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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Joyce Marie Riha for the Master of Arts in English were presented May 9, 1996, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Joyce Marie Riha for the Master of Arts in English presented May 9, 1996.

Title: Fire Ants

Loss is a fundamental part of the human experience, from the loss of security and innocence that comes with the necessary separation of child from parent to the ultimate loss of life. Along the way, there are the losses of jobs, of incomes, of homes; the losses of friendships, of family members, of lovers; the losses of direction, of control, of hope. As cognitive and caring beings, humans struggle to cope with these losses, to greater and lesser degrees of success. This is the theme at the heart of this thesis.

Fire Ants is composed of ten short stories, fictive works, which differ in specific subject matter, yet deal unilaterally with issues of loss.

Like the venomous creatures that threaten to eat B.D. Packard alive in the title story, life eats away at a number of characters in the collection who are deficient. The narrators in "Aftermath" and "Hues," for example, suffer psychological -- if not physical -- deaths. But not all of the characters lack coping mechanisms, unhealthy as they may sometimes be. As the stories

unfold, some characters begin to gain small degrees of perspective and understanding, to learn that while life is full of loss, it is not always entirely bleak. As demonstrated in "Cross Creek," good exists, though it is not always where one might expect it. And life can be full despite loss, as depicted in "Stitches."

FIRE ANTS

by
Joyce Marie Riha

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

Portland State University
1996

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Fire Ants

When they came, they didn't come marching two by two. They came by the dozens, by the hundreds, by the thousands. Battalions of red armored infantry equipped with poison gas and hungry for flesh. B.D. Packard was not ready for them; he was asleep when they arrived. In fact, he had dozed off in the lawn chair after he and Ginger May grilled burgers for supper. Perhaps lured by the smell of sizzling meat, they had come in search of food. And finding none of the cooked stuff, they headed for the tartare. They headed for 225 pounds of prime B.D. Packard. His leg, dangling over the edge of the aluminum frame, served as the appetizer. Fortunately for B.D., the first ants' venomous bites opened not only his flesh, but his eyes, and he managed to escape their attack before they reached the main course. He woke up hooting and hollering, yelling "Goddamnit" and "What the hell," as he swatted at the swarm biting white hot up his leg.

Ginger May had come running from the kitchen. "What is it?"

"I'll be damned. It's them ants. It's them stingin' ants, the ones from Mexico."

He had heard about them on the TV news for the past few weeks, story after story about the fire ants that had made their way north from some South American country, feeding on bird and lizard eggs as well as newborn livestock, chewing on electrical transformers and telephone cables, snacking on human flesh while leaving behind venom more powerful than a cobra's. One of the anchormen had reported that thousands of people were seeking medical help each year for the poisonous bites. The newscast had included pictures of painful-looking pus-filled blisters on legs and arms; a shot of a crying toddler, his face like air bubble packing plastic, red like mottled meat. They showed a close-up of the creature, its iron jaw snapping like an animal trap into something simulating human flesh, its body curling into a fetal position and then striking with its backside stinger again and again. And apparently, as this reporter and others had said, of the hundreds of insecticides on the market, nothing seemed to slow these bands of marauders, these illegal aliens building their arsenals on Texas territory. And now, here they were, on B.D. Packard's place.

"Goddamn Spic ants," B.D. shouted, still swatting at his ankle. "Goddamn Mexicans. It's not enough they come across the border like packs of wild dogs, they gotta bring their goddamn lice with 'em."

"B.D."

"Goddamn bastards," picking up one of the shoes that lay in the grass beside the chair and swatting at the retreating regiment.

"B.D."

"I'm not gonna take it anymore, I tell you. I'm not gonna take it."

"B.D., honey -- " Ginger May tried to interrupt again, attempted to swab his leg with the kitchen towel in her hands.

"They come up here and take my job, they take my wife, but they're not gonna take anything else -- not my yard, not my house, and certainly not my goddamn leg." His voice continued to rise. "I'm not gonna goddamn take it."

"B.D." Ginger May's voice dripped like molasses. "You got me now."

B.D. swatted her away. "Goddamnit, Ginger May, get some ice."

B.D. began his vigil over the backyard that very night, scouring his property for their encampments. He found one on the southeast corner. It measured nearly a foot at the highest point and stretched out over a few square feet of Packard land, and thousands upon thousands of six-legged hourglass figures scurried over the hills of the empire.

The next morning, B.D. was on the stoop of Loveworth's Feed Store when it opened at nine. "I've got them fire ants," he told the man who opened the door and then perched behind the counter. "I need the best stuff you got."

"Man, them suckers is hard to get rid of," the man said, thumping a large plastic bottle of a murky green-brown fluid on the counter. The stuff looked and smelled like waste from the chemical plant where B.D. worked before he was laid off. "This is the best stuff on the market right now," he said, "but I'll tell you, I've tried the stuff, and I don't think anything short of a nuclear holocaust is gonna get rid of those bugs." He smiled as B.D. counted out the cash, "Good luck."

After B.D. attacked the colony with the green-brown sludge, it was clear luck was what he needed, for this concoction merely slowed the army down, and if anything, seemed to incite them to further attack, calling for reinforcements. Only a few days after the first sludge treatment, B.D. found a second encampment, even larger than the first, camouflaging itself under an azalea bush.

At Marston's Feed 'n Seed, he found a cow-manure-extract fertilizer, boasted to be "the best damn stuff available" by this chirping clerk, who berated the chemical brew from Loveworth's. But the results were no different from those of the first treatment; the extract failed to make any significant dent in the alien empire. Millions of tiny beaded figures flew over the mounds of black sand like hovering bombers. Their bodies, in the shape of violins, sang out a war cry B.D. could swear he heard. Soft though it was, their song dripped with poison. They were all the same, he thought, the same

poison under different labels, vendors hawking their wares. And if they were to be stopped, it was up to him.

Over the next several weeks, B.D. devoted himself to finding a poison of his own to stop the invaders. He talked to feed and hardware store employees. He talked to exterminators. He talked to anybody who would listen, asked questions of anybody who would talk. He heard of schemes to build tractor-pulled vacuum cleaners, of plans to import giant South American anteaters. He tried every insecticide he could buy. He tried boiling water, baby shampoo, laundry detergent. He tried smothering, flooding and torching the mounds. But still, new ones kept popping up.

"Goddamn it," he said to Ginger May. "what's it gonna take?"

"Why don't you forget about those ants, honey?" she said.

"I can't. They're on my land. My land," he emphasized, "don't you see?"

"No, I don't see." She paused, then said in her brown sugar voice, "B.D., honey, you're losin' it."

"B.D., honey," he mimicked her in falsetto, "you're losin' it," then dropped back to his usual rough baritone. *I am* losin' it. That's exactly the point. It's my land, Goddamn it." And freshly inspired, he grabbed the fire extinguisher from under the kitchen sink and slammed the door on the way out.

A few blasts of the extinguisher on the colony had the desired effect. It slowed the guerrillas long enough for him to dig a pit next to

the mound and put a piece of Plexiglas over it. Now he could watch his tormentors at work, study their movements. And study he did; he sat for hours, sweating in the humid onslaught of the hot weather months, pounding down Budweiser after Budweiser, smoking Marlboro after Marlboro, trying Packard poison after Packard poison.

One sultry night, out of frustration as well as overconsumption of beer, B.D. decided to relieve himself on the mound. The ammonia of his urine, combined with a toxic chemical sludge he had brewed over the past several weeks in a coffee can in his garage, bubbled on the mound as ants ran for the trenches. "Goddamn," he yipped, aiming his stream of poison after them, his lips accidentally releasing the cigarette which hung there in the process. He jumped at the burst of flame on the ground when it hit, leaving incinerated enemy carcasses on the ground. "I've got you sonsofbitches, now," he sang, zipping his pants and reeling in a quarterback's touchdown jig. Then it was off to the garage to begin the next batch. With a month's brewing time to wait out, there was no time to lose. He didn't even stop in the kitchen for a beer, just set about his work among the canisters, bottles and bags he had collected, taking special care to replicate the deadly recipe as precisely as possible, only this time in a batch big enough to fill two fifty gallon aluminum garbage cans.

When he finally wandered in the house around 3 a.m., Ginger May was sitting at the kitchen table in the dark staring out the

window. B.D. saw the glow of her cigarette, lighting up as she inhaled and then disappearing, like a lighthouse in the night. "I'm leaving, B.D." She exhaled a gray cloud. "I'm sick of hearing about those ants. I'm sick to death of it."

B.D. didn't say a word, just sailed past her into the black. Halfway down the hallway, he thought he heard her say, "No wonder Norma left."

It had been almost a year to the day when he had come home and found Norma with Manuel, one of the cooks from El Nino, the restaurant where she worked. She had started working there when B.D. lost his job at the plant. And on that Friday, she brought home more than a check.

B.D. had stopped off at The Port on his way back from the unemployment office for a couple of beers and a chance to see Ginger May, the waitress whose perky face lit up every time he came in the door. He liked sitting in her section, watching her deliver trays of drinks in her short leather skirt. He loved how she catered to him, bringing him frothy mugs of beer and lingering when her tables were slow, listening to him tell stories about the old days. She could appreciate them, he supposed, the somewhat weathered skin around her eyes telling him they were of roughly the same age. She reminded him of the way things used to be with Norma, before she started working at the restaurant and coming home with stories of difficult customers or short tips, and complaining of sore feet. That

always made him feel guilty, like he had somehow been responsible for the big cutbacks the plant had made or for not being chosen from the hundreds of applicants that went after every machine operator's opening that had been listed in the classifieds since, like it was his fault he was twenty years older than most of the applicants. His whole life he had worked, worked as a man should to support himself and his wife, and now here he was, sitting in a bar while his wife was off working. And every time Norma came home with one of those stories, he was reminded of it, reminded that he had failed. A few beers and sometimes a movie with Ginger May helped him forget all that. Except today, Ginger May didn't have much time to linger -- The Port was especially busy, it being a Friday and all -- so he headed home after just an hour or so.

As he pulled up to the house, he saw the dusty blue Chevy in the driveway and recognized it as Manuel's. He knew that Norma sometimes caught a ride home with one of the cooks or the other waitresses instead of riding the bus, and so thought nothing of it. It wasn't until he opened the door and heard the crash of shattering glass in the bedroom that he knew something was awry. Pounding down the hallway, the small house shaking with every one of his size 13 steps, he swung open the bedroom door. There, he saw a big hairy brown ass disappearing into the bathroom. He saw his wife, her nude body white as scorpion, nearly passed out on the bed. The sweet sour smell of whiskey, tobacco and sex hung on the air. The

lamp from the bedside table lay shattered on the floor, apparently pulled off as the big Mexican stumbled over the cord on his way to the bathroom.

Norma lifted her swirling head with some effort, "B.D., darlin'," she said. "I didn't --" she started, but got no further.

"Goddamnit," was all he said. Then he turned and made his way back down the hallway, through the living room and out into the shadowed dusk. He got in his truck and started it up, not knowing where to go. For lack of a better idea, he headed back to The Port, back to Ginger May.

The next day, Norma begged him to forgive her. She cried until her face was as red and blotchy as raw hamburger. She told him she had been drunk; she didn't know what she was doing. She told him it had been the only time; she had never cheated before. She told him she had made a mistake; it would never happen again. She told him she loved him. She pleaded for forgiveness.

He told her there would be no forgiveness. He told her to leave. He told her to go live with Manuel.

"What about you?" she mustered between sobs.

"What about me?"

"You and that waitress from the bar."

B.D.'s jaw set. "Get out."

She was hyperventilating. He thought of getting her a brown paper bag to breathe into, but didn't. Instead, he spat out venom,

"Slut." Then he turned, leaving her there wheezing, gasping for air, and left.

When he got home late that night, she was gone. He had called Ginger May for comforting, and she moved in with her big Samsonite the next day.

For weeks, he had gotten phone calls and messages from Norma. "B.D., darlin', I'm sorry for what I done." She would cry into the receiver and he could tell that she was biting her lower lip the way she always had, could imagine her eyes red and swollen. "I want to come home," she would say and then leave some number he didn't recognize, plead with him to call her.

"Call Manuel," he would say to the machine, then hit a button in an attempt to erase her voice forever. And then the phone calls had stopped. He would come home to check the machine for the flashing light, wondering why she had stopped calling. He thought that maybe it had something to do with Ginger May.

He was glad she was leaving.

For weeks after Ginger May's departure, B.D. continued his watch over the fire ants, spying on the blood red army, sweating in the heat and drinking, waiting for his new batch of poison to turn into the deadly gas he needed to eradicate the ants. Periodically, he would go into the house to check the answering machine, occasionally finding a message -- a sales call or a hey-why-haven't-

we-heard-from-you from one of his old buddies at the plant. Ginger May called once to see if she could come over for the night.

"No," he said. "I don't think it would be such a good idea."

"Yes," she said. "I guess you're right."

After he hung up, he dialed the number for El Nino, still scrawled on a piece of paper taped to the phone. The man who answered said Norma hadn't worked there for months, "not since she broke up with her old man." Apparently, she'd stopped in once to pick up her last check, but had left no forwarding address.

It was a Friday night in June when the message finally came. He had come into the house for something to eat when he saw the flashing light beckoning.

"B.D., darlin'," she said, her voice soft and smooth as a flower petal. "Just thought I'd call and say hello." She drew in a breath. "I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I won't bother you any more." Then there was the click of the receiver and the machine stopped dead. He played it again and again, listening to the sound of her voice, remembering.

He thought back on how things used to be, how he would come home and she would have dinner on the table -- roast beef and gravy, casseroles, jello salads, pie. He remembered how she would sit across from him, her head tilting, red hair shining under the ceiling light, as she listened to story after story about his days at the

plant, how she would inquire about Artie and Hal, and how was old Mr. Steiner's hip coming along. It occurred to him that she knew them all from his stories. And yet he could not remember a single thing she had told him about her days, though he was sure she had tried. Where was she now, he wondered. How many phone calls and messages had there been and he had not scribbled down one number. Was she sitting at a table right now, tilting her head, listening to someone else? He thought of her naked white body on the bed, a scene etched in his mind forever like an engraving on a tombstone, and swallowed as he reached for the Erase button, then reconsidered.

He walked across the dark kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. Three Budweisers and a half-carton of eggs were all that sat in front of the weeks-old backdrop of plastic Tupperware containers. He took out a beer, twisted off the cap, and took a long swig. Still holding the bottle, he picked up the other two, grabbed the egg carton and balanced it on his forearm, while reaching for one of the yellow plastic tubs in the back he thought might contain margarine. He managed the tub, but fumbled the move to the counter. The egg carton slid, releasing its contents, the sound of delicate shells exploding on the floor.

B.D. looked down at the broken eggs at his feet, the pulp of them raw and bleeding in the refrigerator light, their carapaces in fragments, shattered.

Then, beers still in hand, he walked away from the mess, opened the door to the back yard. He imagined he could hear the ants out there, rallying their war cries, sharpening their spears. They were out there in the dark, as they always were, waiting. Waiting for the taste of flesh. His.

But not for much longer, he thought. The time had come.

B.D. went into the garage and opened the glistening cans, their mouths releasing vapors hot and pungent. He filled the lawn fertilizer spray can he had bought for the occasion and set about his work.

