

SILENT ALL THESE YEARS

A Thesis by

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I have examined the final copy of the Thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts with a major in Creative Writing.

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Ankle to Ankle

Rebecca Lindstrom's problems began when her mother married Bill Barnaby. He was a photographer and a born again Christian in the most fundamental interpretation of the term, but he was more strange than that. Bill had been saved while in drug rehab, according to Rebecca's mother, and the event had turned his life around. Jesus had saved him, and when Rebecca was almost thirteen, the Holy Spirit told her mother that the pair of them should get married. He was set on being Rebecca's daddy, he said.

Rebecca, on the other hand, had never felt a particular hole in that area. While her own father had often been gone, when he did appear, he had a tendency to bring the best gifts. Rebecca had concluded that that was what father's were for. Not for making her go to church, or for touching her in uncomfortable ways, or for lecturing her about her sinful ways. She was only twelve, after all. How many sins could she have committed?

Thirteen was a birthday Rebecca looked forward to. She would enter the arena of adulthood. She would be allowed to wear eyeliner every day, and maybe even conservative pumps on Sunday. Rebecca had done all these things before, but when her mother and Bill married, all the things she considered normal were suddenly considered sinful. She didn't quite understand how that worked, but in an effort to keep harmony in her house, as her mother put it, she gave into the restrictions with minimal fuss.

But that birthday was coming. She would be a teenager, that blessed space between adulthood and childhood; she would no longer be a kid. They were supposed to

discuss that today, a sort of family conference, although her stepbrother and mother would be gone, so it wasn't really a family meeting, but they were still calling it that.

Rebecca sat carefully down on the beige canvas couch, ready to wait patiently for Bill. She adjusted her legs so they were demurely crossed. The depth of the couch made her awkward, unable to lean back and still prop a foot on the floor. Her skirt pulled uncomfortably high, and she struggled to keep the hem close to her knee. She could hear her mother's voice lecturing nasally in her mind: *Ladies always cross their legs ankle to ankle, or knee to knee.* There was a certain quality to her mother's tone when she said things like that, as though she were replaying a recording from her own childhood. Ladies did this, and ladies did that. Rebecca wasn't sure what the distinction was between 'ladies' and whatever else girls were; she just knew that the other must be really bad since her mom never actually called girls anything else.

When Bill entered the room, Rebecca could see that he was excited about something. His excitement was sometimes more uncomfortable than his anger because when he was angry, she could at least predict what might come next.

"I've got a special birthday present for you," he said.

Rebecca could feel the skin of her face pull a little tight, and she shifted her bangs to cover the painful pimple on her forehead. She was a little unsure about this present. For a wedding gift, Bill had given Rebecca's mother a new iron, a fancy one that would steam creases into his expensive shirts without burning them, even though her mother hated to iron. Bill sat down in the blue recliner; her stepbrother called it the Big Papa chair.

“Thirteen is a very important time in a young girl’s life, and I don’t think we should let it go by without commemorating it.” Her stepfather leaned forward in his recliner, carefully mashing his cigarette into the tidy pile of butts in the tray. “I want to take you out to the park and take some portfolio quality portraits.”

“Oh,” Rebecca heard her own voice, a little embarrassed by the breathlessness. “Do you think I would make a good subject?”

Bill was a professional and Rebecca had secretly admired his work. She hoped that maybe he would show her how to take photographs. She had actually hoped he might buy her a camera, but maybe taking her picture wouldn’t be so bad.

Bill continued. “You’re a beautiful girl, and your mother and I have discussed this, and we think it’s an appropriate gift for a mature young woman.”

“If anyone could make me look good, it’s you,” she said.

Her stepfather always responded well to compliments.

“Rebecca, you’re beautiful. You have great bones. Your mother looks like you.”

A public place should be safe enough, she thought. And he seemed really happy with the idea. He always waited to be angry at home. He would say that it didn’t matter what other people thought, and that good Christians shouldn’t judge, but he was always really careful about how things might look, when they were out.

Rebecca thought about having her picture taken for a few minutes because Bill seemed to be waiting for some sort of response. She thought that she wouldn’t mind looking like some of the girls in the *Seventeen* magazines she secretly made a habit of reading. “Okay, if you want to.”

He smiled, the gesture pulling his thick lips back, the yellow stains hidden by the shadow of his lips. “Good. We’ll go this afternoon.”

* * *

The old Chevy Malibu smelled cloyingly of cigarettes and gas, despite Bill’s constant efforts to clean the car. He would wipe down the consoles and there was always a new pine air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror. Every two weeks, he bought one. Rebecca flipped the mirror on the visor down, checking her carefully applied make-up, wiping at the lipstick on her front tooth.

Her mother had helped her with the confusing array of brushes and applicators. *Ladies should always wear cosmetics lightly, as if they have nothing on. Not too heavy. Too much is just too much.* Her mother had forced her to sit on the toilet lid, then spilled a bag of eye shadows and lip liners onto the counter. Rebecca was already in her nicest blouse, and so her mother tucked a hand towel around the collar, fussing for a moment, carefully moving Rebecca’s hair out of the way. There was an ashtray on the counter, and her mother's cigarette sat menacingly close to the edge, burning its way to the filter. Smoke curled out from her mother’s mouth, and around Rebecca’s face as her mother leaned over, instructing her to close her eyes.

She heard her mother continue to speak, but the swish and sway of the brush lulled Rebecca. The sensation of fibers along the sensitive skin of her cheeks and eyelids sent tingles down to the curling toes in Rebecca’s painful shoes. She could smell her

mother's perfume, the acrid scent of burning filter, the wet porcelain of the toilet, last week's use of Ajax.

She wanted to stay in that place and time, not move forward, to the park, and to the clicking of the shutter, and her stepfather's figure behind the camera. She hoped that when she opened her eyes, she would be magically transformed into someone else, an older, more mature and maybe mysterious version of herself.

Sitting in the passenger seat of the Chevy Malibu, Rebecca wondered if Bill would make her smile with teeth, and wished she could have braces. No amount of make-up would fix her teeth, she thought. She pulled down the visor mirror and checked the part in her hair, making sure that the breakouts of acne on her forehead were hidden.

“Stop looking in the mirror, Becca. You look great.”

She hated that, the name ‘Becca.’ It made her sound like a Disney cartoon character, too frumpy to be Rebecca. But he wanted her to call him ‘dad.’ He got furious if she called him by his name. That made her mad, not angry, really, just irritated, that he could call her ‘Becca,’ and she couldn’t call him ‘Bill.’ So long as he called her ‘Becca,’ she wouldn’t call him anything. An image of yelling, “Hey, hey you, over there, yes you,” while in a busy supermarket had Rebecca smirking at her reflection. She watched her eyebrow arch up over her slightly squinting eye and admired for a moment, the power.

Her stepfather leaned over, flipping the visor sharply up, the action startling her when his arm brushed by her face. She leaned back, putting more space between them. Was he getting angry? He was being awfully nice, and she wasn’t sure why, but she didn’t really like it.

“You smell good.”

Rebecca turned her face to the window when he spoke, hating the perfume she had applied. It was cloying, rose-scented, a gift from a woman in church. She hated it, her mother spraying it on her neck and wrists, and tried to ignore the mild headache she always got when she wore the scent.

When they pulled into the park, Rebecca helped Bill remove the camera equipment from the trunk. He had left the bigger props at home, but he had brought a tripod, and she grasped the metal legs as if they were magnetized to her hands. This was a tool that real photographers used.

“I think we’ll start by setting up over there.” He pointed to a small covered bridge far from the road, nestled in a thick stand of trees. The bridge’s peeling red paint was faded, but she could see the charm, the postcard atmosphere of the budding green of the trees. There was a pond with geese nearby, and a jogging path that wound through the covered bridge and farther into the woods. She imagined that she would look very grown-up there, romantic, like one of the girls modeling the new fall line of plaid skirts.

But the spot felt isolated, too far from the parked car, and Rebecca hesitated as her stepfather walked away. She watched the lean muscles of his back pull across the shirt her mother had ironed earlier. When two brisk walkers came out from the shadows of the bridge, she felt better.

“Now you’re going to have to really smile, Rebecca. No tight lips.” He waited for her, and she could see the impatience on his face because of her slowness, and she hurried to stand beside him. She really didn’t want him to get angry. “Not too big a smile, though, because you have big gums, and we don’t want that in the picture.”

She had big gums? Rebecca ran her tongue experimentally over her teeth, trying to feel the size of her gums, and caught Bill staring at her mouth. His gaze shifted away. If he thought she would look better, she would try it his way. He did take good photographs.

When they neared the bridge, Bill took the tri-pod away from Rebecca. She had forgotten she was holding it. He methodically unscrewed each knob that lowered a leg, the movement so intense that she watched his fingers. Why did he do it like that? Was that how other professional photographers did it? He had thick fingers, each cuticle carefully pushed back. Rebecca's mother clipped his toenails and fingernails once a week, kneeling at his recliner while he watched television. He seemed so methodical about the tripod, like he was doing the most important thing in the world. He had told her mother once that photography was all in the details. Rebecca wondered if she was smart enough to get the details.

Another runner emerged from the bridge, and she heard Bill cuss. He was muttering under his breath, and she leaned forward, attempting to catch his words. If he said *shit* or *dammit*, then he could be coaxed to smile. But if he said *fuck* then there was nothing to do but wait for the storm to pass. But this time, he was only praying, asking God to give him patience to get through the day. Rebecca prayed for the same thing, quietly in her mind, not wanting to take the focus of his attention. She didn't think God was really listening, but she made it a habit to at least try once or twice a day to converse with Him. She figured that the god that her mother and stepfather prayed to was probably a little too busy to listen to her, if He was even there. She figured it was easier to believe in the apostles' day. After all, they had miracles pouring from the sky.

Rebecca had never actually seen a miracle, but she wasn't quite ready to stop the silent prayers.

She walked over to the little pond behind the bridge. Her foot got stuck in a divot in the grass, and she carefully tried to pull her awkward heel from the mud. She hoped no one had noticed. The heels made her feel exciting, confident, almost grown up. *You can always tell a lady by the shoes she wears.* She usually hated high-heels. She only had the one pair, black, bought on sale at Wal-Mart, and they were pinching her toes. She could feel the blisters forming already. But she felt sophisticated and she didn't want anyone to see her getting stuck in the mud, or tripping, or anything else embarrassing.

Out on the pond was a family of ducks, swimming in a synchronized fashion, and Rebecca followed their path with her gaze. She wondered if the momma duck ever wished that not so many babies followed behind her.

The familiar whirring of the camera shutter had Rebecca turning quickly around, her shoe lost in the divot of grass again. Bill stood a few feet away, the camera in his hands, blocking the expression of his face. Did she have a stupid look on her own? She wasn't ready. She had wanted to try the pose she had practiced earlier, the one from the magazine, where she narrowed her eyes a little and raised her brow.

"That was a great shot, Becca. You look wonderful. Let's move over to the bridge."

She moved to the spot he indicated, leaning against the wooden frame. Her stepfather finished attaching the camera to the tri-pod. When he looked up, she tried not to cringe. He looked angry. His brows were thick, meeting in the center above his nose while he frowned.

“Not like that, damn it. Like this.” And he showed her. “You need to loosen up.”

He went back behind the camera, and she tried to relax the muscles of her face. The sun glared from behind his head, and she could feel the tingle of tears. She was hot and thirsty already. She didn't want to look stupid. She tried not to lick her lips and smear her lipstick. She wasn't used to wearing it, and the mascara felt heavy on her lashes. Bill kept telling her to open her eyes. She tried.

“Tilt your head down. Good. To the left with your chin. Open your eyes up. Smile. Too much smile, a little less, just the tip of your teeth. Good. One, two...” And he clicked the shutter. “Now turn this way,” and he showed her, and she tried to follow his movements, but her body wasn't the same as his, and she couldn't get the footing right.

He moved forward, his hands touching her face, tilting her head, pushing the hair from her eyes, moving her feet just so. The meticulous positioning made her feel stiff, like a mannequin in a department store. He moved back to the camera.

Rebecca caught a glimpse of movement behind her. Bill stopped for a moment, pulling away from the camera to glare at the runners. But she wanted to look like a model, and so she tried to relax naturally into the pose.

“Perfect,” and he clicked the shutter.

With each pose Bill maintained a steady level of patter, comments made just barely audible, encouraging her to move this way and that. Rebecca tried to follow his every command exactly. She needed to please him, but she was getting a dull headache

from squinting into the sun. The scent of her own perspiration began to mix badly with the rose perfume, but as the afternoon wore on, she knew her Bill was enjoying himself.

You're beautiful, he would say, *gorgeous*. And she would smile, the shutter would click, and still he would talk. *You have great legs*, he'd say. *Let's get them in this shot. Throw your head back, bite your lip a little, okay, great*. Click, and the shutter would whir.

He probably talked that way to all his models, she thought. *I am beautiful; I am thirteen!*

* * *

When the sound of the winding film finally reached Rebecca, her mind went blank with relief. They could go home, she could wash the make-up off. This had seemed like such a good idea, but her mouth felt like an over-stretched rubber band, the muscles in her cheeks sore. She reached the car before Bill, and waited by the passenger-side door.

She watched him fish the keys from his pocket, noting the sweat rings on his shirt. She tried to nonchalantly check under her arms, feeling the trickle of sweat on her neck. She curbed the urge to smile, thinking *I'm sure he would have posed me to hide any stains*. He always noted the details.

She wanted to go home. She wondered what was taking him so long when he slammed the trunk down. He was carrying a blanket.

“Let's take a walk. I want to talk to you about something important.”

What could she say? *No? I'm ready to leave; can't we talk about it later?* But no one in the family ever said 'no' to Bill. Reluctantly, she followed him. This sucks, she thought. She hated it when he got her alone and lectured her. One time he told her that the music she liked was really a tool of the devil. He'd spent nearly two hours outlining exactly why she had to get rid of her tapes, and while she hadn't understood half of it, his stories about Satan's ways had really creeped her out. He said that the devil tempted people to do things that they knew weren't right, but he made it seem normal, and so people were duped. Did Rebecca want to be duped? She hadn't really been sure, but she hated throwing her favorite band's tape away.

He walked through the covered bridge, and continued further into the woods. Then he spread the blanket on the grass, and she realized they were still near the running path, and so it wasn't *that* private. He patted the blanket, and Rebecca lowered herself down to the ground, trying to find a comfortable position that was still lady-like.

Bill started to talk. Rebecca started to daydream. He talked about how she was growing up, and that soon she would have important decisions to make. She wondered if she was supposed to respond, and so she nodded at him, silently urging him to hurry. He talked about how Jesus had saved him while he was in re-hab. He told Rebecca that the Holy Spirit had told him to marry her mother. She knew all of that, and tried not to be impatient. She supposed he thought it was a romantic story, how God brings people together who need each other. She thought God and the Holy Spirit must have been crazy to think her mother needed Bill.

He told her she was easy to talk to, that he felt like he could tell her anything. Of course she was easy to talk to, she thought. She never said anything back. Half the time she wasn't even listening.

