Portland State University

PDXScholar

Dissertations and Theses

Dissertations and Theses

11-17-1995

People on the Edges of Dreams

Francesca B. French
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds

Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

French, Francesca B., "People on the Edges of Dreams" (1995). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 5170.
<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.7046>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Francesca B. French for the Master of Arts in English were presented November 17, 1995, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

COMMITTEE APPROVALS:

Thomas Doulis

Ray Mariels

Anthony Wolk

Richard Toscan
Representative of the Office of Graduate Studies

DEPARTMENTAL APPROVAL:

Shelley Reece, Chair
Department of English

ACCEPTED FOR PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY BY THE LIBRARY

by

on

23 February 1996

ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Francesca B. French for the Master of Arts in English presented November 17, 1995.

Title: People on the Edges of Dreams

This thesis is composed of a collection of twelve short stories, varying in length from 2 to 14 pages.

Each story contains its own discrete theme, but fits as well within the overarching theme of the collection as a whole. This overarching theme is what gives the collection its cohesiveness. The main theme of the larger work can be found in the title of the collection, *People on the Edges of Dreams*. In many of the stories dreams, or dream-states, figure in the lives of the protagonists.

In addition to the dream-state theme there is a less obvious theme, which has to do with the extent to which most or all of the main characters in the stories are faced with a kind of inescapable compassion for others. For example, the self-involved, self-gratifying protagonist in *Matador* cannot help but feel compassion first for Pearl, the woman he insults, and second for the "bums" on whom his livelihood depends. The theme of inescapable compassion can, I believe, be found to varying degrees in each of the stories in this collection.

PEOPLE ON THE EDGES OF DREAMS

by

Francesca B. French

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

MASTER of ARTS
in
ENGLISH

Portland State University
1996

Special thanks to the following people

Tom Doulis
A.B. Paulson
Ray Mariels
Tony Wolk
Henry Carlisle

and to

K.L.
J.M.
J.T.
P.A.
G.L.
K.M.
H.A.

(for all the coffee breaks and all the inspiration)

and to

K.D.

(for having the keen eye of an editor)

Chen's Wife	1
The Guard	11
Afternoon of the Faithless	15
The Good	18
Falling	23
Negative Space	37
Homeland	43
Matador	52
Metatarsus	60
Your Daddy Loves You	73
Gums	83
People on the Edges of Dreams	85

Chen's Wife

Today I am quiet, careful what I say. I don't want to speak this afternoon. I am glad that Chen is talking about his family again. As he speaks I think of kissing his mouth. I am still listening, but I am thinking about kissing his full lips. Each time he comes in for help with his English, he is less my student and more my friend. He does not ask much about me but I know anyway that he likes me, even as he pays what I charge to have conversations with him in English.

Chen's English is good, very good, but he wants it to be perfect. He leaves off possessives and includes too many definite articles in his speech and writing, but I like the way the words sound coming out of his mouth. Today he says he has heard the expression, "Giving is one way of taking," and I think to myself, "It's better to give than receive," but I like the way he says it better.

"I am from the South," he states. "And my wife's family is from the North."

Suddenly this means everything, the way he says it so clearly. I have a picture in my mind. It is a map, or more than a map. Mountains spring up from this model and little roads dot it. The place looks the way it always has

and always will till I go there. Someday I might. And then I will look up Chen's mother and father, and even his brother, the lazy one, who does not know what to do with himself. Chen is sorry for his brother.

"That happen to the youngest," he says today. "They do all or nothing; they see the world or just the comfortable old chair. My brother, Xiao Peng, so far just take the chair. My mother believe he going to change. I don't know, I don't know," he says, his words trailing off, his head shaking back and forth.

In a moment he begins to talk about his in-laws again. This is mostly what he talks about lately. It has been a month since he put in the application for visas for them to visit New York.

"They will stay for six or eight month!" Chen says. "Such long visits. It's too long, I think, but my wife wishes them to stay for one year. She miss them often, but they do not yet treat me like a son. I am married to their daughter for three years, but they do not accept me. But we are family no matter what--in China it's different from here." Chen stops and closes his eyes for a moment. Then he opens them and resumes speaking. "You know what? They never write to me letters, only to my wife. And not one present in the mail. But, when I send them money, what do you think? They accept it!" He shakes his head again. "No. I don't want them here and staying in my house."