He circled around the yard once, twice, even a third time, pouring the steaming gas on the ground around the property line and along the base of the house, refilling the sprayer before crossing back and forth in between. The fluid hissed from the nozzle like a snake spewing venom, B.D. spitting out "Hallelujah"s and "Goddamn"s, drops of sweat rolling down his naked belly and mixing in. Then he retraced his path with the store-bought bottles of ammonia, their acidic citrus scent wafting through the air like a woman's strong perfume. He emptied the last container in the corner of the yard near the first and largest of the ant hills, then completed the dance by pissing on the mound. The sensitive skin of his penis burned where his fingers touched, covered as they were with sloped chemicals. Their fault too, he thought.

He pulled the last beer from his pocket and downed it in one swig, dropping the bottle like an angry missile on top of the hill. In the moonlight, he could see their glistening bodies scurrying, could feel their hysteria, could hear their cries, their sobs, their pleas.

B.D. took a crumpled Marlboro from his drooping pocket and sat down at the base of the colony, silent, his head bowed as if in *prayerful offering, his eyes closed. He felt them red hot like coals on* his flesh and knew that was the way it was with them, those things that eat you alive.

Then, rising like a vengeful messiah, he bellowed at the earth, took out the match, and lit it.

Cross Creek

Walking down the highway, his back stooped under the weight of his satchel, his head bent to avoid the damning burn of the sun, Luther looked beaten and small, like a stray dog who knew the gnaw of an empty stomach, who knew the bite of sticks and stones. Jolene couldn't help but offer him a ride, sweltering as it already was at 7 a.m., and her being a Christian. Besides, she was headed in the same direction; it was no trouble to give him a ride as far as the cafe.

"Where you headed?" she called out, the dust from her tires on the gravel further weighting the burdened air.

"Where you goin'?" He leaned into the window of the VW bug, his weathered face damp from sweat, grime caught in the crevices, his myrtle brown hair gnarled and beard greasy. He looked older than she did, Jolene thought, maybe even pushing fifty, but then, judging from the lifestyle he obviously led, he was probably younger than he looked.

"Cross Creek. About ten miles up the road."

"Then Cross Creek is where I'm headed," he said, opening the door, hoisting his bag into the back, and folding himself into the seat.

He was larger than he had looked from a distance, though still not a big man. His brown arms looked lean -- tough as overcooked meat -- beneath his shirt, his left arm bearing the black mark of tattoo ink. Jolene could not make out what it was with only the swirled tail of it showing beneath his rolled up sleeve, though she imagined some sinister-looking serpent.

"You know Cross Creek?"

"I know a lot of places, sister," he said. She had no doubt that he did.

"I'm headed to Daddy O's. You know that little restaurant at the intersection of Highway Six and the old creek road?" She didn't wait for an answer. "That's my place -- well, my daddy's place, Daddy O -- O short for Olson. He left it to me when he died, rest his soul." She paused, taking one of her plump hands from the steering wheel and placing it on her chest. "Hardening of the arteries, they said. Heart attack took him just like that." She flicked her fingers with a dull snap, then returned them to the wheel. "Oh, here I am babbling on and on and we haven't even been properly introduced. I'm Jolene."

"Luther."

"Luther," she repeated. "I like that name. From the Bible, isn't it?" Not pausing for an answer, "Oh, no, it's not either, is it? It's Luke I'm thinking of. Still, Luther's a nice enough name. A fine name, in fact." She bubbled on, her little doughnut mouth releasing round

syllables that swirled on the air. Luther sat peacefully across from her, listening.

Before they reached the restaurant, they could see the sign by the road. "Daddy O's," it proclaimed in big, blocky red letters. "Eats & Gas. Saving grace. Last stop for 20 miles." As large as an eighteen wheeler, they couldn't miss it. The cafe, however, was hard to see until they were on it, shrouded as it was in the thick growth of many a Mississippi summer. Huge old oak trees lifted their arms in futile gestures toward the heavens, moss weighting their branches. Kudzu tangled itself around everything, dense as a fishnet -- around tree trunks and grasses, around the rusted body of a pick-up truck and an abandoned diesel tank. Thick shrubs and thorny bushes bore through the netted fabric like nails, cementing it to the ground. And in the center of it all, the building broke through, the small white brick oval of it, corners softened by climbing vines, emerging like a communion wafer held high. A large window in front had been painted with the same blocky red letters as the billboard. "Daddy O's. Eats & Gas," it read, though the "& Gas" had been carefully painted over with white to make it less visible against the lace curtains veiling the windows on the inside. The forms of old gas pumps framed the entrance like altar boys.

"Well, here we are," she said, pulling into the cracked concrete lot.

"Much obliged," he nodded, then got out of the car, walked to the edge of the road and sat his satchel down in the dirt. He pulled a pack of Tegar's from his front shirt pocket and slapped it against his hand, the pack birthing a cigarette. He rested it in his thin lips while feeling his pants pockets for a book of matches.

Jolene pulled a bag of groceries from the back seat and watched him for a moment, noticing the anvil of sweat that had soaked through his shirt where his back had rested against the hot vinyl of the car seat.

"Hey," she called. "You look like you could use a good meal. Why don't you come in and I'll fix you up something to eat."

Luther hesitated a moment. "You got a light in there?" he asked, then followed.

Before Jolene had pulled the kettle of steaming grits from the back burner and scraped a couple of orders of bacon and eggs from the larded griddle, Luther had finished unloading the rest of the groceries, emptied the garbage, and refilled the three silver creamer pitchers that sat on the counter. And before Luther had finished wiping the last morsel of yolk from his plate with a piece of buttered toast and swallowed the last of his coffee, Jolene had struck a deal.

Since her father had died a couple of years back and Jolene had been baptized as owner and manager of Daddy O's, things had

been tough. She knew a lot about waiting tables, but she didn't know much about running a business. Her father's accountant had advised her to sell the cafe and move on. But for Jolene, that was impossible. Daddy O's was not just a restaurant to her; it was the spirit of her father, and she was willing to fight to keep it alive. She'd kept the cook and one waitress on board as long as she could, but when taxes came due last spring, she had to let them go. It wasn't a big place -- just the counter and a few tables to serve -- so she decided to cut down on the hours, serve breakfast and lunch only, do it all herself.

Jolene had managed for the past six months to keep Daddy O's afloat, thanks to the cutbacks, hard work, and a handful of locals who continued to eat at the cafe whether out of loyalty or habit. But it had not been easy and she was tired. Under all of the dirt and grime, Luther shone like a gift from God.

Clearly down on his luck, this man needed food and a place to stay. Of food, there was always enough for one extra person, especially considering the waste of lettuce a tad too wilted to make a customer's salad, a package of lunch meat only a day or two past the expiration date, or a loaf of bread that just needed the moldy top cut off. As for a place to stay, there was that shack out back where the previous owner, the one before her father, had lived while he ran his gas station. It had grown over some, but it looked sound enough. A couple of boards on the broken windows, a good

cleaning, and it would be fine. Plus there was still an outhouse and a pump off to the side. Everything a man in Luther's position could need, Jolene thought, besides maybe a bit of religion. And Jolene could work on that. She would give Luther food and shelter in exchange for work, and in the process rehabilitate this lost soul, get him back on track.

"What do you say?" Jolene asked, refilling his cup with coffee from an electric chrome pot.

Luther sat, elbows on the counter, his plate wiped clean, a tired cigarette smoldering in the ashtray beside him, its trail of smoke disappearing as it climbed upward. In a mirror behind the counter, he watched the road at his back, waves of shimmery heat rising from the baked concrete. The hands on the clock pointed to 8 a.m.

"Should we give it a go?" She stood before him, the polished coffee pot still in hand, reflecting his image.

Luther picked up the cigarette and took one last drag. "Why not," he said, holding the smoke in his lungs. "Why not," crumpling the butt in the ashtray and extinguishing its fire. "Why not give it a go."

At Jolene's request, Luther cut his hair and started bathing regularly, if not often. Jolene gave him a trunk of clothes that had belonged to her father and made a point of asking him for his laundry every couple of weeks. "It's no trouble," she told him when

he said he could hand wash them himself, "Have to do mine anyway."

To be honest, Jolene liked doing Luther's laundry. She liked seeing a man's work clothes in the basket, liked taking them from the dryer, warm and wafting of fabric softener. She liked folding them precisely as her father had liked them folded and imagine sometimes that he was still alive. Jolene had been devoted to her father, her mother having passed away when she was quite young. She had done almost all of the cooking and cleaning and sat at the table opposite him as a wife might do. She had never known anything besides life with her father. He had always been there for her, she for him, and she liked to think that it was still that way.

There was something in Luther's demeanor, in the calmness of him, something in his quiet presence that made her feel sure and confident. It had been the same with her father. She liked having Luther at the cafe. She liked watching him work, the sight of his strong back at the grill, his lean arms flexing as he flipped pancakes and hamburger patties for customers. She liked the way his dark eyes listened, intent and caring, when she spoke to him. She liked watching him and noting the changes she observed, like a child watching over a science project.

She liked that other people noticed her effect on Luther as well. She enjoyed when someone like old Stoney Fox, who always ordered his eggs over easy, would say, "You'll make a decent man of

him yet," then laugh and add, "unless I can save him." Or when Charlotte White from church would say, "It's just a miracle what you've done." It gave her something to talk about with others, something of more interest than what she had watched on television the night before.

By the time the relief of cool weather had come, Luther had earned the keys to the cafe. He would open up each morning, brewing the coffee and heating up the griddle while Jolene stopped for groceries on her way from home. Luther would remain at the stove most of the day, framed in the big window with the counter, filling orders as Jolene posted them, her voice singing out "Grilled cheese" or "BLT on wheat" or some other such thing as she slapped each order on the ledge. Sometimes, Luther would come out and refill empty cups with coffee or clear a table, but for the most part, Jolene took care of the customers, bantering about the weather, the prices of produce, the town's latest gossip. Luther wasn't much of a talker, which was fine since Jolene talked enough for the both of them.

It was a good winter for Daddy O's. Some of the regulars who had fallen off started coming back. Construction on a nearby highway led a steady trickle of hungry passengers on a detour right past the cafe. And, of course, there were always the regulars. Coffee was poured by the cup and by the thermos. Burgers,

sandwiches, and macaroni quieted hungry children. Cups of soup warmed the souls of men. Business had never been better, and Jolene felt blessed.

On Christmas morning, the cafe closed for the holiday, Jolene stopped by Luther's little shack after church. She hadn't seen the inside of it since the day of his arrival, since they knocked the vines and cobwebs away from the door and peered into the darkness, the smell of something foul, living things decayed, heavy on the air. It was clear he had put some effort into cleaning. The vines were cut back, the cobwebs and dust gone. The room was neat, the bed made, the blankets tucked under the thin mattress. A table sloped unevenly in the center of the room toward a stool made out of an old pickle crock turned upside down. The incense of clove and tobacco lilted on the air.

"I was just making something to eat," said Luther. "You hungry?"

"No," she said. "I just stopped by to wish you a merry Christmas. I got you a little something, a present," she said and held out the package. "I hope you like it."

"You didn't have to do that. I'm not much for things, you know." He laughed. "Gotta travel light."

"I know -- I mean, I knew I didn't have to, but... It's really nothing, just a little something to reward you for turning -- for doing so

well -- well, here." She smiled at him and put the wrapped package on the table.

Jolene had spent almost an hour in the bookstore in Starkville, picking it out. It was a Bible, a brand new one with a white vinyl cover, a gold cross embossed in the center. Inside, all the words of Jesus were printed in red and there were about a dozen color pictures -- one of the Sermon on the Mount, one of a shepherd and his flock, one (Jolene's favorite) of Jesus turning a single loaf of bread and a fish into many to feed the masses.

Jolene was hoping to see the excitement on Luther's face when he opened it. She imagined he would be touched by her thoughtfulness, inspired by her goodness. But he made no move for the gift, simply thanked her for her kindness, offered her the makeshift chair. She took it, facing Luther who sat on the bed, and they chatted for a few minutes about Christmas and the cafe. Jolene recited as much of the morning's sermon as she could remember and gave Luther a listing of who had been there that he might know, and perhaps more importantly, who not. Luther listened attentively, nodding, offering the occasional "Oh," and "You don't say."

Jolene's stories of church told and thinking of her turkey at home in the oven, she sighed, "Well," and turned toward the table.

There, she stopped, the flash of a kitchen knife catching her eye. Laid out on the little table, she saw Luther's sandwich fixings --

some old chopped ham and browning lettuce, a bowl of cold leftover grits, some stale macaroni, a couple of bruised apples. He had apparently been in the process of trimming the moldy crusts off a few slices of bread with the kitchen knife when she arrived.

This was Luther's dinner, she thought. Luther's Christmas dinner. The one she had given him, made up of scraps fit for a dog. And for once, Jolene was without anything to say. She sat there for what seemed like an eternity. When she was finally moved to speak, she did not babble. She spoke slowly, tasting each word.

"Luther," she turned. "One other thing. I'd like to start paying you an hourly wage. Business has been good, you know. And that's had something to do with you. So -- I'd like to really help you out -- you know, take the next step, maybe save a little money, get a nicer place."

"Sister, that's real generous of you," Luther paused. "But I'm doin' all right. I got everything I need."

"Nonsense," Jolene said, surprised at his modesty, thinking there was a lesson to be learned here. "You'll get a paycheck on Friday." Then, she rose and headed out the door, her "Merry Christmas" drowning out his, "Money just messes me up."

It was just after taxes in April when Luther disappeared. Jolene arrived at the cafe one Friday morning to find the restaurant silent.

There was no gurgling from the coffee maker, no sizzle of grease on the griddle, not even the whir of the ceiling fan overhead.

Jolene's first thought was to check the safe. In the corner of the kitchen, she knelt near the small iron box and turned the dial to the right, to the left, and to the right counting out the day, month, and year of her birth. The door creaked open to reveal a small stack of bills and two bank deposit bags, looking just as she had left them. Still, she counted out the bills to make sure. Next she checked the cash register where she found the twenty or so dollars left in the drawer each night for change the next morning. It wasn't until then that it occurred to her that Luther might just be sick. Maybe he was in his room, delirious with fever, in need of a glass of water or a cup of chicken soup, and here she was checking the cash drawer. Ashamed, she filled a glass with water from the tap and went out back.

In the morning light, the shed looked small and overpowered by the foliage surrounding it. The vines, these past months contained by Luther, were beginning to sprout again, the fertile breath of summer inspiring their growth. It was only a matter of time before they reclaimed the tiny front porch once more, forcing their tendrils up through the jagged floorboards.

There, in front of the door, Jolene stood for a moment, hesitating, afraid. Afraid of what was on the other side. She knew he was gone, knew there would be no response to her knock, to her

whispered "Luther." She knew that when she opened the door, it would creak open to reveal nothing, just a few pieces of worn furniture in an empty room. Still, she knocked, whispered, opened the door.

Inside, Jolene set the glass of water on the table next to the package, its wrap filled with scenes of families under evergreens and church steeples, in front of fireplaces and stockings. In one, a mother read a storybook to wide-eyed children while a cat slept on the ottoman at her feet, its tail curling over the edge and swirling down.

Moth Dance

When we were kids, Sarah was always the one summoned to play *Fur Elise* on the piano for visitors. "Sarah," Mother's voice would ring out in a song prepared for performance, and Sarah would come, her inky black hair in curls, her snow white face still accented pink from the glow of her room. She would float down the stairs and take her place at the old upright an uncle had given us, rising to the occasion each time, never missing a beat as strands of pearly round notes filled the air. After her performance, she never forgot to bow as she had been taught to do.