He couldn't talk to her mother, he said. Rebecca thought that was strange. Rebecca thought her mom was fairly easy to talk to, well, easy until she met Bill. Then she started saying the same weird Jesus stuff he said.

Then Bill said something else. He was in love with her. Rebecca. Not her mother.

Rebecca wasn't daydreaming anymore. She didn't understand what he was saying. She thought that if she listened more carefully, she could make sense of it.

He didn't love her mother, he said, but he knew Rebecca was too young, would always be too young. But if she'd only been a little older.

But she wasn't older, she thought. She was a kid. She hadn't even known how to apply her mascara! How could he love her? What did that mean?

Her gaze caught desperately on another runner on the path until he disappeared through the bridge. She wished suddenly that she could follow the runner, wherever he was going, that she could be the runner's daughter, going home to the runner's house where she would have her own room and her own telephone and her own television. She would call anyone she wanted to, especially the boy from lunch who always winked at her. She would eat dinner without worrying that she'd burned the meat loaf. She probably wouldn't even cook. They would order pizza. She could cross her legs ankle to knee, even in church.

Rebecca heard a strange whimper, and turned her head. Her stepfather was crying. She watched him from the other side of the blanket, as if she didn't know him at all. She could see his forehead, the wisps of brown hair mixed with silver, the gray wires. He pulled a folded handkerchief from his pocket, wiping at his moist face, and she wondered why he was crying.

He spoke, and she thought his voice was intriguing, but she couldn't understand him. She tried harder to listen. She didn't recognize him. She thought to reach out her hand, offer this stranger comfort.

I love you, Rebecca.

He raised his head, his wet eyes seeking her gaze, capturing it, and she felt the almost physical need to give reassurance, to tell him that everything would be okay, as her own mother had told her when she'd gashed her leg while swimming last summer.

He spoke again. He'd gone to Pastor Robert at church, seeking advice. Pastor Robert had told Bill that it was only natural for a father to love his daughter.

Pastor Robert didn't understand, Bill said. These feelings were controlling his life. He couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't work. He'd had to tell her. What should he do? Tell him what to do to make this right.

He grasped the hands that were carefully folded in her lap. "Tell me what to do."

Tell *him* what to do? He was always telling her what to do, what to eat, when to sleep, what to wear. She pulled her hands away, staring at them curled in her lap. She couldn't look at him.

A gruesome image came to her mind, of being trapped beneath his big body on her parents' bed, his lean flanks moving his body in and out of her, of his thick mouth at her small breast.

How could he do this? Rebecca caught herself before she asked the question aloud. She thought of the runner, going home to his own daughters and a pizza. She knew suddenly that she could never have that.

This is what she would have. This man, heavily blowing his nose into a tissue, his face infantile and red. One day, she would be eighteen, and go her own way, and never look back, she thought. This was today, and this was now, and she was thirteen years old, and her makeup itched, and her lipstick was chewed away, and the heat soaked her clothing to her body.

“Bill,” she said, hearing the rasp in her own voice, and carefully cleared her throat. With more force, she tried again, “Daddy.”

He looked up, wiping his face.

She sometimes baby-sat for a couple from the church prayer chain. They had a four-year-old son who still wore diapers. Watching her stepfather wipe at his face reminded Rebecca of the smooth sliding motion, the firm pressure of her hand attempting to remove every bit of waste from the child's smooth buttocks. She hesitated, nervous about moving, afraid to break the moment. Then she reached for her stepfather's handkerchief.

Rebecca smoothed away the moisture from his face, careful not to lean in too closely.

“Dad, I think maybe it’s just weird for you, having a daughter and all.” She fisted the handkerchief in her lap, unable to look at him any longer, letting her gaze turn back toward the pond. “It’s strange having a daddy.” She’d had a daddy once, she thought, and he gave her a saxophone.

He seemed to relax, a whistling sigh leaving his mouth. She wanted to go home. She wanted to be normal. She was tired.

“Let’s just go home. We’ll see what mom is cooking for dinner,” she said. She watched his face, the worry lines easing, smoothing out as he took another deep breath.

Hair

I once lived in a tower, a medieval structure, a difficult concept to believe in this day and age. I lived with my foster-father and watched the world from far away. While my immediate needs were met by unseen magic, still I longed to be part of the city beneath me.

My father had a voice like pavement, grating and deep, with a delicate hum of granite. My ear bone would throb with an echoing resonance. I would close my eyes, the firelight dancing flickering shadows across my eyelids. I had heard the story many times, and although he spoke of things I had never seen, still I was comforted by the conjuration, the texture of his voice.

There once was a Cobbler.

The Cobbler and his pugnacious young Wife subscribed to the school of thought that held *purity of living entails purity of spirit*. They frowned on any conceivable action that might, in the least, be enjoyable. Marital intimacy was of course, for procreation. Their sexual timetable was rigid and regulated, and the military act as regimented as possible.

My father would then insert himself into the story. “It is not purity of living, so much, *ma chere*, but purity of thought.”

The Cobbler and his Wife accepted my conception with the same attitude as they managed their little shop. They had hoped for a son, an individual to apprentice and labor. A daughter was only good for trade, and would be very expensive in the interim.

The pregnancy was normal, for the most part. The Wife’s increasing girth was

merely a sign of her good health. She only sought the apothecary's shop, whose property wall bordered their own, for the mint extract which settled her stomach.

The last months of her confinement, however, became difficult. The Wife's hunger became uncontrollable.

The wife suspected that such hunger was unnatural, for her gaze was forever drawn to the apothecary's herb garden. There, growing with fresh profusion, was rampion. She was starved for the green leaves, as many now are starved for bourgeois acceptance. The Cobbler's Wife nagged and begged and pleaded for her husband to go into the garden and gather some for a salad. But he was afraid of the dark apothecary, who, it was rumored, practiced alchemy.

My father always laughed at this part, his voice a little snide at their foolishness, like a car hitting the shoulder of a highway. He once told me that alchemy was only practiced by fools who inevitably wanted to poison themselves. To change base metal into gold required an inordinate amount of herbal extracts and heat, and was rarely profitable. I wonder what he would say if I could show him the periodic table. But my father said that alchemy was only for greed, not true study.

The Cobbler, a man I feel only distant compassion for, soon gave into his Wife's demands. Sneaking into the lush garden, he selected a fistful of rampion leaves, and scampered back to his home. His Wife was briefly sated.

Several days after the Cobbler made the rampion salad for his wife, she began to hunger once again for the delicate leaves. The ferocity with which she lusted for the leaves disturbed her husband, and he quickly gathered more.

The pattern repeated itself in the following days, until the cobbler was visiting the

apothecary's garden on a nightly basis.

The man whom I call Father was not truly my father. He had no hand in my paternity save to tempt the man who did. Who knows how long the Cobbler would have slunk into my father's garden without discovery. But the Cobbler's Wife was a greedy woman, and eight months pregnant, she pulled her bulky frame over the garden wall to see that the Cobbler did the job correctly. She was quite vicious and loud, I'm told, and it stirred my father from his rest.

And I was the payment for so many rampion salads.

I asked for rampion once as a child. I had an insatiable curiosity about many things, an inheritance from my natural mother, who would lift herself over garden walls. In this day, they would be alarmed and electrified. Rarely, though, did I voice questions that would rain my father's disapproval on my head. I was afraid. In this instance, however, my question wrung a reluctant smile from his mouth, and he produced a rather wilted head of the green leaves.

At first, the leaves seemed to have no taste at all, or rather, a dull flavorless one at best. But in my throat, and centering on the back of my tongue, there grew a salty bitterness that soon engulfed my entire mouth. I begged for water, but the more I drank, the worse it became, until I was horribly sick. I never asked again.

I searched for rampion recently, could only find medieval references, so perhaps it does not grow anymore, or maybe we call it spinach. I am allergic to spinach. It was mixed in a salad I ate in a beautiful restaurant, once I was away from the tower. The leaves were camouflaged by the tomatoes, which I also had never seen. Perhaps my innards rejected the ripe red fruit, so succulent and sweet. Perhaps I am allergic to this

world.

* * *

My father always told me that innocence was my keenest virtue. I should cherish it as I cherished nothing else. He built a tower to enclose me from that which would tarnish my spotless spirit. I was his treasure. From my tower I could watch the streets, the shining buildings, the pipes and filth of industry. *Could they see me?*

He saw to my education: languages, mathematics, herbs... though I never saw herbs grow fresh and strong in the earth until much later. He carefully selected everything I was to learn, never allowing my own perusal and selection. He maintained that my destiny would be a royal one, and I would be polished accordingly. He was particularly stubborn about answering questions that he found impertinent.

From early infancy I cut my hair but once. Sharp objects were strictly forbidden, as I might hurt myself... or someone else. The one knife in the tower was attached to my father's belt, and I touched it only to learn proper etiquette when dining. And my father, curiously fumble-fingered with the twisting locks of hair, left me to my own discretion in dealing with it. As a single braid, my hair circled the tower four times. I was constantly trying to develop ways in which I could move freely, without tangling myself in the furniture. I was once so snarled, my father was forced to snip it off at my heel. I have never been so frightened of anyone, before or since.

Washing my hair took hours. I dipped my head into a washtub, coiling the mass round and round. Awkwardly, I would shove the locks into the water, trying to soak the

hair, bobbing my head until it was saturated. Then with handfuls of cherry blossom gel, I would scrub, starting with my scalp. I would rinse and rinse again, moving in sections. The weight of my wet hair was tremendous, the ache in my neck and shoulders lasting for days.

When I was nine years old, my father left the tower for the first time in my memory. He wrapped my braid of hair around a gargoyle, and tossed the rope from the balcony window. He was deaf to my questions. He sat on the edge for an immeasurable moment, his eyes fixed on something only he could see, then nimbly lowered himself to the ground. And for three days, only the birds and wind were my company.

I hunger for that solitude now. But always, there is noise. Engines and tires and music and humanity. My father's voice could boom and shake, and was the loudest thing I had ever known, but I could discern his whisper from the bottom of the tower. I strain, now, to hear his voice, but I am made deaf by cacophony. From my tower, I watched that bustling activity with envy. If I squinted, I could see the people driving their cars on Kellogg, the sharp lights of the billboards, and I could hear the occasional squealing tire. Those people were going to their jobs at Koch or Boeing making great clumsy machines that would float through the clouds. I wanted to fly, step off my balcony and float out over the golden heads of wheat I could see swaying like a body of water, to taste those grains, but I was trapped, trapped by more than just my tower walls.

* * *

There are moments of my life in the tower that I remember with such stunning

clarity. I was acquisitive by nature, forever needing activity. And yet the tower was not stifling until I became older, and my body pulled at me with strange and disturbing dreams. I would awaken, sweaty, and alone, for my father no longer slept with me in the tower. His place had always been beside me, curled around my back for warmth. But one night, I felt his hand upon my breast, and I squeezed my eyes closed, pretending sleep. I felt him jerk his hand back, as if my flesh burned him, and he rolled away, making the bed creak as he shifted his weight. He moved to the front of the fire.

His escape became a nightly ritual after that, and in the evenings, there my freedom was greatest. The night wind blew foreign smells through the balcony window, the scent of gasoline and hot-dogs and acidic cleaners. In the daylight, the summer sun baked the air dry, and the winter coldness blistered my face. But at night, I built fantasies, rock by rock, as my tower must have once been built.

I can't get over the smells of Wichita, the clear stench of gasoline, the intoxication of a multitude of sweating and perfumed bodies. I am told this isn't even a large city, that there are larger and more crowded places. The thought terrifies me, always to be surrounded by strangers, always looking for *his* familiar face. Even the hygiene habits confuse me. We bathe and then cover the skin with layers of lotion and perfume. Nothing smells natural. It took me numerous lessons to understand the use of anti-perspirants and deodorants. I miss his scent.

When I was sixteen years old, my father, who was not my father, became my lover.

He had been gone for days, and my loneliness was a living creature in my gut. He called my name and I hurried to throw my hair around the marble gargoyle—an

imaginary childhood friend. The familiar tug and pull of my father climbing seemed different this time, less heavy, or maybe I was stronger.

When he pulled himself over the balcony ledge, I was ready with my customary greeting. But, as I embraced him, my arms around his shoulders, I became aware of his body, the scent of male, his hands at my back. I shivered, and looked to his face in fear and curiosity.

His mouth crowded mine, his breath warm and spicy. And I wanted more, something else, greater than what had been before. My clothes itched and irritated my skin. His clothes were worse and my fingers were clumsy. He caught my hands and I was scared. Had I done something wrong?

Let me, he said.

When he entered my body, thick and hard, I thought only that surely there must be more, more than just this burning pain and sweating rhythms. His breath was harsh in my ear.

Then he was rigid, stiff, a rumble coming from his chest and a strange liquid heat between my thighs.

“My name is Gregori,” and I called him father no more.

He did not tell me that what we did was wrong. I felt no moral obligation to deny the pleasure we found, and my life was so very limited. Now, so much later, so much older, I cannot deny the power of what we shared.

For a time, I fell in love with him. Or perhaps I always loved him, my teacher, my lover, my only contact with the outside world.

He would return from wherever he went, calling for me, smelling of wind and

grass, the tang sharp in my nostrils. I would lean into his torso, for just a moment, as he pulled himself over the window ledge. I would taste the air, rolling the mysterious fragrances around my mouth. And it was not him I wanted so much, but the outside world.

* * *

There came a day when Gregori left me for a long period of time, inevitably stretching into an eternity of such bone-aching loneliness as I have never experienced. Though he left me frequently, never had it affected me so greatly. I never knew to worry about food or water, since it would magically appear every morning upon my rising. I sang songs to myself until my throat was raw, melodies of music I had never truly heard from another. I read each of the heavy, dusty books, inscribing the lines into my memory.

“O virtu soma, che per li empigiri mi volvi... com’a te piace, parlami, e socisfammi a’ miei desire.” *O though of loftiest virtue who leadest me round as thou wilt through sinful circles, speak to me and satisfy my desires.*

I braided, and re-braided my hair, coiling it about my waist so many times, I lost count, tangling myself in the sparse furniture, creating labyrinths of the strands. I screamed, so much rage and anger startling the birds from their nests in the turret above my head.

And still I waited, for my Father to return to me, from wherever he had gone.

I became fascinated with the changes outside my tower. One morning I would wake to see the ground covered in crystalline snow. Then, in a matter of days, an unnatural spring would arrive, and the birds would come, bringing new and foreign bits and pieces of the world in their beaks. I would wait, no longer able to sleep, the leaves curling and crisping before my eyes. Seasons were coming and going, and I knew some sorcery protected the tower. I feared my father would never find his way. The trees grew, their leafy branches reaching for the tower's balcony window, while the bushes spread out into an impenetrable mass.

My fear and anxiety kept me awake. And then, just as quickly, a despicable resignation entered my bloodstream, and I fell asleep, unable to wake to acknowledge even the passing of seasons.