I have seen Chen with his wife. Once, from my graduate suite window, I

saw them crossing the campus together, their faces pressed into the wind. I saw them talking and I wondered what it was about, whether it was something ordinary like the supper for that night, or if they were speaking in grave tones about the student protests. I saw them again at the vigil for the students who were slain in Tienanmen Square. They were swaying back and forth and both crying. I was one of a handful of American students there, and none of the Chinese noticed me, especially not Chen, who stood behind his wife, stroking her hair and sometimes kissing the back of her head.

“Kelly,” Chen says, looking up and across the table that spreads between us like a fixed, immovable barrier; everyday, no matter how I imagine it beforehand, it’s the same hard obstacle. “Please, you correct me when I don’t say the right words.”

But I don’t tell him everything he gets wrong. Instead I let him talk and I ask him questions about his mother, his brother, his wife.

“My wife is very stubborn,” he says.

His voice is deep and his head is bent when he says this, but I can see something gleam in the corners of his eyes, as if this stubbornness is the reason he loves her. I feel weak then. I have seen her stern, stubborn face and it has made me feel the same way. I pull back a bit from the table because I have let myself spill over too much into Chen’s life. His wife would laugh at this, I

think, or suck the insides of her mouth in disgust. I would be nothing to her and probably nothing to Chen, whose eyes, when he speaks of her, seem to grow wide and excited. I am not a woman men fall in love with; I am not like Chen's wife.

At the end of our session Chen and I walk to the door of the empty classroom. And as usual I want to say something to him at this point, to take his hand, lace his fingers in mine. But Chen would never forgive the unwanted pass. He wouldn't be like the others, the German, the Mexican, the Romanian. Instead, I watch as Chen's fingers grasp the door knob, and when he opens the door I see his wife standing in the hallway. Above her head is a bulletin board with a rainbow of colorful fliers advertising apartment shares, tutors, and used furniture for sale. She says something to Chen in Chinese. It sounds harsh and for a moment I imagine it's jealousy she's voicing. I realize it's nothing of the kind when she pulls a letter from her jacket pocket and begins to wave it around. Her face looks hard, cross. I don't think she sees me for what I want her to see me as: another woman, attractive enough, a possible lover for Chen. No. She sees me only as another American.

She crosses toward me and thrusts the letter toward my face.

"What it means?" she demands. "What this means?"

But the hard look on her face tells me she already knows the meaning of

the letter. It's from the Immigration and Naturalization Services Department. The request for Chen's wife's parent's visas has been denied. As I tell her this I can see that she has come here on the hope that she was wrong about the contents of the letter.

Chen speaks softly to his wife but she yells back at him. She snatches the letter from me without looking at my face. She holds it in the air, still yelling, and stabs it with her index finger over and over again, as if it is something hard she is trying to break.

"They must come! They must come!" she shouts, staring at me now as if I am connected to the bureaucrats at the I.N.S., as if some words from me will bring her parents here.

Chen's wife turns to him and says something in Chinese. She waves her arms around and speaks for a long time. I stand shifting my weight. I think about leaving, about going home to my dinky graduate apartment and forgetting all about Chen and his wife. But somehow I know I am stuck there. Chen's wife is pointing in my direction as she speaks. I look for something in Chen's face. I know he hates his in-laws, as he has said many times. *They are from the North. They are old-fashioned. They do not want to have the new China. My father-in-law does not care about the students' rights. He thinks freedom bring trouble, democracy bring trouble. My wife is not like her parents, not like them.*

When his wife stops talking Chen turns to me. She stands clenching the letter and staring at the wall. I can see that her anger is still brewing, as it spreads over her skin and seems to reach up into her hairline. The colors of anger, pink and crimson, are all over her face and neck, inhaling and exhaling with her.

Chen speaks to me then. "Please, write a letter to these people. They could have change of mind. Only you can do it, Kelly."

Chen's face is near mine now. Our gazes lock and in his eyes I see what he wants. He wants me to write an ineffective letter to the I.N.S. Just enough English separates his wife from well-chosen words, and he knows it. She will never know the difference between a good letter and a bad one. She will get the gist but not the different shades of meaning. Her parents' visit would ruin Chen's marriage. He has told me that twice they tried to get his wife to leave him. He has talked of the fights they would all have if they came here; he has told me of the anger and the bitterness that always run between them, like rivers they cannot cross.

The three of us go back into the classroom and sit around the table. Chen sits next to me to look over my shoulder; his wife sits across from us, gazing expectantly, as if it's a play or a movie she's about to watch.

We are all silent for a few moments, and then Chen's wife says

something in Chinese.