Mother never asked me to play; she didn't think I was ready for "public performance" as she called it. Since I was two years younger, I had only learned *Gypsy Dance*, and when I practiced it, Mother insisted I play with the metronome because, she said, my tempo was uneven. And so I would sit for what seemed like hours, trying to fix my tempo, the metronome banging in my ear like Sister Patricia's ruler on my desk at school. But even when I thought I'd mastered it, Mother just frowned and walked from the room. After that, I didn't even try, just pounded out the notes as fast and loud as I could. Needless to

say, Sarah kept her place of honor at the keyboard when guests arrived.

Sometimes, I remember, I would try to dance for them, twirling around on my tiptoes to Sarah's lyrical strains, like that little ballerina on the jewelry box I had asked Santa for. I would spin around and around, getting more and more dramatic as the music rose in the center part, until I was dizzy -- trying to ignore all the while that look that Mother gave me, the one that said, "you're in trouble now." Sarah never got that look. But then, Sarah and I were different. If that wasn't clear by grade school -- Sarah's sugar-and-spice sashed dresses next to my snake-and-snail faded jeans -- it certainly was by junior high and high school. Sarah and her friends joined the honor society, acted in plays, went to parties that ended by eleven. My friends -- Joanie, Zip, Cat -- and I, well, we didn't. We skipped class, got drunk with guys at the Brew and Burger, came home when we felt like it.

It was the spring of Sarah's senior year when my friends and I crashed the prom. We'd been drinking since we left school before last period -- screwdrivers, Bloody Marys, Salty Dogs, you name it -- at the bowling alley where Zip worked the snack bar on Friday and Saturday nights. Zip had been making it with one of the bartenders, Nick, and he'd give us anything we wanted. So we hung out there until Nick was afraid we'd get him fired and then we set off for the brew pub. There, we met up with some older guys who worked at a

garage on the east side. We liked the older guys because they usually had money and could buy us drinks. So we hung out there for a while and then somebody -- I think it was Joanie -- came up with the idea of crashing the prom. Since we all wanted to dance, but didn't want to pay the cover charge at the Hummingbird, it seemed like a good idea.

It was late enough by the time we got there that we didn't have any trouble sneaking in. We came around the back of the school and found the locker room door ajar. It had been propped open by some couples making out on the baseball diamond bleachers. Beyond their heavy breathing, the noise of the band was leaking out into the night, along with the strains of voices rising in dissonance to be heard above it. We hung out there for a while, getting stoned in the dark shadows, music and stars pouring over our heads. I remember starting to dance, spinning around the bleachers, Eddie, I think his name was -- the guy I was with -- cheering me on. I was really happy right then, spinning and spinning under the stars, the dark enveloping me, the smile of the moon blazing me on. I began to spin faster and faster until I imagined I was just a blur of light, the moon itself. And then Zip stopped me.

"Hear that?" she asked, nodding toward the glow of the door. I could hear people clapping, people cheering, and for a moment, I thought it for me, until I remembered.

"Come on," Eddie said, pulling me toward the open door. "We came here to dance."

And so we stepped out of the shadows and into the mouth of the gym, a giant jar with things aflutter -- twittering crepes and chiffons, pastel balloons afloat. The band, white in tuxes and tails, warbled from a raised platform stage under the scoreboard, which was concealed by a huge banner that read, in a neat dusty pink longhand, "The Sweet Smell of Success," underlined by the long green stem of a rose which curled up and blossomed over "success." There, under the banner, stood my sister, Sarah, and her date, Tom, Student Council President. There she stood -- or rather, swayed -- in Tom's arms, ivory satin dripping off her pink shoulders like dew, in the dress that Mother helped her make. Perfect and pure, she outshone the blossom that grew on the banner overhead. Apparently, that had been evident to others as well, for in her black hair rested the prom queen's crown. She looked like Snow White. And Tom -- well -- Tom looked like Prince Charming.

I looked down at my own body, the ragged ends of my dishwater blonde hair hanging limply on breasts spilling over my black lace body suit, my butt crammed into black jeans that were a size too small, leading down to my high-heeled fringed boots, scuffed on the toes. I knew my makeup must be running by now, the black mascara and eyeliner bleeding from my eyes. If she was the rose, I was most certainly the thorn. I wanted to run, run from this gym, run

from this school, this city, this state. "Come on," I said to my friends.

"Let's go."

"We just got here."

"I wanna dance," said Zip.

"This rainbow party sucks," I said.

"I wanna dance," said Cat.

"You said you were gonna dance for me," slurred Eddie. "I wanna see you dance."

"I don't want to dance. I want to leave."

I started walking toward the door, only he grabbed me from behind, one hand around me holding my chest, the other around my hips. "We're not leaving 'til I see you dance." His teeth were clenched, his grip tight.

I struggled to break loose. He held tighter, lifting me so that my feet could take no ground. I wrenched forward, raised a knee and kicked back, my boot heel catching him in the groin.

"Bitch," he yelled, swatting me to the floor. "Are you fucking crazy?" I didn't notice that the band had stopped playing, didn't see that a circle of spectators was surrounding us. I only know that I looked up and there was Sarah, standing pure and pristine above me. "Look at you," was all she said, her face wrenched in disgust as if she were looking at a dead pig fetus from the biology lab.

"Look at you," I mustered, hating her, hating them all. "Look at you in your fucking Virgin Mary dress, you priss." I searched in my hate

to find words that would burn. "Like your lily ass is so pure. Tell them, tell them," I was screaming now, out of control. "Tell them how Mother's boyfriends fuck her and then fuck you and then fuck me. Tell them. Tell them..." It wasn't true, of course, but I couldn't think of anything else to say right then that would scald so. I wanted to pour boiling water on her, to scar her as I had been. Father McGuire was the one who restrained me, who picked me up and carried me, arms flailing, out of the gym and into the teacher's lounge. It was Father McGuire who called Mother and had me suspended from school.

Mother reacted the way she usually did when I was in trouble, feigning a migraine, her forefingers massaging her temples. "Why," she said, her eyes closed, talking at, not asking of me, " -- why can't you be more like your sister?"

I thought of a movie I'd seen once on late night TV. It was called "The Bad Seed" and it was about this girl who went around killing people, pushing them down stairs and off cliffs and stuff. I remember she killed this classmate of hers because she wanted a medal he'd won.

"Fuck you," I said.

"You're just like your father," she said, turning her back on me and storming out of the room.

I hadn't even known my father. He died before I was born -- that is, the man who was supposed to be my father. Though Mother

told everyone she was pregnant when he died, I'd found an obituary in Mother's bureau one time when I was looking for tucked away cash. The man who was supposed to be my father died a good ten months before I was born. The article said he'd been found in his car which had careened off the road and into a deep gully. Apparently, because of the angle of the tire tracks, there was some question as to whether it had been a suicide.

"And who might that be?"

Mother swirled like a thundercloud back into the room and then froze. Her face was hard and gray. "What did you say?"

I stared back at her with the same stony eyes and heard my voice, detached, cold and smooth, "I'm my mother's daughter."

We stood there like that, the click-click-click of the clock a time bomb between us, neither one of us blinking. Then, she turned and left the room.

Afterwards, I regretted what I'd done and I tried to make things right. After my suspension ended, I left for school in the morning with the best of intentions, but somehow I never got there. I ended up at the arcade, at the bowling alley, at the movie theater. I knew, of course, that Mother would find out, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

It was a few months later when Sarah and Tom announced their engagement, and Mother started planning their wedding, the table stacked with bridal magazines and swatches of pink fabrics.

Though it was never mentioned, it was clear that I would not be summoned for any wedding role. This came as no surprise. Years ago, I had learned that there was only one role I could play.

It was a Sunday evening in July when I discovered Tom standing outside the kitchen door. Sarah and Mother had driven to a bridal show in Chicago that afternoon, and they weren't back yet. I had gone downstairs for something cool to drink when I saw him standing on the stoop outside the screen door. I had the feeling that, had I not noticed him, he would have just watched me pour the Pepsi into the glass and said nothing. I probably wouldn't have noticed him at all, except I decided to add a shot of Mother's Jack Daniels to the glass, and so I looked around first out of habit.

"Hey," I said. I was a little startled.

"Hey," he said, shifting his feet.

"They're not back yet," I said. I thought this would be enough to send him on his way.

"Oh," he said. "Yeah," not moving, shuffling his feet again. I could tell he had something on his mind.

"You want to come in?" I asked him.

"I guess," he said, looking at the torn T-shirt I was wearing, then squeaking the screen door open and coming inside.

"They should be back soon." I figured I'd leave him to wait, go back to my room. Only he had this strange look on his face. So I hesitated. "Want some?" I offered him my glass.

He took it, the outside beading wet already, and lifted it to his Prince Charming lips, looking at me all the while. "Thanks," he said.

"Yeah, well..." I took back the glass, suddenly self-conscious, thinking of returning to my room. "Guess I'll --"

"Was it true --," he interrupted, "-- what you said that night?"

I could hear the sounds of the summer night through the screen door, amplified -- the grinding of insects, the screaming of crickets.

"Yes," I lied.

The trees whispered in a crescendo and I thought I heard the shriek of some nocturnal bird swooping for prey, an accent punctuating the night.

"I'm sorry," Tom said. And it felt right that he was, for after all wasn't it right that someone should be sorry, sorry for all I had been through, sorry that I wasn't the chosen one, that I was the garbage child. "It's not fair," I wanted to cry. "It's not right," I wanted to scream.

But I was silent. I was silent when the tears loosed themselves and fluttered down my cheeks. I was silent when Tom stepped closer to me and embraced me, silent as he held me and I felt the rise and fall of his rhythmic chest, his hot breath singing in my ear, silent as I felt his hot hands under my T-shirt, pulling at my shorts.

Outside the screen door, I could see a moth fluttering around the porch light, its wings flailing madly as it swooped closer and closer

to the hot globe. I lay there, my back on the linoleum of my mother's yellow kitchen, my feet in the air. And I thought how sad it was that it was only an artificial flame and that, at worst, the moth would only singe its wings.

Primal Urges

Sam's eyebrows had grown together years before I met him, no doubt by the end of puberty, and hair now covered his back as well as his chest. It was as thick as fur in some places, something my female friends found disgusting. I, however, having grown up in a family full of hairy men, found it familiar, even comforting. Sleeping with Sam was a bit like snuggling up on a sheepskin rug. And having just moved out to this unfamiliar terrain from the East Coast, I welcomed his warm, if shaggy, embrace, particularly during the rains which seemed to fall for months on end here.

It was in the second month of this first rainy season and my relationship with Sam, when awakening from the blinding sexual fervor common at the outset of many a union, I discovered his obsession with Bigfoot. Sam had gone out for coffee filters, when I, poking around in the chaos that was his apartment in search of a book to occupy this soggy morning, discovered the box. Sam had just moved into this studio apartment the week before I met him, in transition from a buddy's couch after the failure of his last love relationship, a long-term one, for him, at thirteen months. The box was one of many opened, yet unpacked. It seemed to be the only

one which held promise of reading material, a couple of well-worn tomes protruding from the top, others visibly stuffed with clothing or ski gear. Pulling out the top volume, its book jacket tattered from use, I read the title: *The Search for Bigfoot*. Weird, I thought, remembering a video I'd seen once of a half-man/half-ape creature on some sensational TV documentary. I remembered that I'd been fascinated with this myth-like creature when I was a kid, as I had been with grainy photographs of the Loch Ness monster and UFOs. I wondered why on earth Sam had kept a book like this and moved it from place to place to place. For someone who seemed to travel lightly -- and often, it didn't exactly seem like a "keeper." What was even more surprising was to find that the entire box was filled with similar materials -- books on Bigfoot and Sasquatch tracking, pictures of blurry ape-like creatures cut from newspapers and magazines, videotapes of TV programs covering purported sightings. The box was overflowing with the stuff.

I was still poring through the contents, intently studying printed freeze-frames from a video taken by someone named Patterson in the 1970's -- it was apparently the best footage ever taken of the creature, according to an accompanying article -- when Sam returned. "What is this?" I asked him.

"What's it look like?"

"*Sasquatch Lives?*" I read the title off a particularly well-worn pamphlet. "You believe in these things?" I continued, not completely sure I wanted to hear the reply.

"I do," his defensive tone indicating how seriously he took this topic. "You believe in cows?"

"It's not exactly the same thing."

"No?" he said. "Last year, for the first time in decades, a major mammal -- a new breed of cow -- was discovered in the jungles of Korea. A cow about the size of a goat."

"Really."

"Really," he repeated. "Apparently the jungle was so dense they'd just never spotted one before."

"But an ape..." I began.

"Every other continent has had a great ape species," he said, setting up his argument. "Considering that a land bridge once connected us with Eurasia, it is entirely plausible that great apes once roamed the Northwest." A pause. "I think a few still do."

Had I not already slept with Sam, I'm sure I would have headed for the door then, keeping my back to the wall, nodding patronizingly. But the fact was I had slept with Sam and, in the past month I'd spent in his embrace, he had seemed sane. Intelligent even. So this handsome, rugged outdoors man had a little eccentricity. He believed in Bigfoot. Sasquatch. So what.

"The old growth forests here are extremely thick in places. In the 1980's a plane carrying two politicians -- two senators, I think it was -- went down out here." Sam looked at me to emphasize his point. "We're talking about a plane here, made of metal, yet nobody ever found it. Metal detectors and all. And two senators, you gotta know people searched high and low for them."

"Not necessarily," I interjected. "They were politicians."

He continued, ignoring my little joke. "I know they're out there."

I found his fascination with the possible existence of a North American ape creature not only entertaining, but endearing. I humored him, asking questions, listening attentively to his responses. And then, I started to buy into his argument. I began to believe myself, to entertain the possibility that such a species might have indeed existed until killed or driven out -- in fact, might still exist in some remote Northwestern forest. There was after all that Korean goat-cow to consider.

When the weather started to improve, I was happy to accompany Sam on his treks through the forest. I had always loved the outdoors, part of my reason for making the big break with New York City and moving west, and was thrilled to have found someone who loved it as much as I did. It seemed a weekend never passed that we didn't pack our camping gear in Sam's Pathfinder and head for the coast or the Three Sisters wilderness area or some equally incredible place. I was enamored with old-growth, in love with my

new life, in love -- so I thought -- with Sam. I could almost forget about his obsession with Bigfoot as we discovered mountain after mountain, forest after forest, lake after lake, waterfall after waterfall. Almost. Except for the constant reminder of all the equipment -- video cameras, digital audio recorders, still-shot cameras -- to record the inevitable encounter. And if not for his frequent reminders. We would go hiking through the hills, making our way through oftentimes dense underbrush, when Sam would point out a mossy overhang near a river, commenting on what perfect hiding habitat this would be for our elusive friends. Or he'd stop to examine a particularly interesting pile of scat.

"They'd like it here," he'd say, next to a mountain stream where we'd seen two-foot steelhead jumping in and out of the water. "Fresh water, fish, berries -- even I'd like it here," he'd say. "Yup. This is the place." And we'd camp for the night, me fixing dinner, Sam setting up his recording equipment. He'd give me instructions, just in case, "You go for the still-shot, I'll man the video." After dinner, we'd sit in the dark and wait, our arms wrapped around each other, listening for unusual sounds, ready to spring into action should the occasion arise. Occasionally, we would hear something -- an elk's trumpet, a coyote's howl, a dog's distant bark. Having been raised by a father who was an avid hunter, Sam was well-trained in distinguishing these outdoor sounds. If there was anything unusual making sounds out there, Sam would know.

