branches. A squeaky sprinkler was squirting water onto the grass in slow spurts. I didn't have to turn around to know who Father was talking to. "Young lady." I stood up. I waited for the blow to fall. "Did YOU go to communion last Sunday?"

I knew I could lie. I could say "Yes, Father," and sit down, and nobody would know the difference. I'd had plenty of practice at lying. I was quite good at it. When I went to confession, I always thought up a nice round number

of lies to tell Father about. But here I was, face to face with God's personal representative on Earth, standing at my Catholic desk in a square of hot afternoon sunshine. Color was spreading across my cheeks all the way to my ears. I looked at the statue of Mary by the door.

"No, Father," I decided. That same stupid smile reached my face. The whip cracked again, and all the faces turned to look at me, standing there tall and awkward and evil, my sins spread out again for everybody to see.

"No? Well." Father seemed to be thinking for a few seconds. Then: "Don't you love God?" he asked. His voice wasn't quiet and soft like it was that time he put water on my forehead, or during Mass when he invited us to pray for the souls of the faithful departed. It was like thunder. All those faces staring up at me became a bunch of white balloons attached to the shoulders by strings. My own face felt like it might explode.

"Don't you LOVE God?" The voice boomed again. The white balloons stretched all the way across the room. They were still waiting. The nun and the priest, standing in front of the statue of Blessed Mary, were two hooded inquisitors, carved out of black wood, waiting to put the screws to my Moorish thumbs. Neither of them was real. This was all make-believe and they were Walt Disney people, moving and talking like robots. They were the ones who were silly. They could put me on the rack if they wanted. I had floated away from this green sunny room just like I was one of the white balloons and the string had snapped. I was no longer with them.

"Yes, Father," I finally said, and sat down.

The other balloons all sighed and turned away. They became faces again, with heads full of brown and yellow hair, and eye, and noses, and ears that were listening to Father talk about how much God loves it when we all go to

communion. But they all knew who was holy and who wasn't; who would dive to retrieve a falling communion cracker and who would let it fall; and who would lead the communists to the inner-most sacred caverns of the church, and who would rather be crucified first.

They all had their tiny gowns yellowing in boxes somewhere. They had Catholic mothers who would never dream of fixing anyone a bowl of Cheerios on Sunday morning. They drank water before Mass, and ate bacon and eggs afterward. My mother thought I would feel faint if I didn't eat breakfast. I thought back to the store she took me to with all the statues and books and pictures and rosaries. If I closed my eyes, I could see a real picture, not one with a frame, but the real Blessed Mary, robed in blue, her flawless skin pale as poreclain, standing on the stone floor of her ancient kitchen, and handing the young, beardless Jesus an earthenware bowl of Cheerios.

Nests

On the first hot day of summer vacation, when the sun finally began to pour warmth though the windows and Myra could finally enjoy feeling lazy in the morning, she collected all the house plants from their perches on tables and stands, and placed them on her front porch. The shadows from the trees around her house made delicately moving patterns on the cement porch and the leaves of the plants moved silently in the breeze as Myra carefully washed each leaf with clean water. She then sprayed the plants with the fine mist from a Windex bottle filled with water. Crowded together, the long, trailing philondendron, the two Wandering Jews, one green and hearty, the other purple-veined and spindly, the begonia, the asparagus fern, and the tall rubber plant looked like the dense undergrowth of a jungle as the moisture beaded on their leaves and dripped down the sides of the clay pots.

The plants needed a fine, fresh, sunny day like this after the long, stuffy winter inside the house. Myra felt she could almost hear the leafy pores open to collect and store the sunlight, and the rusty green inner apparatus slide into place to manufacture chlorophyll. As the water dripped from the plants and collected in muddy puddles around the pots, Myra noticed that some of the leaves and stems were even clogged with networks of cobwebs that sparkled in the sun and water. She broke the cobwebs with her finger and rolled them all together into a gray fuzzy ball and dropped it over the side of the porch. The breeze picked up the cobweb ball and sent it acros the lawn, skimming over the yellow tops of the dandelions. Later, Myra would resurrect the lawn mower from the garage and hose it off and push it around the grass and let its soft chop level the dandelions. Now she turned back to the plants and, watching them gleaming and breathing at last, she took

a deep, satisfied breath herself.

She then went inside and opened some windows and noticed the soot that had collected on the window sills. The rooms looked bald and shabby without the plants, and a few brown, crinkly leaves were littered on the carpet around the vacant plant stands and beneath the macrame plant-holders hanging in front of the windows. She wished she could immerse her entire house, and all the furniture, and herself too, in a huge, hot bucket full of Clorox and water and pick the corners up to scrub together and shake it all out and hang it firmly on the clothesline to whip dry and then iron it crisply and sculpt it back into shape, and step back into her immaculate house and her squeaky skin to begin the summer.

