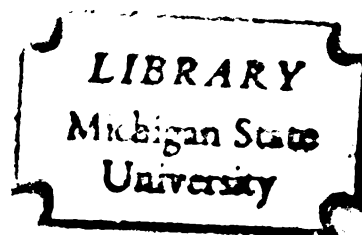




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PRIMAL SCREAM AND OTHER STORIES

By

Maria Frances Holley

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment for the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS CREATIVE WRITING

Department of English

1982

ABSTRACT

PRIMAL SCREAM AND OTHER STORIES

By

Maria Frances Holley

Primal Scream and Other Stories is a collection of fiction that deals primarily with the female response to the human condition. "Primal Scream", the first story of the collection, depicts the coming of age of two adolescent girls; "The Feeder" probes the food disorder anorexia nervosa and the bond of friendship between women; "Fat Arlene" details the life of a compulsive eater; "Night Moon: and "The Rest of Her Life" explore the complexities of male-female relationships.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Sheila Roberts for her invaluable help with my thesis writing.

Special thanks to Martha West, my typist.

The story "The Rest of Her Life" was published in the 1981 edition of The Red Cedar Review. It also placed third in the Red Cedar Review writing competition for 1981.

M.F.H.

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PRIMAL SCREAM

September 27, 1980

Dear Claudia Michelle,

We can safely entitle this letter "SLEAZEBALL WHO'S NEVER BEEN KISSED". That's me all right, Miss Hot Stuff of Whitman High, the victim of a bum rap. Remember that kid I wrote you about before, Larry Pinnazo, the guy that picks his pimples and smears the excess on the lab slides in Biology I? He cornered me the other day by the gym entrance and pushed me into a dark corner, all the time rubbing his chest against mine. He said he wanted to feel my "Chicamungas". That's what he calls them, can you imagine? He put his stubby fingers into the opening of my blouse and started pressing me with his whole body. I was completely grossed out. I mean, the kid has these acne pits, and this real yellow breath, and a nose the size of an enemy torpedo. And when I could feel the fingers creep into my underwire supports, I bit his nose and held firmly like an attack dog that isn't content with a quick nibble, but likes to hold on and tear a little flesh. Anyway, Larry yelped, all the time holding on to his big Italian nose. He screamed that I couldn't fool him. He knew what I let the other boys do.



They had told him. I let them all unsnap my big white bra and let them feel my big pink breasts, and if I really liked the guy, I'd let them go "down there". I should have gone for his nose again after that remark, but he was drawing a rather sizeable crowd. He announced, like a stage actor to an audience, that I shouldn't have lured him to the corner if I hadn't meant business. I wanted to clean his clock for the "down there" remark, and I would have too, I mean, I would have leveled him, if Jeffrey Van Wagner hadn't been in the crowd, looking at me with those big puppy eyes. Well, he's never going to give me a second look now. He heard it all himself. Larry Pinnazo might as well have taken out an ad in the school paper: MISS CHICAMUNGA PUNCTURES PROBOSCIS IN LURID SEXUAL ENCOUNTER. What I want to know is, where does he get his information? I have been chased, poked, teased, grappled with, since the fourth grade when I got my first brassiere, but I have never been kissed. I have never been on a car date or slow danced. In gym class my partner is always Juanita Alvarez for square dancing because the boys never ask either of us. God, I hate these breasts! I hate them! I want to wear a Grow-bra like everyone else, not this big cotton thing with wires and elastic and a spandex fastener with extra hooks and eyes. I call it my steel belted radial special and it digs into my skin and makes me sweat red rivers. I hate walking low, always appearing shorter than I am, just so I can slouch over and cover my chest with my books. I hate the boys yelling "Hey, Jugs", "Hey, Jungle

Tits", and Larry's dreadful "Hey, Chicamungas." No boy will ask me out because they think I am too fast, too dangerous, yet in the shadows of the school, they reach for me, they brush up against me, and whisper dark things into my ear. I want to take a knife, Claudia, one of those big butcher ones that Mama uses in the kitchen. I want to take it and cut a pound or two from each breast, and somehow, miraculously healed I will be sweet, and demure, and will be able to wear stretchable knits or mohair sweaters or t-shirts that are 70% combed cotton. I don't want to hide behind books or my folded arms or a blouse with vertical stripes that only an old lady would wear. I want to, as God is my witness, go out on a car date with Jeffrey Van Wagner without his wondering if I was a possible carrier of Herpes Simplex II. I have had these THINGS since the fourth grade and I am

Singing the D-Cup Blues,  
Your forever friend,  
Franchesca DiGregorio

October 2, 1980

Dear Frankie Di,

Before you decide what to do with your surgically removed poundage, you've got a live market right here in Des Moines. Just send it to me, Claudia Michelle Weber, who will be forever grateful for the Care Package. I have my own nemesis, right here in Des Moines, a regular twit named Dickie Butts (I know, what I'd like to do with that name). Dickie

sits behind me in French II, and although he doesn't pick his pimples and send his fellow students to Cringe City, he has this annoying habit of zipping and unzipping his fly, so you can hear the faint whirrings while you're conjugating verbs. Anyway Dickie calls me "Nubs", right out loud, and for the French translation: "Nubbette" (He thinks he's being cute). He says he wants to get the number of the steam shovel that ran over my chest and he tells everyone he's finally found a place to stuff his dirty gym socks. He says a bread board with two stationary peas on it has more curvature than I do. Frankie, I'd like to sympathize with your problem, but I would kill for a Grow-bra. My ma says I don't even need one. She says if I don't want my nipples to show, I could wear an undershirt (Oh, sure, Ma, Maybe I could buy some Superwoman Underoos!), or I could tape them with small pieces of masking tape. She said she read that bit of advice in Heloise's Helpful Hints. Great. That's the same newspaper column where she finds out how to remove grape juice stains from carpet fibers or bubble-gum from Shiny Vinyl. She thinks she can solve my emerging womanhood with two strips of tape. Arghh!! I did finally talk her into getting me a bra, after all, I am in the tenth grade. But I have an even bigger problem. You know how I once told you how the boys lurk outside the school swimming pool, waiting to see which girls are sitting out that day on the bleachers, so they can figure out who has

their period? I think I mentioned it in the same letter that they pelt these girls with sanitary pads (God only knows where they get them), when these particular girls walk down the halls. The boys act so smug. You'd think they had discovered the secret for the atomic bomb, the way they strut down the hall, making Midol jokes, doing some exaggerated pelvic flinches, and aiming the unwrapped pad with menacing precision. Well, I've never ever sat out of swimming, except for an occasional cold or the time I had an abcess on my finger. I am fifteen years old and I haven't even gotten my period yet. I hate to admit this, but I'd give anything for one of those Kotex missiles to graze my body, I am so worried I may have freeze dried ovaries or worse yet, that my insides have rotted and turned a dusty grey, and that I will never be able to have babies when I grow up. My Ma says she may have to take me to one of those doctors with stirrups, and rubber gloves and long, cold, metallic instruments. I am really scared, Frankie. Do you have any suggestions? Would my jogging help, maybe shake up a few clogged tubes? How about warm showers? My older sister Samantha says I should put a tampon under my pillow and pray to the "God of Missed Periods". I tried it, but,... nothing. Heloise's Helpful Hints hasn't addressed this problem yet. She did a piece this week on saving tin foil. I'd appreciate any suggestions because I'm

Freeze Dried in Des Moines,  
Claudia Michelle Weber

October 8, 1980

Dear Claudia Michelle,

I asked my mother about your problem and she said to book a vacation trip to Aruba, buy a white Jantzen bathing suit, and sure enough! you'll get your period. She says it works for her every time. I think she was joking. My mother says to wait, that things will happen naturally, and that you're what they call a late bloomer. But I have done some concentrated research. It said in the Sunday supplement that jogging in any form can cause jogger's kidney, jogger's heal, and penile frostbite. (I looked that one up, and we don't have to worry about it). The article also said that with serious female joggers, the menstrual period will "cease to flow". It's a proven fact with statistics and everything. So you ought to think about quitting track before your whole future as a woman is endangered! To further my research, I asked my friend Louisa Afficionado all about it. She's the girl that holds court every morning in the smoker's bathroom before first hour. I think I wrote you about her before. She knows a lot about life. She car dates with college boys. She smokes long cigarettes and gives French Kiss lessons to the girls in the bathroom mirror. She even wears tampons. Anyway, I mentioned your problem, and she said cranberry juice. Definitely cranberry juice. You've got to start drinking it. She says it cleans out your system. Pretty soon, she says, you will be sitting out of swimming

for something besides an abcess. You will be bombarded with sanitary pads.

As for my problem, I don't think there is any research that can help. I told Louisa Afficionado about my problem one morning and she stood quiet for a moment, letting her thick lips blow perfect smoke rings from her Virginia Slims. She talks with a great deal of authority, after all, she's one year older, and has just been held back. She told me to stand up straight, stick out my chest and enjoy all the male attention. And when the boys snap my bra straps or grab for my breasts or knead them like they were mounds of yeast dough, I should smile and act mysterious, let my eyes widen, and act like I'm enjoying it. She said it was a proven fact that boys like breasts, and that biting Larry Pinnazo's nose was a mistake. That was not being mysterious at all. She asked me how was I ever going to get a date if I got the reputation as a ball-buster? (I'll have to look that one up).

The new tall and mysterious,  
Franchesca Angelica DiGregorio

November 30, 1980

Dear Tall and Mysterious,

Tear up all my previous letters because I am in love. L-O-V-E Luvvvvvvvvvv!!!!!!!!!!!! And it is not with an immature tenth grade boy who lurks outside of swimming pools, or who tells me I need a melon transplant, or who spends half his

time adjusting the traction on his skateboard. I am in love with a real man. His name is Rodney Allan Forbes III and he is my language skills teacher. He wears herringbone tweed jackets, and wide maroon ties with grey flecks, and he reads us Robert Browning, and he has the most perfect teeth in all of Des Moines. And I know I'm in love, really truly in love, because when he smiles, or reads this Browning guy, my underpants get wet, well, moist, really. The first time it happened, I thought I might have peed my pants, but you kind of know when you're actually doing that. Then I thought, just looking at him made me get my very own period, but I checked after class, and that wasn't it either. But I guess, on account of me sitting in the front row, and picking up all of his psychic vibrations, and looking at those white, glossy teeth, I just became a woman and fell into true love. Anyway, I have volunteered to do all sorts of work for him, and I'm going down to Cunningham's to get some of that coral lipstick they have on special, and I'm going to buy a padded bra with fiberfill. (I'll have to hide it from my Ma. She says good Christian girls don't wear padded bras. But, I'm desperate, and when one is in love, one will do anything). And, I'm going to get some textured pantyhose! Maybe he'll notice me.

Just signing,

Miss Claudia Michelle Weber

MRs. Claudia Michelle Weber Forbes III

Mrs. Claudia Forbes III

Mrs. Rodney Forbes III

December 15, 1980

Dear Mrs. Forbes,

What you are experiencing is what Louisa Afficionado calls "creaming your jeans". She says it happens on car dates, in roller rinks, and at rock concerts. She says its natural and it means you are a real woman, well, practically, but if it bothers you, you can invest in some of those everyday mini-pads. My mother says big business would invent a pad for every natural function if they could, and she said don't waste your money. Rodney Allan Forbes sounds divine and a lot better than my language skills teacher, Ms. Haskell. She buns up her hair, wears grey wool suits, and looks like she's been sucking on citrus for at least a decade. She doesn't read Robert Browning. She likes to diagram sentences and pontificate about the generic YOU. She gave me detention for coming to class with just one shoe. I tried to explain to her what had happened, but she told me to take my seat and see her after school. The reason I lost my shoe had to do with Teddy Klender, who is a lot cuter than Larry Pinnazo and is on the swim team, and on first impressions seems trustworthy. One day, a few weeks ago, he asked me to go sit in his car. I thought maybe



Louisa Afficionado's advice was finally paying off, so I followed him out to the school parking lot and got into his car, thinking, hoping, he was going to ask me out for my first real date. Well, you can call my first male-female car encounter: PROWLING FOR THE WILD CHICAMUNGAS. Teddy Klender didn't waste any time. He unsnapped my bra like he had taken official lessons, and in a matter of seconds my breasts were straining against the fabric of my blouse, and he pounced me, and my head hit the dashboard, and his hot, sticky breath coated my ear, and he kept whispering "Let me lick them, please, let me lick them." He said he had been dreaming about them for months, and I tried, I really tried, like Louisa told me to, to look doe-eyed and mysterious, and to look like I was enjoying it. But when he whispered he wanted to lick them, my stomach did a violent turn, my lips shriveled and contorted, and I began to think very fast. I kicked off my shoe, lifted my leg, even though he had me pinned to the seat, and began honking the car horn with my big toe. Teddy's head just about hit the ceiling. He sat up quickly, straightened his shoulders, and peered through the car window to see if anyone was looking. I opened the door, ran from the car with only one shoe, my arms folded over my chest, and I bent real low, like I was walking against one of those tropical winds, and I ran, limping back to the school. I never got my shoe back and Ms. Haskell gave me detention for violating the dress code. Is there no justice?