Once, near a place called Davis Lake, we heard a strange cry in the middle of the night. Sam was awake at the time; it woke me out of a sound slumber. It sounded like the howl of something half-human and half-beast. We both felt the hair on the back of our necks rise -- in Sam's case, this was, of course, more significant. We stayed awake the rest of the night, our necks craned to the stars, listening, listening, listening, but heard nothing else before the dawn broke. After that, we spent a lot of time up at Davis Lake, hiking around looking for tracks, staying up at night, our ears tuned to the night sounds, but whatever it was seemed to be gone. Sam was convinced we had encountered the beast; he seemed certain that Sasquatch had known we were there and left.

Wherever we traveled, Sam would stop and ask loggers and hikers if they'd seen anything unusual, if they'd heard any strange sounds. If they had, he'd ask them if the hair on the back of their necks rose when it happened. Apparently, this was a common occurrence among those who claimed to have encountered the ape man.

The surprising thing was that so many of the people he asked not only entertained his questions, but took the whole thing quite seriously. Having heard tales of Sasquatch their whole lives, many Northwesterners believed. And many had tales to share of their own Bigfoot encounters. "We were driving along on a moonlit night when one crossed the road just in front of us. I saw its yellow eyes reflected

in the headlights." Or "I saw a pair -- a male and a female, I think, since one was larger and the smaller one appeared to have breasts -- they were making their way across a clearing and into a patch of old-growth." There were stories about Sasquatch throwing rocks and beating pieces of wood against trees. Stories about eighteen inch footprints on fresh logging roads and about thatched pieces of grass where Sasquatch slept. Stories about lava tubes that served as their underground caves. It seemed that there was a story for every outing we made that summer and fall. Still, for all our determination and perseverance, we saw nothing. We heard nothing more than that one bestial call.

It was winter when Sam and I met Red. After a day of hiking, we'd stopped by a small town bar called the White Horse, when we saw this hulk of a man lumber up to the bar. He had a greasy burnt-orange beard and matted shoulder length hair, as well as a belly which protruded a good foot from the dropped waistline of his stressed camouflage pants. He looked like he'd been living in the woods since the Vietnam War. Turned out he'd been a logger before turning his time to hunting bear. He was grunting something at the bartender about "strange things" he'd found on the day's expedition. "Strange things" was all it took to get Sam started.

"What kinda strange things you talkin' about?" Sam asked in the colloquial manner he adopted when talking to the "locals." Sam assumed that this way of speaking, along with the red flannel shirt

thrown over the seat in his Pathfinder, would disguise his city persona, make him one of them.

Red took a gulp from his pint of beer before slowly turning his head, a head which appeared to sit neck-less upon his stuffed torso, to see where this question had come from. He eyed Sam for a good minute before his face slid back to the project at hand, taking another swig from the glass in his big bear paw.

This didn't stop Sam. "You say you saw somethin' strange out there?" A pause filled with the clinking of glasses from behind the bar. "I couldn't help overhearing. I'm a Bigfoot Investigator -- you heard of Bigfoot?" Another pause. I hated when Sam did this investigator thing, as if it were some sort of official position. It sounded so ludicrous, like some Saturday morning cartoon character investigating floating sheet demons on Ghost Busters or Scooby Do. Yet, in some of these small towns, it seemed to play rather well.

Red slowly turned again to glare at Sam, as if at an insect that kept returning, insisting to burrow in his hide. Then, he turned his face forward again. I was aware of someone playing pool in a room to the left of the bar, the click of the cue ball hitting its mark, the drop of a ball in a pocket. "Heard of him?" Red grunted. "I seen him."

And so the conversation ensued, Sam asking question after question, the laconic Red disclosing little more than he had already, that he had indeed seen "somethin' strange" out there today, and he attributed whatever it was to the Sasquatch, a creature he had seen

twice before. Before the conversation was over, Red had consented to let Sam join him on his next outing.

This had me a bit worried. From the first glance Red had cast at Sam, I was concerned. It was a grizzly look -- one that seemed to say he was contemplating making an afternoon snack of the creature in front of him. It scared me, and I tried to talk Sam out of going. But he wouldn't hear of it.

It took a couple of weeks for Sam to prepare for the hunt. Red, a serious man when it came to tracking bear, had given Sam a list of rules to follow before Sam could accompany him on the expedition. Only clothing made of natural fibers could be worn, and only of natural colors. No camera equipment was to be allowed unless it was underwater gear, as the chemical smell of the film could otherwise be detected. For a week before the outing, Sam was to abstain from chemical additives in food, as well as from meat, alcohol, dope, and sex. Any of these could be identified by the bear's acute sense of smell, Red claimed, as well as by "Sass," the nickname he'd given his "friends."

And so Sam prepared for the hunt, attempting to adhere to each and every rule as outlined by this big bear of a man. He bought cotton camouflage gear and underwater cases for his video and still-shot cameras. For a week before the outing, he ate only nuts, grains and berries. And while not abstaining from alcohol, pot, and sex, he did at least cut back.

I didn't think I'd ever been so relieved as when Sam walked in the door after this expedition with Red, particularly when he started to share tales of the weekend's events. Apparently, Red had gone into the forest in search of bear, armed like a guerrilla combat unit, a semi-automatic rifle and grenades among his hunting gear. When Red asked Sam to walk into a frigid mountain lake to de-scent himself, Sam told me he didn't argue.

Stranger still was the story of their encounter with Sasquatch.

"It was wild," Sam told me that night as he foraged in my refrigerator for food. "We were hiking through a fairly dense area when Red grabbed me with that giant hand of his. We didn't talk, just stopped dead in our tracks." As Sam said this, his movements came to an abrupt stop, a clump of grapes swinging slightly from his hand, the light from the refrigerator casting a macabre glow on his intense face.

"At first, I couldn't figure out why we stopped," Sam continued, his eyes shifting to the right without moving his head. "Glancing over at Red, I could see that his head was tilted slightly back, his nose in the air as if he'd caught the scent of something." Sam sniffed the air in my apartment, as if he were reliving that moment in the woods now. "Me," he whispered, "I couldn't smell a thing past the firs and pines. But then, I hear a faint rustling in the foliage just ahead, and it seems to be getting louder. I look over at Red who's still frozen in his tracks, his eyes glazed, looking dead ahead. I follow suit. A few

minutes later, these two guys come walking out of a clump of ferns with these yellow plastic bags -- I think they were picking mushrooms -- and walk past us." Sam looked intently into my eyes. "The weird thing is," he paused, "nobody says anything. It's as if they don't see us." Sam stopped here for a moment, waiting for my reaction, as if he had just revealed some truth with a capital T. The only reaction I was aware of was a tightening in my stomach and the start-up click and hum of the refrigerator, its door still ajar. "Then, Red turns to me with this crazed look and says, 'Did ya see 'em?' and nods. 'Sasquatch,' he says. "Now you've seen 'em too."

At this, I laughed nervously, half-expecting Sam to join in, half-fearing that he wouldn't. Seemingly jarred out of his trance-like state, Sam relaxed his stance and swung the refrigerator door shut. His face softened and he began to laugh, hesitantly at first, then more enthusiastically, as if he'd just gotten caught up in the drama of the story and was completely aware of how insane it all sounded. Tension dispersed in a fit of joint laughter.

That night we stayed up for hours giggling over Sam's outing with Rambo, then making love. Afterwards, unable to sleep, I remember watching Sam sleep in the light of the waning moon, thinking how good it felt to have him back.

But the truth was, after that, Sam was never really the same. It was like he never came back from that weekend with Red. He seemed spooked somehow, as if he'd seen a ghost. While he made

jokes about Red's pending or arrived insanity, he seemed to have made some connection. He revered Red's hunting tactics as "brilliant," saying he'd finally gotten the "handle on the hunt." He'd check my pack to make sure the clothes I'd packed were only cotton or wool, that I wasn't sneaking in any synthetic fabrics. We stopped going out to dinner since we "couldn't control what additives might be included in the dishes we ordered." I became adept at preparing bland vegetarian fare.

Sam wasn't as particular about the beer and dope, the staples on which he lived. And sex, there was no abstinence there; in fact, Sam had heard some old Indian legends about Sasquatch stealing Indian women, and theorized that sexual activity might actually draw them out. I wasn't going to argue about that.

Sam became even more obsessed with finding Bigfoot, as if he were in some sort of race. While we still headed out to the country every weekend, Sam started to do solo overnight hunting expeditions mid-week. Gear packed in his truck, he'd leave directly after work and return there, sans shower, the next morning. He started to look tired.

It was early in December that Red called to say he'd seen a pack of them, what "looked like a family," he told Sam.

"Home for the holidays?" I joked.

And Sam said, in all seriousness, "You never know. I think I may go out with him and check it out."

"The man's mad," I tried to remind him, but this didn't seem to have any effect. Sam began to talk about a Christmas expedition, since he'd have a week off from work. I was obviously less than thrilled about the thought of having to explain to my family that my boyfriend couldn't make it after all, since he chose instead to spend Christmas with some Santa Claus figure searching for flying apes in the land of Oz.

Once, when we were arguing about it, Sam said, "You know, there may be something to what Red said."

"What?" I asked.

"I mean, those guys with the yellow bags -- we were right there, and they didn't see us."

As it turned out, Sam didn't spend Christmas with Red. He didn't spend it with me either. He spent a week trekking on his own in the Cascade Range.

When I returned from New York, Sam not only looked tired, he looked old. His solitary brow looked somehow more furrowed. His eyes seemed to have sunk at least a half inch into his skull. He reminded me of pictures in textbooks I'd seen of Cro-Magnon man.

Even his mannerisms seemed to have changed. He began to eat like a starved animal, forgoing utensils except to shovel whatever was in front of him onto pieces of bread and shove them in his mouth. Anything and everything could be made into a sandwich, he said. His apartment became more disheveled than

ever before, a den of empty beer bottles and dirty laundry. When he was ready to sleep, he'd simply nest in the center of whatever happened to be piled on his bed at the time.

He stopped shaving, which meant that hair now covered about ninety-percent of his body. While he still showered, he had stopped using soap. Even those soaps advertised as Unscented, he told me, could be detected by "Sass." He had stopped brushing his teeth with toothpaste as well, so I didn't mind that we stopped kissing. We only made love once after my return. But it wasn't about love; he took me roughly from behind, satisfying his animalistic urges.

Having entertained my friends for months with Sasquatch tales, I joked about the demise of my relationship with Sam, telling them he'd left me for someone with longer hair. I had simply been the transitional person between his previous relationship and "Sass." I had, I told them, just filled a temporary gap. But I realized that, in fact, we all had -- all the ex's in his life -- we'd all been just temporary stops on Sam's quest.

When I last spoke with Sam, he was on his way to Nepal where he planned to go trekking in search of the elusive Yeti.

At some point in life, I guess, we all have to go searching.

By Any Other Name

Amos Fuss sat at the bar, his small fig shaped body spilling slightly over the stool beneath him, his tiny sausage fingers wrapped around a pint of beer -- his third, and sighed. It had been a usually bad day and ended even worse when, at almost five o'clock on the nose, his boss called him into the central office to tell him he was fired.

That made seven times Amos had been fired -- not counting the other two, of course, since those had just been interim jobs, as he called them, between his sales positions. One as a delivery boy -- though he was 36 at the time -- for a local pizza parlor, the other as a cashier at a Texaco station. Nine times in all, if he counted those, but he didn't, so only seven. Seven times in his profession. And sales, well, nobody could fault a guy for losing sales jobs, with market demands shifting all the time. A salesman had to be in the right place at the right time, and unfortunately, Amos had not.

"Amos," his boss had said this morning, wasting no time, "We're gonna have to let you go."

Amos hadn't protested. "I understand," he'd said, and then went to clear out his desk, taking the calendar the insurance

company had sent him, with the pictures of barns and churches and trees that told you what season it was by the color of their leaves, and the coffee mug from his mother that said "Amos." He left all the brochures on aluminum siding behind. There just wasn't a market for siding here in Cement City. No wonder he'd been in a slump.

His boss hadn't offered him a seat, hadn't even said he was sorry. Amos couldn't help thinking of Bunny and how she'd left him with no more than a note:

Amos,

I'm leaving you.

I'll send papers for you to sign later.

Bunny.

p.s. I think the tuna casserole in the fridge has gone bad.

And, in fact, it had. Amos had cleaned out the casserole dish, heated himself a TV dinner -- Salisbury Steak -- and watched a rerun of "Green Acres." Five years ago, almost to the day.

And so, when on his way home, his head slumped over like a bowling ball on top of a rag doll, he saw the red and orange reflection in a sidewalk puddle, the neon woman taking a swig from her beer and then putting it down, taking a swig from her beer and

then putting it down, taking a swig from her beer and then putting it down, rippling at him, beckoning him from below, he decided to join her.

Of course, there was no rippling woman in the bar as the blazing sign had promised, only the bartender, a blunt, thick man with a head like an anvil and ears that jutted unevenly out from his shaved head as if a large mallet was wedged at an angle inside. He was in the process of changing taps on a keg and looked up only momentarily as Amos settled himself at the bar, putting his brown vinyl briefcase and his wadded khaki raincoat on the stool next to him. Amos folded his hands together, his fingers stacked like plump commas on the bar, and waited for the bartender to look up again. When he didn't, Amos finally interrupted, "Excuse me."

"Yeah, whadda ya want?" Still hunched over, talking from the top of his head.

Amos talked to the featureless square of flesh, noticing the stubble shadow of the U-turn hairline. "A beer."

"What kind?"

"What do you got?"

"Bud on tap, Miller in bottles," said the head.

"A Bud," said Amos.

"I'm changin' the tap," still without looking up. Sounding annoyed.

"Miller, then, is fine," said Amos.

"Outta Miller," said the head.

"Well then, Bud, I guess," smiling awkwardly at no one. Adding "Whenever you get to it," tapping his little rodent paws on the bar.

When the bartender got to it, he slammed a pint of beer in front of Amos, slopping some on the counter, not bothering to wipe up the overflow, then disappeared in the back room where he stayed for a long stretch of time. Amos sat quietly, drinking his beer, watching the distorted reflection of the red and orange woman in a round security mirror high above the bar. There she sat in the center of the convex frame, her hourglass shape lost, her body bloated like that of a drowning victim, hoisting something -- not a glass, it appeared, but a gun -- aiming it out in front of her and then at her head, out in front of her and then at her head, out in front of her and then at her head. The rhythm of it was eerily soothing, that and the steady sound of the rain that had begun to fall, hitting the high dark windows of the pub, a slow drum roll.

The bartender reappeared, disappeared into the back room and reappeared again, organizing things behind the bar, as if preparing for a big rush or party that had yet to begin. He did not look at Amos, not even when Amos cleared his throat, just went about his business as if Amos was not even there. Only when Amos asked directly for a refill did he acknowledge him, looking up from his work like a parent forever annoyed by an accidental child. Two times, Amos asked for refills, his voice small and apologetic. Two

times, he added "whenever you get to it." And two times, the bartender did just that, slapping the beers on the counter, leaving Amos to wipe up the puddle before him. The third time this ritual was performed, Amos nodded, spoke.

"Got fired today," he said.

"Yeah?" the bartender said, looking for the first time directly at him -- weighing, judging, delivering his guilty verdict.

"You ever been fired?" Amos asked.

"What's it to you?" asked the bartender.

"Nothing," Amos said. "I just thought -- "

"I don't think that's any of your business," he cut Amos off.

"Sorry," offered Amos. "I was only making conversation." The bartender stared for a while, saying nothing, then returned to the back. Amos, uncomfortable, got up and went to the men's room, relieved his bladder, washed his hands.