"I feel the urge for a ritual cleansing," she told herself as she went into the the kitchen to pick up a little plastic bag of bread crumbs and walked outside to the backyard and the bird feeders that stood in the middle of the yard beneath a cluster of tall trees. A horde of big, chattering squirrels surrounded the feeders, sitting on their fat haunches, holding bird seed and and bread crumbs in their front paws as they gobbled away. As Myra approached, the squirrels scattered to the trees and leaned down from the branches to scream and scold at her as she filled the feeders with two different kinds of bird seed from coffee cans and sprinkled the bread crumbs around the base of the standing feeder.

During the winter, the squirrels had gotton fat from raids on Myra's bird seed. As she sat in the kitchen, she would see the plain sparrows and starlings and ugly black grackles, shivering in the cold sleet and freezing drizzle, picking at the bird seed and then suddenly taking wing at the approach of a squirrel. The wet snow under the feeders was stamped with more squirrel prints than delicate bird-foot patterns. Myra had tried hanging aluminium pie-pans

from the clothesline to frighten the squirrels and attract the birds, but the squirrels were intrepid and fearless and the sparrows and the occasional blue-jay or cardinal could only snatch at the feeder until a squirrel appeared. Myra had hoped the neighbor's cat would stalk and capture one of the squirrels between her jaws and shake it like a rubber mouse and fling the carcass at the base of the feeders to warn off the rest of the tribe. But the cat, as fat and round as the squirrels, preferred to sit on her porch where it was dry, and simply eye the slow arrivals and quick departures of the birds at Myra's feeders.

In the spring of that year, Myra had read in her bird book about finch feeders, long clear plastic cylinders with miniscule holes and little wooden perches for the finches to sit on while they pecked the special finch food from the holes. Finches would not feed from any other type of feeder. Myra had decided that the shape of the feeder would discourage the squirrels and maybe attract a whole new colony of birds to her yard, so she'd bought the feeder and the special seed and hung the cylinder from the clothesline. At first, the squirrels were thwarted by the strange apparatus in the yard, but eventually they'd discovered that by hanging from the clothesline by their hind feet, they could pluck the finch seed from the bowl of the feeder with their front paws. But the finches, small, yellow-bellied and long-beaked, did start coming in to Myra's yard, and they seemed to appreciate the feeder and ignore the squirrels with an impunity the other species did not possess.

After filling the feeders, Myra stepped back and sat down on the grass beneath the silver maple tree and watched the bird feeders. Waiting for the birds had been a luxury only for Saturdays during the school year. Now she could sit on the grass all day if she chose and study the robins and finches

and cardinals and bluebirds she expected would dot the air in her backyard with color. Since setting up the feeders at the end of last summer, she had hoped a family of birds would set up a nest in one of the trees, and lay some eggs, and she would eventually hear the peeping of the young in the moist, early mornings while they waited to be fed. But the spring season had been cold and rainy and no birds moved in to Myra's yard. She looked above her, through the green-studded branches of the silver maple, and tried to decide if it would be a good place for a nest. Good, strong, hearty branches, proximity to a food source, ample leaves for security and camoulflage. But when Myra looked back down at the feeder, there was one squirrel already munching on the bread crumbs, and another one hanging by it's feet from the string which supported the frightening aluminum pans. Myra picked up a pebble and flung it in the direction of the squirrels, who screeched and ran for cover in the trees. Still no birds.

Myra laid down on the soft light green grass that grew beneath the silver maple, and cushioned the back of her head with her arms and contemplated the summer ahead. Last summer, she had cultivated a tan. As soon as the weather turned warm, Myra went to the whole-sale store and bought a discount folding lawnchair for $9.00, and every day she unfolded the chair in the back-yard and arranged her equipment on the grass around her. She needed a beach towel to spread across the chair so she wouldn't stick to the plastic strips when she began to sweat, a glass of iced tea, or perhaps a beer, a book or a magazine, some baby oil, and, before she'e stopped smoking, a pack of cigarettes and matches and an ashtray. She set the chair in the position that afforded maximum exposure to the sun and layed on the chair and began to perspire. During the long, broiling afternoon, the ice in her tea melted and the sides of the

glass became wet and the drops of water steamed onto Myra's hot skin when she lifted the glass to take a drink. She would retreat to the house to refill her glass and rest her eyes in the darkness and check her tan in the mirror, lifting the straps of her bathing suit to assure herself that this torture was really having some effect. Each day, she turned herself over every half hour and splashed on the baby oil and read her way through every word Ernest Hemingway ever wrote, and drank a quart of tea, and, by the end of the summer, the whites of her eyes seemed like chalk marks on brown construction paper, and the thin skin between her breasts was fried purple and blotched with big freckles, the kind that are on puppies' stomachs. If she opened the top of her blouse, she could see the distinct, definite triangle of splayed freckles on her chest. Her hair had lightened a few shades, and when school started in the fall, a few of the other teachers, as they all trooped from one orientation meeting to another, had noticed, and called her Blondie.