I told my mother about it, and she threatened to call up the Klenders and tell the whole pack of them to "F\_\_\_\_\_off and die." I've never heard her speak that way before. My father made her apologize for her language and sent her to her room. He told me she just wasn't been the same since she started going to these assertiveness training groups. He told me boys would be boys, and he had found himself in a pickle in the backseat of a Studebaker once. Sometimes, though, I wonder if my mother is all right. She doesn't make pasta on Thursdays anymore, just Sundays, she loses Dad's socks (he says deliberately), and my father's latest kick is that he says he knew he should have married a woman from the old country. She gets sent to her room a lot lately. Oh, she puts up a fight, knocks over a few plants, kicks the heat register, but still she goes on up, probably just to avoid a fight with my father. Sometimes, when she doesn't know I'm looking, I find her in the laundry room screaming into the washing machine. It's empty, the agitator isn't moving, and she's screaming her primal scream, that's what she calls it. After daddy had sent her to her room for this Teddy thing, I went up to see her. She had piled some pillows against the wall, and had laid her head back, closing her eyes. I sat next to her and she ruffled my hair, the way she always does, and said the next time a boy did that to me to forget the horn, and aim for his family jewels. She bent her knee and thrust it into the air like a karate

champion, and pointed to her body and showed me where to aim, and then pointed lower to show me where to go for the second jab. I asked her if that was being a ball buster (Remember? I tried to look it up, but it wasn't in the Random House Edition), and she chuckled and said, "Yes." Then she got to looking kind of sad, and turned her head to the wall, pulling the covers up to her neck like a sick child and spoke in a soft, low voice: "Promise me Franchesca, promise me, you won't make the same mistakes that I did." I wanted to ask her what she meant, but she closed her eyes and turned her body to the wall. I thought after this Teddy thing, I might want to come and live with you, but now I see my mother needs me.

Merry Christmas,

Frankie Di

February 3, 1981

Dear Frankie Di,

I've been doing a lot of extra work for Mr. Forbes now in his office, and I can even go into his top drawer for paper clips. He has books all over his office, beautiful hard-bound books lined in neat rows in wooden bookcases. The room smells of pipe smoke, a cherry blend, I think, and he hangs his herringbone jacket with the suede patches on the sleeves on the coat rack by the door. Did I

tell you he wasn't married? Ever since I found that out I have been in heaven. And I have more good news. I can sit out of swimming now for something more than post nasal drip!! And as if the two had something miraculously to do with the other, I can now completely fill an A cup, Teen Queen, sans fiberfill. I cut down on my jogging, drank cranberry juice, buried a tampon in my father's vegetable garden under two feet of snow (that was my Aunt Idah's idea, she's Polish and they do those kind of things), and I did isometrics for my breasts and VOILA! Dickie Butts is even laying off in French now. He's quit the steam roller routine and modified his peas on a breadboard (he's upped it to two prunes), and best of all, Rodney Allan Forbes let me read some of his original love sonnets. I think the tenth grade is turning out to be the best year of my life!

A-Cupped and thrilled,

The Future Mrs. Forbes III

May 18, 1981

Dear Claudia Michelle,

We gave Louisa Afficionado a baby shower in the bathroom before first hour yesterday. She got four teddy bears and a box of Huggies Disposables. Shes moving with her about to be future husband, Nickie Rocco, a serviceman, to Antler, Oklahoma, She's going to live in a trailer with a Hoover

portable washer and cable tv. Louisa said she could have stopped herself from getting pregnant, on account of she knows all about those things, but she was bored with school and wanted a baby to love and to love her back. She said Nickie Rocco is okay, even if he does slick his ducktail with Vitalis and carry a pearl handled knife when he's out of uniform. Of course, I'm in shock, and gave up my French Kiss lessons on the spot, and I'm going to take my time to consider all of Louisa's previous advice. I don't want to end up in Antler, Oklahoma in a mobile home, and I don't want all the boys whispering that I squish when I walk, like they do about Louisa, and I don't want to car date with older boys with slick hair and slick grins who treat my body like a slab of stewing beef. And I want to listen to my mother who says my body will catch up with my breasts, like hers did for her, and I don't want to go to bed at night dreaming of pounding and binding and slicing my breasts in my twilight sleep.

Of course, I think your Rodney Allan Forbes III sound wonderful, but he is an older man, and I'd hate to see you in Antler, Oklahoma talking babies and trading venision recipes with Louisa Afficionado.

Yours forever,

Frankie Di

June 8, 1981

Dear Franchesca,

I was never going to write another letter again. I just want to hide myself in my room and never see or hear from anyone, but I figured I owed you an explanation. I am mortified. Crushed. Grossed out. I want to die, or at least be a nun. Everything around me looks grey and dirty, and it shouldn't; school is almost over, and it is warm and bright outside. My Rodney Allan Forbes, my Mr. Tweed, my Robert Browning is like all the rest. He's like that Larry Pinnazzo, or worse yet, Dickie Butts, but I would say in the final analysis, he's much like that Teddy Klender fellow that made you lose your shoe. And you know, if you get up real close and get a good look into his mouth, his teeth aren't so white. They're wearing little yellow cardigan sweaters, each and every one of them, and his breath is horrible, at first smelling like a strong flower, but underneath, there's a current of ugliness, a smell as yellow as his sweatered teeth. I bet you're wondering how I got an A-number-1 close-up view of Mr. Wonderful's mouth. First of all, if I tell you, you've got to promise not to breathe a word of this to a living soul, because if my mother finds out, she'll ship me off to a Bible camp in Plainfield. Well, last week, I was in his office after school, stapling and paper clipping and straightening the papers on his desk, just like I usually do. Mr. Forbes walked in and stood in the corner, leaning against a bookcase, staring at me. I noticed he had closed the door, something

he had never done before. The stapler jammed. He grinned at me, and at that point his teeth still looked quite lovely and white. "Did I tell you what a wonderful job you've done all year, Claudia?" he asked, then he moved towards me and stood behind my chair. "I really appreciate it," he continued. The coarse fabric of his tweed jacket grazed the back of my neck and it started to itch, I wanted to scratch it, but I was afraid to move, so I kept fumbling with the jammed stapler. He pulled me up from my seat with his big hands and turned me around and that was when I got a good look at those teeth, and smelled the stale, ugly breath. And then he was pressing himself against me, and I could feel it, I mean IT, and it was like he was carrying a rock in his pants, and all I could think of was it must have been long and a purplish pink, like in those lab transparencies we have in Biology I. I could have used some of your mother's karate instructions at that point, but I couldn't think. And then he kissed me, a wet, tongue kiss that made me want to vomit right there. I just ducked, and crawled out from his grasp and ran like hell to the bathroom where I wiped the wet kiss from my lips with some brown paper towels, and washed out my mouth with the warm faucet water, and I locked myself in a stall, and just cried. I waited till everyone had left the school, and went home, hoping my mother wouldn't guess what had happened, hoping there wasn't a rash on my neck from the tweed, or some telltale sign on my lips. I didn't eat dinner, just went to my room, and I haven't felt

like doing much since. I sit in the back row of his class now, and I rarely look at him, I just sit, barely listening, looking out the window at the gray and dirty parking lot, praying that the term will be over. Did I say the tenth grade was the best year of my life? Just sign me

Disillusioned in Des Moines,  
Claudia Michelle

June 12, 1981

Dear Claudia Michelle,

Well, you can entitle this letter: YOUR GOD HAD CLAY FEET. Ms. Haskell, my English teacher, explained that to mean, we shouldn't set anyone up as a god, because they'll only disappoint you. I personally don't think Rondey Allan Forbes III should get away with this, on account of according to some extensive research on my part, he is guilty of fourth degree sexual misconduct to a female minor. I personally think he should be lined up and shot right there in his office. If I could tell my mother, she'd probably call your school board and tell them to all go F\_\_\_\_\_ off and die! for hiring him in the first place. But in order to protect his job, he'd do what Larry Pinnazo did, he'll say you "lured" him into the office, you shut the door, and that you've been bothering him all term. In court, he'll bring up the Jungle Coral lipstick, the textured pantyhose, maybe even



the fiberfill, and when he got on the stand, under oath, he'll say you, yourself, pressed against him, and grabbed the rock in his pants. I've seen all of this before on made-for-tv movies. By the time the hearing was over, the boys would be saying you squish when you walk and Rodney Allan Forbes III would be promoted to Vice-principal (I accentuate the VICE). You'd have to move away, or your mother would have to send you to Bible Camp for deprogramming. My advice is to go into your mother's laundry room when no one is home, lock the door, open the washing machine and make sure it's empty so you have a real good echo, then SCREAM! SCREAM that primal scream my mother says is so therapeutic, and let that echo fill your head. Perhaps it can wipe out the memory of Mr. Forbes and the yellow, wet kiss. I tried it last week after Larry Pinnazo called me FranCHESTA, and it worked!

Here's to the eleventh grade,  
Franchesca DiGregorio

### THE FEEDER

That summer day Alma Winters came to lunch, I noticed she had lost weight. She had lost the fullness of her breasts, the pinkish flesh of her cheeks, and could have been a small boy sitting there, instead of a grown woman playing with the food on her plate. Her once fiercely platinum hair was a faded brown, cropped close to her head with rigid sprouts standing upright at her crown and temples. Her grey eyes seemed much larger than I ever remembered, glass marbles fixed in a dull yellowed skin. Alma did not look at me as she arranged the meal into forced geometric designs on her plate. There was a sense of primordial ritual as she played with the food, separating it into squares and triangles with the tongs of her fork, then pushing the food together into a larger rectangle. It was only after several minutes of this ceremonial rite that she took a bite. She showed no measure of enjoyment of her food, which could have been tasteless stones, the way she labored to swallow. Periodically she would lay down her fork, reach for her water goblet, and take measured mechanical sips, her lips never leaving the rim of the glass.

I felt like a cow next to her. My breasts were round and full from nursing my daughter Jenny, and David had joked

just that morning that my arms and legs were getting to look like baby sea whales. I felt misshapen, a flesh balloon, sweat trickling down my inner thighs making my print shift stick to my skin. I smelled of cooking grease and soured milk. I was uncomfortable in the late summer heat. Alma was cool and composed.

Jenny, who was seated in her highchair, squirmed momentarily and threw a large pasty noodle on the floor. She whined and I knew she wanted my breast. I lifted her out of the highchair, wiped the tomato sauce away from her face with a napkin, and opened the top button of my dress. Jenny maneuvered herself into a comfortable position, letting her smooth cheek disappear into the soft white breast, her lips blowing little fish kisses until she reached the nipple. Alma did not look up. She rearranged the food on her plate.

"It's too bad David can't be home for lunch," I said, shifting Jenny deeper into my arm for more leverage. "He would have loved to have seen you."

"Oh really?", she asked, taking a small even bite of the noodle.