I have no way of measuring the true length of time I slept. But then, one afternoon I was called from my slumber by a voice, a husky, masculine thing which, for a moment, had fear and excitement bursting in my mind. I pulled myself from the floor, stretching the muscles cramped by my uncomfortable position before the fireplace. The call came again, and with a sinking sensation I knew it was not my father's voice. I hesitated a moment, a foreign timidity stalling my forward momentum, and then my own curiosity compelled me to the window.

The figure of a man stood far below me, and he waved, signaling he had seen my timid face peaking from the balcony. But I could not respond because I was so fascinated with his appearance. For ages I had watched the bustle of people moving below, but they were always oblivious to me and my calls. They would step around the tower's base without ever touching the edge. But now, below, stood a man.

I cannot explain my need or desire to a modern world, my loneliness, my curiosity. There are so many rules and lessons that a woman must learn, things that protect her from danger, where in my world, my tower protected me, as my father had once watched over me. I did not hesitate to wrap my hair around the gargoyle's hideous face and lower the rope to the man below.

As the rope reached the ground, there was a trembling in the tower, as if the very earth was coughing, but as the man reached for the hair, the structure settled into peace.

The stranger's name was Roland, though he did not call me by my given name, saying it was not feminine enough for so beautiful a woman. He called me his Rose, and sang songs, using a stringed instrument whose voice was more pure than a bird's.

During the course of that strange day, he pulled something from his pack slung over his shoulder. He smiled at me, handing me a delicate, beautiful flower, and I felt tears gather in my eyes, for Gregori had never brought me gifts, except for the time I asked for rampion leaves. In a tiny pot, small enough for my hands to encircle, was a flower of the deepest crimson color I had ever seen. He called it a rose, for his own hothouse rose. And he faltered a little at my expression, explaining that they were cultivated for purity and color. He explained that he earned a living delivering such things to people. I reached out my hand, pulling back quickly as my finger was pricked, a drop of blood smearing between my rubbing thumb and forefinger. "Careful," and he laughed a little. "They have thorns." And in that moment I despised him, that he could take such knowledge for granted, so basic a thing as a rose having thorns, but I had never seen a rose, never touched a petal. I turned from him, sucking on my finger, hiding my eyes, which my father said revealed my every thought.

The day went by in silence, a strange tension growing between this stranger and I. He tried to draw me into conversation, asking questions of my life in the tower. But I turned from him, watching the rose as its shadow grew along the opposite wall. In an awkward fumbling of hands and elbows, he wrapped me suddenly in his arms. They were alien, lacking the familiarity of other arms. But my curiosity was aroused. I allowed him to seduce me. Or perhaps I seduced him.... Either way, we brought each other to climax in a tangle of limbs and braids and sweat. And then Roland slept.

Bored by his inattention, nervous with a strange fluttering in my stomach, I allowed curiosity to sway me, and I searched through Roland's pack. There I found a book, inscribed with lines of poetry I had never before seen, and I read carefully, better to commit the words to my memory.

“Thy sins are forgiven, Wichita! Thy lonesomeness annulled, O Kansas dear! As the western Twang prophesied thru banjo, when lone cowboys walked the railroad track past an empty station toward the sun sinking giant-bulbed orange down the box canyon.”

I could feel Roland's gaze, and I turned to him, a gentle greeting on my lips. The strange burning in his eyes stopped me, and I shifted uncomfortably under his scrutiny.

“You did that very well.” His voice was low, resonant in the tower, the stones shaking a little with his words.

“Did what well?” I could hear the slight tremor in my own voice.

He pushed himself up from the bed, swinging his legs to the floor. He sat for a moment, just looking at me.

“You didn't make love like an innocent.”

“Perhaps because I’m not an innocent.”

“I thought you told me no one comes this way, Rapunzel,” and when he said my name, his mouth a little cruel, the tower stones shook.

“No one comes this way.”

“No one but your father, isn’t that what you told me?” I nodded my head, a little frightened by him.

“Your father?”

“Yes,” I forced the word past the tightness in my throat. He didn’t respond, sliding his legs and arms back into his clothes. He straightened his garments, then reached across my lap for the stringed instrument. He didn’t touch me. He slung his pack to his shoulder.

I cried to myself as I lowered my rope of hair. Roland would not look at me as he dropped over the balcony’s edge. I knew he would not return.

* * *

Roland had left the potted hothouse rose. I burned the poetry in the fire that night, wanting desperately to burn the flower as well, unable to destroy the reminder, the fragrance filling my circular cell.

Gregori came, calling my name, three days later. I leaned over the balcony edge, as I always did. And for the first time in my sheltered life, I really looked at him, noted the creases near his eyes, the hollowed concavity of his chest, the crisp gray threaded through his hair. He was pale, his cheeks strangely rose-hued from his recent exposure to

the sun, and my forehead could rest easily against his chin. Roland had been taller, fuller through the shoulders, bulky in his motions. My father had a close-cropped beard, an affectation he had never carried before, and I hesitated for a moment before throwing my arms around him.

“Hello, my dear Rapunzel, and have you missed me?”

“Yes, Father. Where did you go for so long?” I began pulling the rope of my hair back into the tower, wrapping it round and round my torso, as was my custom.

“I was securing your future.” He was settling a bag against the wall, near the fire, as I turned to look at him. Could he smell my rose? Even then I could smell the heady perfume, and I wondered that he didn’t comment on it.

“My future? But I thought my future was here, in the tower.” I bit my lip, anxiety curling in the pit of my stomach. Could he not see I was different? Was I then, not different? Had Roland not shared my bed, kissed my mouth, fondled my breasts?

“Ah, dear and sheltered treasure, your past is the tower. Your future, however, is a different thing altogether.” He waved his hand at me, forestalling my barrage of questions. I swallowed my curiosity, nodding my head in acquiescence. I had waited this long. I could wait a few moments longer.

I poured him a cup of his favored wine. And then I hummed, a song that had quietly entered my mind, the very song that Roland had taught me. I moved to where he stood, handing him the cup of wine.

His move was so sudden, I spilled the red liquid onto the sleeve of my gown. “Where did you hear that song?” I stuttered a bit in my hesitancy, frightened by the grasp of his cold fingers on my wrist. “Who has been here?”

“No one, Gregori. What a strange thing to ask,” and I forced a nervous laugh from my throat. It sounded tinny, hollow, even to me.

“Someone has been here.” He stood before me, crowding me into the cool circular wall of the tower. “Tell me who has been here.” And he slapped me, my head turning more in shock than in pain. I cupped my cheek.

“No one has been here, I swear.” But he wouldn’t hear my words, his hands grasping my shoulders, shaking me. The anger that I had swallowed, kept at bay for days, began to climb its way from my heart.

“You will tell me who has been here.”

And then I screamed at him, “What does it matter?” He dropped his hands from me, and I could see that I had surprised him.

“After all that I have done for you, how could you do such a thing?” He seemed to fold into himself, sinking into the bed as if he could no longer stand.

“And what have you done for me?”

“I have protected you, sheltered you from what you could not understand.”

“That you did for yourself, and no one else.” And my anger left me, gone as quickly as it had come. He was tired, I could see that now. And he loved me. I could see that also. I straightened from the wall.

“Did he touch you?”

“Who?”

“The man you let into the tower.”

“How do you know it was a man?”

“Child. I can smell the rose. Did you think I wouldn’t notice it?” He smiled a

little, and I could see that somehow I had broken him. I began to cry.

“What does it matter? He is gone now.”

“It matters.”

“I do not love him.” I am not sure why I told him.

“And you think that you love me?” I went and knelt at his feet.

“Of course I love you.” I desperately reached for his hand, but he shrugged away from me.

“You know I am not your father.” And he handed me a knife, the knife he wore sheathed at his belt, the knife he had once used to cut my hair at my heel. “Go.”

I swallowed the grief lodged fully in my throat. I stared at the blade as if he held poison. He wanted me to leave, and somewhere, deep in my chest, an exultant fear made its way to my heart. To be free.

But how would I live? How would I eat? Gregori had cared for all my needs. And suddenly I realized he was giving me a choice, a chance to stay, and live with him, my father, my lover, here in the tower. Or a chance to go.

As if my hand belonged to someone else, I reached for the knife. I stood up, looking at his face, tracing the new lines I saw there. And then I ran.

At the balcony, I looked out, at the people, the parks, the stench of smog. The tower began to tremble. I wrapped my hair around the gargoyle; a fierce creature I had once pretended was my pet. I turned my head, seeing Gregori still seated on the bed, and then I grabbed my courage in both hands, along with the rope of my hair. I cut the long braid off at the nape. And then I climbed down the tower.

When my feet touched soil for the first time, I was shocked at its coolness. In my

mind, the ground had always been warm, warm from the living trees and grass that sprung there, warm from the sun. The tower shook, and I ran.

I ran as fast as my limbs, unused to exercise, could go.

I heard Gregori scream my name, and I stumbled to a stop, overwhelmed by what I had done. For the first time in my life, my hair blew into my face, and I cursed the wind, shoving the strands away from my eyes and mouth.

The earth shook, and for a moment, I thought to return, go back to my sanctuary, and my lover. But the ground was rippling, twisting unnaturally, and I fell to my knees, yelling for my father, or Roland, or anyone that would hear me.

The tower crumbled. Each stone fell in upon itself, as if a great hand was ripping the rock from the mortar that sealed it, and I could not see my father. On and on it went, until finally, there was nothing... nothing but a pile of rubble, and dust, and I choked. I could never go back.

Wednesday in April

Kimberly has been driving for two hours down the dirt and gravel roads of rural Kay County, Oklahoma. She was lost for half that time, searching for the hidden turn-off because she was only here once, during the funeral nearly five years ago. She rode in the family limousine then, swallowed between her parents and their grief. She remembers struggling to turn her head, jostling them, but they had continued to stare blankly ahead. Kimberly looked behind, trying to count the line of cars stretching along the high way until it disappeared at the horizon. Later, Grandma Coo would say, “People always mourn the young more.”

Finally, she sees the familiar fence post, the one with the cattle skull lying on the top. She knows if she turns left there, to the west, she should find the cemetery a quarter mile ahead. She feels like she finally has a break.

The cemetery gates are two limestone posts that have melted away in the weather. Immediately behind is a huge rusted fence frame, the doors swinging wide with strange twisting creatures along the sides. The arch isn't connected to fence in any way, and yet Kim feels as if she's passing through a portal. She shivers in superstition.

She can see the grave through the bug-splattered windshield. She sees the marble, a tiny, embarrassing little memorial, the name and dirt blurred to insignificance by the distance. She had imagined something larger, a monument representing lost potential. Her knuckles grip tight to the wheel for a moment, and she wonders if she'll even get out of the truck. What is she doing here? She doesn't know how to do this.

Grandma Coo says some people have to learn how to grieve, that it don't come

natural. She says that Kimberly needs to learn how to cry and that it ain't natural to fight fate all the time like she does.

Kim thinks Grandma Coo, her mother's aunt really, worries too much, and even though it irritated Kim, she was trying to calm Grandma's fears.

She rubs her face in her hands and pulls open the door.

Kimberly's sneaker sinks into the moist ground. The cold seeps through the holes in the sole of her shoe, the socks becoming clammy and moist. But she is saved from going forward, even for an instant, as she struggles to free each sodden foot. There is a quiet slurping sound, the suction's release unbalancing her. She reaches for the truck, her hand catching the door, her momentum swinging her. She slams the door, the noise startling the flock of birds in the tree to the north of the grave. She waits, a little frightened.

She knows she is alone, but the returning silence intimidates. She can see from the headless stalks of the flowers Mom planted that someone has been mowing.

Kimberly had told her mother they would do that, but the woman was stubborn, telling her Michael was lonely out there in the country. He was dead, she thought, how lonely could he be? She could see Grandma Coo rolling her eyes at that. "Jesus still loves ya' honey, even if you ain't lovin' him back."

Kimberly had tried to tell her it was peaceful—and wasn't Heaven supposed to be like that?

But maybe Heaven wasn't like this place, with the miles of wheat fields surrounding the cemetery. The emptiness—no echoes, just the wind swallowing sound away. Even the oak tree is lonely, standing all by itself, she thinks. She should have

come with the rest of the family. But then... *No*. It's better that they aren't here. She's only come to inspect the new headstone. The old stone had been flat, lying flush with the grass. The gray marble had been shiny with only Michael's name, no inscription or benediction.

How much could a head stone really say, though? Would it say that Michael was allergic to strawberries, or that he hated chicken still on the bone? Was there enough room to list his ambitions to be a pro NBA player? What about sins, like the time they'd stolen a pack of cigarettes and puffed and choked their way through it at the park three blocks from home. Or would the headstone mention the girl he thought was pregnant by him, just days before he died. It turned out to be a false alarm. Maybe it would've been better if it hadn't.

Kimberly walks toward the new stone, this one upright, already shaded with clay dust, and too small to list all the things it should. She reaches to swipe at his name, leaning over, trying to not stand where his body might be. She doesn't want to think he's down there, somewhere beneath. Her hand leaves a smear on the marble, but her palm is stained red like dried blood. She brushes awkwardly at her jeans.

Indecision makes her uncomfortable. What is she supposed to do now? Should she get on her knees and pray? She's not really into that. All that talk from Grandma Coo about Jesus was silly really, but she'd never hurt the old woman's feelings. Kim would even get dressed up on the occasional Sunday and join her at church. Should she be overcome with grief, wailing out? She's not really into that either. It's just a big chunk of rock and somewhere under there is a corpse, trapped in a carefully pressurized casket. She steps back, folding her hands in front, hoping she looks solemn and

contemplative.

She has a vague memory of another funeral, this one for her grandmother's sister's daughter and both of Kim's parents had been solemn and quiet, her mother jerking her hand on occasion to settle her down. But the woman's husband had wept, his hand shielding his eyes, his shoulders jerking as he breathed. The woman had not attended.

Kimberly covers her eyes with her stained palm. She has to go to the bathroom.

Mom told her once that they stayed out here for nearly two hours. Kim has been here five minutes. She is determined. She can make it five more. She wants to do this right.

She is sure there's a method to this, a way to exercise the memories. She's tired of thinking about him, and though it had been nearly ten years, she thought about him more now than ever before. Maybe it was because Grandma Coo was getting frail. Maybe it was because she had gone to the Family Christmas gathering for the first time in years. Maybe it was because his birthday would've been a few weeks ago. But she wants to do this right.

She still has to urinate. That seems especially irreverent and she tries to stifle the urge. She wiggles, crossing her legs for a moment, trying to relieve the pressure on her bladder. She tries to study the new stone, focusing on the now-shiny surface where her hand had wiped.

She studies the marble inscription, each letter plainly spelling out Michael's name. She reads his birth date, and skims over his death date. *Cherished Son*. Who wrote those words? Mom or Dad? And that was it; no noble little saying, no psalm to satisfy

Grandma Coo's devoted heart. *Don't you protect what you cherish?* Kim pushes the bitter thought away. That issue should be long-since over.