This summer, instead of working on a tan as her project, or instead of a literary excursion through Somerest Maugham or Doris Lessing, she thought of putting in a garden. The beds that ran around the perimeter of her yard were over-grown and thick with tangled bushes that yielded a niggardly crop of blueberries, and a few stunted rose-bushes and some weepy, watery blue flowers that might have been morning-glories and then again might not be. They had all been planted by the house's previous owner, Myra's ancient Great-Aunt May. Aunt May, Myra's mother's aunt, had lived in the house for 60 years, and would live there still if she'd been allowed to. Aunt May came from the nursing home where she was confined for occasional visits, and when she did, the first thing she wanted to do was to hobble out into the yard, leaning on her cane, to reach out and pick and taste a blueberry, or muster all her still-considerable strength

to pull a weed away from the washed-out morning-glories, and to scold Myra, her scratchy voice sounding like an angry squirrel's, for not staking the hollyhocks as she should. "They'll fall over," Aunt May warned. "Fall right over in the dirt and there they'll be. Should just take care of these things myself," muttered Aunt May as she turned to trot painfully to the garage in search of green garden stakes and thick twine.

Myra wanted to say that she had other things on her mind, like making a living and paying her bills and filling in her lesson plans, and that the shade from all the trees in the yard made growing things difficult, but the old lady had tended and coaxed and prodded the few dwarfed blooms from the earth and she took a custodial interest in their well-being. So Myra trotted behind Aunt May, more the old lady's image than she would like to admit, and followed instructions as to the proper way to stake a wilting hollyhock.

Propped on a little table next to her bed at the nursing home, Aunt May had a Polaroid snap-shot of her yard in the full bloom of spring, taken just before her departure to the nursing home. Myra, on visiting days, brought her a rose or a branch from the flowering crab tree wrapped in wax-paper to place in a vase among the African violets and impatiens her aunt tended on her window-sill, and invented glowing tales of the yard's lushness and her own diligence. But the yard was the garden of an old person. No clean borders of marigolds around the edges of the flower-beds, no saplings safely protected behind little circlets of wire fencing, no symmetry, no regularity. The flowers here grew from labyrinths of greenery and rough vines, and the colors of the blossoms themselves were somehow faded and soft, bleached by the rain-falls of so many springs. Even the grass on the ground seemed old, thin, and barely green. It crushed easily and did not spring back when stepped on. There was

even the pall of death hanging over the yard, in the decaying leaves beneath the bushes, the buzz of flies over the compost heap in the back, and the nauseating funereal sweetness of the blooms themselves. The flowers in her yard could have sprung from the freshly turned-over earth of a grave.

When Myra moved into the white clapboard house, so close to her new job, and so charming with the wide, white-washed front porch, she hadn't known what to do with Aunt May's things. She hadn't wanted to throw them out in cold blood, because the furniture, the pictures, the doilies and antimacassars, and the little porcelain animals were as familiar to her as if she'd owned them herself. She remembered the thick, gray uphostered couch with oak inlays on the arms and the matching easy chair, and the lamps with roses painted on their jug-like bases and light green silk shades that stretched over wire frames. There were pictures of the Last Supper and Jesus and Yosemite National Park on the walls, and, propped up on a set of wrought iron shelves, were Aunt May's postcards.

The postcards were mainly from California and some were from 1920 and even before. They were grainy, gaudily-colored pictures of Hollywood and Vine, and the lush orange groves of Burbank, and palm-lined streets, and sunsets over the Hollywood Hills, pink and orange and red clouds reflected off the "Hollywood" sign. She had pictures of movie stars' homes, Fanny Brice's, and Mabel Normand's, and Eva Tanquay's, all showing ornate Spanish-style haciendas with red-tiled roofs and a posed flamingo or two on the lawns. The postcards had all been sent to Aunt May by her only son, Jim, who as a young man after being wounded in France, had set out for California to seek his fortune. "Dearest Ma," one said. "I have arrived in Los Angeles. Oranges are everywhere. Am sure to find work soon. My best wishes go to you. Yr. loving son, James." Myra, as a child