"But then, I'm kind of glad we had this time to talk alone."

Alma neatly wiped her mouth with the cloth napking, appearing to be finished, even though a great deal of food was left on her plate. I noticed fine strands of brown hair growing above her lip, alien shadows to this formerly very feminine creature.

"So," I paused, "When did you begin losing all this weight?"

"Oh, it's all come about gradually," she answered.

The breast milk from my untended breast seeped through the fabric of my dress, I was embarrassed, and shifted Jenny, who at nine months seemed too big and cumbersome to nurse. She eagerly reached for the swollen nipple of my other breast, while I wiped myself with a cloth diaper that I carried on my shoulder.

"I've been losing weight for awhile, now," Alma continued, placing her silverware on her plate and pushing the plate forward. "Everytime I look in the mirror, I see fat. It seems my stomach is an inevitable fate." She pinched a thin line of skin where her stomach should have been through the fabric of her tailored blouse. "You know, I don't even have my periods any more. I love it."

"Alma, I'm worried about you."

"Don't be."

"How does Cal feel about this?"

"Oh Calvin. He's been a bit of a brute. But let's not talk about me, please."

And so I launched into a self-conscious monologue about my life, my life with baby, my life with David. The night feedings, the diapers, the baby edging herself around the coffee table like a plump duck, giggling and cooing one moment, engaged in a tirade the next. I talked at considerable

length about my body, all round and sagging, laced with white ribbons of stretch marks, and how the heat made me feel like a swollen pear, all thick and ripe and miserable. I talked about David and the business, how he liked his shirts ironed, that he likes his phone messages written neatly in ink, and how he wrote me a little note every morning before he left for work, "Sylvia, stick to your diet." And then I talked of the baby again, the Laleche League, the parenting group meetings, how zinc oxide is better for diaper rash than anything commercial on the market, how I intended to nurse Jenny until she was two years old even though my mother-in-law thought the whole idea disgusting. And it struck me as I spoke that I had no idea what language I spoke before this Baby Talk. What could I have possibly thought or said before there was a David or a Jenny? My head was filled with every moment that Jenny made, every mono-syllable that she uttered, every new and startling skill she mastered. And when I did not speak of Jenny, it was David and his business, David and his needs, his desires for the family. I vaguely remember a young woman, with long black hair and black eyes, a literature major at a small university, who romped in a woolen turtleneck and faded blue jeans, carried a Greek woven bag she had bought in Europe, laced leather sandals up her calves, who met friends in dark campus taverns, political rallies, and in the dormitory rooms late at night. I vaguely remember her speaking, but the language and tools of speech are alien to me now, and the faces and names of her cohorts are impossible to

remember. And this woman adopted a new language, and spoke to a woman who politely listened, but who did not share the language either.

Alma once had told me she had graduated from Stephens College in Missouri, when Stephens was a finishing school, devoted solely to preparing each young woman for a life with a successful man. Alma had jokingly mentioned once there was a mini-course in "the art of pouring tea" and she laughed, "the art of wearing gloves". She had been waiting for Calvin when he came along, she said. She was attracted to his angular frame and Nordic coloring, and she was bored with Stephens, and her courses, and she fell for him so passionately, that she forgot who she was and why she had ever gone to college in the first place. She quit Stephens her junior year and married Cal in a large ceremony somewhere out East.

I managed to finish college, but I fell hard for David, much like Alma did for Cal. David told me he didn't usually like literature majors because he found them flighty and unpredictable, but he thought he could handle me and mold me into the perfect wife. I remember tossing back my black hair and laughing at that remark, telling him, this abrasive young man, I had only known for two weeks, that you can only mold gelatin and cheese, neither of which I remotely resembled. He roared at that one, and later he told me he had decided that night he wanted to marry me. Something about the anger in my eyes that intrigued him.

As I rambled on, Alma sat composed, smooth like carved marble, smiling a thin line of a smile, her hands, a small child's hands, folded neatly in her lap. Jenny was asleep at my breast.

After Alma had left, and I had put Jenny in her crib, I remembered back to the time when I had first met Alma. It was the night she and her husband Cal had thrown a celebration party honoring his new partnership with my husband, David. She was much rounder then, her face a soft pink, her blonde hair like a child's doll, and she was open, receptive, not the frigid mannequin that measured every move, every bite of food. She laughed appreciatively at everything her husband said that night, as if his words were golden, or god-inspired, and she sat with her tea, her laquered nails tapping delicately on the porcelain cup, smiling, giggling, winking at the other guests. I remembered the earrings and the fine golden chains that dangled from her neck and fell into the crevice of her then fuller breasts. She dressed flamboyantly, in odd-glittered colors, and men crowded around her. These same men often congratulated Cal on how lucky he was to find such a fine hostess and a good wife, and the other wives in the room envied her, myself included, because she was many things we were not. I hadn't had Jenny yet, and I sat at the dinner table, my pregnant belly resting in folds, straining in a slanted position, my puffed legs sprawled beneath me. David kept laying his hand on my stomach saying such things like, "That better be my cake

baking in this oven", and he patted my stretched flesh, as if I wasn't even there, merely a receptacle for some precious cargo. Alma laughed heartily at David's humor, along with the other men at the table who spat and choked and roared, and I sat back, grinning, pretending I enjoyed all this attention. I remembered at one point the baby gave a strong kick and David raised his hand with an almost religious gesticulation and shouted, "Goddamn, it's going to be a first string linebacker, sure as hell." I remember sipping my mineral water, amidst the laughing, and wondered what exactly a first string linebacker did.

Alma sought me out later in the evening, "I'm so glad our husbands are going to be partners. We're going to be fast friends, I can tell. I want to hear all about your baby." And before I had a chance to respond, she had flittered away, off to Cal's side, crawling into the folds of his arms, and he steadied her, positioned her, and her form became fluid as she melted into a cool liquid in his grasp.

Several months had passed after that summer lunch with Alma, and I did not think much about her. I was engrossed with Jenny and the house, and my diet which was David's pet obsession as well as mine. David had devised a curious regimen he had found in an old Air Force manual. He had written down my instructions neatly on a legal pad, detailing the precise amount of sit-ups, leg lifts, arm twirls, that I was to do each day. By each category, there was a box to be checked each time the prescribed exercises were completed. Every



morning, next to his "Daily Notes for Sylvia", ("Don't touch that Jamaica Almond Fudge ice cream, Syl, I'll check the level when I get home"), he left the annoying Air Force regimen, with a newly sharpened pencil laid next to it. I often greeted the note with a half eaten banana or toasted bagel hanging from my mouth, and in an act of silent defiance, I checked the little squares perfunctorily as I dipped my finger into the Jamaica Almond Fudge.

I decided to have Alma over for lunch again in November. She arrived promptly, dressed in a roomy t-shirt that swallowed her boyish frame. Her hair was shorter, swept back above her ears, and she had lost more weight. She seemed to be in even more control, her posture rigid, almost military, her hands tight and folded in her lap, the purplish veins transparent, like frozen rivers in her flesh. I stared at her face, the skin still yellowed, but now deep grey circles swelled around the eyes, and her smile, much tighter, stretched like a violet string across her face. I had fixed something rich and pasty, I wanted to fatten her up, but she no longer bothered to lift the food to her mouth. She neatly separated it and let it converge again with each mechanical movement of her fork.

"Alma," I began, "Is it possible that you could have lost more weight? You really didn't need to." I saw in her form the frozen pictures of war and famine that lay like a sheet of cellophane over my consciousness.

"When I look into the mirror all I see is fat. It's funny, but I find I can live quite nicely on some meat broth and a sliver of fruit."

"But that's not enough, Alma. You need more."

"No, you're wrong," she shook her head. "I need nothing. I'm in complete control now."

"What do you mean you're in control?"

"My body is my own."

"Has Cal said anything about this to you?"

She laughed, and said nothing for a moment, then straightened herself in the chair. "Oh he forces me to eat. He pinches the food between his fingers and forces it into my mouth. I swallow it alright, but I throw it up later." She laughed again. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"No, I don't think that," I answered. "But you and Cal were always so close."

"Oh really? Is that what you thought?" I heard the faint stirrings of Jenny in the upstairs bedroom. She's probably hungry, I thought, and my breasts ached. "I think that's the baby, Sylvia," Alma said, and stood to leave.

"Alma, please stay. You just got here. Have dessert. I made it special."

"Sylvia, please don't worry about me."

"How can I help you?"

"You can't."

I noticed the bruise as she was putting on her overcoat. It lay under her arm, large, circular, the deep purple of a summer plum.

"Alma!" She jerked, I must have startled her. "What happened to you?" I heard Jenny wailing in the upstairs bedroom. My attention shifted in the direction of the bedroom door, then back to Alma, who was quickly buttoning up her overcoat.

"Oh, that. A gift from Calvin. He had a bad day at work."

She lifted the woolen hood over her head, opened the door, and walked rigidly into the brutal wind. I felt a chill as the wind crept into the open weave of my sweater. I folded my arms across my chest and hid my hands under each arm. I closed the door behind her and stood for a moment ignoring the persistent cries of my child.

"She's the joke of the office," David said that night at dinner. Mort Kreiners calls her 'Alma from Aushwitz'."

"That's so sick." I said. "I can't believe you can even repeat that."

"Alma used to be some broad," he continued, "Cal was considered lucky going home to that every night. Mort says you couldn't pay him to lay her now."

"More Krieners is an asshole."

"More Krieners sold three houses last week."

"How can you defend him?"

"Like I said, he sold three houses last week."

"Anyway, I tried to get her to eat. I made lasagne. She just played with it. Wouldn't take a bite."

"I figure if you can't get her to eat, no one can," he smirked, patting the meat of my thighs. "You're always

feeding everyone, including yourself." He reached for his coffee, and swirled the black brew with his spoon. He smiled. "Did you do your leg lifts today?"

"I didn't have time." He let that one slip in, I thought, he's a real professional, him and his little calculated doses of disapproval. I had covered my advancing weight that winter with oversized sweaters and pants, and had been careful to keep my arms covered and my legs hidden under large towels after a shower, and then safely lost under a lounging gown. Even though Jenny had several teeth and was increasingly mobile, I was still nursing her and my breasts were still huge and swollen and laced with purple veins. That's it I thought. No more nursing, Jenny, you're going cold turkey tomorrow. No more feeding off of Momma.

"I think Cal has been hitting Alma and I'm worried," I said, looking for some type of reaction in David's face. I folded my hands across my breasts hoping to minimize my misshapen body.

"He says he has to get tough with her to make her eat. It's none of your business, Syl. Now drop it." He got up from the table and turned, "Cal is my friend, my partner, and we get along fine. Just drop all of this."

I took David's advice, letting it go, hoping Alma could resolve what was troubling her on her own, after all, she herself said I couldn't help her. Months later in the spring, when I had all but forgotten about Alma, and David ceased to even mention her in conversation, I became absorbed

with Jenny and her expanding vocabulary. I wrote down every new word she acquired and the day she uttered it into a little journal I had been keeping since her birth. Her newest phrase was "I want, I want", and she followed me around the house playfully reiterating her new sentence. David had left a note for me one morning in the spring, and instead of his usual "Stick to your diet, Syl!", there was a set of terse instructions: "Get ahold of Alma Winters. Invite her and Cal to dinner tonight. I'll explain later."

Alma was distant on the phone, and responded in short, brittle sentences: "Yes. That will be fine. We can make it. Thank you. Goodbye." Her voice was a bizarre parody of one of those computer toys that respond verbally to a child's persistent finger punches. I heard a grey undercurrent of pain, not the whinings of a hungry child that I was so used to responding to, but the low, hollow moans of the wounded. Her voice made me think of that morning when I lay in bed, startled by the imperiled quakings of a small bird trapped in our roof that the workman had finished repairing the day before. It was a sparrow or a Brewers Blackbird that often nested in the soffets and gutters of the neighborhood homes. I stared at the sloped ceiling, directing my attention to where the bird had been entombed between the rafters. The scratchings became more frantic as I envisioned the bird flapping its fragile wings in the darkness, in blind panic, buffeted only by the freshly laid insulation. I threw off my covers and stood on the mattress.