Chen nods his head and says, "Kelly, tell them we are very unhappy with the decision to not get the visas."

I look at Chen for a sign, and then I feel his foot graze mine under the table. I write out, "To whom it may concern, we are extremely angry about being turned down for visas for our relatives." After I write this I feel a little strange, as if at any moment Chen's wife will break into fluent English and expose me for what I have just written. She is the kind of person I can imagine getting into my very thoughts somehow. I look up and across at her. She sits there looking angry and I think that after all I am expressing the way she really feels in this letter.

His wife says something in Chinese, and then Chen turns to me again. This time his eyes are opened wide and he looks right into my face.

"Now tell them that we want still to get the visas," he says.

So I write, "You must give us the visas, you must. This is very important to us." I read it over and then add, "You have to let us have our way. Don't you people care at all?!"

Chen reads what I have written and a slight smile comes over his face. I can tell he is pleased with me. He brushes my foot again.

The two confer some more and Chen dictates. The letter goes on in the

same vein and is so bad that Chen and I can't help laughing a bit. I dare to look at his wife's face a couple of times. At first she looks as angry and serious as ever, but after a while her expression shifts; her forehead wrinkles up and her eyes seem to wander, passing over other things in the room.

"That's good, Kelly, that's very good," Chen says, bowing his head to hide his laughter.

Chen and I are staring down at the letter. We read it over and make changes together. Chen's wife says something to him but he is busy running his finger over the lines of the letter and doesn't hear her. In a moment she scrapes back her chair and goes to the window.

The letter is terrible. It is sure to make the officials at the I.N.S. angry. By now Chen is practically convulsing with laughter and his eyes have begun to tear. We are in a laughing fit together, like two children at church or in the back of a car. We are unable to stop. Chen pats me on the arm for emphasis and leans toward me a bit more. I look up for a second and see that his wife is still across the room staring out the window.

"Oh, Kelly," Chen says loudly, as if he has forgotten that his wife is in the room. "This letter is really good!" He is clenching my arm now and laughing hard.

I put my hand on top of his. I cover his fingers with mine. I imagine

leading him up onto the table and I picture us lying there and still laughing, while undressing and touching each other.

Then Chen's wife yells from the window. "Stop it! It not funny!" Suddenly she is facing us again. She looks angry and tears are running down her cheeks, but she makes no attempt to wipe them away.

But somewhere behind the hardness she looks small and sad to me. I let go of Chen's fingers and he takes his hand from my arm. He gets up and starts toward his wife but she comes closer to the other side of the table instead. Chen circles around to where she is. He tries to touch her but she resists him. She bends over the table until she is inches from my face. Disgust, or something like it, is flickering over her features. She reaches for the letter in front of me.

"I write myself!" she yells, tearing up the letter and letting the pieces fall before me.

She rushes for the door and Chen goes after her. I can hear them in the stairwell shouting in Chinese. I cross the room toward the open window. Outside I see Chen's wife emerge from the building and start hurrying across the campus. Chen is following close behind her. He is trying to take hold of her hand but she keeps reaching behind her and pushing away his arm. I can see from her profile that her mouth is sealed up tightly. Chen keeps shouting

the same Chinese phrase over and over again, but his wife only moves further and further ahead of him, along the neat brick pathways that separate patches of newly sprung grass.

The Guard

I see everything through my window, sickness and anger, even death. That man lying on the ground, for instance, surely isn't only passed out drunk. He's been there all day in the middle of the sidewalk. I have seen more than a few dead people. I pass them on my way to work. How soon after death do they move from dead person to corpse? And what a strange word, corpse. What a cold, detached, immaculate word. They are all among me here in the city, these possible, probable corpses. I wonder how I or other New Yorkers would react differently if we knew for certain that these people are in fact dead.

There should be a commission to take care of this, the Corpse Testers, who go around checking the pulses of the possibly dead. They could dress up in whites, with stethoscopes around their necks, and get dead people off the streets. I suppose if they do get a pulse or a heart beat they could just leave the live ones where they are, or maybe wake them and ask them could they move to the side. I mean, look at the 34th Street subway station. It's like a campground in there. I see row and rows of prone and supine people. It's a busy station for the living and the dead.