on visits to Aunt May, had collected all the postcards from James, and stacked them up and read through them all, having trouble deciphering the old, spidery handwriting and the occasionally smudged ink. While her mother talked with Aunt May in the kitchen, or helped make dinner, Myra learned that James had found work in the orange groves, then as an usher in a movie theater, then as a film projectionist. He married a sweet young lady named Miss Melanie Marshall and they set up housekeeping in a little bungalow, a pink stucco cottage nestled in a clump of orange trees and eucalyptus trees and hydrangea bushes pictured on the front of the card, and on the back of Fanny Brice's house, was the news that Aunt May was a grandmother. Little Jolene, propped up in a wicker carriage, her eyes looking startled by the flash of the camera, appeared on a card, and later, she was standing up, holding a rubber ball, and wearing an organdy dress with ruffles and layers of lace and satin ribbons, her sparse yellow hair coaxed into finger curls that almost reached her lace collar. That was the last postcard. When she was little, Myra just assumed that James and Miss Melanie and Little Jolene had simply moved closer to Aunt May and didn't need to send postcards anymore, but later she learned that Miss Melanie ran off with an itinerant farm-worker and left Little Jolene in James's care. James eventually lost his job at the movie theater, and with Little Jolene and no Miss Melanie and no money and no more stucco bungalow, James became despondent and finally packed Little Jolene's things and sent her on the train back to Aunt May, then took a trip himself to San Francisco. Aunt May later learned that he had sat in a hotel room in Chinatown for two days before taking a trolley down to the Golden Gate Bridge. He walked to the mid-point of the bridge, and leaned against the railing for a few minutes, and before any of the passers-by realized what was happening, he climbed onto the railing, clung to an iron pole, then

let go and jumped off. Little Jolene lived with Aunt May until she graduated high school and got married. Myra never saw a picture of James or Miss Melanie, but from reading all the postcards, they seemed like real people to Myra, and she made up stories, at night in her bed, of a handsome young James in his spanking clean usher's uniform, carefully guiding the deceptively sweet Miss Melanie to her seat in the front row, and gallantly handing her a box of popcorn he had swiped from the concession stand. They were Myra's relatives after all. She was connected to them by blood, even if they were long dead and Little Jolene herself only a hazey memory in Myra's mind. Living in Aunt May's house, she was surrounded by artifacts of her own history.

Myra stacked all of Aunt May's furniture and doilies and lamps and pictures in one of the hot, closed-off rooms upstairs and had bought little postcard-sized picture frames, and framed all of James' postcards and arranged them on one of her living room walls. Her friends that came over all noticed the arrangement and stopped to examine the postcards and remark on how clever Myra was.

Myra used Aunt May's flowered china and her old glasses that were souvenirs from places visited long ago, Ocean City, New Jersey, and Miami, Florida, and even Waukeegan, Illinois. The glass was brittle and fragile and Myra had already broken the Blatimore, Maryland glass. She kept some of Aunt May's knick-knacks, the little china dogs, and kittens batting at china balls of yarn, the little porcelain tea-cups and saucers that Aunt May had sent away for and which had painted on them in weak colors the official flower of each month of the year. Aunt May was delighted when she came over on a visit and recognized her old things among Myra's own collection and arrangements. She hardly seemed to notice that most of her furniture was nowhere to be seen, or that the postcards were in frames and she couldn't really read them. She was more interested

in getting out to her garden and poking around the flowers and bushes and scolding Myra and having Myra wrap up a bouquet for her to take back and show her friends. This little house and plot of earth was her real domain where she had lived happily alone for 40 years since Jolene left, and the garden became her child. Myra decided against digging up the old garden. Maybe tennis lessons could be her summer projct. The garden could stand as a memorial.

The squirrels weren't chattering anymore. They were crowded at the feeders, greedily snatching the birds' food. Myra stood up and took a step toward them and they scampered away again. She scooped up the fallen bird-seed from the ground and poured it back in the bowl of the standing feeder. On her way back to the house, she stopped at the car and opened the trunk. Inside were books and papers and pictures and cards from her classroom. She piled the books and supplies by the car on the cement floor of the garage and took her six geraniums from the floor of the back seat. Some dirt had fallen onto the newspapers she'd spread on the rubber mats, so she wadded up the newspapers and stuck them in the garbage can. Then she took the supplies into the house. What she would use again next year would go into a drawer or her file cabinet. The rest would be thrown out. She dumped the pile of supplies and books on the living room floor and began to sort.