Kim turns away, ready to leave, relieved just to see the truck parked a few feet away. But something niggles the back of her mind, a thought, a protest. She stops, thinks for a moment. When did Michael die? July 2nd? What does the new memorial say? *March 3rd 19—to July 3rd 19—*. Is that the right date? That can't be right. She kneels down, as if looking closer will change the inscription. She remembers.

Michael had died during the summer vacation Kimberly turned eighteen, when he was sixteen years old. She had wanted her freedom so badly, freedom from the system, from her parents. They had family problems, like most teenagers. She had been staying with friends from church for the last few months. Kimberly was too rebellious, her mother said. Michael was a man, though, and could get away with things Kimberly couldn't. Brother and sister didn't see each other. They didn't speak.

But on the night he dies, he went to a friend's house, drank a few beers, watched a football game. Then more friends came and he drank more beer. When they ran out, he was in a hurry to get more. He borrowed a truck from some girl he knew, and driving seventy, flipped the vehicle on old Hubbard Road. A farmer found Michael the next day with his head pinned between the truck door and the cracked ground. Kimberly had nightmares of Michael crying for help as he slowly bled, staining upholstery, the door frame, the ground, even the grass until everything was the same shade of rust.

The family opted to display the body. Kimberly went to see him a day before the funeral, July 4th 19—. It was so strange to see all of the Independence banners, the patriotic swag of downtown Ponca City, then enter the funeral parlor where solemn

church music piped over the intercom.

Michael's face was strangely waxy, his mouth a colorless blue, his lashes still impossibly long. But Kimberly had realized that it wasn't him. He'd changed in the time they'd lived apart. She didn't see his face every day. There was guilt for that. Maybe she wouldn't have recognized him had he been standing before her, laughing because she was clumsy. But the face, with the mouth and eyes painstakingly sewn shut, had not been Michael.

Kim had left the funeral home. She drove out to the gravel farm road where Michael flipped his truck. Hubbard Road was a ten-mile stretch connecting Ponca City and Blackwell. There were no shoulders and deep irrigation ditches ran along side. There were places where the wheat edged right up to the faded white lines of the roads. In other places, the landscape was barren, the prairie grass eaten away by herds of cattle.

The police had already removed the vehicle by then, and there was only yellow tape marking the scene. The ribbon reminded her of television shows, where homicides are blocked from the press. On impulse, she tore a strip of the plastic, stuffing it into her pocket.

She could see Dad's car, a brown twenty-year old Malibu, parked by the side of the road, but she couldn't see Mom or Dad. She called out, but no one answered. What was she doing there? She walked. Soon she was more than twenty yards from her parked car. She noticed the torn soil, the broken stalks of wheat. She came up on a cleared area, as if the palm of some giant had dug a gash from the earth. Her gaze was fixed on the muddied brown stain, a three-foot circle of drying blood. Shattered glass surrounded it, the only sign left by the truck. His face had been there, she thought,

imagining an imprint.

She reached her hand down, needing to feel the blood, strangely fascinated by the circle. Maybe she hoped for some warmth beyond the liquid heating in the sun. The stain was cool to the touch. She realized in that moment that the body in the casket, back in town, really was Michael. And she couldn't stand the thought that *They* would seal that box, where he couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't breathe.

She didn't know how long she stood there, bent at the waist, her body stiffening, her hand clenched in the dirt. There was noise further to the east. Her eyes searched the field. Then she saw Dad.

He was kneeling, clenching something in his hands, his fists curled at his chest. Numbly, she knew that he was sobbing, an eerie, broken wailing. For a moment, he was human, a real person, and she wanted to go to him, place her arms around his shoulders, cradle his head, as he cradled his hands against his chest.

She *hated* him. Michael should have been at home, safe in his own bed at three in the morning, if the man had forced Michael to follow the same rules she had. Now he had the audacity to grieve? And she hated him. He could cry.

Mother went to him. Kim hadn't even seen her, but she went to him, kneeling beside him, holding him, and his arms fell to his sides. Clenched in Dad's hand was Michael's baseball cap, a Christmas present from Grandma years ago. She wanted to snatch it from him, hold it as he had, scream at him. He doesn't have the right to cry, she thought.

* * *

Kim sits before Michael's grave, nearly ten years after his wreck. No one can get the death date right? She knows he didn't die on July 3rd. The funeral service had needed time to prepare his body, and no one wanted a funeral on July 4th. So when the family finally buried him on the 5th, it had been nearly four days, and flesh was sagging, the acrid smell filling her nostrils. Sometimes at the nail parlor with her mother, she can't stay, the odor so familiar.

Does it really matter what day? She can hear Michael's voice her my mind. He never cared about things like that. He forgot their parents' anniversary every year. Kim never knew if he did that on purpose. Or maybe he had been forgetful. But Dad was never forgetful. He still writes in a journal, a day-record, keeping track of his bowel movements, his sex life, his business appointments. He used to tell a story...

I almost died eating dinner on September 25th, 19--.

Kim hates the way he tells that story.

It's never the way she remembers it.

* * *

They were eating at a restaurant, with Michael at the left, her mother on the right, Dad across the table from Kim. They were in the middle of the flow of traffic, a place she hated to sit. But they came during a dinner rush, and dad never got a booth anyway, because he couldn't fit between the seat and the table. All the tables around them were filled. Dad was lecturing, although she can't remember what had been done. He just

seemed to like to chastise. Kim was playing with the food on her plate, carefully chewing each bite slowly, because eating too fast was guaranteed to elicit more. She would count until thirty, swallow, reach for a drink from her glass, swirl the water around. The tiny details kept her mind occupied.

Then she heard her mother say her dad's name in that quiet voice that she despised, the voice that said, *Of course you're right, and you have every right to be angry, and I'm completely sympathetic to your needs... but you're causing a bit of a scene, and maybe you should calm down...* The last part of the name was always said lowly, carefully. It appealed to reason, and the shrieking voice in the back of Kim's mind would cause her hands to shake, just a little, not so anyone would notice, and she would have to look away, at the stain in the wall, or the bits and pieces of food on her plate.

So she played with her food, keeping her eyes down, except to glance at Michael, who grinned at her slyly. But then her mother said her dad's name again, and this time her voice rose on a question, and Kim looked up to see his face turning red, and then a darker purple. He banged his hand on the table, spilling a glass of water, and for a ridiculous moment her mother had her cloth napkin in her hand to clean up the spill. Kim knew he was choking, and he looked at her, and he knew she knew, and she just sat there, wondering if she had a black dress.

But then her mother realized what was happening, and Dad stood up, knocking his chair over, and she could see a waiter hurrying over with a pitcher of water. Mother reached around his stomach, her hands grasped in fists, and she squeezed him. Kim stood up. She knew everyone must be looking and watching this horribly funny, gagging man. Mother was squeezing again and her dad was making these wet noises, and then a piece

of steak larger than Kim's tongue flew from his mouth and landed on his plate.

Michael laughed. Kim wanted to laugh too, but part of her, that shrieking part, was a little disappointed, and then they all sat down in their chairs again. The waiter refilled Dad's glass. They looked at each other. She thought her mother was going to be sick. But then Dad picked up his knife and fork, and she knew what he was thinking: *if I'm going to pay for this steak, I'm going to eat it*, and he cut into the grayish meat.

Later, back at home, Michael and Kim howled, the laughter tearing up their eyes. Michael kept mimicking dad's face, the bizarre noises. Neither mentioned death, and she stuffed the thought down, ashamed she had even hoped.

* * *

Dad, who remembers the date he *almost* died, can't even remember the day his son *really* died. She shakes her head, squirming, still needing to pee, indecisive over whether she should leave. But what can she do? The headstone is here, out in the middle of nowhere, and there's nothing she can do about it. She twitches from foot to foot. The carver's place is only fifteen miles down the road. She could drop it by, demand that they fix it.

She bends over, experimenting, trying to pick up the headstone. It's heavy. She shifts it a little, but the weight on her bladder is incredible.

She has to make a decision. *To pee or not to pee?* She hears Michael's laughter in her mind. Is she practical, or is she squeamish? She decides.

She moves away from Michael's grave. She's not *that* shameless. She unbuttons

her pants, scanning the horizon for people, even though she knows she's alone for miles. She pulls her jeans over her knees, hunkering down, carefully balancing so as not to splash on herself. She lets go.

The heat is incredible. The relief has her giggling, until she's finally laughing so hard she has to put her hands on the ground. She can hear Michael's echo, as if he appreciates the humor of Kimberly peeing on herself at a cemetery in the middle of nowhere.

She wipes her hands on her jeans, damp from the grass. She moves back to the headstone. It seems so important. She tries to lift it. It doesn't budge. She swears it had shifted a little when she tried a few minutes ago. She shoves against it; she should be stronger now that she's not concerned about urinating, but she can't seem to get a grip, her feet slipping.

Does it really matter? Shut up, Michael, she thinks.

Of course. It matters.

Kim stands, her hands loose to her sides, rolling her shoulders, twisting her neck. She thinks about those warm-ups she's learned in aerobics. She looks left. She looks right. She shakes her hands and takes a deep breath.

This time, she feels a movement at the base of the headstone, and she leans into it, pushing at the slick ground beneath her feet, like a runner on a forty-five degree hill, just trying to shove the damn thing over, grunting, churning, twisting the grass into mud.

She slips and falls, landing on her hands and knees with mud all the way up her shins.

Does it matter?

She is gasping hard, loud ragged breaths. She looks up, staring at the headstone.
She didn't move it, not even a little.

No.

She guesses it doesn't matter.

And for a minute, she thinks she can cry. She thinks Grandma Coo will be happy
now.

The moment passes.

She stands, the blood rushing, clearing her head. She digs her keys out of her
pocket, then rests her hands on her hips.

How long has she been here? Fifteen minutes?

Good enough.

The Garden

She pushes her hands into the soil, the wet cool earth temporarily relieving her body of the sun's heat. She doesn't really know what she's doing, but she purchased a book, and some tools, and if the old lady next door could do it, she thinks, so can she. She makes a fist, letting the mud ooze from between her fingers. Is the dirt supposed to be this soggy? She shrugs her shoulders philosophically. By June, the land will be riddled with cracks and fissures, and she'll need to water between midnight and two.

That's when the city water authority says it's okay to water, although she's broken the law today. Mrs. Kellerman, from next door, says that fresh flowers need fresh water.

"Christina, what are you doing?"

She looks over her shoulder, shading her eyes from the afternoon glare, wishing she'd bought the floppy straw hat.

"I'm planting petunias, Chris. What does it look like I'm doing?" She smiles a little at her husband, trying to take the sting out of her words.

"It looks like you're making a mess."

She sighs. "I know that's what it looks like, but I'm trying to start a garden."

"Oh."

She turns back to the soil, carefully digging a hole with the new tool, trying to look competent.

"Did I tell you that some of the guys were coming over?"

She hears the hesitancy in his voice. She grunts in response.

“Well, anyway, the guys are coming over to watch the game, and I was wondering if you could make some of that cheese dip you made for the New Year’s party.” The end of the sentence is garbled, Chris rushing to finish.

Did she make a cheese dip? Christina doesn’t remember ever making a cheese dip. She leans back on her heels, thinking. No, no, she made a bean dip. Marianne from accounting made the cheese dip.

“Chris, Marianne makes cheese dips. I make bean dips.”

“Oh.”

She can tell that he’s a little embarrassed, looking at the dog across the street, the boy mowing next door, anywhere but at her. The impulse to scream at him and throw the three-pronged tool has her blinking. They both watch the boy mowing, his lines careful and precise. Christina recognizes the mower. He charges twenty-five dollars for the front and back yard. It’s a good deal.

“Do you think you could make a cheese dip for us?” For an instant he is five years younger, and she’s five years younger also, and she likes him, and he likes her, and she’ll spend the afternoon making a cheese dip.

* * *

The ingredients for a Spanish Rotell sauce are simple.

1 lb Velveeta

12 ounces (2 cans) rotell peppers

6 ounces. jalapeños

Christina carefully writes the instructions out in a step-by-step process. She is already determined to never make cheese dip for the guys again.

Slice Velveeta block into 1-inch cubes. Place inside crock-pot, set at medium. Pour in cans of rotell peppers and jalapeños. Stir vigorously after half-hour of heating. Ready to serve in one hour.

“Chris,” she calls, using her mother’s come hither voice. He hates it. She hates it.

“Yeah,” he yells back, not getting up from the recliner.

“You’ll need to stir this in a half hour.”

“Can’t you do that?”

She looks down at the index card gripped in her hand. She has bent and creased it. She takes a moment to carefully straighten it back out, walking to the living room as she does so.

“Here.” She hands him the card. “I’ve written the instructions out for you. All you have to do is stir it in a little while.” He takes it, studies the card intently.

“Where will you be?”

She hears the mild confusion and irritation in his voice.

“I’ll be outside, planting petunias.” She doesn’t give him a chance to respond, letting the screen door slam behind her.

The sun is only a little further toward the horizon, and Christina smiles. Her new book says a half-day of sunlight is good for flowers. She pulls the six-pack up into the light, admiring the perfect bell shape of the blossoms. They look delicate and fragile, the colors vibrant fuchsia and violet. They also look like a stiff wind might pull them out of

the ground, and she frowns in concern. The salesman assured her they were a hardy variety, and would bloom through mid-September, or at least through the first frost.

Christina digs a hole two inches deep, carefully removing one of the plants from the plastic carton, the roots balled in a stiff clump. She loosens the soil, extracting thick tendrils of root, and then carefully places the plant into the hole. She prepares the next hole, an exact six inches from her starting point. She has a diagram in her new book, an outline of where the plants should be placed for optimum sunlight and visual pleasure. She is following directions.

She is very good at following directions, she thinks.

She made excellent grades in high school, but wasn't remembered by her teachers.

She went to college, because that was what people like her did. She even had a nihilist stage, when she cut her hair an inch from her skull, pretending that appearances were innately false. She graduated in four years.

She married her college sweetheart, a man her parents approved. Chris was tall, well built, and reasonably intelligent. He was also good at following directions. He had a decent job, helped to pay the bills, and enjoyed working on cars. He was a man's man. They were Chris and Christina to their friends. She barely remembers a time when the two names weren't linked.

Who was she before she was Christina of Chris and Christina?

That is not a question she wants to think about while she's planting petunias exactly six inches apart.

She hears a car pull into the drive. She looks up, seeing Brandon, of Lauren and Brandon. She waves.

He waves back, smiling, a generic greeting exchanged between couples who are friends.

“Chris is inside.”

“Good. I can’t wait to try that cheese dip you’re so famous for.” Christina smiles tightly in response.

“Make sure to give it a good stir.”

He goes into the house, the routine of the game no doubt imprinted on his mind.

By the time the fourth car arrives, Christina no longer looks up, intent on her third row of petunias.

* * *

She is devastated. Mid-week, a frost blew in from the north. By Sunday, her garden is a patch of carefully placed brown carcasses. How could they die so easily? She is furious. It wasn’t *that* cold.