When he came back, a woman was standing just inside the door, shaking her broken umbrella like a snake, its dark folds spitting venom at the room. Then, she shook her arms, flapped them against her coat, spewing yet more water, in battle with her garments. Her opponent apparently overpowered, she fought her way out of the coat as if from a skin, emerging wet from inside like a scavenging vulture picking its way through a dead victim's flesh. She dropped the carcass of the coat and the spine of the umbrella near the door,

and moved into the bar, perching on a stool two down from Amos, the one in the center.

In the light of the bar, Amos could see that she was not young. Her skin was the color of a grocery bag, crumpled from use. Color had been added as if by the heavy hand of a child. The rain had soaked the grocery bag brown, turning it to mud, sweeping torrents of color into the gullies and crevices, her eyes bleeding blue and black ink. She dabbed at her eyes with her fingers and managed to avoid plucking them out with inch-long nails the color of dried blood. She dipped one set of these talons into a large black pouch, digging, papers shuffling, plastics and metals and who knew what clicking together like castanets.

"You have a cigarette?" her voice deep, looking up at Amos, her hand still in her bag.

Amos, caught off guard, "Um, no, I-uh -- don't smoke."

Looking back into her bag, she shifted the contents around. "Any change?" she asked, not looking up. Amos didn't respond. She set one, two quarters on the bar, then put her hand back in her bag shuffling some more. She looked up, annoyed. "Hello?" she said, stressing the second syllable. "Anybody home? I said, do you have any change?" A pause.

"Any quarters?" She enunciated the syllables, her voice hard, speaking as though he were someone from another country, daring to speak a language other than hers.

Feeling scolded as he had so many times before, shamed, Amos reached in his pocket. "Um -- well, yes," he said, his palm displaying a handful of change. Before he could ask what she needed, her clawed hand swooped in, claimed a chunk for its own, and carried it off to the cigarette machine near the door. Her purse sat on the bar next to the two quarters she had produced.

Amos watched as she put his change into the machine. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight quarters, then yanked a silver knob under the picture of the camel head that looked like two testicles and a penis.

Before she had made the nine or ten steps back to the bar, she had expertly perforated the package's skin and extracted the prize. The bone of the cigarette now between her black lips, she perched once more on her stool, turning to Amos. A muttered thanks. Then, handing him a red dime store lighter, "Would you mind?"

Amos, still holding the remnants of his coin cache, dropped the change on the bar near his pint jar, and fumbled for the lighter. "Um -- sure." He finally got it on the third try.

She inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. Amos had the feeling, though, that she was somehow still looking at him. Staring into the black, seeing all, seeing him. Seeing him as others had -- his boss for one, his ex-wife for another -- crouching in the dark corners of life. Amos put the lighter quietly on the bar and turned back to his beer,

not wanting to be caught looking at her, glancing nervously sideways at the bleeding creases of her eyes, at the way her brown nostrils flared with each breath, at her black lips forming a perfect "o". After a few extended minutes, her eyes reopened.

"Amos. My name's Amos -- Amos Fuss," he offered.

She didn't respond, just peered at him out of her mask. She took another drag on her cigarette, the rain's drum roll accentuating her tacit response. Setting her cigarette in a sooty ashtray on the bar, she turned toward Amos and exhaled, a fetid wave of smoke washing over his face and shutting out oxygen, pulling him under. She reached out with the tines of her forked hand, and for a moment, he thought she was going to touch him. Instead, she raked the spare change next to his beer into her palm and rose, leaving him on his stool, silent with asphyxiation. She walked over to the jukebox under the high heeled legs of the neon woman, her dark body silhouetted in the coal-burning glow of red and orange from above, the flame-leaping yellow from below, the jukebox light.

He heard the coins drop into the machine, heard the punch of buttons, the fall of a disc, then a scratchy needle impersonating a voice he knew. "Oh the shark, babe." Pause. "Has such teeth, dear." The rhythm of it matching the rhythm of the neon woman's rise and fall above. "And he shows them." Pause. "Pearly white." Bobby Darin. The woman arched her back to him, holding the box on either side, pressing her hips into the yellow glass, holding contact for a

moment, releasing. Then, knowing he watched her, she craned her neck around to meet his gaze, her eyes alert, focused, her body swiftly circling, her sinewy limbs moving back to the bar. She picked up Amos's wadded coat and briefcase, tossed them on the stool she had previously occupied, the coat missing its mark, crumpling to the floor.

"Hey," he started to say, only she spoke, cutting him off.

"Amos," she said, blowing steamy syllables into his face. She picked up his drink and lifted it to her black lips.

"What can I get you?" The bartender had emerged from the back room. Amos noted that he was standing attentively in front of her.

"Bourbon," the woman said, setting Amos's beer back on the bar, "and a beer back." She paused. "The same here for my friend, Amos Fuss," she said, her voice wet, a finger uncoiling, reaching out, swirling, directing him to come closer, then diving, impaling the piece of paper on the bar, Amos's bill, pushing it forward. Amos felt his stomach twist, the way it did when Bunny's last Visa bill arrived in the mail, the one with the Ethan Allen living room, dining room, kitchenette and bedroom furniture sets for her new house.

The bartender poured the drinks, sat them on the bar -- without accident -- and added the drinks to Amos's tab. The woman picked up the shot of bourbon and tossed her head back, wet feathers of

hair sticking to her forehead. Amos paused only a moment before mimicking her gestures.

"Another."

And they were off, Amos doing most of the talking, keeping up with the woman, drink for drink. He told her how he'd been fired, how he'd been wronged. "Of course," she replied, or "clearly" and he thought at first how these words were sympathetic, only the tone seemed otherwise and so he began to wonder. At times, he looked up and saw someone familiar -- was it Bunny? -- in her eyes. And so, he told her about Bunny and how she'd left him and how he'd been wronged. He talked about justice and life as if the two were related, his words coming in faster spurts now, and with them, emotions hot and bubbling like molten lava. Then, in the midst of his eruption, catching a glimpse of his distorted red face in the security mirror, he stopped himself, capped the volcano, remembering the manners his mother had taught him. Sinking -- almost cowering -- on his stool, he apologized for dominating the conversation and asked her name, embarrassed that he had not already done so.

"A name is just a label, Amos Fuss," she said. "Sometimes they fit. And sometimes..." trailing off. "I don't like to be labeled." Mysterious.

"I hear what you're saying. To tell you the truth, I've never much liked the name Amos."

"Amos." She whispered it, almost whistled on the s. "Amosfuss," slurred together as one word, ending in a sultry hiss. She smiled and ordered another round of drinks.

When she left to go to the ladies room, Amos noticed a piece of paper sticking out of her bag. A note, it looked like, with a scripted name at the top. Robin.

"Robin," he said it out loud. Not such an enigma after all.

Later, coming out of the men's room, Amos found her holding up his crumpled coat, climbing into it, moving toward the door, motioning for him to follow. Amos almost forgot his briefcase in his intoxicated excitement.

"Hey." It was the anvil headed man who spoke, holding Amos's case in one hand, the bar tab in the other. Frantically, Amos tripped toward the bar, pulling a wad of bills from his wallet and tossing them on the bar. The bird woman was already out the door. He thought to grab her coat and umbrella on the way out and did.

Outside, the rain had slowed to a drizzle, tiny beads of water striking so cold they stung hot. He wavered for a moment, his head teetering.

She was standing outside the bar in the glow of the neon fire, looking like something out of Dante's inferno. He stood for a moment in the shadow of the doorway watching, trying to gauge her next

move. He looked at her, his eyebrows in sideways question marks over the tiny black dots of his eyes. Her eyes, focused red in the glow, familiar. He had seen those eyes before. She would take him tonight, he knew. He stepped out into the blaze of light.

She said nothing, simply took his hand in her taloned grasp and pulled, leading him down the street, into the dark night. He followed her into the vacant industrial district near the river, steam rising from street grates and catching mysterious light sources, glowing ghostly white in the black.

It occurred to Amos that he had never been in this section of the city before. He had always avoided it, even in daylight. The myriad of streets and alleyways here were always dank and dark, hidden as they were in the monstrous shadows of dead warehouses left standing like giant tombstones in a graveyard. Amos had always known that to be here was to be out of his element, alone, vulnerable, caught in a maze. He would never have conceived of venturing here in the light, let alone the dark, and yet here he was. Flying through the streets in the hands of this bird woman, Robin.

He followed willingly, excitedly, down each street, probing the darkness, peering into the cavities of doorways. Feeling alive, aroused.

At last, she stopped under a decayed awning, extracted a key from her pouch, and opened a black door.

Just inside, she turned, craning her neck down to him, her fingers swooping over his face, his chest, her mouth opening over his. At last released, alive with power, he groped furiously, his jaw opening wider and taking her in, his hands around her head, her throat. And then suddenly, she stopped. As though tasting something that had gone bad, she drew back.

But there was no stopping him now. He had ignited, he burned. He grabbed her feathered hair with his hand and wrenched it backward, sucked her tongue into his mouth and gnawed.

She thrust him away. "Hey!" her cry stopping him. "What the --?"

For a moment, Amos paused to look at her. He looked at her with his beady brown-black mole pupils growing. Looked at her as he had looked at his mother, at his ex-wife, at his boss, at how many others. And something shifted, his question mark eyebrows stretching to exclamation points, his twitching mouth settling to an underline. There was no longer any question in Amos Fuss's punctuated face. No longer lack of definition. He drew in his fingers, knotted them around the broken umbrella he still grasped, then lifted and swung, lifted and swung, lifted and swung at those all-knowing eyes, the jagged spokes catching her forehead, tearing it red.

Her face alive with anger, fear, the intensity of pursuit, her great wings flapping, her talons screaming out at his flesh, stripes of red hot across his face, his arms, his back. He was on top of her now,

she pinned beneath him, and the umbrella's claws came down again and again until those predator eyes ceased to see in the dark, until her great black beak lips opened not in a war cry, but to accept him. To accept him as he came.

In The Aftermath

I once dated a New York City firefighter who told me the thing he dreaded most about his job was not throwing himself into the midst of a raging inferno, but going in once the flames had subsided. It was then, he said, that he and the rest of his crew would wind through the smoky corridors of an apartment building, forcing open doors, checking for survivors. Often, a door met with some resistance, the tension of something heavy against it. That weight was usually a body, he told me, and in most cases, someone old. They were found by the doors because they had died while trying to get out. I remember little else about the firefighter, save this image fixed in my memory.

I've only seen the woman who lives next door to me three times in the two years I have lived here, twice when I saw her checking her mailbox in the entryway downstairs and once in the Korean grocery on the corner. Each time, she seemed startled, jumpy like something hunted, like the mice I sometimes saw in my apartment when I came home and turned on the light. "Hello," I said each time, and she responded with no more than the briefest tight-

lipped smile, so quick as to be almost a twitch. It was as if she did not recognize me at all. But I know she has seen me every day I have been here. Her door is exactly opposite mine, and almost always when I am coming or going, I hear the slide of metal, the sound of the peephole cover opening on her door, and I know she is there on the other side of this dark eye, this bulging pupil, watching me.

Sometimes, I hear her in there shuffling around, clanking about in the kitchen, mumbling. I imagine her wearing a flowery nightgown with a tattered robe that doesn't match and well-worn pastel slippers that go pat-pat-pat across the hard wood floor. I imagine her thin gray-blue hair disheveled and sticking out of a hair net she wears for sleeping, tissues wadded in her pockets. She talks to her cat and maybe even to herself, not loud enough for me to hear what she is saying, just that she is saying something. I think the cat's name is Whiskers. Maybe Whisper.

I'll never forget my first view of New York. I flew in at dusk as the sun lowered its head over the curve of New Jersey, leaving an aura of molten orange to light the sky. Backlit like that, the figures of skyscrapers appeared like ancient timbers over the embers of the city, a thousand glittering window eyes sparking and flickering in the shadows.

When I stepped out of the terminal at LaGuardia, I took in my first breath of city air, inhaling deeply its tincture of taxi exhaust and

baked asphalt, the scent singeing my nasal passages and permeating the humid summer night. I remember holding that first dose of city air in my lungs for as long as I could, as if I could breathe in the pulsing life of the city and keep it inside me.

I had arrived in New York and promise hung in the air like something tangible, like some piece of fruit you could reach out and pick. I was twenty-one, fresh out of college with a BA in Theater, lured by flaming neon billboards and the golden spotlights of Broadway. I was going to be a great actress -- perform Shakespeare, Ibsen, O'Neill. I was going to see my name in lights.

But first came the problem of seeing my name on an apartment lease. Or a mailbox for that matter. What I wanted was a Manhattan apartment. What I could afford was a share in Brooklyn.

I took a share I found through the *Voice*, as well as the first job I was offered. I got it through an employment agency listed in the paper, a position as a "Group Assistant" -- whatever that was, I remember thinking -- with an ad agency. And while I quickly learned that "Group Assistant," roughly translated, meant "Secretary," I figured it was preferable to waiting tables. The hours were long and the pay wasn't great, but it covered the rent. Besides, I barely knew a soul when I arrived -- just the friend of a friend who offered me a couch until I found a place of my own -- and I quickly bonded with some of the other "Group Assistants" in the trenches -- others like myself who had come to the city seeking their fifteen minutes of fame.

We did what people do in New York -- talked about all the things we were there to do, too poor and tired most of the time to actually do them. We shared our hopes, talked about our dreams over bagels and coffee, sushi and saki, falafels, tandoori chicken, gin-and-tonics.

It was on one of these outings that I met Michael. He had a broken leg at the time and reminded me of a young Jimmy Stewart. I imagined the two of us cast opposite each other in Alfred Hitchcock's "Rear Window," me in the Grace Kelly role. I saw myself arriving at his apartment with a catered dinner, a negligée in my handbag, and nursing him back to health.

As it turned out, he wasn't a photographer like the character in the movie. He was an artist. Well, after hours. By day, he worked at the same agency I did as a number cruncher in the media department. I never did the Grace Kelly negligée thing, though I did bring him take-out and videos a few times while he was still in his cast.

After that, we dressed in black and went out to downtown bars -- CBGB's, the Back Fence, the Atomic Cafe. We downed shots of tequila, drank beer with slices of lime, and talked to other people in black about the big breaks that were to come. On the way back to Michael's apartment, I'd stop for the latest issue of *Back Stage* which we'd peruse over sesame noodles and steamed dumplings at the local Chinese place, Michael sketching Keith Haring-like primitive figures in the margins while I circled notices for cattle calls. The

auditions were usually during the day and I made plans to take a late lunch, maybe leave work early, but inevitably, some crisis presented itself just as I was grabbing my coat and heading for the door.

After six months, I was promoted to Assistant Account Executive, an impressive enough title when I wrote letters to my family and friends back in Nebraska. A pay raise came with it and so I was able to move to an apartment share on the Lower East Side -- at last, a Manhattan address.

Of course, this still didn't create much extraneous income for plays and the like. Sure, there were the half-price tickets at the TKTS booth in Times Square, but who had the time to wait in line like that? As it was, both Michael and I worked ten, sometimes twelve hours a day.

Occasionally, we did manage to catch an off-Broadway production, but it usually led to a fight. I remember we saw Timothy Hutton in "Prelude to a Kiss." Afterwards, Michael raved about the performance.

"It's the best play we've seen in a long time," he told some friends we met up with later. "The script was good. The casting, the acting -- excellent."