"What are you doing Sylvia?" David had asked, turning in a half sleep. I lifted my fingertips and grazed the ceiling.

"There's a bird trapped in the ceiling. Can't you hear him?"

"He'll die soon. Let it go."

"Can't we get it out?"

"Now, how are we going to get it out Syl? We just paid eight hundred dollars to have the roof fixed, and you want to save some damn bird?"

"I can't stand listening to it die."

"Then go downstairs and fix me some coffee."

"How can you stand it, David?"

"It's easy," he had answered, sitting up in bed. He turned on the radio.

The dinner party was Cal's idea. He had hoped that if Alma was around familiar faces, she might eat. He admitted to David she was losing more weight, that he had found her vomiting several more times in the bathroom, and that he had to get physical with her. He had to watch her constantly now, following her to the bathroom, and having to force feed her in the mornings before he went to work and at night when he got home. He thought it was time to involve a doctor, but Alma had refused.

The dinner surprisingly went well. Alma made a visible effort to eat, not toying with the food, but actually scooping large amounts of food onto her fork and shoving them

into her mouth. David and Cal made a deliberate attempt to not watch Alma, and were engaged in a raucus retelling of some more office antics of Mort Krieners. He had, so they said, deliberately spilled coffee on Miss Kendall's bosom, in hopes of getting to wipe it away with his pocket handkerchief. Miss Kendall, the secretary, was noticably upset when old Mort dropped his handkerchief down her cleavage, and proceeded to retrieve it. David recounted that "her jugs were just a jigglng" at the sight of Krieners hand, and she poured another cup of coffee on his three piece pin-stripe. I often wondered how a man I could be married to could defend a man who had such an open contempt for women. It seemed to me that David and Cal, and all men for that matter, had a fierce camaraderie, inpenetrable, a shared, personal knowledge, fraternity, partnership, that excluded women. It is a code, an unspoken devotion. I felt jealous of Cal and David and Mort, much like I felt in high school when I saw the male athletes on a football or basketball squad hug each other after a win, or pat each other on the rump, or fiercely defend each other on the field, while I enviously sat in the stands, surrounded by the other girls, yearning for that type of camaraderie. The girls would cheer and wave at the men hoping for some form of recognition or male attention. But we were all separate entities, failing to acknowledge each other, only interested in extrapolating a small fragment of this male fraternity.

Alma asked for seconds of the dessert after finishing two helpings of the main course, and Cal smiled appreciatively at me. David nodded. She smiled and took large chunks of the cheesecake onto her fork and dropped them into her mouth. I reached for a piece of the cheesecake for myself, hoping that David was so lost in his reverie with Cal that he would not notice, but, as if on cue, he tapped my elbow with the prongs of his fork and whispered so Cal and Alma could most certainly hear, "Not tonight, Darling, you've had enough as it is." So I continued to minister the meal, monitoring everyone's plate, standing, then sitting, treating each portion of food as a personal gift to the taker.

After coffee, Alma excused herself and left the table. Calvin gave me a sour, pleading look, so I offered to walk her up to the bathroom using the excuse that I wanted to check on Jenny. David winked at me, letting me know I had done the right thing.

I stood by the closed bathroom door. I heard the low guttural sounds, the heavings, the moans, and then the sudden flush of the toilet. I wondered if I should knock, and then the door opened. Alma stood in the doorway, not surprised to see me at all, her dull hair matted and wet, fresh yellow balls of sweat beading her forehead and the pronounced hair above her lip. "Please don't tell Cal, Sylvia." I felt as if we shared a small closet, suffocating in the dark, acrid smell of vomit, and I felt the sad, sick walls of enclosure. She lifted her sweater and showed me several wide strips of



surgical tape wrapped around her emaciated body. "He did this," she announced, and headed down the stairs, her form distinctly masculine in nature. Her body was propelled by some ethereal energy, giving her strength, and as she disappeared down the stairway, I knew I would say nothing.

Alma called three weeks later, her voice was different, not the clipped military sentences, but a series of unpunctuated fragments. She asked to see me. It was urgent. I remembered a doctor's appointment I had made that day for Jenny's inoculations, and the promise to pick up David's pin-stripe at the cleaners, and my luncheon meeting with David's mother. "Yes, Alma. Please come. I'll be waiting here for you."

I suddenly felt the same fear I did the night I stood in the imaginary closet, the stale air that hung low around me, the feeling of hopeless enclosure. Jenny had tripped over a line of toys in front of her and held out her arms for solace, a green plastic frog lodged in one hand, the other tugging at the fabric of my shirt, pleading to nurse. I walked into the kitchen and poured her a cup of juice, she tagging behind me, at first resisting the cup, still tugging at the cloth of my shirt. "No, Jen, you use a cup now. Momma has no more milk."

Ten minutes later Alma stood in the doorway in a pair of denims and a bloodied white shirt. There was a large untended bruise, split and bleeding on her forehead. I ushered her in, her frail body quaking, her hands, like strings of

bones, convulsing. She bit into her shaking hand, making small indentations in the skin, trying by the self-induced pain, to steady herself. She composed herself, transfixed by the tiny dots that filled with blood and steamed the hollows of her skin. "Let me take care of that cut, Alma. Please." I sat her in the living room and then ran for some disinfectant and some bandages. When I returned, Jenny was yelling, "Hurt, momma, hurt!" Shaking, I spilled the bright orange mercurchrome over the wound. Jenny pummeled my legs, disturbed at my behavior, tugged demandingly at my slacks, and then sat curiously to watch the bright spectacle, the mercurchrome spreading like ink on white paper, creating a Rorschach abstract on Alma's face. I took some tissue out of my pocket and gently wiped away the excess, placed some soft gauze over the wound, finishing with two strips of adhesive tape.

"I thought I was strong enough to kill him," she began. "I worked at being strong...in control...I thought I could do it this time, this time...I waited so long for just the right time...I thought I had the power...I had the power ..."

"Alma, what are you saying?" I grabbed her fists that were wound tight like hoarded string.

"I thought he couldn't touch me anymore...I thought my body was my own...I felt strong...did everything, everything right..."

"Alma....."

"But oh oh that bastard that bastard he walks in on me in the bathroom I had to had to vomit that toast he made me eat that morning and he walked in that bastard and he grabbed me and he still can beat me he still can hurt me and it still hurts still hurts and I thought I had the power to make it stop. I yelled I was going to leave him and he said 'You skinny bitch, I'll kill you yet.'"

"Alma, please, calm down, slow down."

Her trembling ceased and I wrapped my arms around her. Jenny, surprised by the sudden silence, edged into our circle, and with a surge of compassion that young children often intuitively display, reached for both of us. We sat there a very long time, arms entwined, heads together, eyes closed, listening to the ancient rhythm of our blood. And in this human huddle, we shared a secret knowledge, a silent, undying bond, a communion that only females can share.

Later in the day, David walked into the kitchen and found Alma, quiet and contemplative, sitting at the kitchen table warming her hands around a cup of tea. Jenny was in her highchair fingerpainting with a jello salad, tossing bits of strawberry gelatin onto the linoleum floor. David grabbed me by the arm and led to outside to the living room.

"Get her out of here Sylvia", he said.

"She's hurt, David. She needs help."

"Cal said she got hysterical this morning, trying to puke her breakfast into the toilet. He says he's having her committed."

"He's the one that should be committed. He's an animal."

"Can't you see she's fucking nuts?, he yelled, and then more quietly: "Listen honey. She's his wife. This is his business. You're my wife, and I want you to get her out of here."

"I can't."

"He's my friend, Sylvia. He's my partner. This is his mess. I'm calling him." He picked up the phone and began to dial.

"David, please, don't."

"Do what I say Sylvia. Get your daughter, clean up that fucking mess she's made in there, and then start dinner. I'm not coming home to this kind of thing. I mean it!"

I walked into the kitchen, went over to Jenny, and lifted her from the highchair and wiped her face and hands with a dishrag. I looked at the bowl of jello on the floor and the little strawberry hills that peppered the tiles. I looked up at Alma, whose flushed and bruised face registered nothing. She sipped her tea. "Come on, Alma. We're going." She looked up. "Come on, I'm getting you out of here. David is calling Cal. He'll be here soon." She didn't move. I felt as if my chest was exploding. My anger was so rich, so deep, surging like volcanic lava, a grit that burned my throat, enflamed my voice. God, I thought. It's not only Alma that had to get out of there.

As we drove off, all three of us in the front seat, huddled together again, as soldiers do in combat trenches, I looked through the rear view mirror to see David in the driveway, yelling, I suppose, my name. As we pulled further and further away, I saw our roof, still neatly repaired, and I thought of that lost sparrow, entombed in the darkness, shrouded with its broken wings.

### FAT ARLENE

I don't go out anymore. Ever since that thing with the babushka lady, and that kid Teddy Armbruster, and of course, my meeting with Alonzo DePalma. Mama brings me my food, and Mrs. Alexander from down the street still visits often enough, and there's my stories on tv and my True Confessions that come in the mail. I'm not going to take any more risks, that's for sure. Mrs. Palmatier, that's the lady with the babushka, comes by my front window twice a day, so I know I'd run into her. And that Teddy and his friends, well, they've taken to wheeling their dirt bikes, with those long banana seats, and the colored streamers right up here on my porch and racing down my steps. You think it would ruin their tires the way they carry on, as if I wasn't even alive inside this house, hooting and hollering things like "Hey, Fat Arlene, why don't choo come out?" or "Mama says you're a real certified crazy, Arlene!"

I'm Arlene Obispo, I am thirty-one years old, and I weigh three hundred and ninety pounds without my clothes or my shoes, at least that's what the doctor figures, on account

of his scale only goes up to three hundred and fifty pounds. He offered to take me down to the grain elevator to weigh me, or the hospital loading dock, but I decided to just stop going to him instead. I just hate the humiliation of getting on any scale. The nurse is always making these small clucking noises, and writing something secret on her clipboard, and shaking her head the way all nurses do.

I don't go anywhere anymore since the babushka lady started poking me with her umbrella one day while I was on the sidewalk headed for the market. She's the certified crazy, not me. Mrs. Palmatier always wears a black wool dress even in the summer, and has a black knit babushka tied around her small head, with a big black knot at the base of her neck. She carries this black umbrella, and a large shopping bag from Mittler's Emporium. She's a skinny one, that's for sure, and folks around here say she only buys one can of tuna and a pound of Juju Fruits a week at the market. One day she just took that ugly black umbrella and started poking at me while I was walking. I admit, I'm not one to get around easily, having sugar and varicose veins, and being just plain slow, but here she was poking at my rear end and giggling. I just stopped in my tracks. I just froze right there, and the point of the umbrella slid into my butt, and traveled around my side and traced little spirals over my body. She faced me head on, this pile of old bones, with that stick, taking small slices from my flesh and never once

looking into my eyes. She just wanted to poke at the folds in my flesh like I was some heifer or feeder calf ready for a livestock auction. I felt at any minute she was going to bid seventy-nine cents a pound off the hoof. I guess it wouldn't have been too bad, seeings how she's touched and all; I figured the Juju Fruits had done something to her brain. But then this Teddy Armbruster, he's what you'd call a regular shit-assed kid, and his buddies, Roger and Bobby, became a crowd, and gave the babushka lady a few rounds of applause and cheers. They were chewing on these Slo-Poke suckers, the long thick kind that last all day, and when they'd smile, brown stalactites of caramel dripped a thick stream of goo onto their shirts. Teddy smiled that brown smile and yelled: "Hey Fat Arlene, you want some of this candy?"

Listen, you shit-assed kid, I thought, I'd like to shove that stick right up your nose. But I couldn't say anything, I never do. With all that poking at me and the laughing, I became disembodied, as if my flesh belonged to someone else. It was like my mind, by some mistake, was only temporarily inhabiting this thick, motionless frame. I closed my eyes and felt the small pricks to my skin disintegrate, and the static of the boys' laughter melt into a vacuum inside my head. I thought of the thick caramel sucker, moist and sweet, like sugar meat laying on my tongue, and I chewed it whole, and the nectar spewed forth into a brown sugar stream.