Reaching her fingers to a bloom-less stalk, she rips it from the ground, the stem crumbling in her hand. She reaches for another, placed carefully six inches from the first, rips it up. This is therapy, of a sort, she thinks, except it’s cheaper. She is calm, methodically tearing the plants up.

When she has finished with all three rows, she stands, wiping her hands off on her jeans, then she drives to the store.

The sales clerk is the same teenager who helped her earlier. He tells her that his mother loves the tool he is trying to sell this week. Does she look old enough to be his mom? The Dirt-Dynamo is a little expensive, but it's *the best garden invention since fertilizer*. It is a shiny gadget, with a rake handle, and four fierce looking spikes on the end. He demonstrates its use, twisting it this way and that, the special handle designed for turning soil. He explains the engineering principle, and Christina smiles, nodding her head, completely oblivious. She snatches it from him, forestalling any further explanations.

When she turns the car onto her street, she sees Chris' car in the driveway. What is he doing home? He was supposed to be watching the game at someone else's house.

He is waiting on the porch. She decides not to pull the Dirt-Dynamo from the trunk. What if someone has died? She won't get to work in her garden, but she can't think of any other good reason for Chris to be home.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"What are you doing home? Did something happen?" She knows she sounds rude, but she can't help it.

"Nothing is wrong. I just didn't feel like watching the game. Is that okay?" He sounds defensive, and for a moment, Christina regrets her tone.

"Well, sure. I guess it's okay." She feels awkward, standing below him on the porch. She is hoping he will keep himself occupied, so she can try out the Dirt-Dynamo. She goes back to the trunk of the car. She can hear him following.

Christina takes the garden tool out. Chris reaches for it. For a moment, she hesitates, reluctant to give it to him.

“What have you got?” He actually sounds curious, and Christina forgets to be awkward.

“Isn’t it great? I got it to till the soil, and turn all of that dead stuff under.” She smiles, letting Chris hold the Dirt-Dynamo.

“Feels expensive. How much?” She hates it when he talks like that. She tells him less than she actually spent.

He cringes. “Whew. Can you take it back?”

She snatches it from him, cradling it to her chest. “No, I can’t take it back. The clerk told me it was perfect for what I need.”

Chris stuffs his hands in his pockets.

“I’m sorry, Christina. I didn’t mean to sound like a jerk.” He sounds sincere, and she doesn’t know how to respond. She turns away, determined to show him that the Dirt-Dynamo is the *best garden invention since fertilizer*.

The soil is like cement, and she can’t get a good grip on the handle. It’s not nearly as easy as the clerk indicated. She stabs at the ground, her frustration growing.

“Here. Let me try.”

Just like a man, Christina thinks, *to prove a woman wrong*. But she lets him have the Dynamo, hoping he can’t figure it out.

Chris uses the tool with a dexterity that has Christina seething. This is *her* garden, *her* idea! Why doesn’t he just go watch the game?

“Why don’t you go behind me,” he says, in his reasonable voice, and she knows he knows she’s angry, which makes her more angry.

“I know what to do.”

“Okay,” and he’s puffing now, getting tired, and she’s pleased that it is harder than he thought.

A rhythm begins, twist, turn, dig. She places each plant carefully in its new hole, patting the soil gingerly. They don’t speak, and Christina is content, her anger draining away with each new petunia.

When it’s done, they are both sweaty, tired, pleased.

“Thank you, Chris.” Christina smiles at him, offering a truce.

“You’re welcome.” She can see that he accepts it.

* * *

“The hand of God is at work in this,” he says.

“Jesus, how can you say something like that?”

They stand before the garden; a strange moss-like fungus has swallowed each and every bloom.

“It’s like the plague of Egypt.”

“Do you think I watered too much?” She is not really asking, merely muttering out loud, but he hears.

“Nah. Maybe there wasn’t enough sunlight.”

“The book says approximately six hours of direct sunlight daily.” She is ready to cry. How could she fail? She’d followed each direction to the letter.

“Well, I suppose that’s about right for this spot.”

“I even used that weed stuff in the green bottle.”

Chris puts his arm around her, but she shrugs it off. “Don’t. I don’t want that.”

“What’s the big deal? So you can’t garden. Who cares?” He has his hands on his hips. “We can just hire somebody else to do it.”

“I don’t *want* someone else doing it. I want to do it myself.” She knows she’s unreasonable, but *damn it*. This is important.

“Whatever. I’m going inside.”

“Fine. Avoid it. That’s what you’re good at.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She sucks in her breath. “When was the last time you did something for me? When was the last time you cooked dinner? Did your own laundry? Anything?”

“What are you talking about? I drop my laundry at the cleaners, and I have to make my own dinner when you’re in class.” He throws his hands up. “What does this have to do with your flowers?”

“Nothing. It has nothing to do with the flowers. Just go inside. Watch the stupid game.”

He does just that.

* * *

“I got you something yesterday.”

“What?” She barely hears him, her attention focused out the window. She can see the damp soil, prepared for another attempt at flowers, but she can’t bring herself to go outside.

“I picked something up for you, at the store. I thought you might like it.” He hands her a can. She automatically lifts a hand, shaking the can curiously at its weight.

“What is it?”

“It’s seeds.”

She stares at it, a little horrified that Chris has given her another opportunity to screw up.

“See, it’s foolproof. You just pop the top, and then you sprinkle the seeds wherever you want flowers. You don’t even have to weed.”

Christina gazes back out the window.

“Chris...” She starts, but he doesn’t let her finish.

“Just try it, Christina. You haven’t done anything outside for two weeks. Just try it.”

She nods.

* * *

At first, she tries to separate the seeds, carefully placing each one in its own individual hole. But the sheer number of seeds overwhelms her, her hands over-flowing until seeds spill onto the ground. She tries to pick the seeds back up, since they aren’t in

the militant placement she wants, but more spill out of her palms, and in her perfect spot there is now a not-so perfect arrangement of seeds. Where's the harm? She shrugs. She can't do worse than she's already done. She sprinkles a few seeds out of the can. It's like salting a steak, she thinks. A few more shakes here, a few more there, and she's covered her original area for the garden. She still has a half a can.

She sprinkles seeds along her fence line, around her mailbox, around the maple in the back yard. She tosses seeds randomly into her neighbor's yard, where the grass is smooth like velvet carpet. She's still not satisfied. Where would she really like flowers?

She walks up to the porch, and into the house. Chris is sitting in the recliner, but the television is off. He's reading, and Christina is a little startled to see him doing that. She walks to him, stands behind him for a moment, and then up-ends the entire can over his head.

Chris leaps from the chair, scattering seeds all over the carpet. "What the hell are you doing?"

Christina starts to laugh. He looks so ridiculous, seeds and dust trapped in his hair. There is a seed resting precariously on his upper lip, and if he snorts, he'll get the seed jammed in his nose.

"I just wanted to see if you're full of enough shit to bloom," she says, laughing, pointing her finger. She knows Chris thinks she's lost her mind, or maybe hasn't taken her anxiety medication. He's baffled, and that's even funnier to her.

"I'm sorry, but the can says to *sprinkle liberally wherever a dose of springtime is needed.*"

“You think I need a little springtime?” He’s growling at her, and she knows he’s probably angry.

“I think we both need a little.” And she smiles at him, not caring if he’s angry. “We’re both so boring.”

“Boring, huh?” Chris shakes his head, spraying Christina with seeds. He reaches for her, and she gasps, twisting out of his reach. She realizes that he’s laughing, and she stops, allowing him to wrap his arms around her.

“Let’s go eat dinner at Marmalade’s.”

Christina pulls her head back in shock.

“But that’s two hours away!”

“So what? It’ll be a nice drive, get us away from this house and this town.” He won’t let her pull away, although she’s pushing at him.

“But I have things to do today, laundry, the dishes...”

“Now who’s boring?” And she realizes he’s right. The restaurant isn’t *that* far away, just far *enough*.

“Give me a minute to change clothes?”

“Don’t bother.” He pulls her to the door, snagging his keys from the peg. “Let’s just go.”

And they did.

* * *

“It really is a nice effect, don’t you think?”

The flowers have bloomed in a random profusion, and Christina is flabbergasted. She had no idea this would be the result. But it has a pleasing presentation, despite the chaos. She looks at her husband.

“Yeah, it does look good.”

Rosary

I have come to Eureka Springs, this place she loved and visited in childhood, a place I had never been, though we planned to take the trip one day. We will never be here together, but there is a melting sweetness to knowing that she walked these streets and smelled these odors.

It is hard for me to think of her name, to shape my silent voice around the syllables, to name her into being. Her parents eloped here to Eureka Springs years ago. I would tease her about their Haight-Ashbury tendencies, and the nights they must have lain awake, twining each other, whispering promising and potent names. In hindsight, she was lucky. They might have named her Sunshine, or Freedom, or even Vietnam. I suppose Solstice was not so bad.

There, I have named her, and the vise on my chest is not so tight this time, here in this little tourist town she loved so much. I can breathe around it, and think of other times quickly, and not of her and that final blank explosion of blood and brains and a gaping hole of skull and bone.

I sold my car to come here. I parked the old Delta 88 at the IGA down from my house, a flaking rental, with my phone number on a sign, and an old man called me less than two hours later. It seemed so easy to just unload unnecessary things, like they had been waiting forever for me to say *I don't need you anymore*. He liked Oldsmobiles, he said. He had been looking for a two-door model like mine. He would restore it, though it wasn't a classic, and drive it around town on game days, with his grandchildren in the back. He was generous and kind and paid in cash. I made sure to take the Ani DiFranco tape out of the deck.

Soli liked to sit next to me in that car, her foot on the dash, painting her toenails while we debated where we would go. She would sing along with the music on the scratchy radio, her voice off-key and breathless. I would inhale the smell of gas and dusty upholstery and fingernail polish, and smile, and sing with her.

We drove once to a flea market three hours west of Stillwater. The aisles were lined with chipped pottery and dusty bell jars, booths of scrap iron and antiques and fluorescent beer signs. At the end of the narrowest row of tables we found a Cherokee woman selling jewelry. I watched in fascination as Soli talked and gestured.

In memory, I can't hear what Soli said. I stand here on the streets of Eureka Springs, in the shadows cast by the buildings, and I remember that flea market and the Cherokee woman with turquoise and even the little silver ring I bought. But I can't remember what Soli and I talked about on the drive, or what she said to that woman, or even on the trip home.

I don't know why I've come to Eureka Springs. Strangely, we never came here together, though she talked and laughed about happy summers. I know it was stupid and foolish to leave school in mid-term like that, and I know my mother is upset and worried. I should call her, although I know I won't. I know that I only have \$600 left, most of it tucked carefully away in my bra.

I found a place to sleep, a quiet motel on old highway 62. The rose mulling details drew me in to the hushed office. The bearded manager, Rudy, coughed repeatedly into his shirt, but he was quick, and in the end showed me around the back to my room.

The place sits on a cliff, with greenery camouflaging the depths below. Rudy has begun to come out sometimes and sits under the canopy of trees with me and we smoke

and nod and commune with nature. He likes to spit over the side of the balcony, down into the valley below the motel, and he swears in German if his daughter asks him to do something. But mostly I ignore him and he ignores me, and we are content.

* * *

Soli and I went to coffeehouses with rattan furniture and glassless windows and scribbled furiously in our recycled paper notebooks. We complimented each other on our cleverness; sipped moodily from kitschy mugs of steamed milk and caffeine. She smiled at me from across the glass and stone tables, something whispering about her eyes. I loved her then, completely.

She had a way of moving, a thin figure in her cut-offs and linen shirts, a smooth flow of skin and bone, swaying to some rhythm only she could hear. If I sat close next to her, our shoulders and arms touching, I could almost feel that silent music. I waited impatiently for her to acknowledge our connection, but she spoke to the room, to the air, with me only straining to catch those small drops of attention.

There were nights when other poets came to the coffeehouses. They stood at the far corner, and raised their hands to silence the braided voices in conversation. Soli raised her head from her own writing to listen. I hated those poets, those selfish and idealist spouts of new-age spiritual wisdom, snapping their fingers in time to the sloppy meter. But she clapped, those small hands like fluttering birds, and she would turn to me and smile. In those moments we shared, I loved her more.

We met in a nihilist literature course in the spring of 1999. She came in late, her face blurred and flushed, her eyes moist, and I noticed that she was the only other female in the room. She took a seat near the front, her body folding and bending to contort into the wooden desk. The male occupants shrank from her, watching with a wariness and magnetic pull, as if they couldn't look away.

For days I watched her from the back of that room, like a puppy in her excitement, wriggling in her chair, impatiently slapping her hair behind her shoulder as she explained this passage, or that poem. She was like some deity, bestowing kernels and bits of knowledge and wisdom. Though the words were not unique, she infused every idea with passion, even an atheist like me could be convinced. But hours later, away from her and that class, I would say to myself *She's so naïve*, and *The world isn't really like that*, and *How can she believe such crap?*

I returned to the class fortified to dismiss her. But then she would speak again, just as passionately and eagerly as before, and I believed.

* * *

I am sitting with Rudy. He is laughing through his beard at his own joke, but I'm not really listening, only smiling occasionally because I don't want to hurt his feelings. He lets me stay at his motel for \$150 a week, and that seems fair, though there is no kitchen and my funds are running low. His daughter has brought me pre-packaged blueberry muffins every morning this week, since the sign advertises a continental

breakfast. I am the only guest now, and the daughter is frugal where her father is generous.

I have never been moved by nature, the idea of some Gaia entity or power or holiness, but in this place, on this porch forty feet above the stream in the valley below, I am feeling sanctity. There is a scent of green things and moisture, along with a light aroma of potato salad from the kitchen below, and Rudy's cherry pipe tobacco. Even the air seems green as the sunlight is filtering through the canopy of trees. I am told there are ghosts in these mountains, spirits from the Civil War and a murdered wife or two. Rudy has told me that I may walk and hike through the property behind the motel, but I haven't yet had the energy to move much beyond the porch.

Sometimes it feels like I have slept for months, but it was only one month ago yesterday that Soli died, and though I know I am awake and can hear the murmur of Rudy's voice, I travel in my own memories.

Soli and I hunted for treasure through the heaps of junk at the antique mall three hours from our college town of Stillwater. She haggled with the Cherokee woman over the price of the beaded necklace, but I stared at the ring I wanted to buy, a chunky silver circle that had no clear pattern. Soli finished her bargain and leaned next to me over the glass counter. She pointed to another ring, this one with a geometric design in turquoise, but I was not interested. I'd found the one I wanted.

I bought the ring, had it for months, but then it went missing. I wore it on my left index finger and would roll it and rub it with my thumb, a nervous habit I continue.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the plastic rosary.

Hail Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with thee.

I can't do it.

Rudy reaches across my lap, grasping my hand as I grasp the first bead of the rosary. *You are of the church?* I don't want to disappoint him but I tell him no, not since I was very young, not since my mother divorced my father. *But you have a rosary*, he says, and I know he is a little confused. I don't want to tell him that I should be praying every day, praying for a soul lost in purgatory, beseeching holy Mary mother of God to forgive Soli and let her pass through the gates of heaven. I tell him I am learning to pray. *That is good*, he says. *Everyone should know how to pray*.