Mostly I think street people don't care much about themselves, but

there are a few who are trying to preserve some shred of decency. This is obvious when you see them sporting some filthy little collar and tie, or when they've slicked back their hair and splashed on aftershave. Where are they going? Where are any of us going, for that matter? Who do I put on perfume for? my boss? the other guards at the museum? the nice-looking people who come through there? It all seems so primitive, so necessary to our survival somehow, or maybe not. I've tried dressing up at home when I'm alone, it feels insane. You know, I wish they *would* move all those people off the streets. Their shopping carts clank under my window at night and wake me. I dream some nights that they are right there with me, their carts rattling into my subconscious like horses trampling over a murky field.

Everyone has the need for self-respect. From my window I watched a man with cerebral palsy. He was crossing two sides of the intersection and had to stop twice for the light. As he stood at the corner he was very still. One hand rested on his hip, the other hung at his side, just like anyone. Passing him right then as he stood there, you'd never know he had the bad palsy of someone on a drunken bender, but as soon as the light changed his stillness turned into something frenzied and unexpected. First he was the anyone, the everyone on the corner waiting for the light to change, and then he was struggling to control the haywire spasms that got him from place to place. He

made it over the first leg of the intersection, and then stood waiting for the next light. As he leaned against a newspaper box, I thought I could see the small movements of his eyes. I'm sure I saw him looking around to assess who had been staring at him a moment before, who had been wondering if he was drunk, or what. He was a young man, and not bad looking, but I wondered if he had been turned down by women all his life. Maybe there had been a few who fell for him but then changed their minds, or perhaps after a while he had simply told them to go. Maybe it's too much to love a person with a problem, too much all around. Like me, he was maybe in his mid-thirties. I was not unattracted to him, myself, and I wanted to open the window and say, what the hell, we are all self-conscious when we're waiting to cross the street, because we are under the illusion that the traffic has one mind, and that we are being cruelly and unnecessarily watched. No one likes to stop dead in the continuous movement of the city; it's too much like a frozen thought in the mind. Don't feel bad about yourself; you suffer enough.

At work at the museum, I move slowly about. I have a way of disappearing and reappearing on the other side of a room. That's what we're trained to do. We move from room to room with the regularity of carefully scheduled trains. My eyes can scan a gallery and know where everyone is standing, where everyone's hands are. I memorize faces, clothes, height, hair,

moles and toupees. They look at the art and I look at them. If there is anything, anyone strange, I know it, because it is my job to know it. I hear things, too, I hear it all. When I go home at night I still hear old conversations in my head. Once I heard a man in the Northern Renaissance room tell a woman that he was having an affair. The couple was staring at a self-portrait of Rembrandt, and she said, I know, I've always known. They moved on and I stared at Rembrandt, who seemed also to have been staring at them, and I thought, and now we do, too. Now we know that there are women who stay with men, and men who stay with women, when they know full well that something is wrong, that they are giving themselves to others, resting on chests and hearing heart beats of others. How strange. How strange that we prefer to lie and to cheat, when there is no gain in this, when there is no real gain at all. When I go home at night I feel smart because there is no longer anyone there but me. There is no one to trust or mistrust. I look out the window and think to myself, I am missing nothing.

Afternoon of the Faithless

Chester was late so Jill had seen the Toulouse-Lautrec exhibit all the way through without him. But she thought it couldn't hurt to go through it again. She practiced what she would say about each painting. This one has too much red, this one lacks depth; but these, oh these here, such colors in the faces, such animated limbs. She could point out these things to Chester, not that he wouldn't see them himself. He was bright, very bright for someone his age, she thought, even though she usually resisted dividing up the world according to brain power. That was what most people did, and Jill did not want to be like most people. It was her singularity that people reacted to most. It was what had made Chester forget the difference in their ages (and forget his young wife) and fall in love with her. He never even seemed to notice, through his youthful eyes, that her hair was grayer now than when they met.

As she looked at the third in the collection of paintings, she wondered if Chester would really see the power in the green- and yellow-tinted faces, and the small bearded figure in the back who was supposed to be Henri himself. It was not like Chester to be late, and now the gallery, which had been empty a minute before, was quickly filling up with high school students. Their teacher

was trying to get their attention but several of them had wandered from her side. They hid behind partitions or imitated in unflattering ways the figures in the paintings, as if not understanding the depth of feeling in the art. But one boy, about fifteen, followed the teacher through the series, pointing out which ones he thought were “cool.” He read the titles aloud and botched the French, and Jill was getting a little annoyed, especially at the way the teacher was so flattered by his inquisitiveness. Jill almost preferred the kids who hid behind the partitions and pushed and shoved each other around the gallery.

She checked her watch again and felt a little rush of anger. But she held it down and brushed at the pleats of her skirt, feeling the anger disappear in the folds.