I could feel the circular wind of the dirt bikes as they taunted me, and when I opened my eyes, Mrs. Palmatier was gone, headed toward the market, her black receding frame a stick in the wind. Teddy Armbruster skidded to a stop in front of my stomach, the rubber front wheel grazing the fabric of my dress. I suddenly felt full and heavy, the sun began to make me sweat, and my legs ached from my stationary position. "Hey Arlene, you think if I ram my bike into your stomach I could bounce home without having to do any peddling?"

Okay, I know I'm not pleasant to look at. My arms and legs are like rippled potatoes all bunched together in a sack, and my stomach sticks out so far I can't see my feet, and I've got to wear those orthopedic shoes with tiny holes in the sides to let my corns breathe. I'm uncomfortable most of the time. My breasts are supported by this white cotton bra that cuts into my skin and makes red moist creases that burn when I walk or move in any way. I've taken to sitting in my naugahyed chair by the front window and just watching out. I haven't really the clothes to go out anyway. I wear two muslin sheets sewn together into a loose shift. Mama rigs them up for me on her machine. She buys the sheets cheap at J.C. Penney and sews the tops and sides and makes the armholes, finishing them off by hand. They don't have my size anymore in the catalogues, and since I refuse to go outside and down to the Miss Chubbe Specialty Shop in Marpole City, Mama said we could order the pretty

flowered sheets that go on special after the first of the year and she could fashion me a dress or two.

I really took to my dresses, and felt real pretty, the way she had taken them by hand to sew the finishings. But Teddy and his gang wouldn't let me alone. It was a hot day, and the air came up between my legs and seemed to cool me off. I had my hair set and sprayed just right, and my lipstick bright on my lips. Mama says I have beautiful hair, just like the models on tv, and she and Mrs. Alexander both say I have such a pretty face. The sun was freckling my nose and the slow wind was ruffling the hem on my dress and like I said, I was feeling real pretty. "Hey Arlene, Omar the Tent Maker back in town?"

I had almost forgotten the tent jokes, the Omar jokes, the jokes about my clothes in elementary school. I had almost forgotten sitting in the back row in school. The fat kid in the back row dressed in womens' sizes because she had outgrown the children's department. The kid in the last row with the too long dress and the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. I preferred the back row in school. It allowed me to become anonymous. The kids would always complain they couldn't see around me or over me, so I'd sheepishly take a seat in the back, where kids would have to make a great physical effort to turn around and taunt me. Sometimes they would even forget all about me. I remember it was in the fifth grade that Geoffery Webb, another ass-hole kid, created the name Fat Arlene, and it stuck. "Hey just walk around

Fat Arlene," he'd snort, "And you're walking around the equator." Or he'd make some guttural imitation of a sow, and fall to the ground, his face shielded by an upraised arm and wail, "Help!! Fat Arlene's gonna sit on me!"

And I'd just stand there, much like I stood there when the babushka lady was poking at me, and stare at my shoes. I always had the prettiest shoes. They were red with shiny gold buckles or a black patent leather. Even though I was in womens' clothes sizes by the time I was in the fourth grade, my shoes were a normal size. I found myself staring at those shoes, especially when kids like Geoffery went at it, or when the girls refused to pick me for their kickball team until Miss Prentice, the teacher, made them. I'd just stare at those pretty shoes and not say a thing, just thinking how they might need a shine when they got home.

It's not like nobody has ever liked the way I looked. There once was a man named Marshall who loved me. I met him while I was visited my Aunt Lula's down in Marpole City. He had been visiting his sister in the house behind my Aunt Lula's and he had seen me working out in the garden. He had come up to me while I was kneeling on the ground, the fresh dirt making black patterns on my knees, and I was wearing one of those shifts Mama had rigged up, and my hair was fresh washed, and I guess I looked all right considering I had been clawing in the dirt most of the morning. He was ordinary looking, with some strands of thin greased hair combed over

a balding spot, and he wore a pair of glasses that was taped together over his nose. I sensed right off this wasn't some joke being played at my expense. He was a small man, with a child-like frame, and his shoulders curved into his body. He told me how he was one of those official Fat Admirers. They have a group and everything localized out East somewhere. I thought for a minute maybe it was one of those cults you read about, but he assured me they were all very respectable people, mostly men, who really admired women with a little girth, and a little meat on those bones. They were not embarrassed to be seen with women like me, and their official organization motto was "The Fatter The Better".

At every visit he brought candy, a pie, or a sweet roll, or maybe some take-out food from Delvechio's. The only places he would take me was to restaurants, and he would fuss over the menu, suggesting several desserts, asking for a double order of whipped topping or chocolate, and he would even grab a large handful of those pastel mints that are free by the cash register, and stuff them into my hands or feed them into my mouth one by one. "Had enough Arlene?" he often breathed into my ear and then suggested going home to ride the ponies. And then I would think of what my mother had said to me: "Arlene, Marshall may be the only chance at life you'll get."

Well, riding the ponies wasn't exactly what it was cracked up to be, and Marshall wasn't exactly what you'd call

an active equestrian. He'd often just lie there, his balding head resting under the flap of my full breast, his little pink fingers kneading my poundage like a small kitten pummeling the underside of its mother. Sometimes I was afraid I just plain smothered him and he had died, the way I never heard anything from him, just an occasional snort that rippled my skin. He would disappear into my folds, burrowing away like a fetus in a womb, lying immobile, offering nothing in the way of what I anticipated was to be the pony ride of my life. He couldn't understand it the one day I told him to leave my house, and that I didn't want to see him anymore. I remember him saying, "Arlene, baby, sex doesn't have to be wild and frenzied. Sex can be comfortable, secure, protective." I wanted to tell him I got more exercise on the toilet, but all I said was "Marshall, you made love to my body and not to me."

When Mama heard about Marshall, she said she knew all along he would hurt me, that he couldn't have possibly loved me, and that perhaps he had found someone skinny to take my place. I tried to explain to her it was all my decision, but she seemed not to listen. Now when Mama thinks I'm feeling bad, she brings over a lot of food and we cook all afternoon. Her specialty is stuffed cabbage with rice and a honey bread filled with whole nuts and candied fruits. She makes a rich pudding from scratch that needs to be stirred at least a thousand times and tops it with real shavings from a Hershey Bar. Sometimes she just bakes donuts all day

and lets me dust the twisted rolls with a fine sugar, and I get to eat them ready hot. Mama was not always like this. She used to bring over magazine articles about stapling my stomach, wiring my jaw shut, and rearranging twenty-five feet of my intestines. She would come with stories about someone who had heard from a friend of a friend that a miraculous weight loss had occurred after an injection of lamb urine or the cells of a cow pancreas. She read out loud newspaper articles about women who had lived for two years on packets of liquid protein and shots of Vitamin B<sub>12</sub>.

Even when I was a kid, from the time I was in the first grade, I had been on the beef-patty tomato-wedge diet, the "Six Hard Boiled Eggs A Day Diet", and the banana diet. She pinned pictures of cute little girls, cut from glossy magazines and catalogs, on the refrigerator with little piggy magnets. The little girls were usually involved in some physical activity like jump-roping (something I was afraid to do) or acrobatics (something I refused to do). As I grew older, the childrens' pictures were replaced with teenage models right out of Seventeen Magazine, modeling junior petites or string bikinis, and surrounded by muscular boys in tennis sweaters and football uniforms.

I really did try for Mama and Papa. I was the only kid in the second grade with carrot curls and melba toast for lunch, I ate six unsalted hard boiled eggs a day until I thought I would puke, snacked on Rye Krisp, did twenty-five

prescribed Jack Lalanne daily leg lifts. As I got older, the pictures changed again, to pencil-thin professional models from Cosmopolitan. I counted my calories verbally for Mama and Papa before every meal, kept a written record of my exercises, measured my saturated fats by the teaspoonful, and tried desperately to change. I always knew there was something horrible about my body, and I cursed it as I stood naked in front of a mirror, and I pinched it and squeezed it until my fingers burned. And sometimes I would noticeably lose weight, and Mama would flutter around the house, and call her friends, and say I had only twenty more pounds to lose. I would wait for my life to be as suddenly perfect as those photographs. I'd return to my bedroom and shut the door, and I would unwrap the Hostess Cupcakes or the Hersey Bar secretly purchased at the store and hidden in my stamp collection under the bed.

But that was before Papa died. Now Mama seems to enjoy all the cooking and she doesn't pay much attention to what I eat. She warns me that the people on the outside will hurt me, that they don't understand me, and she'll protect me.

So Mama comes to visit regularly three times a week, and as soon as she steps in the door something is crackling in the hot oil on the stove, ready to be laid on wax paper or a paper towel, all smooth and warm and ready hot. Then she does my dusting and all my heavy work on account of I'm

on "restriction", and pours a gallon of that Sno-Bowl stuff in my stool, mops my floors, and picks the lint from the carpet with her fingers, just as if she was picking at little bugs. Then she starts cursing out loud about how I should have never left her and Papa and how the whole world out there's going to hurt me.

And I tell her no one can hurt me when I'm in here and they're out there. Beside they're lovely people, mostly students, colorful in their fall sweaters and knapsacks, trekking by my window at all hours of the day. They are a stream of activity, each one eager and alive, all hurrying by, never glancing in to see me seated in my chair. I attach fictional names to their young faces, with fictional families and homestead. I imagine the dishes they eat from, the sheets they sleep on, the sounds they make when they awaken in the morning, even what they can see outside their kitchen window, and the smell of the strong coffee percolating in their pots. I give them all strange names like Alvina, Bird Lady, Wheelman, and Handsome Backpack Man.

They mix so fluidly with the neighborhood regulars. They weave around the babushka lady, and that awful Armbruster boy and his mother, who I hear is carrying on with the hydraulic lift man at New Tread Tire. They race by Mrs. Alexander, a little tipsy from her drinking, and one pretty near knocked Mama over just last Wednesday. On certain days, the people change, and sometimes there is someone I see once



and never see again. I was hoping Backpack Man would not be one of these. He would pass my house every day at precisely 10 a.m., always hurrying, his backpack jammed full, and slung over his shoulder. He wore a thin T-shirt most days with some white running shorts, his wild black hair often wet from what I supposed was a shower. I had been watching him for months, but was careful not to fall in love right away. I wanted to be sure.

I started to get up very early for my shower, taking care to get my hair and make-up just right. I spent a long time flipping my hair into little ringlets that fell to my shoulders. I applied my make-up carefully, a bit too heavily I think, but I wanted him to notice me through the window. Mama and Mrs. Alexander both say I have such a pretty face.

Every morning at ten o'clock, I would position myself in the chair, laying a robe over my lap so he couldn't see my legs as they flattened and bulged against the base of the chair. I would repeat my vigil in the afternoon as he returned at three o'clock, turning off my stories, making sure once again my hair was sprayed and properly in place, hoping that in the less hurried stride of his return trip, he would glance into my window.

It was during one of Mrs. Alexander's weekly visits that I learned Backpack Man was Mrs. Alexander's new boarder, Alonzo De Palma. She lives in a two-story white clapboard

down the street next to the Armbrusters. Alonzo, one of the college's students, had just rented the flat above hers.

She sat in my kitchen, cradling a glass of wine, her wooly grey hair jutting out at odd angles from her small head. She always brings her own wine to our visits, the kind she can pick up cheap at the A&P, seeings how she does the majority of the drinking. She looks a lot older than her true age, which I estimate to be about sixty or so, the drinking causing dark creases in her face and letting the skin yellow and swell around her eyes. Cigarettes have soured her breath and stained her teeth, but she does dress up for our talks. She wears a print polyester dress to each visit with some costume jewelry and simulated pearl earrings that hang from her ears like misshapen sea shells. Mama says Mrs. Alexander is a sad case and I shouldn't let her in. But Mrs. Alexander is so pleasant to me and tells me of all the things happening in the old neighborhood that I can't see through my window.