Soli once told me that Catholics want it neat and tidy. She was indifferent to the religion her parents followed. She was indifferent to the priests, and the tradition, and the hollow spectacles. When she was eleven, her parents converted, turning their backs on a lifetime of exploration, wanting only to be led by starch-collared men with crinkled eyes and perfect teeth. The priests loved Soli, who sinned and confessed and sinned again.

Soli dragged me with her after our nihilist literature class one day. *We should be study partners*, she said. She made me feel smart, though I told myself her attention was the result of my being the only other girl in the class.

We went for coffee.

I don't believe in deities, she said.

And I remember talking to her about the death of God and His creation by man and our superstitious need to have faith in something so that we didn't fear death.

She smiled at me and there were moments she agreed and times she just looked at me like maybe I was hopeless. Her hand brushed my face and her eyes crinkled with humor and she said, *the animals of the earth don't need religion*.

We sipped our coffee and wrote mad and inspired thoughts in our journals.

* * *

Stillwater, Oklahoma is a very different place from Eureka Springs, Arkansas. Though only six hours apart, Stillwater is flatlands, while the tourist town clings desperately to the side of Ozark granite hills. Soli's parents came here often, and I am glad that I've made the trip. I feel more connected to Soli's memory, though we were never here together.

In the lower valley basin of Eureka there is a steam train. They need waitresses for the daily lunch runs and Rudy has put in a good word for me. They like me and have told me I can begin work tomorrow, get a feel for the rhythm of the train so I won't spill any drinks. The chef is intense; *this is the most important occupation in the world, to feed the people*. He droned on and on about the serious nature of a train that travels fifteen miles out, then fifteen miles back in.

Soli's wake was strange, or maybe it was just strange to me since I had never been to another funeral. Her parents were slumped in their pressed clothing, as if the starch was the only thing holding them up. I was moving through gelatin, shaking hands, nodding in commiseration, hugging strangers who sniffled and whuffled into my hair. Her father's hand was cold but firm, and her mother handed out little plastic rosaries made of iridescent beads to each person. *Please pray*, she said, barely memorized lines. *My Soli Marie needs you to pray, pray that God is benevolent and allows her to*

eventually pass the gates of heaven. Pray to Mary to intercede, to have mercy on her soul.

I stood mainly in the back. Her parents had selected a casket named *Simplicity*. I had no idea that each casket had an individual name, as if the carved boxes had personalities of their own to compliment the requirements of each body.

Catholics, I remember, normally have closed caskets on the day of the funeral, but the night before is reserved for the viewing of the body. I had never viewed a body before. I wanted to stay in the back. I didn't want to go forward and kneel on the little padded bench and say quick furtive prayers. But the line of mourners drew closer, and I was moved forward with it, up to the front of the room.

I shook her father's banker's hand. I knew in his heart he believed his daughter had committed a terrible sin. Soli's mother was more difficult, tracks of tears and grief marking her face. She hugged me and thanked me for being her daughter's friend. She asks me to pray for Soli, and I wanted to tell her that I didn't believe in God and I didn't believe in heaven or hell, or anywhere else. But I was a fraud, finally telling her I would pray every day. She seemed comforted, this once-upon hippie in her now religion, with rules and boundaries. Strange. Soli had told me that her mother had smoked pot and danced naked.

I stood before *Simplicity*, and looked down at Soli. They had put a wig on her head, a stiff straw-like thing. When she blew the back of her skull out with the 9mm, the hair must have been destroyed.

I knelt quickly. I didn't want to look at her face anymore, the thick rosy blush, the waxy lips, the wig. The padded bench was hard on my knees. I wondered if I was

supposed to close my eyes. Then the old ritual came, kneeling next to my mother and father in church as a child. The Lord's Prayer rose up in my mind, and I quietly whispered the words to Simplicity.

I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to get up from my knees, from the privacy between me and the casket. When I got to my feet I would have to look at her again. So I clutched the iridescent plastic beads of the rosary in my hands, saying the Lord's Prayer over and over.

There was a touch on my shoulder, and I looked up at Soli's father. He patted me awkwardly with his cold, dry banker's hand and I could tell he wanted me to move along. Or maybe he was trying to console me.

So I got up quickly, trying to avoid looking at Soli in the coffin. But the harder I tried to stare elsewhere, the more I felt some pull to look, the twisting of both impulses making my head hurt. Finally, I looked at her face, the eyelids bruised and bluish, the fingernails carefully painted in a pale pink, a silly lace dress she never would have picked for herself.

There was a glint of silver on her hand. It was my ring, missing for weeks, bought at the flea market. She must have taken it from me, stolen it, and I was suddenly so angry that I wanted to scream into her face, snatch the ring from her hand, tear the wig from her head.

I could look at Soli then, after that quick bloom of anger, and touch her, although her father still hurried me along.

* * *

The morning sunlight seeps through the curtains of my room. I've left the window cracked, though the air is chill, and I can hear the raucous calls of birds. Rudy told me yesterday that there is a path through the hills to the sixty-foot-tall Jesus statue. We can actually see the statue from the balcony, and Rudy told me that a visit would help me.

I pull on my clothes without thought or discrimination. I take the steps down to the path that leads lower into the valley floor. The crisp sound of crackling underbrush is loud, but the birds don't seem disturbed, as if they are used to clumsiness. I have the impulse to shriek.

I wish Soli could laugh.

If there were ghosts, and if I believed in such things, maybe I would hope that Soli would come to this valley behind my motel and walk beside me.

The hill grows steeper, the path slick and dark, and I lose my footing and slide feet first into the creek bed. The mist comes, washing over me like warm breath. I lean there against the creek bank as the wind speaks and whispers, carrying across the water and the granite hills. I try the rosary. *Hail Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.*

Amen. More wind. Whispers.

I let the plastic beads slip from my fingers into the chill water. I reach my hand into the clear liquid and pull the dripping rosary out. I shake it for a moment and then slip it into my pocket. I tug at my submerged feet until the creek releases me.

I hike through the hills, down through the basin, then puff my way up to the crest of the opposite hill. I'm at the foot of the giant white Jesus statue, but He seemed more profound from a distance, the arms spread wide in saving grace, the face peaceful and androgynous. The cement base is covered in graffiti: *I love Daniel...Katie and Ryan forever... Eastside gangstas...* And when I look up, the face is miles away.

Anywhere Else But Here

The need to buy a house began when my oldest son, Adrian, turned eight. He looked up at me with his father's brown eyes and I saw him as he would be as a man—sensitive, somewhat fragile, trusting. The city just didn't seem like the right place for us anymore, maybe too fast and too hurried, too hard. What would my son become if we stayed? What would we become?

So my husband, Thomas, and I began a search that took nearly eighteen months. We wanted an older house, but in good condition, a place we could raise our boys, where they could play and learn and grow, break things as boys do. But I didn't want a place that would fall apart while we lived there. Thomas was very good with computers, a genius really, but I didn't trust him with a hammer.

We found a three-story house just outside the farming town of Chikaskia, Oklahoma. Nearly eighty years old, it had recently undergone a total renovation by the previous owners, with storm windows and a finished basement. On the three-acre lot, just past the main house, there was an equipment barn, perfect for my warehouse. In fact, everything was perfect, the hardwood floors, the natural stone fireplace, the massive fenced-in yard—for a family dog, finally.

We couldn't afford it.

I cried when Thomas told me, after he'd done the numbers and attempted to shift things from one column to another.

The City had become a monster. I was afraid to watch the news, worried my boys would be kidnapped at the grocery store, afraid someone would break into our house and

murder us. It seems rather irrational, in hindsight, since terrible things can happen anywhere, but I couldn't control all the variables.

More importantly, I didn't want my husband to see Sherrilyn anymore.

Then Thomas' father passed away.

* * *

The funeral was a strange family reunion, what with the relations who traveled from two and three states away. I met cousins for the first time, but I was too caught up with the boys to really take note. I suppose Thomas was too caught up in his father's death to pay any attention either, and his mother was already packing up the house to sell, planning on finally purchasing that condominium in Florida that she had been pestering Harold about for years. He had never wanted to move, however, content to live just outside Kansas City. He said the City had everything they could want, and family nearby besides. He meant us.

My middle son was named for Harold, though we called him Little Harry from birth. And my youngest, Paul, was named for my own father, who died when I was sixteen. I thought about him a great deal while I grasped Adrian's hand on one side, and little Harry's in the other, and watched my husband hug my youngest while they lowered his father into the ground. Paul was terribly worried that Grampa would get cold down there, and I could hear Thomas shushing him and whispering, trying to find some explanation for death a three-year-old could grasp.

I'm not sure I really understood death any better when I was sixteen. My father had been the most energetic, magnetic man. Then he just wasn't there anymore. At least that's the way I remember it, my timid mother always calmly waiting in his shadow. She married again less than a year later, another blustering man whom I argued with constantly. They moved to Michigan soon after I left for college. I see them maybe once a year now.

Thomas' family had become my family, Harold--my father; Sue--a friend my mother had never been. And although I was desperate to move from the City, I never considered that *they* would be far away.

* * *

I watch Thomas type away at his computer, content to sit in the dim light. I'm getting used to the sounds the house makes when the winds blow heavy, the creaks of the roof, the subtle rattle of window frames. It can be soothing, especially when I compare the sounds from our old house, the car alarms, the random sirens, the neighbors and their slamming doors. The boys are asleep and I've taken a shower, using the new fragrance I picked up when I drove into town today.

I want Thomas to notice me, to see me standing here in the doorway. I want him to look up from his computer screen, to sense me somehow, but he doesn't. After a while, I decide to go to bed.

* * *

Harold and Sue used to come in and out of our house in the City as if they lived there. They never knocked or rang the doorbell, just put their key in the lock and strolled in. Sue would bustle about, straightening couch cushions, adding ingredients to the dinner I was cooking in the kitchen. She would lean in, kiss me on the cheek, and whisper *Allison, you're the daughter I never had*. I would forgive anything after that, and usually did. There were certainly nights I wished they wouldn't come over.

There was one night, a Thursday, when I'd first found the credit card bill. I had been trying to organize the desk in our too-small office, looking for my order forms to send out with the new catalog, when I found it. Just an innocent slip of paper, with a balance much higher than I expected.

I found Thomas in the kitchen, rummaging through the refrigerator.

“What is this?”

He looked up, perhaps nonplussed at my intensity.

“What is what?”

“This MasterCard bill. What in the world did you spend \$600 on?”

It wasn't so much what he said, but rather the expression on his face, the same expression I'd learned to recognize on Adrian's face when he had sheepishly done something he knew he really shouldn't have.

“It's not what you think, honey.” That's funny to think about now, because honestly, I wasn't really thinking anything except we needed to save every penny if we were going to move.

Thomas is a handsome man, with dimples and tiny laugh-lines around his eyes. His hair is dark and wavy and he has only recently started graying around his temples. But his was a face I saw everyday. Maybe I'd forgotten that he was good-looking. It's hard to look at your mate when you're constantly looking after three growing boys. But as he leaned against the refrigerator door with one arm placatingly out, it occurred to me that he hadn't aged as much as I had.

“What am I supposed to think?”

That's when the boys erupted into the kitchen, calling out loudly that Grampa and Gramma were here, and when could we eat dinner because they were starving, and couldn't we have ice cream for dessert? Yes, yes, we could have ice cream for dessert.

Thomas wrapped his arm around my waist and took the bill out of my hand.

“We'll talk about this later,” and he kissed me.

* * *

So my husband had an affair. At first, I really did want to move from the City for the boys. I had some idyllic picture in mind of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, with sweetgrass between their teeth, and thought that was a far better image than my sweet Adrian with a concealed weapon while he flashed gang signs. He was still innocent, with his chubby baby-fat and his missing teeth, but he was growing far faster than I had ever expected.

Thomas doesn't know that I know about Sherrilyn. It started with that credit card bill, and then he kept coming home later and later. He's a graphic designer and we own

literally thousands of dollars in computer equipment. He could work almost completely from home. Then why all the late night meetings? He told me it was because of some big clients the advertising firm was wooing, and as the principal designer, his presence was necessary. That seemed logical to me—for awhile anyway.

My life was really very busy, too busy to really question where my husband was on all those late nights. I would get up in the morning around six, enjoy a solitary cup of coffee, then see that the boys were dressed. That was often an ordeal in and of itself, with Adrian attempting to stuff Little Harry into Paul's clothes, and Paul screaming his head off that those were *his* socks, and me trying to hustle all three into the bathroom to brush their teeth. Adrian could walk himself to the bus stop, but I had to take the other two to day care on my way to work. Thomas didn't like them underfoot on the days he worked at home, and although it would've been cheaper, I certainly knew he couldn't be expected to get work done with them around. I would go to my job at the bank as a loan officer and proceed to tell clients all day long that their equity just didn't add up to the low-interest-rate mortgage they were hoping for. In the meantime, I would go without lunch, since I usually forgot to make mine while I was slamming Adrian's together. Then, when my work day was done, I would pick the boys up from the day care, pick Adrian up from a neighbor's, stop at the grocery store for something quick and easy to cook for dinner, and hope that Thomas might've thrown some clothes into the washer.

After picking up the house, cooking dinner, bathing the boys, and finally sending them off to bed, I might look around for a moment and notice that Thomas wasn't home yet. I might then shrug my shoulders, and go out into the garage and do what I loved: put together the packages from the mail-order company I had started.

I'm really just a middle-man, a distributor. I find interesting items and Americana crafts at fairs, and then offer to picture them in my catalog. It was originally Sue's idea, as she was always visiting these craft fairs, and thought it would be great if some of these small businesses could have better access to a larger clientele. I started with a small website, and then enlarged it to include a mail-order catalog service. I think I just needed a hobby to start with, but I laugh to think about that. With three boys, who needs a hobby?

After a few weeks, I knew, in my heart, that Thomas wasn't at any meetings. He didn't come home smelling like perfume, or with lipstick on his collar. Except for that strange credit card bill, there weren't any unusual charges to his cell phone or to the house line. It wasn't even that he seemed uninterested in sex. It was mainly how he acted when he was at home: fidgety, like he would prefer to be anywhere else but here.

So then Harold died, leaving us enough money in his will to purchase the house in Chickaskia.

* * *

The sky seems brighter here, like the colors are somehow more blue and more yellow. Sunrise is at about 6:00, but the sky is light enough by 5:30. I still enjoy a solitary cup of coffee, but now I can go out onto the porch and sit on the swing, like a Folgers commercial. *The best part of waking up...*

I wonder if Thomas is happy here, if he misses the City, misses his father, misses Sherrilyn. But part of me doesn't really care. I don't miss those things, and at this point, that's all that really matters.