Thumbing through discarded lesson plans and childrens' projects, she walked in her mind through one of the dozens of days she'd spent in her classroom. All of the days were predictable, with math and language and story time and lunch and recess, yet there was always the chance that something different would happen, some moment of illumination when a child finally got the idea. She enjoyed those times, but it was usually the dismal sameness of faltering through the readers and the arithemtic lessons. She was glad that the year was

finished and she had time now for herself and her projects. Long, empty time was before her until September, time that she would fill without meetings or children or parents or conferences or the teachers' lounge or the alarm clock. When anyone asked her, she always said, oh yes, she loved teaching and the children and how they crowded around her on the playground and brought her home-made Christmas cards and how some had even cried at the end-of-year picinic. But the relief she felt in June made her wonder if she really meant what she said. She realized she had a good, fulfilling job and Blue Cross and membership in professional organizations. But she felt sometimes that it wasn't really she who taught those strangers' children every year, who watched them come and go and push each other off the monkey bars. It was someone else who preached the times tables and rhythmic exercise and Valentine's projects, and who made the classroom a friendly bower of geraniums and pictures of brightly-colored farm animals and woodland friends. She knew that this was who she really was, in her quiet house, not prancing enthusiastically in front of the blackboard. She could fill her time any way she wanted to now. There were no other variables in her life, no cranky child who had been denied breakfast, no avenging parent on the phone, no harried administrator shoving forms at her. Now was her time to be her true self. The rest of the year was false.

Even with the newly-installed screens letting what breeze there was, the room was getting hot. She went to the refrigerator for iced tea. The inside of Aunt May's old humming Frigidaire Coldspot was cluttered with forgotten celery and onions and cottage-cheese cartons filled with ancient leftovers, and there was the sour smell of old milk. She would clean it soon, and put a box of Arm and Hammer Baking Soda on one of the shelves. Picking up a damp plastic bag of dripping lettuce, she was another dark bag pushed all the way

to the back. Inside it were dried up gladioli that had been there since last fall. Myra took the bag out and held it for a minute. Then she carried it and the moldy lettuce to the garbage and threw them out. Instead of returning to the living room, she took her tea out the back door and watched the birds and squirrel parry for control of the feeders.

She remembered the night she'd first seen the gladioli. Rounding the corner at Michael's house, she had seen the flowers rising from a vase on a table that was set for two on the tall platform porch. Michael was inside preparing dinner for them, and Myra had taken a stroll to see his yard and to get away from the embarassment of trying to converse with this strange man who she had met only that morning at the first staff meeting of the school year. After the meeting, Myra had gone to the coffee maker and was pouring herself a cup when Michael came up next to her and asked her right there if she'd like to have dinner at his house that night. So she was there, out in the country, and she came around the corner of the house and looked up and saw the flowers orange and purple and yellow against the early-autumn dusk. There was utter silence all around her, and the used-up brown fields sweeping out in the distance, and the tall spikes of the glads jutting up against the sky. Later, Michael took the flowers from the vase and gave them to her as they stood by her car in the silence under the bright orange moon.

The first time Michael slept at her house, they'd awakened when the sky was still black. Myra was surprised that she had fallen so deeply and totally asleep and she stretched and yawned and fingered Michael's curly hair in the last minute before they had to get up. In the past, Myra had slept tensely and rigidly and hardly at all when there was another body in her bed. She felt herself intruded upon, the confines of Aunt May's big iron bed violated by a

new presence, not entirely welcome, which had introduced itself into her constructed world without her permission, an independent variable she could not control. But with Michael, instead of closing up and turning dry as sawdust and skulking immediately to the bathroom to dress, she luxuriated in the few seconds before the alarm went off, and wished that daylight savings time was still in effect so she could see his face more clearly on the pillow next to her.

While Michael was in the shower, she went into the dark kitchen and got out a bowl and a skillet and a knife and spatula. She brought eggs from the refrigerator, and milk and cheese and green pepper and an onion. As the sky began to lighten the yard outside, and the wind picked up the fallen leaves, Myra spread the pepper and onion and chesse on the cutting board, and began to chop. She diced the cheese and sliced the pepper and the onion and cracked the eggs against the side of the bowl and poured everything together and stirred in the milk and whipped the mixture with a wooden spoon. She had never made eggs for a man before. She poured them into the skillet and watched them bubble around the Teflon bottom of the pan and collect around the edges. Myra stood over the simmering eggs and urged and coaxed them with her spatula, turning them over and over until they were ripe and colorful and lumpy with cheese and onion and pepper. When Michael came out of the bathroom, tying the same tie he had worn to school the day before, he saw the breakfast Myra made for him, the steaming, fluffy eggs, and came to her and lifted her right off the linoleum floor and kissed her.