She talks about the hummingbird family that feeds off the trumpeter vine down at Glencairne Park; the way the poplar leaves look like hoards of quivering silver dollars when the wind hits them just right; and of the barn swallows that have chosen her garage to raise a brood. Years ago, I often visited her house, peeking through the loose boards of the garage wall, watching the parent swallows bringing small bits of broken insects to the eager yellow mouths that

gaped in the darkness, hungry, wanting some acknowledgement that their existence mattered. I would check on them daily until their growth period had expired, and their yellow beaks that turned to a pale grey and their wings fluttered and strained against the mud nest. But now that Teddy Armbruster has grown into the regular shit-assed kid that he is, I won't be squatting to see between any wooden boards.

"You shouldn't let any twelve-year-old kid keep you from doing anything, Arlene honey," she said, warm and flushed from the wine. "Just the other day, he called me an old broken down drunk, and I told him I'd like to see his brother Leroy become an only child, real fast. That shut him up."

And then she would talk about her boarder, Alonzo De Palma. She was all the time calling him a real nice boy that didn't play the FM Station too loud, and you never heard a peep out of him. And there was certainly no carryings on with any lady friends the way her other boarders had.

The weather grew colder as I continued to watch Alonzo from my window. Thick sweaters and angora hats replaced the thin T-shirts and running shorts of late summer. The babushka lady had covered her black dress with a black wool coat; Teddy Armbruster wore a lined silk baseball jacket as he still flipped his bike onto my porch; Alvina, the lady with the muscular legs and the wedgies, switched into some sensible brown shoes; Mr. Wheelman donned a pea coat and still dangled his bike wheel from his forearm. Alonzo DePalma covered his

long legs with blue jeans and took to wearing a maroon sweater; his face all ruddy from the autumn wind, his backpack still lazily slung over a wide shoulder. I was more in love than ever.

I hate winter. I have no winter coat. Mama says she hasn't figured out how to fashion me one out of wool, there being no patterns large enough at the store, and besides, being on Social Security for my sugar and disabilities, I can't afford it. I have boots, but no balance. The slickness of the pavement sends me reeling, my uneasy, thick legs flipping out from under me. I fell once a couple of years ago on a walk with Mrs. Alexander, and she just couldn't, much as she tried, lift me up. She had to go call on a policeman that was directing traffic at the corner. I lay on the sidewalk; I had a coat that could fit me then, my legs exposed, a raw pink in the brittle cold. My bare hands scraped the ice from the sidewalk, my eyes were closed, warm tears freezing in the corners. I was hoping that no one would notice, me like a giant sea munnal beached on the ice. I hated myself. I hated winter. I hated that dark empty cloud that welled inside my stomach. The meat on my thighs burned, and I hated the wind. I hated that policeman that finally lifted me up with the help of two passersby. "Listen Tess," he chuckled, giving sideways glances to the two men, "Maybe you should stay in on days like this."

Alonzo DePalma grew much more handsome as the winter wore on. He grew larger in a sheepskin jacket, his black curls capped in a blue sailor's hat, his cheeks chapped and red from the wind. One day, after having performed my daily ritual, showering, setting my hair, preening in front of the bathroom mirror, and after seating myself in the large naugahyde chair, wrapped this time in a colorful afghan, Alonzo seemed to wave at me. His wave was brief, but I am sure it was for me, and he smiled, not a full teeth smile, but a smile just the same. He paused momentarily in front of my house, leaning on one leg, letting his backpack slide down his arm. And then he smiled again and walked on. I'm sure he was admiring the way I had brought my hair away from my face and put it into a hill of ringlets on the top of my head, and my cheeks were rouged high on my cheekbones the way the professional models do, and of course he noticed the new orange lipstick Mama had picked out for me at Rexall's.

I began to laugh, and lifted myself slowly from the chair, so moist with the sweat of my own excitement, I had to peel myself away from it in sections, getting small plastic burns all over my legs and my back. I hurried to the front room closet, finding my winter boots under two years of True Confessions magazines. I grabbed a grey, rough army blanket from the top closet shelf.

I must have been a sight heading out my front door, with my sheet dress on, the army blanket not quite fitting

around my large breasts, and my black boots. It seemed strange walking down the steps, letting the snow climb over my boots. The cold, brutal wind slapped my face, made my nose run, sent me spinning. It was only a block from Mrs. Alexander's house, and the sidewalk seemed clear enough, and my boots packed the snow under my feet. I thought I could make it, no babushka lady or the Armbruster kid in sight. But the Armbruster kid was diddling in his driveway, I could see that from where I was standing, and I knew I would have to pass him to get to Mrs. Alexander's and to get to Alonzo De Palma.

I wished I had had a coat. My arms and legs peeked out from beneath the wool like large pink sausages. "Hey, Fat Arlene," Teddy bellowed, "Ringling Brothers designing clothes now?" He was stockpiling a reserve of iceballs in his driveway. God, I wish I had a coat. Just a few more steps. "Hey, Arlene, what's gonna happen if you fall today? Gonna need a construction crane to lift you up, that's for sure." How would you like to wear those iceballs kid? Just a few more steps. Damn, it's cold. God. "Hey, Fat Arlene? Think this iceball would bounce offa you?" I've got hemmoroids bigger than you kid and I set on them all day. You could be next. Shit, what's he going to do with that iceball? "Hey, Obispo, this one's for you."

The pain was quick, cold, blasting my arm for a second. I turned to Teddy. He was gliding another iceball from one

hand to the other. I thought of Mrs. Alexander's, then of Alonzo, turned from his slick grin and marched forward.

Mrs. Alexander answered the door in her bathrobe and two mismatched slippers. She had a glass of red wine in one hand, and a short cigarette smoking in another.

"Why Arlene, honey. For heaven's sakes. What have you got there?"

"I was just out for a walk. Thought I'd stop in."

"Arlene, honey, that's you father's old Army blanket. I remember the day he brought it home."

"My winter coat is in the cleaners."

"Oh I see. Well, just set yourself down right here. You must be freezing," she said, directing me toward the sofa. "How about a glass of wine?"

"No thank you," I said, letting the blanket fall from my shoulders onto the sofa. Mrs. Alexander brought a clear bottle to the sofa table.

"I don't like to mix my drinks, but this weather calls for a real snort," she announced, pouring herself a tall glass of vodka. "I like it straight up. Warms the innards. Sure you don't want some, Arlene?"

"No thank you."

"I've got some streudel in the cupboard."

"Maybe later." I heard footsteps overhead.

"Honey," she began, between sips of her drink, "What possessed you to leave your home on a day like this? And look at you, bare sleeved and all."

"I thought I'd like to visit. I haven't been here in a while."

"You haven't been here in six months."

"Has it been that long?" I heard a drawer close and more footsteps.

Mrs. Alexander lowered herself into the only armchair in the dark living room, taking a long, vocal sip of her drink, and laid her head back against the worn fabric of the chair. She dozes a minute, then awoke, and then dozed again, the glass of vodka dangling precariously from her hand. Little balls of air erupted from her mouth, making soft baby snores. "Honey, you'll have to forgive me, you caught me at a bad....." And then she was asleep, full and strong, bits of spittle foaming in the crevices of her mouth. The glass fell.

I heard his foot steps on the stairs, then a quick, short slam of a door. I saw Alonzo briefly through the front window, standing on Mrs. Alexander's stoop, buttoning his sheepskin jacket and straightening the knit cap on his head. Mrs. Alexander snored peacefully in her chair. I left the living room and climbed the stairs to Alonzo's apartment.

The second story apartment was long, narrow, and paneled in a dark wood. Alonzo had tacked up posters and unframed artists' prints on all four walls. There was a stereo in one corner, a twin bed and dresser in the other, and to my right was a small kitchenette with a gas stove, a small sink, and a portable refrigerator. A wooden table



with two chairs was placed in the center of the room.

I walked over to the dresser, dodging between the table and the wall, and opened the top drawer. I ran my hands over the folded shirts and the underwear, feeling all the time a watery sensation in my mouth, feeling my mouth heat up, almost on fire, then a surge of moisture rolled over my tongue. I opened the second drawer and rustled the thick knitted sweaters with my hands, lifting one to my chest and holding it against the exposed skin of my neck, I let my hand run over the top of the dresser then onto the walls, over the posters and prints. Again, the pleasant fire in my mouth, then the cool liquid laying on my tongue, I opened the cupboard, and brought down two plastic dishes and cups, not very elegant for a first time, I thought. I found some dirty silverware in the sink and washed them off with a cool stream of water. I was hungry, empty. I brought from the refrigerator a pack of bologna, some cheese, two oranges, and a half a loaf of rye bread. I began to eat, but did not taste the food. I consumed it all, but could not tell you exactly what I ate. I closed my eyes. Alonzo was all naked and smooth, and I was tree-limb thin, loose and natural like a willow branch, swaying under his brown body. He wrapped his long legs around me and rode me like a sleek horse, and he called me honey and sugar, and I would take small bites of his skin into my

mouth and hold them on my tongue and suck the salty juices from his flesh, leaving his neck all swollen and red like a summer plum. And when we had finished, I was round and full, and complete, and knocked a single cup onto the floor.

## NIGHT MOON

"It's just after eighteen years of marriage, Olivia  
....I don't see why you want to hyphenate your name. Norris  
is a perfectly good name."

"I want my birth name back," she said staring at the  
windshield wipers. The car was cold. She wished he would  
turn up the heat.

"Boomer?? You want to be Olivia Boomer-Norris?"

"What's wrong with that, Norton?" She could see he  
was scowling.

"Boomer sounds like that disco dance creature down  
at the Capris Club."

"That's Boom-Boom, and she's a mud wrestler."

"You see? People will call you Boom-Boom."

"Norton, people don't call thirty-eight year old P.T.A.  
mothers Boom-Boom. Besides dear, I want to publish under my  
own name."

"I always assumed your writing was merely a hobby,  
a pasttime until Natalie and Nels were grown."

"I know you did. You've never taken my writing ser-  
iously. That's why I still type at the kitchen table instead  
of having a desk of my own. That's why there's Chicken

Noodle-o's spilled all over my manuscripts, and triscuit wafers in my typewriter carriage, and that's why there's phone messages like 'Olivia, Agnes MacNamara called' written in felt tip marker on the title page of my rough draft. And all of you practically freeze me out every time you open the freezer door after one of those push-up pops."

"We could set up a card table in the den."

"I tried that. Nels turned it into an Indian tee-pee."

"Well, then, you can use my desk."

"You know how frightfully neat you are. Last time I used your desk you complained that I spilled Korrektotype all over your computer printouts and that I chewed your pencils".

"Well, you did chew my pencils."

"I get nervous when I write."

"I am an orderly person," he began. She could feel a lecture brewing. "You know I'm neat. You knew that when you married me. You said you loved that about me. You said you loved my mathematical mind."

He was right, damnit, and she knew it. She stared out the window watching the drops of rainwater converge in rhythmic formations on the windshield. She thought back to college, and the abrasive dry-humping sessions in the back-seat of Eddie Cordova's Nash. She remembered Alan Bartholomew, Wierd Alan is whather room mates called him, and how he

ripped the Picasso prints from her apartment wall and stuffed them down the toilet. She remembered the assistant professor in medieval studies who told her she could forget the major paper if she would only consent to some Celtic love abberations. Male confusion. And then she met Norton. Neat, clean, uncomplicated Norton, with his white Pedwin shoes with gold buckles, his polyester dress slacks, madras shirt, and slide rule. He did not try to kiss her, or roll her on the campus lawn. His breath was not sour like Eddie Cordova's, his manicured nails were not chewed and bloodied like Wierd Alan's, and he knew nothing of Celtic love rituals. She delighted when he whispered soft mathematical computations to himself. He was very much the proper gentleman. "I did love that about you, Norton, I did," she whispered, her breath blowing clouds on the side window. He did not hear her.