The screen door cracks open, and I turn to see Paul rubbing at his eyes. It's early for him. He pads out onto the porch and crawls up on the swing with me. He tugs at my arm so he can peer into my cup, and I let him have a little sip. I like him when he's like this, quiet and ready to cuddle. He idolizes Adrian, and since Adrian feels he's too grown up to be cuddled, then Paul doesn't want to hug or kiss either. But there's something really precious about that last child, the last one you know you'll have. Sometimes you watch him more closely than the others, because you know time will just slip by, and suddenly he'll be grown and there won't be any more babies.

He leans into my side and I wrap my free arm around him, catching a whiff of his baby-sleep scent.

The screen door cracks open again, and I turn to see Thomas rubbing at his eyes. It's early for him, too. He sees us, smiles at the picture we must make, and comes out onto the porch. He reaches for my coffee cup, and I automatically hand it to him. He takes a swig, grimacing; he doesn't take sugar in his. Then he sits down next to Paul and sets the swing liling with his foot. I want to look at him, but I'm afraid, afraid maybe he isn't really here, with his foot contentedly swaying. And maybe I'll see a look in his eyes, a look that says he's not really even thinking of us, his family on the porch. That maybe he's thinking about the City and how different it was there. Maybe he's thinking of Sherrilyn.

* * *

Chickaskia is literally a one street-light town. There is an Asco grocery store with twelve aisles. There is also a family drug store that still sells school supplies, perfume, and has an ice cream fountain. There is a Wal-Mart that closes at 8:00, which makes me laugh. I didn't know Wal-Marts ever closed. Chickaskia also has two gas stations, owned by the same family, and the patriarch is also the president of the Chamber of Commerce. His wife is the high school principal, and his brother is the local state representative. There is a car lot run by a disreputable man who wears red suspenders. He has maybe twenty cars to sell, but I drive by daily to see if he ever puts out a different car.

There is a feed store which also carries clothing and farming accessories. I like to go in and wander around trying to identify things. I haven't taken the boys in yet because I'm afraid they'll ask too many questions I don't know the answers to.

There are fifteen churches. I gather the boys every Sunday morning and visit a new one each week. I haven't bothered to explain to them the nuances of small-town Presbyterians verses Methodists. I'm not sure I understand the difference. The Presbyterians watch the teachers at the school to make sure they aren't teaching anything unsanctioned. The Methodists run a soup-kitchen for the non-existent homeless population. But the Sunday services are almost identical.

Thomas has yet to join me. His answer to my regular query is that we weren't religious before, why should we be now? I really want to smack him then, just tear into his face. Small town church just seems to be part of small town life. It's what you do. But he hasn't quite got the hang of that either.

* * *

Harold was a gardener. That wasn't his profession; he was actually an accountant. But gardening was definitely his avocation. He used to say that he felt closest to God with his hands in the soil. Sue would play at gardening, nipping off the deadheads of petunias and occasionally pulling out a dandelion weed. Harold, on the other hand, would mow his lawn in exacting diagonals. He would plant tomatoes after the first frost, cucumbers by mid-May, and pumpkins in July. He would mulch and weed and sow all year long. He even died in his garden, an unexpected aneurism causing a stroke; he collapsed among Sue's daffodils.

I want to plant a tree in his honor. We are going to the feed store to try and pick out the right sapling. I haven't decided if I want a fruit tree or maybe an evergreen. I've never planted anything before, but it seems like the right time to try.

The boys are running around the feed store like we were in Disney World. I hate when they get like this, full of volatile energy; they probably ate too much sugar at breakfast. We pass the gardening tools, and the pallets of huge sacks of grain. I make each boy connect hands like we're a choo-choo train and I'm the engine. Paul is the caboose. Adrian, I can tell, feels he's too old for this game, but he plays along anyway, finally making a choo-choo noise of his own. I can hear Paul giggling as I drag them around the displays until we get to the doors leading outside.

"I thought we were getting a tree for grandpa," says Harry.

I point out the rows of one gallon pots.

"Those aren't trees," he says.

“They’re baby trees, like when Paul came home from the hospital. They’ll grow,” I tell him.

“But when can we climb them? We can’t even hang a swing on this one.”

He is completely disillusioned by the whole process, I can see that.

But Adrian has wandered away. I’m looking around, tugging on Paul’s hand, listening as he still makes choo-choo noises. I call for Adrian.

“Over here, Mom. What about this one?” He is gazing at the tree intently, and for a moment, he doesn’t look like Thomas so much—more like Harold. The tree has familiar leaves, broad like the palm of my hand, but I don’t know enough about them to identify this one.

“Read what the card says,” I tell him.

“It’s a Woodbury oak. This says it’s a hardwood, appreciates full sun, and will grow up to twenty-five feet high.”

“Wow, twenty-five feet! That would be a really high swing,” says Harry. The little tree seems a tad spindly to me, only about four feet high now, with a narrow stem-like trunk.

“I don’t know, guys.” I’m reluctant to tell them yes. I’m not sure this tree will survive.

“Oh please, please, please.” It’s always surprising when they chant in unison, they so rarely agree, and so I give in.

* * *

When we get home, I find Thomas throwing things haphazardly into a bag. He's never been good at packing. I usually do this little chore for him.

"Oh good," he says, "I'm glad you're home."

"Where are you going?"

"Corporate called, that big account I've been working on, and I guess the CEO wants to talk to me in person, wants to check out my design ideas."

I get a bloated sensation in my stomach, a niggling in the mind, but I dismiss it.

"You have to go now?"

"Yeah, he wants to see me at the morning meeting, and he's got something scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. If I go now, I can be there by 8:00, and still get a hotel room." I can tell he's really excited, like maybe this is a big break for his career.

"It could mean more money for us, honey. Don't be upset."

"Where are you going?"

"Kansas City. But don't worry, Ally, I'll be home by Saturday night."

I walk over to him and pull the shirt from his hands that he's stuffing into the duffel. I kiss him on the cheek, rubbing my face on his stubble. "Why don't you let me do this while you go shave?" He nods and hurries from the room.

* * *

Thomas hasn't called. He called when he got there last night, and gave me his room number and the hotel name. But he hasn't called all day.

I lift the phone and dial Thomas' hotel room. I miss him already. I wait through the fourth ring. He must not be in his room now, but it's 9:30. Maybe a dinner meeting is running late?

But then he answers his phone and I smile to hear his voice.

"Hello?" He seems to be in a hurry.

"Hey, honey. How did the meeting go?"

"Oh, Allison, it's you."

I laugh. "Who did you expect it to be?"

"No one, Ally, I'm just really busy right now. Can I call you back?"

And then I hear it, another voice in the room, a decidedly female voice, sultry and exotic, asking, *Do you think we'll need more towels?*

"Allison?" Silence. "I'll call you back."

He doesn't know I heard *her*, doesn't think I know anything, he wants to just hang up, do *whatever* with her, and then just call me back?

"Sure, Thomas, call me back later."

I hang up the phone.

All this time. All this time and I thought that was over. I thought we could move here and everything would be new and better, a fresh start. But it's not new, at least not for Thomas.

I go up to our bedroom. I notice the pile of laundry in the corner, mostly socks knotted up with Thomas' boxers. I notice his shoes on the floor, his papers across the nightstand.

His stuff is *everywhere*.

I really don't want his things cluttering up my space.

I head up to the attic and pull out some of our moving boxes. I'm not sure why we saved them. Now I'm glad we did. I drag them down the stairs, tripping awkwardly with the boxes caught under my arm, but catching myself from actually falling. I go back into the bedroom.

Carefully, as if the items were fresh from the dryer, I fold his laundry from the floor. Then I go into the closet and begin to pull his clothes from the hangers. I fold these as well, his crisp oxford shirts that I've carefully ironed, his favorite jeans with the holes in the knees. All of it. I pleat the pants so the crease is centered on the leg, brushing away at a small piece of lint. Then I begin to set each item in the boxes, making sure not to press too hard and crush new wrinkles into the fabric.

I carry the first full box down to the kitchen. I rummage through the drawers and find the packing tape. I seal the box. Then I walk it out near the street and place the box five feet from the edge, so that no one will accidentally hit it while driving. I notice that clouds are collecting in the east. Maybe we'll get rain by morning. My new tree could certainly use it.

I feel a bit vague, as if I've done this all before, that packing Thomas' things neatly into boxes is familiar. I keep working. Finally, the bedroom is empty of him, save for the sheets, and they're 300 count Egyptian cotton and he never quite appreciated that like I did. The last box from the bedroom makes six boxes in the yard.

I think I'm going to do the office next. I know I kept the computer boxes upstairs in the attic. I should be able to put everything back neatly, like when they came from the store. I'm doing him a favor, really, packing his things up for him.

The phone rings. I look at my watch. It's 11:30, a little late for a phone call. I answer.

"Hey honey. It's me. I'm sorry it took me so long to call back. Everything okay on your end? How are the boys doing? All tucked in?" Thomas has always started phone conversations like this, not really waiting for an answer, just blithely talking.

I tuck the phone between my shoulder and my ear. "Yeah, Thomas. Everything is fine. We can't wait for you to come home tomorrow." And I stifle a yawn.

"Well, I can tell you're sleepy," he says, "and I'm beat, so I'm going to tuck in, too. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay. It'll be good to have you home. I love you, Thomas."

"I love you, too."

I hang up the phone. It is going to rain. Maybe I'll bring the boxes into the garage.

Silent All These Years

Emily Anne Jackson has watched an HBO special of some people doing naked yoga, and is determined to try it that way. She has twisted the blinds closed and dead-bolted the door. She is still a little nervous, afraid the cable guy might randomly turn up. Not that the cable guy has a key or anything, she reminds herself, but she slides the chain, just in case.

Emily Anne decides to push the tape into the VCR before shedding her terry robe. She isn't quite bold enough to just let the material slink to the floor. Maybe after she does the breathing exercises that Master Li demonstrates on the video, she should untie the belt.

Emily Anne is new to Yoga. Her doctor recommended a light exercise routine to help combat the extra pouches of flesh that have begun to develop below her breasts. She was exasperated to discover that while they sell bras to push up tiny breasts, and bras to flatten pendulous breasts, they have yet to develop something for extra breasts. The doctor assured her that she was not abnormal, that many women her age were fighting the onset of a slower metabolism, but while she appreciates the newly rounded curves of her buttocks, she despises the fact that she no longer has a waist. She isn't really fat, she decides, but there are definite pouches and bulges in the strangest places.

The woman in the JC Penney lingerie department recommended a lycra tube/girdle thing. She assured Emily Anne that the state-of-the-art material would hold everything 'in.' But after wiggling into the thing, Emily Anne was unable to button her blouse over her newly enlarged chest. Just because the flab was in front, that did not

make it a boob, and squeezing it all into a particular mold made it very difficult to breathe.

She needs a new body.

Emily Anne is confident that naked yoga will do the trick.

With a burst of nerves and enthusiasm, she unties the robe. With a little wriggle, she is loose. She stares down at her body; she is going to reinvent herself. Closing her eyes, she pictures the perfectly toned body that will soon be hers, if she does exactly as Master Li instructs. But when she opens her eyes, she is confronted by the mounds of tissue that jostle this way and that when she moves.

As she attempts to bend and sway with the flowing grace of the figure on the screen, she reminds herself of the alternatives.

Liposuction was her first idea. But while watching the Discovery Channel, she was disgusted by the barbarity of the act. The liquid gelatinous mass looked like tapioca pudding, with shlops and glops from the clear tubes falling into buckets like melted yogurt.

Master Li's voice interrupts: *Embrace the dawn*. Emily Anne stretches her arms upward, then bends over, trying to watch the video while reaching for her toes. She stumbles forward, catches herself before she falls completely, but not before she's staggers into the television, sending the VCR to the floor.

She sighs. So much for that.

* * *

Emily Anne is going to have lunch with her mother. This is a once-a-week routine, and she takes comfort in the ritual elements of getting ready.

The action of putting cosmetics on her face is soothing, the slide of the brush gliding over cheekbones, the flesh tingling. The only part she truly dislikes is the plucking of eyebrows, the snap and sting. Once she went so far as to try to trim the longer hairs, but she ended with a bald spot in the middle of the left brow, one she had to fill, drawing it in carefully with a brown pencil.

Her sturdy little compact, a Neon, gets twenty-eight miles to the gallon. The car was her first adult purchase and she combed the pages of Consumer Reports for weeks, finally basing her decision on economy and thriftiness. She originally wanted a little red CRX, a car that had lost popularity in the past ten years, but nonetheless appealed to her burgeoning sense of freedom and independence. But a vision of the CRX after an accident, a crushed tin can, had changed her mind. She'd opted for the 'sensible' choice, and wished now in hindsight that she'd been more adventurous.

She slides into the car, automatically reaching for the little spray bottle she keeps in the glove compartment. A squirt here, a squirt there. *Aaahhh*. Emily Anne breathes deeply of the Nu Car smell. Amazing invention, the particular odor of new car sealed in a plastic bottle. She hopes it will cover the constant cling of cigarette smoke, maybe help maintain the resale value of the car, but since there are two nickel-sized burns in the passenger seat, there isn't much chance of that. She turns the radio on and drives to the Sweet Basil Cafe.

When she steps inside, Emily Anne looks across the sea of faces until she finally spots her mother waving frantically from a table in the back. The clientele is primarily

middle class, and the menu is ordinary; Emily Anne prefers a restaurant with more interesting food. This is, however, exactly the kind of place her mother would select, with little thought to other venues.

Her mother is wearing the predictable outfit, carefully pressed slacks, a few discreet and tasteful touches of gold, and the suave artistry of Estee Lauder. She wears the youth-dew fragrance, which would be overpowering on a less sophisticated woman, but on her, is effective.

“Oh Emily Anne, dear, you really shouldn’t wear that shade of green. It really doesn’t do anything for your complexion.”

Emily Anne rolls her eyes at the familiar admonishment. It doesn’t matter what color she wears, her mother makes similar comments on everything. One time, after strenuous dieting, Emily Anne had finally squeezed herself into a size twelve. Her mother had not noticed the new jeans or the new blouse or the new hair style. It was the tobacco stain’s on Emily Anne’s teeth that received comment. Another time, right before her high school reunion, Emily Anne had selected the “wrong” shoes to wear with her outfit, and even though they fit perfectly and were in the latest style, her mother had insisted that she borrow one of her pairs, a pair that pinched painfully at the toes.

“I’m so glad you could take time away from your busy schedule to spend some time with your mother.”

There is a certain wheedling tone, as if to suggest that Emily Anne is doing less than a favor to come out to the restaurant. It is a guilt trip, Emily knows, because she cancelled the previous week.

Emily Anne chafes a bit at the comment, since she hasn't really been busy lately; she just hasn't wanted to spend any free time with her mother. The conversations invariably fall into the doldrums of her mother's self-recriminating comments, and Emily Anne is rarely called on to do more than grunt in response.

When the waiter comes, Emily Anne orders the grilled chicken sandwich with extra mayonnaise.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Her mother asks. "Wouldn't you rather have a salad?"

"No, Mom, I'm not in the mood for a salad. I'll have the sandwich."

Her mother makes a humming noise, as if she wants to continue, but doesn't want to seem like she's criticizing Emily Anne's choice.