After a few weeks, Myra began to allow herself a fantasy life with Michael; she saw herself dressed in his plaid bathrobe or in a flowered wrapper of her own, presenting her morning eggs to him like gifts, cracking open the shells

and stirring the cyclopian yolks efficiently with a fork, and every morning chopping things to add to the eggs and fill them with lovely flavors. She would nourish him, feed him the eggs she had mixed together, watch him eat and fill himself up on her offerings as the weak sun slanted through the window and the first sparrows fluttered around the feeder. She would wipe the sticky albumen from her fingers on one of Aunt May's hand-embroidered tea-towels.

She had kept the gladioli in the refrigerator even after it was obvious to her that Michael was not coming back. By that time, the ground was covered with a light dusting of snow and she had been ferociously preparing for the Christmas pageant and Michael no longer came down from the 6th grade classroom to wait by her door every evening, or left her little notes in her mailbox, or had one of his students deliver a folded piece of paper which was covered with hearts and a little sketch of himself with the word "sigh" in a balloon over his head. The flowers had grown stale and rancid along with the wrapped up pepper and onion and the eggs got somehow frozen to the bottm of the carton, until finally they were thrown away.

Outside Myra walked around to the front porch and moved the plants around to catch the morning sun. She picked off the rotting leaves and the dead stems that were brown and useless. She brought the hose around from the side yard, and, standing away from the plants, she arched a light spray of water over them and washed out the corners of the porch. She brought the broom out and swept the muddy water off the porch.

She sat on the step then and finished her tea, and for the first time in months, longed for a cigarette. She felt a queasy rumbling low in her stomach that made her forget about smoking. She counted backwards in her head to the month before, then counted forward to the present.

Lately, her periods had been short and painful, never lasting more than two days, hardly long enough to really be noticed. She knew that her friends, most of them, bled copiously, the rich red bounty of their ovaries flowing on for days. Myra herself seemed to be drying up, the few constricted gushes wrung from her arid organs only from force of habit. She felt no connection at all with the moon or the tides or fertile corn maidens writhing on the damp earth beside yellow-haired farm-boys, later squatting in the field to bring forth lusty young. Her vacant ova were washed from her according to the advancing numbers on the kitchen calendar.

She finished her tea and gave the plants one more turn toward the morning sun. Then she went back inside to continue sorting through the school year.

Myra practiced her tennis stroke every day for an hour. She took her new Chris Evert signature racquet and a can of balls to the playground and batted the balls against a special board set up on the court. Her shots were wild and she sent several balls over the top of the wire fence and had to retrieve them. She tried to aim at an imaginary spot right in the middle of the board, but the balls seldom hit the imaginary spot and she usually forgot where she had placed the spot anyway. At night, when she had trouble sleeping in the heat and the sheets stuck to her, she saw herself on the court swatting at the imaginary spot. She lay on her stomach, the points of her hip-bones resting on the mattress, and counted the strokes. Forehand, back-swing, the thwack of the ball as she made contact, the follow -through. She never made it past 18 strokes, even in her sleep.

The mornings when she woke up were full of the sounds of birds. No little kids walked down the sidewalk, yelling and pushing each other on the way to school.

The bells from the elementary school still bleated out on schedule, calling for children, but no one listened to them anymore. The summons drew no one.

Myra took her morning tea to the back porch and sat down to the wonder of waking up slowly and in her own way. The mornings were hazy and hot and the grass and leaves were moist with dew and humidity. Myra could feel her hair already beginning to curl up her cheeks and neck as she sat and sipped and watched the bird feeders.

One morning a few weeks ago, just after the end of school, Myra was out in the yard inspecting the feeders. The little flock of finches scattered to the trees when she approached. She watched them fly off, then something on the lower branch of the silver maple caught her eye. She walked closer to the tree and saw a tiny cup of twigs and sticks and mud wedged in the fork of two branches. A nest. Myra withdrew slowly and sat on the ground to observe the nest and try to identify the finches that were building it. Slowly, one by one, the finches left the branches to gather at the feeder, and the squirrels, frightened off by Myra's presence, had gone to plunder elsewhere. The finches had unopposed right to the yard the, and Myra saw a plain, brown-colored female finch fly to the branch of the maple where the nest was. A piece of yellow string or straw dangled from the finches' beak. The leaves of the tree obscured Myra's view of the tea-cup sized nest, but soon the finch flew off on another errand, and another, more brightly-plumed finch, a male, flew over and deposited a beakful of leaves at the nest. When the couple was reunited, they took time out for a snack at the feeder, then went back to work.

Myra watched the nest grow bigger and sturdier, and the female finch made fewer and fewer trips to the feeder. The mother bird flew directly back to her place in the silver maple and spent the long afternoons drowsing inside the rim of the nest. Once Myra waited until both finches were at the feeder and she

crept closer to the silver maple and stood on her tip-toes and saw the tops of three small, smooth white eggs rising from the lip of the nest. The nest was full now, heavy and lowslung and gravid with the finches' eggs.