"Come on," I said, "the casting? I mean, Hutton was okay. But the lead actress? Shit, she couldn't act her way out of a hamburger wrapper."

"I thought she was great," he said.

I couldn't believe I heard him saying this. "Great?" I was incredulous. "Great as an actress? No. Great in bed? Probably. I bet she slept with someone to get the part. I mean, who was she anyway? Some nobody." I couldn't even remember her name.

Neither could Michael, which proved my point.

I'm not sure how it happened, but somehow I got lost in the maze of the city, lured by the next promotion, the next pay raise, the next apartment. I was made Account Executive, then Account Supervisor. I moved from my share on the Lower East Side to a share in Chelsea. Michael and I parted because, we told people, we fought all the time. But really, I think it was because we shared too many dreams and so became constant reminders of the compromises we had made.

I replaced Michael with Neville, Neville with Bruce, Bruce with Nick. I moved from Chelsea to Nick's studio in Hell's Kitchen, and when that relationship cooled, to a sublet studio on the Upper West Side. And somewhere between Houston and 86th, I stopped buying *Back Stage*.

I remember one other thing the firefighter told me. He said he didn't think he was going to last long.

"What do you mean?" I asked him, thinking about how many firefighters must lose their lives on the job and how tragic that was.

But he wasn't talking about that kind of death. What he said was, "I just don't think I can open many more doors."

This morning, I saw a girl -- a young woman, rather, maybe ten years younger than me -- buying *Back Stage* at the newsstand. Her dark clothes were rumpled, her hair in cowlicks. No doubt she had been out all night. I had been up and out early for my usual jog, running circles around the reservoir in Central Park, bored by the routine of it. I stopped for coffee and a bran muffin at Zabar's on my way back, stopped at the corner newsstand for the *Sunday Times*.

The image of that girl sticks with me as I return to my apartment, as I sit, nibbling on my muffin, trailing crumbs through the Metro section, headlines blaring of murder, mayhem, violence, fires burning out of control. I feel a knot tightening in my stomach.

When the phone rings, I don't answer, just sit quietly on the floor.

"Hi," my voice says, sounding not at all like me, "I'm out. Please leave a message."

"Hey," says a rough tenor, "it's Alexander. I met you at the *Forbes* party last week... I was wondering if you'd like to grab a drink or a cup of coffee sometime..."

The voice sounds familiar, but I am having trouble remembering a face. For some reason, I am thinking of the firefighter. I am thinking of the media rep, the stockbroker, the

financial planner, thinking of all the men I've dated in New York. The features of their faces fade together like a police composite, the facts of their lives blur like those in the obituaries before me.

I am thinking about the old woman next door and how I don't even know her first name -- only "Nussbaum" appears on her mailbox -- or what she has done for a living -- was she a businesswoman, a teacher maybe, a singer, an actress? I am thinking about how her cat was meowing and scratching at the door last night and this morning when I came home.

And what else? That something was missing. I didn't hear the sound of her metal eye.

In the hallway, I hear the sound of someone shuffling about. Thinking it might be her, I get up and go to the door, slide open the peep hole and look out.

Just to see.

Hues of Cucumber and Tomato

Uncle Lloyd sits in the sun porch in his chair, a vinyl rocker the color of Granny Smith apples, its seat so worn from the rivets on his overalls that it has been mended in spots with strips of medical tape, once white but now gray and gluey. He sits there, rain falling outside, smoking Salem after Salem, listening to the AM radio blaring orchestra renditions of old pop tunes, static, the occasional weather report. He sits waiting for the downpour to cease, a cloud of smoke enveloping him and the old radio console, as well as the empty chair on the other side, identical to his except that it is the deep berry color of the untended Red Delicious fruit outside, now wormy and rotting.

"I feel it in my joints," he says, rubbing the arms of his flannel shirt as if he's cold. He has been talking about the interminable rain and how it won't let up. During the summer, the rain would have been welcome, celebrated even. But at harvest time, it is a curse. The few crops still tended on the home place must come out soon or they will be lost. There is no way to get a tractor through these rolling hills without getting stuck in the mire.

"Tell me about it," says my father, patting his denim thighs.

Three years ago, he had both knees replaced. When he comes out from town to help Lloyd with planting and harvesting, he does mostly tractor work.

"What's the forecast say?" I ask, trying to make conversation. I can't believe I have flown fifteen hundred miles to talk about the weather.

"Rain most of this week. Maybe clear up on Monday," Lloyd says.

"Sunday," my father corrects. "Supposed to clear up Sunday."

"Monday is what I heard," Lloyd says, his mouth tightening like the drawstring on a laundry bag.

My father sets his jaw, the family resemblance evident, and shakes his head. They are like children who pantomime zipping their mouths and throwing away the keys. My father looks to me for validation, for some look that tells him I think he is right and Lloyd wrong.

Sitting on the vinyl couch across from my father, I refuse to play the game, avoid his gaze. Instead I look down at the scenes of country life printed on the couch's surface in hues of cucumber and tomato. The illustrations look like those pictures in Dick and Jane books when I was a kid. My grandmother had all the cushioned furniture in this room done in vinyl because this is where the men sat when they came in from the fields, their overalls dirty, boots caked

with dry mud. Here they sat and smoked, listened to farm reports, weather forecasts, Czech polkas, Glenn Miller songs.

Suddenly I am eight again, watching my mother and father dancing to Myron Floren's accordion band and a melody that runs like rippling water over an oom-pah oom-pah base. My mother kicked her heels high, her aqua dress and yellow apron flaring, the sun streaming through the porch windows as if the day would last forever. My father lifted her high in the air at the end until she giggled, "John, put me down," and we all laughed, me on the couch, Grandpa in his red chair, Lloyd in the green, Grandma standing in the doorway.

Another time, when I was ten and we were staying at the farm during Easter vacation, we went to the hatchery in Tama for baby chicks. We kept them in egg crates in the porch overnight since it was late when we got back and Grandpa needed to get the heat lamps set up in the two brooder houses near the hog pen. I slept in the porch that night, wrapped in my patchwork print sleeping bag, and awoke the next morning to a frenzied chorus of high pitched peeps, a hundred fuzzy lemon-drop-faced sopranos. I picked them up one at a time and held them to my cheek, the feeling soft like kisses of angels.

Before Grandpa carted the crates off, I took one of the chicks and put him in a shoe box in a closet upstairs. He stayed there, this

pet of mine who I called Sunshine, for four days, me sneaking in pockets of feed, leaving him water in one of my Magic Oven cupcake pans. On the fifth morning, I found him huddled in a corner of the box, still and silent. I knew even before I touched his yellow coat and felt the absence of warmth, that he was dead.

On a farm, death becomes something of a routine, the slaughtering of cattle, hogs, chickens. Litters of kittens frozen in winter. Sometimes, my grandfather would drown the fall kittens before the first frost. "More humane," he would say. "Would you rather see them catch their death of cold and then freeze?" "No," I would respond, biting my lip. But I didn't understand. I couldn't see anything humane about it.

I took Sunshine's corpse to my mother in the sewing room where I found her bent over a piece of sky blue fabric, her golden hair trickling onto it as she traced a pattern with chalk. With wet cheeks, I offered her the shoe box, stammering "I didn't -- I didn't mean to--"

She took the box from my hands, as I spilled bits of my story, and peered inside. "Oh, Kell," she said, setting the box down. She pulled me to her, wrapped me in the folds of her dress like a cocoon. "Kell, honey," she said, "It's not your fault. It was just his time, that's all." And later, when I began to catch my breath, "Just think, he'll be a chick forever. You saved him from the butcher block."

She helped me construct a coffin out of a cigar box we found in the pantry and a headstone out of a foil pie tin. I wrote "Sunshine" on it, each letter with a different color of crayon, the image of the sun in metallic gold at the top, and we buried him past the orchard, next to Duke, the old collie who had been hit by a car before I was old enough to understand.

Today in the gray light, the sofa looks tired, its cheerful scenes faded, a worn facade of country life.

"There goes Dub," Uncle Lloyd says, staring out the window and across the road at the Hayek's place. My father gets up and turns to watch the jacked-up Chevy pickup turn from the gravel driveway onto the paved road and pick up speed.

The Hayeks have lived across the road for as long as I can remember. Joe and Maureen had three sons who all stuck with the family business, and little by little, their farm spread out along the east side of the road. All three boys married right out of high school and bred like coyotes after that. Two of them live with their families in farmhouses just down the road. Dub, who is my age, lives with his wife and three kids in a trailer parked back behind Joe and Maureen's. Now there is a pack of Hayeks working the land, funneling their money back into the farm.

A few years ago, they replaced the old wooden barn on their property with a huge aluminum structure. It looks out of place here,

not only because it looks like an airplane hanger, but because of the color. It is the turquoise of the tropical seas seen on postcards. It doesn't fit in this countryside of red barns with peeling paint, wooden corn cribs and grain silos.

When Dub's truck disappears over the hill, my father sits back down. "What're they up to?"

"Same," Lloyd says. He reaches for an unopened pack of cigarettes on top of the radio, rips back the cellophane and foil, hits the pack on his wrist harder than necessary to extract a cigarette. His eyes get dark and narrow like mountain ash leaves when he says, "Joe still wants to lease the land across the creek."

Lloyd has never forgiven my father for leaving the farm, for going to business college and working in town. For that matter, I don't think he's forgiven my father for going off and marrying, for having a kid. Lloyd never married, spent all his life on the farm. My grandmother once told me he was in love with some woman when he was young, but she went off and became a nun. I'm not sure if this was fact or fiction, since my grandmother also told me she encouraged my father to marry my mother. "If you love her, son," she said, "go after her. Marry her." Or so her version went. But I know from the stories my father told me that she did not approve of my mother in the beginning, a "city girl." I suppose she blamed my mother for taking her boy away from the farm, even though he'd already gone off to college before he met her.

"Why don't you lease it to him?" my father asks. "Land's not doin' anybody any good just sittin' there."

Lloyd lets out an annoyed sigh, as if this should say it all.

"Might as well get some money for it."

"Might as well just give 'em the whole goddamn farm," Lloyd says, his face taking on the color of a beet.

My father lets a blast of air and pent-up frustration release. "I'm not saying --," his voice loud now, "I'm not saying to give --"

"You want something to eat?" I interrupt, trying to diffuse the situation before it becomes volatile, rising and heading for the kitchen. I am back visiting for the first time in two years. I don't want there to be a fight. Better they say nothing, just sit in silence as they usually do, staring out the windows.

That was what we did when my mother died. Nobody could make sense of it. The men sat in the porch, gray and silent. My grandmother busied herself in the kitchen, as much to deny herself time to think, I believe, as to do what someone had to. I drifted between the two, bobbing from porch to kitchen, kitchen to porch, like something cut loose in the ocean.

In the kitchen, I hear the rain throwing itself against the west window, see the darkness seeping in. I turn on the overhead light to fight it, the artificial glow dimmer than I remember, its weak beam casting shadows in the corners. The rain on the window pane drums

out a syncopated rhythm which reminds me of the old blue and white speckled percolator my grandmother used. For a moment, I imagine I see her there, standing at the gas range, eggs sputtering on the front burner, coffee drumming on the back, dough silently rising in a crock nearby. I can almost see a path worn in the brittle linoleum tile, from refrigerator to stove, stove to counter, counter to sink. Today, I will busy myself as she did, trace her path, keep my hands and mind occupied so as to keep from feeling.

Without her, the kitchen seems smaller somehow. Perhaps it is the intrusion of Uncle Lloyd's microwave, set in the center of the counter. He is not much of a housekeeper and so did not even bother to clear the things behind to place it against the wall, simply put it in the only open counter space for convenience. He never learned to cook, living as he did, his whole life in the care of his mother, and it's evident after only moments of foraging. The fruit cellar, once packed with jars of preserves and home canned vegetables now houses cans of pork and beans, tuna, a dozen varieties of Campbell's soup. The freezer, no longer filled with white paper- wrapped packages from the butcher in town, is stacked with TV dinners and frozen pizzas. Lloyd is no longer the brown sun-painted man I watched hoist hay bales on top of wagons. He looks pasty like cookie dough, his skin greasy like a potato chip. I wonder how someone can stand to live like this. My father says he deserves

whatever he gets since he never learned to do for himself. He resents that Lloyd spent his life living rent free on the home place, never having to cook a meal, never having to do laundry. I think he feels Lloyd is somehow responsible for Grandma's death, him having expected her to take care of him when she was feeble herself.

I find some eggs in the fridge, a bit of cheddar cheese, an onion. A can of mushrooms from the pantry, some fresh tomatoes Dad brought from his little garden in town, and we have omelets.

"Lunch," I start to call out, then remembering where I am, correct myself and say, "Dinner." For some reason, my family has always called the noon meal "dinner," the evening meal "supper." And though I have altered my ways to fit in beyond this property's farthest stretch of barbed wire, I know that change is not welcome here.

My father is up first, though not quickly, making an audible grunt as he pulls himself up from the couch. "Did you hear her?" he snaps at Uncle Lloyd who is finishing yet another cigarette. "Dinner."

"Yeah, I heard her," he says, and I hear the spin of the old push-top ashtray. I used to play with that old ashtray, fascinated by the spring mechanism that sucked ashes into some lower vault.

"It's getting cold," my father says, settling into his usual side chair under the framed print of the Last Supper. Lloyd comes in and sits opposite him, facing Jesus and his apostles, John, Luke, Peter, Judas who betrayed him. I sit next to my father.

Nobody sits in the chairs at the head or foot of the table. In some sort of silent homage to the dead, they sit empty.

Though my mother was taken quickly in a car wreck, my grandparents' deaths were anything but humane. Grandfather was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease a few years before he died. It caused him to shake uncontrollably, and he had trouble helping with even the simplest chores. In his last years, he watched the farm he had built gradually slip away -- first the hogs, then the sheep, most of the cattle and chickens. Mercy finally came when he suffered a heart attack on a gray November day, five years ago. He was sitting in the sun porch in his red chair reading the *Des Moines Register*. Lloyd found him there, his head tilted back, the paper spread on his lap.

My grandmother died the following year. She fell one day, hanging out laundry, and broke her hip. She didn't have the strength to get to the house and so she lay there on the ground for hours until Uncle Lloyd finished his work in the fields. He found her, propped against the fence, watching the sun set over the west hills beyond the barn. That was the last day she saw her home. After the hospital, there was no way Lloyd could take care of her; he could barely take care of himself, and so they sent her to a nursing home. There she had a stroke. By the time I got home, there was little left of the

woman I had known. Just the shell of something once vibrant and precious.

This visit, though planned for no funeral, is no less somber it seems. Perhaps this is because death has become so much a routine that I find I have come to expect it. I realize that each visit with my father or Uncle Lloyd could be the last. I come hoping that we might say what's never been said, thinking I might find some meaning in it all.

But here we are, eating our omelets at the dining room table with Wonder Bread, Smucker's jam, and silence.

I cook and feed to express love. I eat to fill some empty place inside.

At the end of the meal, I will pick up the dishes and wash them. I will hug Lloyd good-bye and head with my father back into town. He and I will spend the next two days talking without saying anything. Then I will fly back to New York, thankful for the din of the city, comforted by its noise. Yet realizing that, for me, noise is just another form of silence.