"Isn't that your friend Ella Cummins, running in this rain?" he asked. Olivia leaned forward to get a better look. "Yes. That's Ellie." She rolled down the window and plunged into the rain. "Hey Ellie! Hey Ellie Mae!"

"Olivia, will you please roll up your window. You're letting the rain in."

"I should have gone running with her today. I always feel terrible when I miss a day."

"That's another thing, Olivia. You're taking this jogging business far too seriously."

"What do you mean?"

"Darling," he said in his perfect father's voice. God, how she hated that voice. "You get up early in the morning, dress in some skimpy outfit, parade your legs through town, and then deliberately run in front of Mr. Huntington's house."

"Norton, Mr. Huntington's house is on the jogger's path."

"You know how he hates his employees or their wives to tamper with the company's image."

"Mr. Huntington is an old fart, and you know it."

Norton gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned a blue-white. "Mr. Huntington puts the bread and butter on our table. You know how he feels about employees' wives. They should be seen, and not heard, and when they are seen, he wants them in a respectable skirt and blouse, not in some silk running shorts."

"He probably doesn't even notice me, Norton. I run with several women."

"You mean like that Ella Cummins?"

"Yes. I run with Ella."

"The woman needs a sports bra, with wires, or something. Or at least she could cup her breasts under her arms to steady them, or she could forget running all together."

"Norton, sometimes you can be such a incredible bore."

"I just don't understand why you run, Olivia. You should be home. Natalie had to do her own laundry last week. You forgot to wash her school clothes."

"Natalie is sixteen years old. I am sure she will not suffer major damaging effects if she presses the wash cycle on the machine."

"Well, I hope you don't mention your jogging at this party tonight. Mr. Huntington will not be amused."

She began to trace stick fingers on the side window. She loved to run, it was as plain as that. She loved the gunmetal sky in the early morning, the clear, sweet calls of the birds, and her woman friends in their sweats and bandannas, and she loved the freedom when she ran. She had heard of the "runner's high", that burst of intoxicating adrenalin, that morphine-like state, when her body takes flight, and she moves like an African gazelle, all sleek, and brown and light. And she loved that man in the park she saw every morning, the runner, with the long sinewy legs that bulged in tight circles as they rammed the pavement. He took her breath away, that god in Adidas, with the long hair, night black, and wild. She thought he was a Latin, maybe Italian or Greek, with a large interesting nose and black almond eyes that were transfixed in the glare of the morning sun. He was as brown as the earth, and slick with a rich, oily sweat, and she often thought how she would like to have him

right there, right in front of Del Rosa's County Court-house, right there in front of Lois Van Sickle and her communal coffee klatch, right there in front of Norton. That would be perfect, she thought. Me with the Roman god who sweats. Norton doesn't sweat. He prides himself for it.

"I don't like you neglecting your work at home, Olivia." She couldn't believe he was still talking. "The kids need you."

She reached over and turned his face towards her. "Read my lips, Norton, I run every morning. I will continue to run every morning." She dropped her hand and turned back to her stick figures, who were now formless and melted into a vapor cloud. "The rain is really coming down harder now," he said, and patted his hair back with his neatly manicured hand. "Good thing old Mr. Huntington didn't plan a barbecue." She saw the veins in his neck turn a fierce throbbing purple.

"What do you really know about those women you run with, anyway?"

"They're my friends. That's all I need to know. Besides they're marvelous."

"Even the odd one in the black bandanna?" He began to fidget.

"You mean Natasha?"

"I heard she keeps birds in her house."

"Chickens. She keeps chickens."



"What do you mean she keeps chickens?"

"They're pets."

"Olivia, you mean to tell me you run with a woman who has chickens for pets?" He had her now.

"Relax, darling, really. They're paper trained."

"And that other woman. The one whose thighs make that horrible plopping sound when she's running?"

"Janice??"

"Mr. Huntington calls her 'thunder thighs'."

"You've discussed Janice with Mr. Huntington?"

"Only after a few martinis dear, at lunch."

"And I suppose you discuss me? What exactly do you say about me?"

"Nothing dear. Mr. Huntington does have a certain sense of decorum."

"But if you did discuss me, what would you say, Norton?"

"Frankly, I would say you were going through a phase."

"A phase? You mean like adolescent acne and puppy love?"

"Well, I suppose one could call it....."

"You think I'm going through a phase?" She edged over in her seat.

"Norton, dear," she hissed. "I was thinking. Why not let Natalie and Nels hyphenate their name too? That way the Boomer name could be passed on to our grandchildren."

There was a black, deadly silence. Norton grouped then regrouped his thoughts. He sputtered like a broken machine. Olivia grinned.

"No son of mine is going to have a hyphenated name. Nels is a Norris. He is neither a Boomer-Norris nor a Boom-Boom-Norris. He plays football. Do you have any idea what the kids would do to him at school?"

Olivia smiled. "What about Natalie?"

"As for Natalie," he argued. "I went to great lengths to establish an alliterative resonance to her name, hence the lovely Natalie Nicole Norris. I absolutely refuse."

"Well, Norton, I...."

"Honestly, Olivia. Sometimes I just think it would be simpler if you went out and had yourself an affair. I could handle that. It would be much simpler to deal with. I think you've managed to go quite crazy, and I don't know what to do with you!"

"What to do with me? What to do with me?" She was screaming now. "I am not an errant child, a household pet, or a mathematical equation that didn't pan out. You don't have to do anything with me. I can handle myself quite nicely, thank you!"

"There's no need to become hysterical. You're overwrought. You need a rest."

"I am not overwrought: I do not need a rest!" She could feel the anger, the fire on her tongue. "Stop the fucking car, Norton."

"You know how I hate it when you use that word."

"You hate the word fuck, Norton? You hate fuckfuck fuckfuc....."

"That is enough, Olivia. That is quite enough."

"Stop the fucking car!" He slowed, then pulled the car off to the side of the road.

He touched her shoulder. "Now, I want you to settle down, Olivia, I realize I've upset you."

"Don't you fucking patronize me, Norton." She opened the door, removed her coat, and threw it back into the car. The grey flood of rain pummeled her cheeks.

"Where are you going, Olivia? We're already late for the Huntington's."

"I'm going running. Give the Huntington's my regards."

"What will I tell them?"

"Tell them I was upset, and overwrought, and I needed a rest, and you put me to bed like a good, little girl." She slammed the door.

She felt the cold, clean rain wash over her like baptismal water. She loved the way the liquid seeped into the fabric of her blouse and spread over her skin, making her breasts taut, making her shiver. She stopped, removed the black pumps, and let her feet hit the gravel, the pools of water washing through the weave of her nylons. She saw Ella Mae Cummins in the distance, drenched, but still running, her

arms outstretched towards the night moon. Olivia screamed,  
"Hey Ellie Mae, wait up. It's me."

## THE REST OF HER LIFE

Dear Valerie,

I turned thirty today. I stripped myself naked in front of the bedroom mirror and stared at my body. Do you remember those upright breasts tests we used back at the dorm, the ones I always used to fail? You know, the one from Seventeen Magazine, where you had these two pencils and if you could secure them underneath your bosom you were destined to a life of saggy breasts and underwire bras? You and Margaret put the pencils underneath your perky chests and they dropped to the floor. I remember both of you breathing a sigh of relief. Of course, when it came my turn, I not only held up the two pencils, but your snack banana, and Margaret's copy of Portrait of An Artist As A Young Man. You both laughed, in fact, you became hysterical. I knew I was doomed. A vision of my grandmother flashed before me, standing next to her white enamel stove in one of those Molly Goldberg housedresses, sipping from a wooden spoon, with her supple bosom hanging firmly at her waist. Well, that vision came true today, and now at thirty years old I've graduated from pencils, bananas, and slim novels. I think I could take on Websters Complete Unabridged Dictionary without blinking an eye! To make matters worse, I edged

closer to the mirror and saw several off-white stretch marks etched on my midriff along with that deep pink Caesarian incision that threaded a highway across my abdomen. The stretchmarks and scars were like ancient battle wounds embedded in the very fabric of my being. I just stood there turning from side to side analyzing my misshapen profile. I also noticed these spongey fat globules which had invaded my arms and upper thighs. I pivoted, they jiggled and sent silent waves over my skin. I don't know how they got there. Were they secret night invaders that took up residence while I was sleeping unaware, only to emerge triumphantly on my thirtieth birthday, trembling sadistically at every one of my appraised movements? Val, do you have grey hair yet? My doctor says it's stress. Stress will give you grey hair and those deep blue halfmoons that settle below your eyes.

We never thought of having grey hair when we were young, did we? Weren't we both fifteen when we met? You were with that guy Ricky, whose face was all smile and freckles, and he had his arms folded around you. I can remember you sitting under that blue pine in the arbor, your hair hanging loose to your waist, your slender fingers polishing your guitar with rose oil. You sang those mournful Welsh ballads about long lost loves, rakes and ramblers, fair maidens. Your voice was so clear, so sweet, so full of purpose. I had to sit down and listen. I loved "The Wagoner's

Lad", you know the one by Joan Baez used to sing acapella:

Hard is the fortune of all womankind,  
 She's always controlled,  
 She's always confined,  
 Controlled by her parents,  
 Until she's a wife,  
 A slave to her husband,  
 The rest of her life....

We became fast friends after that, sharing in those big dreams that fifteen year olds are prone to, you the dynamic folk singer turned lawyer, I the serious novelist who on her first try writes the Great American Novel and ends up on the cover of Time Magazine. We did have high standards, though. You would only sing Welsh and Celtic ballads and I would refuse to sell the movie rights to my novel because they would probably give the male lead to Troy Donahue.

We did digress from the totally serious, didn't we? Remember you decided to do my nails for the prom. You didn't care that they were ravaged and bitten and my hangnails were red and swollen. You decided every inch of me was going to be perfect. We went to Cunningham's and spent a good hour selecting a respectable pink lacquer and you earnestly set about to do my nails in the most careful manner. I remember we were in your mother's bedroom, filled with lace and the scent of violet, and we kept laughing and laughing and you kept smearing the thick goo all over your mother's vanity. You kept missing my nails. Suddenly you stared me right in the eye and said to me in your perfect rich bitch falsetto:

"My dear, are you familiar with the celebrated list "HOW TO GET A BOY AND KEEP HIM"? "At the top of the list," you began, "is the most important rule known to any modern woman:"

1. BE MYSTERIOUS--Keep him guessing, never let him know what you're thinking, don't lay all your cards out on the table, be aloof yet alluring.

(I personally thought that was a little like being constipated all the time).

Then there was number two:

2. DON'T MAKE WAVES--Keep everything on an even keel. I loved that one, and it was the hardest for me to control, I suppose. I was always mouthing off and getting into some kind of trouble at school. Remember when I yelled at old man Weber in 10B English for teaching out of the Cliff Notes for Moby Dick? He hadn't even read the fucking book, and he'd say things like "Let's see, on page four of the helping guide it says Moby Dick chronicles the classic struggle between good and evil," and then he'd look up and blow his nose. After a few days of this, I snarled at him, "You're really insulting our intelligence by trying to teach a book you've never read." And that old fart kicked me out for three days. My mom was mortified. She told me, "Don't rock the boat, don't make waves, keep your mouth shut." Applying the "Don't Make Waves" principle had much greater implications when it came to male-female relationships. If he wants to see a Charleton Heston movie, and you're tired of religious epics,



you say nothing. Even if you'd rather see "Splendor in the Grass" and watch Natalie Wood and Warren Beatty heat up the screen, you've got to settle for "Ben Hur", even though you've seen it three times and you know all about the leper colony and the chariot race.

All right, can you remember what number three was? We were laughing so hard by this time you had nail polish all over your upper lip and you tried to wipe it off with your sleeve.

3. BE FEMININE--Drag out that old mystique, dust it off, be gracious, ever so alluring, talk in a soft sultry voice, and by all means...OOZE.....