While the eggs were gestating under the warm brown breast of the mother, Myra felt stirrings of fertility within herself. She made trips to the grocery store every day. She took a cart from the line of them and walked the aisles of the grocery store, stopping at each different grouping of food to examine the boxes and cans and read the print on the labels and the recipe ideas on the packages. She liked the vegetables best, their bright colors and ripe fullness catching her eye and inviting her squeeze. She enjoyed thinking up things to make from the fat, red tomatoes and pungent onions and lumpy green peppers and what spices she could add to zucchini and summer squash and rhubarb. She bought carefully and took the vegetables home and simmered them together for hours, adding tarragon and oregano and basil. She sliced the zucchini and washed the dirt off the mushrooms and cut them to expose the fan-like undersides of the caps. She liked the way the colors of the vegetables looked in her kitchen, vivid against the wood grain of the cutting board, and she liked the voluptuous fullness they came to in her hands. She made quarts and quarts of tomato sauce and put it in glass jars for later use. She invited her friends over to eat and served meals on Aunt May's china and set the table with quilted place-mats and matching napkins and a vase of the sad little roses from the yard. She poured the vegetable-laden sauces over swollen purple eggplant and filled her friends and herself.

In the mornings, she made sure the finch feeder was full of seed and the female finch was resting comfortably on her eggs. She stored the leftover vegetables in plastic bags tied tightly with twists of wire and the inside of

the refrigerator was fresh and protected with baking soda. The breeze blew in the open windows and made the white ruffled curtains billow out, and the shiny green leaves of the plants rustled together. In the fragrant evenings, Myra rode her bicycle around the neighborhood and watched as the streetlights blinked on and heard the whirring of fans in open windows and the voices from television sets. The air around her smelled faintly of baby powder and roses. At night, she slept soundly, and after tennis practice each morning, she sat in the yard and watched the finches and waited for the eggs to come to term and hatch.

She visited Aunt May almost every week, bringing her flowers from the yard and some of the vegetable sauce and letters to read her from her own mother, Aunt May's niece. Aunt May was confined to bed, and as the summer days expanded from the sate of hot air, she started to grow vague and distracted and was often asleep, her mouth open and her face caving in around it. By the time Myra got up to leave for the half-hour drive home, Aunt May no longer knew she had been there, and no longer grilled her about the care of her yard or what kind of fertilizer she used on the grass. Instead, Aunt May reached out a shaking hand from the bedcovers and fingered the hairy leaves of her African violet and the framed pictures of Jolene and Jolene's four daughters and mumbled about Jolene's girls and how one was going to have a baby any minute. Whenever a nurse or attendant came into the room, Aunt May sat up in bed and announced that one of Jolene's girls was going to have a baby any minute and to be sure and tell if her the phone was for her. "Absolutely any minute now," Aunt May repeated and sank down onto her pillow and smacked her gums together and talked about Myra's mother and her aunt and how they had all lived together in the old house down South and how Aunt May, every evening as the sun lowered behind the

hills of the old city, would put a white towel in the kitchen window as a signal that the girls were to come home from the playground and get ready for bed. She remembered the calls of the strange southern birds that inhabited their yard, and the dripping trees and flowers after the rain, and the cracks and gravel on the ancient sidewalks in front of the house, and she told Myra how Little Jolene had looked, frightened and hungry, after stepping off the train from California. "And now Jolene's about to be a granny herself," Aunt May declared. "Imagine that. That scared little girl, my Jimmy's little girl, a granny. My little girl's little girl's going to have a little girl. My family's like a braid that keeps getting longer and longer down my back." Aunt May closed her eyes and gave a long sigh. She picked at the sheet with her clawed fingers and Myra stood up to gather her things together and leave, when Aunt May opened her eyes and stared straight at Myra and said, "You take care of my things. They're all I ever had. Remember that." Then she lay back down and her mouth relaxed into what Myra had heard the nurses say was the "O" sign, the open round gaping mouth of the sick and the old. What they had to look out for was the "Q" sign, when the tongue went slack and hung out the side of the O. The "Q" sign meant death.

Myra thought she had better write to her mother and tell her that Aunt May was slipping away and that someone had better get in touch with Jolene. As she started the car and rolled down the window, she thought about Aunt May's life, and her son James and her girls and her great-grandchildren and her great-great-grandchild that could be being born right that very instant all woven tightly together, all connected and over-lapping and necessary if the braid was to continue to grow longer and thicker. Myra was a strand out of place. No, she told herself. I have my life, too. I have my house and my job and the plants

and the birds and the things I like to do. I have a life.