At the Sign of the Black Angel

On a bridge over the Vlatava River, a black angel sings. Barbara can hear it, the voice of a young girl, carried on the wind across the water, across the bridge and over the torrents of people snapping pictures and inspecting street vendors' wares, hauntingly audible over the minstrel who stands nearby playing his accordion for spare crowns and the occasional dollar. Barbara hears it and follows, past the canopied cafe and the perfume of coffee, past a dozen young men with their tables of military hats from disintegrating Eastern bloc countries, past the book vendor with his stack of Praha guides and walking maps, past the old peasant woman peddling religious tokens and the tourist haggling with the marionette vendor. She stops in front of a hulking piece of sandstone, the towering figure of a haloed saint, its form blackened and eaten away by centuries of pollution and life.

The face that looks down on her from above is that of a young woman, her fine features battered, her sad expression captured forever in stone. It seems to Barbara that the musical strain emanates from the statue's very mouth, its message expressly for her. After all, no one else seems to hear its voice. Yet, as she tilts her

head in an effort to hear what this sphinx has to say, the voice diminishes to little more than a whisper. She can hardly hear it now, let alone decipher it -- the verses seem to be in Czech and she does not speak Czech, save the essential yes, no, please, thank-you, how much, and good day. And now, even the whisper has faded. Barbara hears only the sound of people talking on the bridge, the sound of the minstrel's bellows.

When Adam catches up with her, she is still staring at the black angel, seemingly hypnotized by the form in front of her.

"Kind of creepy, huh?" he asks over her shoulder.

"What?" she says, jarred out of her trance. "No. No, not at all. I think she's beautiful."

He shakes his head and mumbles, "To each his own," the mocking tone of disapproval evident, before turning and joining the crowd around the minstrel.

To each his own. It was the same thing he'd said when they'd walked through the red light district in Amsterdam the week before, his commentary on the kind of women who would do "that" for a living and the kind of men who would want to sleep with "tramps" like them. It was the same thing he'd said when observing the squalid tenements they'd seen on the outskirts of Berlin as their train passed through, as if poverty was something these people had chosen. It was the same thing he'd said back at home when Barbara had

shown him the paintings she was considering submitting for a local exhibit.

When was it, she wonders, that he became so intolerant, so judgmental. He had seemed so open-minded when they had dated and first married. He had been so supportive of her and her interests, even professed to love her art. It had seemed, at the time, that she had walked on water in his eyes. Now, it was apparent, she did not even float. And given the reflected image in his slate blue stare, it was no wonder Barbara had left the paintings in the attic, dismissed the idea of exhibiting, and shortly thereafter, stopped painting entirely.

"Yes," Barbara repeats under her breath, "to each his own." She will have to remember to use that phrase the next time he brings home one of those chrome desk toys from the Sharper Image. A bit of ammunition. She will not tell Adam about the angel's song.

Barbara joins the minstrel's audience as he finishes his last piece and the small crowd begins to disperse. Adam moves forward to drop a few dollar bills into the musician's hat. At least, she has to admit, he is generous with his money. Of course, with that, a little voice in the back of her head says, he can afford to be.

"If I see any more saints with pie tins around their heads, I'm going to scream," Adam whispers to Barbara, turning away from a Byzantine mural in the Emmaus Abbey. He has had his fill of gold leaf,

his fill of churches and museums packed with religious relics.

"Ready?" he asks her, nodding toward the door.

"Why don't you go on without me," Barbara suggests. "I won't be long." She smiles an apology out of habit. "I'll meet you back at the hotel."

Adam shrugs his consent and delivers a perfunctory kiss before setting off.

But once she has finished at the abbey, Barbara does not head toward the hotel in *Vaclavske namesti*, the city's center. Instead, she finds herself wandering through the streets of Prague, as if drawn by some magical force, taking in the architecture, taking in the people, taking in the air. It is the first time on this trip she has felt able to breathe without fear of hyperventilation.

Barbara wanders past ancient stone buildings, Gothic and neo-Classical facades now craggy and blackened like her angel, past Baroque and Rococo stuccos with hundred year old frescoes and religious relics still intact, past the swirling spires and onion-shaped domes of fairy-tale castles gleaming in the sunlight. She wanders along cobble-stone streets, meanders through courtyards, noting the markers on each house, coats of arms and mysterious inscriptions. She knows from the guide book Adam brought with them that these signify physical markers. "At the sign of the Black Horse," for example. "At the Golden Cross." She tries to decipher them, but this is no romance language and she finds herself at a

disadvantage. Tired and thirsty, she buys a bottle of water and rests on the steps of the Jan Hus Monument with the inscription, "Pravda zvitezi," something about truth. She wonders if she imagined the angel's song, if maybe she needed to.

Barbara finds herself back at the bridge just as the sun disappears over the steeples and rust colored roof tiles of the city, the angel now just one black silhouette among many.

In the shadow of the sleeping sun, the white moon waxing, the bridge takes on a new atmosphere. It is easy to see why this is called the Paris of the East, the new Left Bank. Black and denim and tie-dye abound, woven together in the tapestry of the crowd, visual focus drawn to clusters of kaleidoscope color around street performers on the avenue. Actors with elaborate marionettes and puppets play out the scenes of life, a romance here, a battle there, the steady flow of conflict and resolution, resolution and conflict.

A musician, a young man with cinder black hair and smoldering charcoal eyes, plays an acoustic guitar and sings old Beatles tunes in heavily accented English. The constellation of bodies around him join in when they know the words and often when they do not, a phonetic "Hey Jude" resonating across the water. That the young man is a Gypsy, Barbara has no doubt. She can tell not only by his physical features and clothing, but by something else she senses about him. She remembers the tour guide in Munich mentioning that

the Gypsies have been persecuted throughout time and that thousands of them were silently exterminated with the Jews during World War II. On this trip, she and Adam have seen a number of gypsies, and for some reason, she finds herself fascinated by them and their culture, intrigued by their sense of magic.

She is thinking of this when she notices the woman sitting on the bridge rail near the black angel, the yellow glow from a gas street lamp creating an aura about her, the sinuous curve of her long blonde hair following the nape of her neck and catching the light, illuminated as if from within. Barbara stares in disbelief. It is not the surreal glow that shocks her, but the striking resemblance. It is as if she is looking in a mirror. There, under the gaze of the black angel, sits her double. The only visible difference is in their clothing; while Barbara is clad in khaki slacks and a blazer, her twin is liberated in a splash of color, a brightly patterned dress of gold, purple and blue which flows freely over her ivory skin in the warm breeze. Like a swan in a sea of color.

As if she has been waiting for just such recognition, the woman rises and moves toward Barbara. But instead of stopping, as Barbara suspects she might, the woman simply smiles and passes, proceeding along the bridge toward the Old Tower. Barbara waits a moment and then follows. She follows, across the bridge and through the tower's arch, down streets illuminated by a misshapen pearl of moonlight overhead, as well as the glow from apartments and cafes.

She glides through the maze of cobblestone streets and courtyards, through the *Starometska ranice*, the Old Village square, with the intricate fifteenth century clock whose maker was blinded at the king's command after finishing the project, to prevent him from duplicating such a masterpiece for anyone else.

Barbara follows her seemingly unsuspecting guide down a final narrow passageway, through a darkened arch with a wrought iron gate, and into a courtyard dimly lit by gas lamps perched like gargoyles over a blackened door at the opposite end of the square. From the shadow of the archway, she sees the swan tail of the woman's dress complete its passage across the cobblestones and disappear around the charred door. A moment later, a light goes on in a ground floor room just to the right, the golden glow of an old crystal chandelier suspended from the ceiling casting its light unevenly through old hand-cast panes of glass.

Barbara approaches the window slowly, quietly, attempting to conceal herself in the dark shadows below the chandelier's aura. Rising slightly into the yellow light, she peers over the edge of the windowsill to discover a paint encrusted easel, a large wooden table covered with jars and brushes and paints, canvases hanging and stacked against the walls. Canvases alive with color and movement, canvases that seem to breathe as she breathes. Barbara gasps, for these canvases do in fact breathe with her. They *are* hers. *Her* canvases. *Her* paintings. Identical, stroke for stroke, to the ones she

put away in the attic so long ago. Her gasp audible, she hears movement from inside. She turns and runs.

She runs back through the courtyard and the narrow passageway, traversing the web of courtyards and cobblestone streets stretched back to the center, *Vaclavske namesti*, Wenceslas Square. There, in the vast expanse of the darkened promenade, she feels even more exposed, more vulnerable. She scurries past the imposing bronze monument of Wenceslas on horseback towering over four saints below, feeling eyes upon her, feeling caught.

Breathless, Barbara arrives back at the Europa, stopping only to retrieve a key from the startled night clerk, before rushing on to the room. Catching a glimpse of herself in a lobby mirror, she sees the flash of a familiar pattern, a rainbow of color flowing behind her in the image of a dress.

Pausing in the hallway outside the room, she attempts to collect herself, attempts to make some sense of what she has seen. Perhaps, she thinks, she is going mad. Yet, she knows she is not. What she has seen is real. What she has felt, for the first time in a very long time, is alive. Whatever is in the air here has enabled her to breathe once again. And though the message, like the images through those ancient glass panes, may be somewhat distorted yet, at least she knows she must stay and decipher it. She will tell Adam, regardless of how crazy he will think it sounds. She will show him the artist's studio. She will tell him she is staying, regardless of the

consequences. Taking a deep breath, she turns the brass door handle with determination.

The door opens on Adam's reclining mass, his corpselike silhouette made more severe in the gray static glow of a dead TV channel. As Barbara attempts to locate the TV controls, she sees her reflection in the wardrobe mirror, an image not of brilliant color, but of bland khaki.

By morning, the reality that seemed so clear in the glow of the gas lamps, seems exposed as anything but reality in the unforgiving blaze of daylight.

Curious though, Barbara, without explanation, insists on taking a detour to the train station, leading Adam down a narrow cobblestone street, through a wrought iron gate and into a courtyard where she pauses in front of a familiar stone facade.

"What is it?" Adam asks.

She doesn't respond, just walks slowly up to the window to the right of the door and peers inside. But where the artist's studio should be, there is only an empty room, a frayed electric cord hanging where the chandelier should have been.

"Barbara." Someone calling her name.

Something else. Faint strains of music from somewhere nearby.

"Barbara." Adam's voice from behind.

"Sorry," Barbara whispers. "I guess -- I --" trailing off. A child's voice. A young girl.

"Barbara," Adam's voice, louder now, pulling her back. "We can still catch the ten o'clock," his voice impatient.

The music stops.

In *Hlavni nadraze*, the central train station, when Adam and Barbara stop to pick up their suitcases from baggage storage, a man -- an American -- is asking the woman behind the counter to call the police. It seems he put his pack in one of the lockers across the hallway and it's been stolen. "Should have checked it," Adam says to Barbara. "Guide books tell you to steer clear of the lockers here. These people," he says this as if referring to the entire Czech population, "they watch you set the combination, then rip off your stuff." He adds to the man who has, not surprisingly, overheard his comment, "Should have checked it." That righteous I-told-you-so tone. The same tone as "To each his own."

Barbara suddenly feels like she is suffocating, as if all the air in the train station has been sucked out by a giant vacuum. Time has shifted into another dimension and everything around Barbara seems to be happening in slow motion. Adam's exchange with the lost-luggage man, then with the lady behind the counter, a newspaper vendor waving today's edition of *Lidove Noviny* from side to side, like the pendulum of the ancient clock, a hunchback

Gypsy woman approaching from the right, the baggage lady checking claim tickets and turning to begin her search, the Gypsy woman coming toward her, Adam directing the baggage lady to the appropriate patch of gray on the shelves behind her, the familiar hues of purple and gold and blue, holding out a single swan blossom in her left hand, coming straight toward her, her eyes now locked with Barbara's, saying something, something Barbara is not sure she understands but believes is about time, and now though she sees the Gypsy woman's mouth moving, she hears nothing but the song of the black angel growing louder and louder before the entire room starts to spin -- the Gypsy woman, the lost-luggage man, the baggage check lady, Adam, the newspaper vendor, the lockers, the floor.

When Barbara comes to, Adam is standing over her. She sees the lost-luggage man and some people she doesn't recognize, including a man in uniform she assumes is a policeman. Adam is asking her something, if she is okay.

"Yes," she says, starting to get up. "I'm fine. I -- I don't know -- I -- I'm fine."

Adam takes her waist, steadies her. "What did she do to you? Did she do anything to you?" he asks.

Barbara is confused. "Who?" she asks. "What are --" She stops as she sees another man in uniform holding the old Gypsy woman who is yelling something at him and trying to pull away. Her flowers lie

wilted and broken on the floor. "You mean --," Barbara begins, then, "No. No. She had nothing -- I didn't -- Please. No. It must have been the heat. It was," she shakes her head, "nothing. Please let her go."

At Adam's nod, the man in the uniform releases his hold on the old woman who continues to curse, shaking her fist at the officer, then at Adam. Still ranting, she stoops her hunch-back frame over to pick up what is left of her trampled bouquet.

"Wait," says Barbara, fumbling in her purse and producing a folded twenty dollar bill. "Her flowers," she tries to explain to Adam, pulling away from him to approach the old woman, touching her hunched shoulder, the woman startled from her raving and the task at hand.

Adam fumbles with his wallet and attempts to offer Barbara a smaller denomination, but she ignores him.

"For your flowers," Barbara tells the woman looking into her eyes. "For your flowers," she repeats, gesturing toward the wilted blossoms and putting the twenty into her hand.

The old woman attempts to dust off the traumatized bouquet, then hands it to Barbara, grasping her hand as she does so and moving so close that Barbara can smell the unpleasant odor of sweat and age. The Gypsy twists her head over her bent frame so that she and Barbara stand almost eye to eye. Tightening her grip, the old woman says something of seeming portent, something Barbara thinks at first has the tone of a warning, but not trusting

herself, decides must have been meant as a blessing. The old woman holds Barbara's gaze for a moment, then drops her hand, turns and hobbles away.

Barbara watches her make her slow journey toward the exit, as Adam finishes pulling their bags from the counter and tipping the baggage check lady.

"You're okay then?" he asks.

Barbara nods. "Mmhm," convincing herself.

"Well," Adam says, checking his watch. "We can still make our train." He starts for the tracks. "Let's go."

Barbara pauses for a moment, looking down at the tired and thirsty blossoms in her hand. She takes in a short breath, holds it and follows. Follows what is familiar, what is safe.

On the train, she will find the restaurant car and buy a bottle of water.

Stitches

It was as if Maggie had been stabbed in the chest, but from the inside. That was what woke her. For a moment, she lay still, trying to get her bearings. She had been dreaming of the house where she and Bill had lived when they were first married, and for a moment she thought herself there. But no, that wasn't right, she was at home, in the big white farmhouse she and Bill had shared for the past fifty-four years. She could hear his labored breathing beside her.

Her heart beat as if the force of it would enable escape from her chest as she turned herself over to face him. "Bill," she started to say, as she reached for his arm. She was about to continue, "Bill, I think I'm having a heart attack," when the second stab came. Only this time, she was awake to see Bill's body convulse and hear his gasp, the sound of a balloon releasing its last bit of air when the person trying to knot it has accidentally let go. It had not been her heart attack at all. It had been his, but she felt it all the same. And was that so strange? After years of their lives being interwoven, their bodies intertwined, they were part of the same piece of fabric. If one part of that fabric were torn, one thread broken, the rupture

would run from one end to the other. There was no seam in the middle to stop it.

What to do, she wondered, impressed with the calm she was able to maintain. Think, she told herself. Dial 911, came the thought. But no, that would take too much time. They were miles from town; the ambulance would take at least twenty minutes. It was unlikely, this being Bill's third heart attack, that they had twenty minutes.