Ooze. I love it. Val, do you know I even practiced a lisp at home to use on my dates to appear more helpless, sweet? God, when I think back, I get embarrassed just thinking of myself lisping all over that guy at the dance. He was taller, I recall, and I looked at him and lisped that I wanted some punch, then lisped that I wanted to dance, and then lisped that I had to go to the bathroom. It was disgusting. But you know, I can't for the life of me remember number four? I've tried to remember, but I can't. I really can't.

Did I ever tell you you did a shit job on my nails? Ah, the truth comes out. But you were superb at the prom. I mean, you hair wasn't ratted in that obligatory "flip" and you wore that black silk gown with the spaghetti straps.

Lillian Van Dusen, you know, the one we called "Miss Wasp", said she had never heard of any color other than pink and aquamarine ever being worn at the prom. You were dazzling though, even if nobody would speak to you at the punchbowl. It was those high top basketball sneakers you were wearing, God, what a scream when you lifted your dress, of course by that time, your date Chuck had done a wheelie on his skateboard into the Doctor Zhivago Ice Palace.

There I was in my pale pink organza with my pale pink Capezio pumps, and a contrasting pink satin evening bag, hiding my nails and smiling. God, I might have even been into my lisp at that point, I don't remember, and I hated the boy I was out with. His name was David and he kissed wet and had a brown smile, and was two inches shorter than me before I ratted my hair. And that little shit had the nerve to stick his disgusting raw hand down the front of my dress and gave me what he termed a "love tweek". I think he expected me to cream my pale pink one hundred percent nylon panties that I had bought especially for the occasion. I just stared at his brown smile and grinned. Where were you when I needed you? You were probably helping Chuck disentangle himself from the styrofoam icicles, I guess. I know what you would have said to the "phantom tweeker": "Touch me there again, and you're a dead man".

I don't remember how I got through that evening or why I even went. My mother told me every girl should have

a prom memory, and so when David asked me, I guess I was doing it out of respect for some future prom memory or something. So I went with David with the scrubbed pimples and Vitalis residue, and let his greasy hand slide under my dress during the ride home. My mother writes me now and says this David guy, David Holmes, owns two furniture stores and a car wash and has a big home in Grosse Pointe and still isn't married. She's implying, "See, see what you could have had!" Of course, I never told her he made me vomit when I got home. I entered the safety of the bathroom, sank to the porcelain bowl, letting my pink organza smudge against the cold bathroom tiles. I pulled the seat, hung my head, and vomited a deep dark bile.

My mother was visiting last weekend. She hardly ever comes up. She claims she can't stand the way I keep house, and it makes her nervous to come. I had to go out on an errand Saturday (I didn't want to be caught without food in my refrigerator before she came. She always claims I don't feed Gretchen or Timmy right.) When I arrived home, laden with groceries and a bouquet of chrysanthemums, I entered my kitchen which had been properly scrubbed with a disinfectant the night before. There, out from beneath the refrigerator door peeked two tiny slippered feet which could have only been my mother's, because she's the only person I know whose pastel slippers look just like hamsters. I heard a curious scraping sound

and asked my mother what she was doing, and she announced she had seen something moving in my refrigerator. She was convinced there was something alive and mobile in my meat keeper. I assured her there was nothing remotely alive in the meatkeeper, and the only thing left in there of a suspicious nature was a small bowl of prune yogurt with a scrummy film over the top. Then she started in on me on how was I ever going to keep my husband with my place being a mess all the time. You've got to remember I had spent most of the night cleaning. I had dusted everything, washed the kid's hair, cleaned the junk drawer and arranged my bath towels in nice little rows, and this woman finds a stray piece of pepperoni, long forgotten, shriveled into a ragged stringy mass that was hidden between the bologna and the breakfast sausage. I wanted to show her the rejuvenated junk drawer, or the neat rows of color coordinated towels, or the dusted tops of my tiffany lamps, but I just put away the groceries and arranged the Chrysanthemums and smiled and listened to her stories about her migraines and her water retention. She even had the nerve to feed my dog. She said he looked underfed and malnourished, even ravenous. Val, have you ever known a cocker spaniel to look ravenous?

She bought Gretchen a pair of those Gloria Vanderbilt designer jeans and gave Timmy a Tonka steam shovel, and got Roger a large can of unbroken cashews, and she gave me a stack of new washcloths and a quart of Murphy's Oil Soap, no shit.

Of course Roger and her get along so delightfully, it's as if I'm not around. He's always mentioning my failings, like his socks are never properly matched, there are mouse droppings on top of the refrigerator, and I let my plants die. She sits there and sucks it all in, and makes these pathetic clucking noises, and oozes sympathy and laughs heartily at his stale joke on how there should be a house-keeping school for women with masters degrees.

I get very nervous when my mother comes here. Things become out of focus, I get tense, I can't explain it really. I feel a panic, my head reels, I become compulsive. Gretchen had told my mother I made her buy J.C. Penney jeans and wouldn't let her have any jeans with a name engraved in leather on the rear pocket. My mother glared at me and then pulled out these Vanderbilt jeans with the embroidered swan and I swear Gretchen swooned. She glanced at me with a triumphant smirk and ran quickly to her room to try them on. Timmy, as if on cue, marched up to his grandmother and gratefully accepted his Tonka steam shovel and wandered off into a corner somewhere muttering that mommy had also refused to purchase this particular toy because it was too expensive. Roger, of course, had to get a gibe in that he never buys expensive cashews because I'd probably eat them all or let the kids eat them, and my mother told him to hide the can.

That night when the house was quiet, and Roger had gone to a meeting, and mother was sleeping soundly in the

guest bedroom, I sat alone in the living room sucking in the stale, grey air. I could feel my mother's presence and her sense of disapproval. Her lack of faith filled my nostrils like a thick, dense fog, and all I could feel was a small deep spot at the center of my soul. I grew sick and queasy. I traveled up to Roger's and my bedroom and found the can of cashews, unhidden, on top of the bureau. I swallowed each one whole, like a bitter pill.

Roger left me once for a slim blonde in his office named Bambi. Bambi, do you believe that name? I swear she made it up. Anyway, she was a size three, now nobody is a size three, but she was, and before she ran off with Roger, she told me she had to buy all her clothes at a pre-teen shop. She was a friend of mine, or at least she weasled her way into my confidence. Once I had her and her husband, Walt, over for lasagne, and Roger told me after the whole affair was over that she had her foot on his zipper all during dinner. My God, a guest in my house was giving my husband a foot job while I was serving up baked lasagne. First of all, I don't see how she could have managed it. I tried it the other night and knocked over the table. Anyway, he lived with her for awhile, and all she liked to do was go shopping and watch television. She hated to cook and had four different brands of mascara. Roger found out she dyed her hair and didn't throw away her dental floss.

I was at home with Gretchen and Timmy then, they were so little then and really didn't know what was going on. It was a difficult time for me. I spent a lot of time huddled in a corner, almost catatonic, waiting for Roger to return. I would beg him and make a fool of myself everytime he came over to see the children. Sometimes I would deliberately look destitute, or suicidal, or schizophrenic, whatever I thought would work to win him back. He often would find me in that corner, uncommunicative, forgetting to feed the children, and unable to eat or urinate. Other times I would throw tantrums and rage and demand that he give her up, not knowing he had done just that, months before. Finally, I said nothing when he came, preferring to stay in my bedroom until he left. I must have pushed all this inside of me once again, because I began to feel nothing or want nothing.

Roger came home about six months after he left. He just walked into the house, brought his suitcase upstairs and went to bed. He got up the next morning and ambled down for his usual breakfast of sausage and eggs and never said a word about it. We have never spoken about it since. All I know is that I never want to feel that bad and that numb again.

Margaret, dear Maggie, left her husband. You know, the guy who drank a lot and always turned off the Joni Mitchell records. You predicted she would leave him. Well, one night he got to drinking, and becoming vulgar, and he nailed

her in the bathroom. She just stayed that way for seventy-two hours. The fucker got up the next morning, got dressed, and went to work, and he just left her there. She, of course, became violent and pounded the door, and shredded the toilet paper, and screamed for two solid days and then he remembered to let her out. Margaret has a lot of class, she just walked calmly out of the bathroom, picked up her cat Felicity, and walked away from the house. She ended up here after driving all night without a litter box. We had a long talk. She didn't stay long because Roger can't stand her. He says she makes him nervous. He says she always has an opinion about everything. Remember the time in college he actually forbid me to see her? He said he was a bad influence on me. I guess I had more guts back then because I told him to kiss off, which infuriated him. I didn't see him for two weeks. I think he took me more seriously back then, because he relented and never spoke of it again. I'm so glad she's finished with Clayton. She got the cat and the orange Corvette and the English clock. He got the house, the stereo and the good stainless. All these years and she never said a word. Do you know he dumped pancake batter on her head and sent her to the hospital with four broken ribs? All this was going on for years and she never said a word. She said she was carrying it around with her like a corpse chained to her heart.



Valerie, the doctor says I am under a lot of stress, and I've really got to relax. I can't sleep at night. Roger says I need a job, to keep me busy, you know, but I can't seem to summon the energy to get dressed and leave the house. I'm not sure I'd find anything I really like, I've been out of it for so long. So I hang around the house and stand naked in front of mirrors staring at my misspent body, and lament over silver hairs and my ethnic breasts. I can't seem to close my eyes at night. The pills don't seem to work. I lay awake at night staring at the darkness, letting it surround me, letting it fill me.

I can't seem to get things moving or together. Last night Roger came home and the dinner wasn't even on, and the table not set, and he came up to ask me why the chops weren't frying in the pan. I cracked what I thought was a clever bit of repartee and said: "I don't know. Why don't you ask them?" That pudgy round face of his exploded into several shades of red, and I could see that line of perspiration bead above his upper lip. He looked just like Richard Nixon when he gave his "I am not a crook" speech. Anyway, he announced quite loudly: "I'm not going to eat any of this shit!!" And that is when he flung the chop. He picked it up deliberately with his hand and aimed the pinkish meat at my sternum. The pork-chop smashed against my white Quiana blouse and bled into what resembled a map of equatorial Africa. The blood of the meat

trickled into my bra, staining my hidden flesh. From that dark lost place within me I felt stirrings, and as these feelings rose, my abdomen and my chest began to quiver. The hidden energy reached my throat and I howled. I surprised even myself. I felt woozy and out of control. I reached for this open jar of olives sitting next to the stove, and poured them all over his three piece suit. I can remember Gretchen and Timmy giggling somewhere out of my vision and I can remember the look of supreme horror on Roger's face. He yelled that I was sick and crazy and fled the room. He threw the damn porkchop first, for God's sake. Well, he hasn't spoken to me at all today. I got up this morning and put on his coffee and his usual sausage and eggs and he walked right by me and out the door. He left his favorite suit crumpled in a pitiful mass next to our bed. It smelled of olive juice and pimentos. I went to the window and opened it wide letting the cool October wind enter. Since he has left, I have been cleaning like crazy and getting everything in order. I planned a perfect dinner. I don't want anything to set him off tonight. So, I've cautioned the kids to be quiet when their dad gets home, and they've got to pick up their messes and not fight with each other.

My head really aches now, and Roger still hasn't come home yet. The pot roast is overcooked and stringy by now, and the potatoes have crumbled into a pasty mush. The kids were hungry, so I gave them some sugared cereal and put them

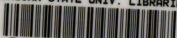
to bed. I don't have the energy to check the pot roast any more. I'm still here in my bathrobe and my hair needs washing. Where is Roger anyway? I'm all out of my prescription, and I need it, but I'm afraid if I leave the house, and Roger comes home and finds me not here, he'll be upset with me. He's punishing me, I know he is, because of the olives, because I got mad and directed my anger at him. I wasn't thinking straight, I'll explain that to him. He's got to come home, it's my birthday today. I should be happy on my birthday.

Valerie, this is the fifth letter I've written you and you never write me back. Why don't you ever respond to my letters anymore? I know you're a big lawyer now, and you're probably busy, but it's my birthday today and I deserve a letter. Don't I?

Your friend,

Dorrie

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