"What, Mom? Go ahead and say it; I know you want to."

"I was just thinking that maybe you would want to make a healthier choice, what with your diet and all."

Emily Anne sighs. She looks at the waiter who is patiently standing at their table, then orders the spinach salad with no dressing. Sometimes it's just easier to do what her mother wants. Her mother, on the other hand, has no reservation about ordering the grilled chicken sandwich for herself.

"Your father isn't doing so well," her mother suddenly says, after the waiter leaves. Emily Anne is fuming over her mother's order, so she misses the comment at first.

"What?" she finally says, her mind catching up.

"The doctors say he's going to be fine, he just has to have this little surgery."

Emily Anne sips at her tea. Her mother looks at her, raising her brow, a cue.

“What surgery?” Emily Anne dutifully says.

“Oh, it’s a procedure.” Her mother’s voice seems overly calm, “where they use a tiny balloon to expand one of his arteries, to let the blood through. It seems pretty simple, but he’s not feeling well after that cold.”

“Mom, it wasn’t a cold. He had pneumonia.”

“Oh honey, it was just a little cold, nothing so serious as the doctors made it out to be.”

Emily Anne controls the need to roll her eyes. Luckily, the waiter has arrived with food, and so there isn’t as much need to talk while their mouths are working. Emily Anne wonders if her mother really expects her to be worried or upset. She has a tough time working any feeling up in regard to her father. She has wished for some time that he was dead, but that seems cruel. She concentrates on her salad. They have added little strawberries and nuts, and even though that makes for good color, the taste is uninteresting and bland. Emily Anne hates salads. Her mother’s chicken looks very good.

When they finish eating, Emily Anne immediately gets up, in a hurry to leave. There are a few small crumbs from the nuts of her salad on her shirt. Her mother reaches over and brushes at them with her napkin.

“What will people think,” she says. “They’ll think you didn’t have a good mother. Let me just get those for you.”

In the process, Emily Anne’s blouse gets straightened and her hair gets tucked behind her ears.

“There. Now you look perfect.” Emily Anne hugs her mother, kisses her cheek.

* * *

After ten days, the yoga tape is routine, or at least Emily Anne is familiar enough with Master Li’s motions that she can follow them without looking. She stretches her arms over her head, feeling the pull of sinew in her back, and she exhales, imagining her lungs are water barrels being turned over, and she swishes out the air, reaching for her toes. She is naked.

While she is still leery of the window blinds and the door chain, she has begun to like the feeling, the risqué action. The motion of air across the crease of her buttocks is surprising, as is the subtle dampening of the skin beneath her breasts. There has been no miracle so far, no amazing random reshaping of her body, but she is starting to enjoy the feel of her own skin, the messages of hundreds of tiny little hairs. Part of her had begun to think her skin can *hear* a little too.

Once her clothes are back on, she feels stifled, closed in, but exhilarated as well, as if she knows a secret no one else knows, because she knows her body, and the sweat, and the breathing, in and out, in and out, so much breathing... breathing through the left nostril and breathing through the right, the air moving all the way down to her heels.

* * *

The jarring ring of the telephone on the night stand has Emily Anne jerking from a sound sleep. She looks blearily around, confused by a lingering erotic dream, the

twisted sheets tangled around her knees. When the phone rings a second time, she slams her hand into the handset, knocking it from its cradle before she is able to bring it to her ear. Still groggy and unable to focus, she bangs the plastic against her ear.

She hears her mother's voice, but she can't register any of the words. For a moment, she holds the phone away, considers just putting it quietly back into its cradle. But familiar guilt makes her move it back, listen.

"Emily Anne, do you hear me?"

Emily Anne mumbles what she hopes is the appropriate response.

"Your father is down at the hospital. They think there's something wrong with his gallbladder, and they're not really sure what they're going to do... Emily Anne, are you awake?"

Maybe the old bastard would finally die, Emily Anne thinks. I could only be so lucky.

"Yeah, Mom, I'm awake. Now what's going on?"

With a sigh, she banishes the desire to return to sleep. Her father complained of stomach pains after he ate her mother's meatloaf. The pain increased until he was curled into a fetal position, and her mother had panicked, and called an ambulance. Maybe the grocery store sold her mother bad ground beef? Maybe the tomatoes were sour?

"Oh... what if I've killed your father?"

Emily Anne snorts at this.

"Mom, what do you want me to do?"

"Well don't you think you ought to be here?" There is that tone to her mother's voice, a peculiar resonance, as if her mother has moved the phone away from her mouth.

“I’ll drive up tomorrow.” She wants to sleep now. Sleep seems like the most important thing in the world. She’ll drive up tomorrow.

* * *

After her morning yoga, Emily Anne climbs into the Neon. The route is familiar and boring. She has purchased several books on tape that she keeps ready for the two-hour trip. But as she turns onto the highway, she leaves the radio off.

So her father is in the hospital. He isn’t really her father. He is actually her mother’s second husband, but the life-long habit of calling him ‘dad’ has blurred the distinction. And since her natural father drifted away years ago, it really is a moot point. She rarely thinks about *him*, her other father. When she does think about him, she is confused by her own ambivalent feelings; she can’t quite decide to love or to hate him. So she pretends he doesn’t exist.

Her stepfather, on the other hand, *him* she has no ambivalence about. She hates him, despises him. When she first met him, at the age of eleven, she had only hated him for taking her mother away. By the time she was seventeen, she despised him for other, more painful reasons.

She remembers that she only wanted to escape, rest for awhile, leave her own skin, stop the terror and fear and exhaustion. And maybe she wanted to hurt the people who had hurt her, but that wasn’t really a conscious thought. She slid the razor along the delicate skin of her wrist, passing it back and forth, caressing the fine lines. She wasn’t afraid, and that was a relief all by itself. There was no fear, no fear of the pain, no fear of

the blood. She was calm, as if the soothing repetitive motion of the razor was quieting the riotous noise in her brain.

The razor parted her skin, a sliver of a cut, and she watched the slim trail of blood that curled around her wrist. She wanted to laugh at how easy it was. She would just fall asleep and that would be The End, and it wasn't nearly as melodramatic as on television, and there was something soothing in that.

But the blood started to congeal around the cut. How silly she was to think that the small slice was all it would take? The familiar helplessness crawled up her spine, and her vision blurred as her eyes filled. She couldn't even do it right! And why couldn't she just lie down and wake up somewhere else, anywhere else?

The anger roared to life somewhere behind her, crawled up her spine until it burst in her brain. She had a glittering sensation, as if her mind had separated from the physical, and the rush narrowed her vision to the fingers gripping the blade, like she was watching a cartoon one frame at a time.

Then she felt the cold metal on her wrist; the chill clarity brought fear back from the dark corner her anger had banished it to. She had to really push the blade, bear down on the resisting tissue. The popping as the artery wall collapsed surprised her, but then the blood rushed, roared a train in her ears. She panicked, cried out to the empty house, afraid that she really *would* die, and the resolve that had moved her dissipated.

* * *

The county hospital where her father is staying was built in the late forties, and remodeled in the seventies. Among all the sterile whites are splashes of sea foam green, *a hideous color*, Emily Anne decides.

Emily Anne is at the hospital because she *has* to be. She does not like hospitals. They are white, always white, the patients, the doctors, the pills, everything is always white. She wonders if the nurses carry around little bottles of medicine-smell, with a squirt here and a squirt there, to reassure everyone that the resale value would be maintained, that everything really is *that* clean.

The summer Emily Anne turned seventeen, she stayed in the hospital for two months. At first, they would not let her wear her own clothes. It hadn't mattered, the lack of clothing, identity. The nurses and counselors told her she could have her own clothes back if she would write an autobiography. She had not wanted her clothing back. But the autobiography was okay.

She wrote about her mother, and the swimming pool in the apartment complex where she first learned to hold her breath. She wrote about the Arkansas mountains, and camping, and caving. She wrote about her favorite teacher. She did not write about her stepfather, or about love, or about death.

Her counselor, a tiny Indian woman with a thick accent, asked if her life had been only good things? If her life had been only good things, why had she wanted to die?

But you didn't ask me that, Emily Anne had protested.

Well now she was.

So Emily Anne rewrote the damned thing, and tried to be honest and to include the trivial bad things.

But she knew why she wanted to die. In a brief letter to her counselor, she gave four reasons: Loneliness, anger, spite and fear, but it really only boiled down to one; if she didn't kill herself, then her father would kill her.

Seventeen was a tough age, she remembers. She had really wanted to buy a car, but she wasn't able to save enough money. She had to walk everywhere she wanted to go, and even places she didn't want to go, like school. Unfortunately, there was no way to get out of school.

Emily Anne dragged the saxophone case, her hand getting slick on the handle. She was tired, and still had a mile and a half to go to get home. She wished that the house wasn't so far from the school, and she wished that just once her stepfather would come to pick her up so she wouldn't have to walk the whole way.

He had told her, "If you want me to come pick you up from school, then you're going to have to pay for the gas, just like you would a cab."

"You mean I gotta' pay you for a ride home from school?"

"If I'm going to be your cab service, I might as well get paid for it."

God, she hated him. So things were bad right then, so he couldn't find a job. She paid for half the groceries out of her part-time job check, couldn't she just get a ride home from school? But she hadn't wanted to argue about it, not over something so silly, and she hadn't wanted to admit that she was trying to save some of that money for a new saxophone. So she walked.

She pushed the crosswalk button. She hoped nobody from school would see her walking home. It was so embarrassing, like she was a freshman or something.

And then there he was, Brad Donavon, in his new Camaro with his stereo blasting. She hoped he didn't see her standing there at the corner while he waited for the light to change. *Please don't look please don't look... oh god, he's looking*, she thought.

"Hey Emily, you wanna' ride?" *Oh god oh god oh god oh god. What do I say? Oh god, Yes yes yes yes.. I wanna ride in that shiny new car and go anywhere you wanna go, and we can just drive.*

"No thanks, I'm fine," and she hoped that her smile was a sophisticated, nonchalant one.

"Come on, before the light's green."

So she got into his car, tried to act like this happened to her all the time, like she accepted rides from the most popular guy in her class, and it was nothing. With the windows rolled down, and the radio blasting again, she could close her eyes and be anyone else. And for five glorious minutes, she *was* someone else.

But when the car pulled into her neighborhood, she had him park two blocks from her house. There was no way she was going to let her stepfather know that she had been in a car with a boy. No matter how strange Brad thought she was, she couldn't let him drop her off in front of her house.

Emily Anne watched as Brad drove away, a little sick to her stomach, wishing she could've just stayed in the car.

Her father met her at the door, his thick hand at her throat, and she backed away, moving from the one-handed grasp, but then he brought his other hand to bear, and she was trapped with her back against the wall, her toes stretching to keep balance, his face flushed with anger and red fury, spittle at the corners of his mouth. One hand swung

away, and then rushed forward, smacking her across the face, and her head knocked into the wall and her glasses flew across the tile of the entryway, and she cried, only dimly aware that the syllables dripping from her mouth were pleas, and he kicked her as she sat on the floor, the air gone from her lungs, and she gasped and wheezed.

He was yelling, screaming, *whore, harlot, jezebel, slut of a Mary Magdalene, and didn't she think he'd see, and how stupid did she think he was, was she even a virgin anymore, and he'd seen the car, and all boys ever wanted was sex and she'd probably been a dumb cooze and given it to him, and who was that boy...* and so it went, on and on and on, with her lying on the floor of the entryway, her glasses too far to reach, and there was a moment when she reached for those glasses, and he raised his foot and stomped on her hand, but he was getting tired by then, and it was a half-hearted stomp. *See what you made me do?*

And her mother came, and wiped away her tears and the bit of blood on her face, and she clucked her tongue over the pinky finger that was swollen and sore, *see what you made him do?*

* * *

He is lying there, on the bed, with tubes and bits and pieces of plastic poking from him. He can't ingest food, he can't really even breathe, through the pain, and they have him hooked to an oxygen machine. All of this for a gall bladder? Maybe the doctors are overreacting. Maybe they have a difficult time determining an emergency in such a small town.

Or maybe he really is dying. Maybe he is going to croak, and she can go to a funeral wearing a black dress and carrying orchids.

She takes the seat next to the hospital bed. He looks frail, lying there amidst all that white. There is an IV needled into the papery skin of his hand, and tubes coming from his nostrils. His complexion is chalk and milk, his lips chapped and cracking. Is this what death looks like?

When she had been twelve, she stole an entire pack of cigarettes from her mother. She went out to the park and sat on the bleachers around the baseball diamond. One cigarette after another, she smoked the whole pack, until she was both sick and proud.

Her stepfather blamed her mother, saying she smoked far too much, and that the carton should've lasted a week. It never occurred to either of them that Emily Anne had swiped them.

How is she supposed to feel about this now?

She wants him to say that he didn't know how to be a father. Master Li says forgiveness frees the spirit.

And he is lying there, in the bed, the flesh sagging on the bones. She wonders suddenly if maybe she couldn't just pull a tube here, or kink something, if maybe she could help him die a little.

After she slit her wrist, for days in and out, she stayed in the hospital, tried to talk with the counselors, until finally, she just broke. She sobbed and cried and wailed, wanted to be someone else, to occupy another's skin, and wanted to know why couldn't her mother have just divorced him years ago?

She just wants him to die. What if she were to just unplug that little machine over there? Surely it wouldn't make that big a difference?

She wants him to die. She's wanted him to die for years.

She sits next to his hospital bed; he is still, his breath a wheezing blur, and she thinks, he should try Master Li's technique. And then her mother walks into the room.

She still looks good for a woman her age, the wrinkles about her eyes faint, charming rather than faded, and her smooth southern voice can soothe anyone. Her mother was so gentle, so fragile, even before she married. And with that thought, more come, the moments when her mother cautioned her to be quiet, and reprimanded her for making him mad, and silently watched as she was slapped to the carpeted floor.

But it had always been her and her mother before that, a team against the world, and why is she here in the hospital with her mother and him? Why did she even come?

Emily Anne takes another deep breath, a Master Li breath, and then looks at her mother again. The makeup is heavy, actually flaking a bit at the eyes, and the lipstick has all but worn away, except for the darker liner. And her hands, Emily Anne has never even noticed the hands, with the white/blue skin and the rings and the folding skin, and *there* is her mother's age, in the flesh of her hands and her neck, the neck that has held that head high, despite everything she has stood aside from and watched.

Emily Anne looks back at him on the bed, and he is just a man after all. But he is mortal, and dying now. She looks at the scar on her wrist, the puckering of the purplish tracery, feels the gathers, and she looks across at her mother's face. Her mother's eye shadow is the same shade of purple, an unnatural color, both on Emily Anne's wrist and on her mother's eyes.

Emily Anne attempts another deep breath, a Master Li calming inhalation, but the knot in her chest makes it difficult to breathe. She closes her eyes, follows the path down into her calming center. But it isn't there. She decides that she is tired of this path, tired of this.

She reaches out, touches her mother's hand on the hospital bed.

I love you, Mom. I'll always love you.

The lump in her chest begins to ease.