CPR. She'd have to try CPR. If only she could remember what she'd learned in that class. She could see the nurse who had taught it. She'd been about the same age her Evelyn would have been had Evelyn lived. She'd had the same auburn hair, the same greenish eyes. Maggie had imagined that the teacher was her daughter, that by some strange stroke of fate, Evelyn's soul had made its way to this other woman. After all, hadn't Evelyn been applying to nursing schools when the accident happened? Hadn't she been pursuing a career in health studies when that truck driver's aneurysm burst and sent his semi-truckful of frozen sides of beef into Evelyn's second-hand Ford Galaxie? Why, God must have put Evelyn's soul in this other nurse, it being an accident and all, it only made sense. Of course, later, when she shared her theory with Bill, he'd said, "Why, Maggie, if that woman's the same age as Evelyn'd be, she'd of been alive when Evelyn was. Don't you think she'd of already had a soul?" "Oh," Maggie had said. "Well, yes, I guess so."

She could hear the nurse's voice now, "First, lift the head..." Bill's head seemed heavy, like the canister in the kitchen that was filled with pennies. Bill had been meaning to pick up some of those penny rolls so they could take them to the bank, he just hadn't gotten around to it. "Tilt the head back..." Hadn't she read somewhere that the head accounted for a good percentage of body weight? Or was it that a good percentage of body heat escaped through the head? Maybe that was it. "Plug the nose with your fingers." If Bill had been awake, Maggie was sure he'd have made some joke, maybe "Fingers? Ha! Better use both hands on this nose," or "You know, took an ambulance crew and four fireman to do CPR on Jimmy Durante." They weren't all that funny, Bill's jokes, but Maggie couldn't help but laugh. It was the way he told them, she thought, because life's so hard, a person needs those little laughs to get through.

"Open the mouth and place yours over it..." With her thumb and index finger on his lower lip, Maggie gently pulled open Bill's mouth. His lips were soft, moist.

The first time she'd felt those lips she'd noticed that. It was in the back of her daddy's Hudson. She'd been seventeen at the time. She'd gone with her father to pick up a baby pig he'd bartered. Bill's uncle owned the stock barn, and Bill was the one who loaded the young sow in the back of the truck. Maggie knew him from the country schoolhouse though neither one of them had attended for a

couple of years. Times were hard and their families needed every capable hand on the farms. Maggie had been sitting on the tire well in the back of the pick-up watching Bill lift that armful of someday's Christmas dinner into the truck. For a few minutes, they sat and talked, or more accurately flirted, while they watched the pig snort around its new confinement, then settle in a thatch of straw by the cab. Maggie had turned her head around toward the stock barn to see what was keeping her father when Bill kissed her. The pig didn't make it to the next Christmas. It was butchered for Maggie and Bill's wedding reception.

"Breathe, one, two. Inhale, one, two. Breathe, one, two. Inhale, one, two." There was a rhythm to it. Same as when little Evelyn had been born. Maggie had been picking tomatoes in the garden when her water broke. She was only at eight months so it came as a bit of a surprise. Bill, who had been roguing beans in the far west field, knew immediately that something was up. By the time he made it to the house, the contractions were only a few minutes apart. At first, Maggie had wished her mother was there to help, but Bill was so calm, so in control. "After all," Bill had said, "I've been through a couple dozen births already." Maggie wasn't sure she liked being compared to livestock, but she guessed there must be some similarities. "Bill," she'd whispered, "I'm scared." Bill had taken her small callused hand in his, transferring the strength of a dozen John Deere tractors and the calm of a clover field on a hot summer

day. "Breathe," he'd said. And Maggie did. "Push," he'd said. And Maggie responded.

"Breathe," Maggie said. But there was no response. Still, Maggie continued trying, trying to breathe back into Bill the life she felt he had breathed into her. After what seemed like a lifetime itself, she stopped exhausted.

Now, she was angry. "Dammit, Bill," she wanted to say, "Why didn't you just have the operation?" But no, Bill had said, he was too old for an operation like that. Rather he should live the rest of his life in peace and quiet and die at home -- even out in the field -- than whither and die in a hospital like a season's forgotten apples in the fruit cellar. Yes, she had agreed, he had a point.

But now what? She should call someone perhaps, but who? A doctor? Some professional who would come, place his stethoscope on Bill's chest and tell her what she had no desire to hear? A mortician? Some complete stranger who would come to cart Bill away like his latest science project? No, not that. Never that. She was not ready to lose Bill yet. Not ready at all.

She would have to think of what to do, that was all there was to it. But all she could think of was that Bill knew, had always known, would always know what to do. He was like that. He had always noticed a new dress or a new hairdo, always said just the right thing when she was feeling low, always knew what to do in times of crisis. The time Evelyn was twelve and fell out of the hayloft, catching her

arm on a rusty nail and tearing it to the bone, Maggie had panicked, fearing tetanus, amputation, then death in hysterical progression, but Bill was calm. He knew just what to do, just what to say. Why, he actually had Evelyn chuckling between sobs on the way to the hospital. Maggie thought she'd picked up some of this quality from Bill over the years, as if it were something that could be breathed in like the scent of lilacs or absorbed like lotion on dry skin. But now that there was a crisis, her composure, so intact at first, was simply gone -- faded like last Spring's lilacs, evaporated like the lotion she continually swabbed on her chapped hands.

If only he would open his eyes and tell her, if only he could tell her what to do. If only, if only, if only... Maggie began to chant, almost inaudible, just a whisper. "Open your eyes," she said. "Open your eyes. Open your eyes." After all, she was not a doctor. She'd read about these things, people having near death experiences, seeing bright lights in a tunnel, then coming back. In fact, she'd read in a mystery novel once about someone who'd appeared to all observers to be quite dead, yet came back to life in the next chapter -- something about a drug, she thought, but wasn't completely sure. Who was she to know such things? Bill would know. Then they would laugh afterwards, laugh at how silly she had been to be so worried, laugh as he told his story of the tunnel, probably adding humorous tales of who and what he saw along the way for her entertainment, laugh as they had laughed so many times before.

And so she continued her chant, continued until her voice felt ragged and her body spent. She was so tired. Maybe if she just put her head on Bill's shoulder for a little while, she could rest.

Maggie lay there, her head on Bill's muted chest for some time, watching his hands turn from age- and sun-spotted flesh to the ashen gray of the November sky outside. Occasionally, she closed her eyes in an effort to sleep. If she could only sleep, she thought, there was the possibility that when she woke, Bill would be back from the tunnel, or better yet, she would find this had all been a dream, though a bad one at that. She was afraid to move, afraid to look up and discover a face as firmly set as those she and Bill had seen on Mount Rushmore the summer after Evelyn died. She could not bear the thought of seeing Bill's face that way, without those familiarly ruddy cheeks and mischievous eyes -- in fact, could not bear the thought of life without them -- so she remained frozen, her head anchored over Bill's silent heart, until her pained and stiffened joints would allow it no longer. When she finally uncoiled, she was aware of the cold of Bill's body.

The sweater. Why hadn't she thought of it sooner? She'd been knitting Bill a sweater, he got so chilly in the evenings. She picked the color carefully -- Darnell's Periwinkle Blue, Dye Lot 7814 -- because it reminded her of the wildflowers that had covered the farm when she and Bill had first found it. They would have missed it entirely if the bridge on the paved road hadn't been out. As a result,

they had taken the bumpy gravel road past the Dvorak farm to get home, and while they were admiring the purple blue haze of the pasture rippling in the noon day sun, a stony patch of road punctured a tire. While Bill changed the flat, Maggie collected wildflowers from the unused pasture next to the road. The heat being what it was, they decided to rest in the shade of a willow tree near a small creek that ran through the property before continuing on. There, under the fan of willows, they made love. And when they discovered that a baby was on its way, Bill made an offer on the land. The Dvoraks accepted.

Having started the sweater about a month before, when the evenings started getting chilly and the lawn chairs were packed away for the winter, Maggie was now more than half-way through. It wouldn't take long to finish.

Besides, she was grateful for a mission that would take her away. Her knitting basket was downstairs in the living room. Though the floor was cold and the air chilly, she didn't take the time to put on her robe or slippers. There was the sweater to think of. She padded her way downstairs, settled in the stuffed green chair next to the floor lamp, and picked up the near-sweater, once only single strands of fleece, now intricately and painstakingly patterned together, stitch by stitch. Needles in hand, she wrapped the tapering thread around her fingers and went to work.

It was Bill who'd encouraged her to take the knitting class. When Evelyn died, she'd felt lonely and isolated. Her parents had been long gone, her only sister living in Pennsylvania. Bill was in the fields for hours at a time. And the rural route address certainly didn't encourage many next-door neighborly drop-ins, particularly after the Koneckys retired and moved away. The class was taught at the town church once a week, and when Bill saw her looking over the flyer that came in the mail, he insisted she go. "It'll be good for you to get out," he'd said. And he had been right. The class had patched a tear in Maggie's life. She'd kept in touch with a number of women, become close friends with a handful.

Through the years, they had been a family of sorts. But now she was the only one left. First, Bessie had died in that train wreck, then Mildred with cancer, Maureen and Florence with strokes. These days, she and Bill got Christmas cards from some of Mildred's children, but that was about it.

Then there was her sister Mary in Hope, Pennsylvania -- Mary who had fallen and broken her hip just last Spring. Maggie had wanted to go see her while she was in the hospital, but it was an expensive trip -- plus Bill had just come home from the hospital himself after his second heart attack, and Maggie thought it better to wait a while. She'd go once Mary got home and didn't have hospital staff around to help her. By then, Bill would be stronger and she could stay longer, which would be nice since neither she nor Mary could afford

to make these trips often. But then infection set in Mary's hip. She never made it home.

Maggie's eyes were tired now and when she stopped to rub them, she noticed it had gotten quite bright, the sky a blinding white like the inside of a fluorescent bulb. How long had she been sitting here, she wondered, her eyes sore, fixated on the bristly strands of blue and on her reddened fingers. Hours certainly. It felt like years. Her head pounded the way the ground did when cattle charged, breaking down fences and anything in their path. Her arthritic finger joints screamed if only to be heard above her head, and her stomach joined in with an earthly rumble. But she couldn't stop, not now. Not when she was so close to the finish.

She started directing her fingers out loud, as the nurse had instructed her in CPR. "Around. Around. Double loop and through. Around. Around. Double loop and through," the stitches harder now, her fingers like kindling. Each stitch took two, maybe three times the time, but she was determined and kept on. "Around. Around. Double loop and through." She ignored the rumbling from her stomach. No time to stop and eat.

She barely noticed the passage of time, the chime of the clock, she had to focus her eyes so intensely, lest the needles and the yarn become one big purple blue bruised blur. It didn't matter, she was near the end.

And there it was finally, the last stitch. It looked good even if she did say so herself. Even with rushing to finish. Oh, there were a few places where the stitches seemed less than perfect, tighter or looser than they could have been. There were a couple of spots where she thought she might have actually missed a loop, maybe even a whole stitch. But it was finished, whole -- and she had to say, not bad work at all. She hoped it would keep Bill warm.

Getting out of the nest she had created in the padded chair took some effort. Maggie couldn't remember when she had felt so stiff and tired. She tottered up the stairs, her weakened knees trembling with each step. She was out of breath by the time she reached the top and had to pause for a moment before making her way into the bedroom.

There was Bill on the bed as she had left him. He did not look good, she thought. Not good at all. His skin was gray, his lips almost blue. And what was that smell? That sickening, rather bittersweet smell. Something like urine and chemicals and she didn't know what else. She'd have to wash the linens, she guessed, and as long as she was at it, the towels -- and, of course, she should probably ask Bill if he had anything she should throw in with the load.

Walking past the vanity, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, her hair disheveled, bags under her eyes -- and, heavens, she was still in her nightgown. It was late, she knew. But to dress now seemed pointless -- she was so tired, and after all, Bill was asleep. At

least, she would brush her hair. She had always tried to look nice for Bill. She lifted the tarnished silver brush that was part of the vanity set her mother had given her when she got married. It was surprising how easily it slid through her wiry gray strands, as if through the silken tresses of youth. She even imagined it looked, not gray, but blonde today, perhaps it was the light.

In the mirror, she could see that Bill's eyes were still closed. Closed as they had been that first morning when she, waking early, had stared until he, sensing her gaze, turned to embrace her. So as not to wake him, she dropped the sweater over his torso, tucking the sleeves under his stiff elbows. Now he won't be cold while he sleeps, she thought. But she was. Cold. Quite cold. And tired. So tired. Maybe she'd just snuggle up to Bill to keep warm. Yes, that's what she would do.

Maggie lay down on the bed and nestled her head on Bill's shoulder. She shut her eyes and felt his arm wrapping around her.

Été dans Paris

They danced on top of the Eiffel Tower, the Christmas bulbs of Paris laid out around them, and the man in his orb above grinned. They promenaded through the courtyard of the Louvre, the crystal eye of I.M. Pei winking at them from the stone face, and Mona, she smiled. They pirouetted in Rodin's garden where roses blossomed, and Balzac paused with a hearty grin.

"I love you," he declared.

"I love you," she echoed.

It was summer and they were violins singing Ravel, flutes twittering Debussy. They were gouache on canvas, they were the current of the Seine.

He wrote the sonnets of Baudelaire, the stanzas of Rimbaud. She painted the watercolors of Matisse, the oils of Van Gogh. They created in a garret on the Left Bank, a one-room flat with a hot plate and a shared bathroom. They had a few hundred dollars and with it they rented the masters' lives.

They sipped cappuccino in cafes, savored wine in pubs, colored their palettes with bread and cheese, peaches and plums, chocolate and crepes in parks and in bed. They made love to each

other, to their idols. They offered their bodies to the masters, but the landlords wanted cash.

"We'll manage," he said.

"Yes," she agreed.

He took a job in a cafe waiting tables. It lasted a stanza, a week, words romancing him away, the text of the menu dry to his thirst. He took to writing poems in the Metro, his vocabulary in French limited, a few francs to buy cheap wine.

She went to work in a bakery, hot from ovens awakened at dawn -- her only pleasure in this medium, arranging pastries on trays. Her wages went toward rent. She brought home day-old bread.

They had little money for ink, for paint. It did not matter. They were tired all the time.

At night, they would drink his cheap wine, eat her day-old bread. Sometimes they would go out and sit in cafes, ordering little. She would go home early in order to rise with yeast the next day. He stayed out later and later, pouring anything he could find into his glass. She began to gorge herself on buttery croissants and syrupy crepes at work when no one was looking.

"You're getting fat," he rebuked her.

"You're drinking all the time," she spat back.

He met a woman, autumn falling, in a bar one night. Her husband had left and she was willing to compensate him for his time.

The woman bought him bordeauxs and cabernets, chardonnays and champagne, paid gin and amaretto for his soul.

She noticed the absence, took up with a baker who brought her biscuits and jam to dry her tears. He sated her hunger with wheat and rye, cheesecake and eclairs. He stuffed her with dough and semen until she was fat with his seed.

It was no longer summer, now autumn, winter gray. Their attics were filled with no manuscripts, no canvases, only black turtlenecks and berets.

And in their memories, they danced on top of the Eiffel Tower, the Christmas bulbs of Paris laid out in bits and pieces around them, and the pock-marked man in his orb above looked down on them and laughed. They promenaded through the courtyard of the Louvre, its pointed glass eye piercing from the stone face, and pale Mona, she smirked. They pirouetted in Rodin's garden where thorns glistened and Balzac paused with a sneer.