The weather that day was hot and oppressive, the sky hazy and turning darker as Myra drove over the country roads leading back into the city. She remembered driving these same roads after visits to Michael. Low thunder came from the Southern sky and the clouds turned darker and became an ominous green color. Myra turned on the car radio and, after a few minutes of music, a voice came on with a weather advisory and said there was a tornado watch in effect for the county until 4:30 that afternoon. Myra started to drive a little faster as fat drops of rain splotched the windshield and the wind turned the leaves of trees inside out. Soon the windshield wipers could not keep the windshield clear of water, and Myra slowed the car down to a crawl. She leaned forward in the seat and tried to see the road but the rain was coming so fast she could barely make out the end of the hood. The wind had a hollow honk in it as it tried to whip her little car onto the shoulder of the road. The music on the radio crackled with each flash of lightening. Myra heard a sharp crack and a splintering sound behind her, and she looked out the rear-view mirror and saw that a big branch from a tree had fallen across the road right where her car had been. The crack was deafening. Myra began to coast to a stop on the shoulder of the road, but then she remembered that she was in danger of falling branches if she stopped, so she drove back onto the glistening road and kept going toward home. She wanted to be home, among her things where it was safe and where nothing happened that she did not set into motion. She was defenseless here on this road in this storm.

She kept the car on the road by firmly planting both hands on the steering wheel and going forward very slowly. The buildings on the edge of town were barely visible through the sheets of rain. The road in front of her was littered

with leaves and small branches and a garbage can rolled right in front of Myra's car, and caused her to swerve and brake hard on the wet pavement. A car horn blared at her from behind. Myra was shaking, but she was almost home.

As she turned off the expressway, the rain lessened and the wipers could keep the windshield clear. A few more farewell rolls of thunder came from the swiflty moving black clouds. The streets were slick and reflected the headlights of the cars, but the rain had almost stopped by the time Myra turned in her driveway. She pried her sticky hands from the steering wheel and sat just breathing for a few seconds. Then she got out of the car and walked into the yard.

The grass was strewn with leaves and twigs and sticks that had snapped from the trees and bushes were bent over and the petals of the roses were scattered on the ground. Her lawn chair was turned over and was dripping wet. She turned to go inside, where she now realized the windows had been left open, and then something on the ground under the silver maple made her stop and turn toward the tree.

She put her hands to her mouth as she looked at the little broken cup of straw lying on the brick walkway through the yard. The sides of the nest were cracked apart and the eggs were smashed on the walk. There were egg shells and sticky liquid on the cement, and, kneeling down, Myra could see a tiny bent claw sticking from a lump of yellow liquid, and a few embryonic feathers floating around the foor, and, there, swimming in the liquid, was an infinitely small, round brown eye staring at her.

Myra's stomach turned over and she covered her mouth tightly and ran to the back door. Fumbling for her key, she swallowed hard a few times and let herself in. She leaned on the sink and filled the Miami Beach glass with water and drank it in one gulp.

She clutched the glass and walked around the house. She stopped at the living room door and saw that the powerful wind coming from the windows had knocked over the plants lined up in front of them. The dirt was all over the carpet and the stems were snapped and the remaining leaves on the stalks already looked wilted. Two of the clay pots were broken, and Myra saw the exposed and severed network of white philodendron roots.

She took a roll of paper towels outside and went to the maple tree. Ignoring the staring baby eye, she scooped up the pieces of the nest into paper towels. She left the egg shells there and brought the hose around and turned on the water. Turning her eyes away, she aimed the stream of water at the shells and the dead fetal birds. When she turned back, the down-covered liquid was gone.

She took the nest back into the house. The mother and father finch would not come back. Their home was gone, but they could go to another yard and find another tree and another finch feeder and a new cache of string and straw and twigs. Myra was left with her substitute things, her plants and her vegetable-cooking and Aunt May's postcards and tea-towels and bird feeders and this little nest that she would wrap in tissue paper and preserve to take in for a science lesson for next year's children.

Later, while reading in her bird book, she would learn about a species of birds that lived far above the Artic Circle, and who clung like barnacles to the rocks in the stormy ocean, and there, in the crevasses of the rock, they built their nests and raised their young and taught them to fish and fly and survive in the cold and wet place. This species also had a subculture of spinister birds, who clustered together apart from the mating couples, but built nests just like their mated sisters, and lowed and brooded and dozed

over the eggs that they laid. Except that the eggs were sterile, they had never been fertilized and would never hatch. The eggs would rot beneath them, but the spinster-birds guarded and protected their nests and their eggs with a mother's fierceness. They guarded the eggs just as if one day they would come to fruition. Just as if they contained something real.