By now the high school kids had moved to another room. She wondered if Chester could have mixed up the time. She thought she’d ask him when he showed up, and then she decided not to. That would put him on the spot, make him uncomfortable. Why add to his burden? He worshiped her, and she knew she would some day let him down. She heard his voice in her head again. “Just say the word and I’ll leave my wife.” But it was too much. Too much, really. She understood better that it would never work.

In another moment she smiled into the glass covering a charcoal study for the *Moulin Rouge* because she saw Chester’s reflection there. He moved like

a man excited, expectant. She turned slowly to face him. She thought, my turn will look natural, spontaneous. He won't know I've seen him in the glass.

The Good

The buildings of the Combat Zone were smooth and cold as silvery ice, and they rose much taller than my small body. Even as a child I knew there was something depressing about the jewelers' shops that inhabited the first floors of many of the buildings and the restaurants with the hard, Chinese letters on the outside, painted red and chipping. There were no people there on Friday evenings, except an occasional business man, like the one I saw one day turned sideways in an alley with his suit bunched up around him. He was urinating into a garbage can.

“Don’t look!” my mother snapped out, grabbing my hand and crumpling my fingers in her palm.

But I had looked. I had looked at his eyes when he’d turned his head for a moment, and I remember the expression on his face. He did not look mean or embarrassed but sad, like he’d had plenty of places to relieve himself--his home, his office, a restaurant--but he’d gone here, among the putrid-smelling alley garbage and the rats, because it was late on a Friday afternoon and he was drunk and didn’t know any better. When he glanced back at me I thought he must have been sad, very sad. I pictured his home far off in the

suburbs, neatly painted, surrounded by a clean, evenly-mowed lawn, like ours, each blade of grass seeming to obey the sky and grow straight. I saw his wife in the kitchen, plump, patient, clean as a whistle, waiting for her husband to come home. But suddenly I pictured the man knocked over the head and dragged into the back of the alley. I saw him dead, rotting, picked at by flies and dogs, while his wife waited dinner and his children played in the yard.

On the narrow sidewalk, my mother thrust my arm forward as if it were a ship's rudder, and clicked her high heels quickly along the pavement. But I turned once more and saw the man emerge from the alley and slip into a long, black car. I caught his eye again but there was no sign now, as he buttoned his suit jacket, that he was the sad man I'd seen urinating in the alley.

Soon we were going past the whores who flanked doorways and stoops, as if there was no wide world to travel but only a corner to go around. That day something happened that had never happened before. One of the whores reached over and touched my hair. And then she called out in a voice sweeter than most I had heard that I was a pretty girl.

My mother pulled me to her quickly and said, "Never mind that trash."

And this was loud enough for them to hear, because another one shouted back, "She was just trying to be friendly."

And the sweet one yelled, "Fuck you," over and over again until we were

finally at the end of the block.

I wanted to ask my mother about it, but we were already in the lobby of Wang laboratories, and some people were talking to my mother as we waited for the elevator to come. We didn't talk about the whores, but I could see that my mother was a little nervous, and she kept turning from the other people to see if I was still there. And I knew she was brave as she heaved a sigh and brushed back her hair with her shaking fingers.

As usual, on Fridays, we went to Wang laboratories to pick up my father. At his office, my father would sometimes scoop me into his arms, if I were lucky, but other times he'd be busy with the men there and I would sit and draw or swirl in a chair till everything was blurry. That day my father brought me into the room with the big computer, the whole-wall of a machine that hummed and buzzed and flashed red and green lights.

"Don't touch anything," my mother warned, pulling my hands behind my back.

But I just smiled because my father had already told me about this computer many times, and I knew that, though I could kick it with my Mary Janes or twist the knobs right off of it, I couldn't really harm this huge and powerful machine. My father said it was just as much a creation of God as any tree or mountain, and that it would one day help to show pictures of one place

to people in another place, and that preachers could reach people right through the television, and that the world would be a better place because of it.

That night I sat on my father's lap. I was falling asleep as he read to me, but I woke suddenly to say, "Daddy, a nice woman touched my hair today."

And he said, "Who was it?"

And I said, "A whore."

Then he pulled me to his chest and I could hardly breath, and he said, "It's okay, you're home safe now."

After they tucked me in that night, my parents whispered outside my open door for several minutes in the hallway light.

I never went to my father's work again.

And my mother was right when she kissed me good-night and whispered, "You can forget all that."

Because I did forget it, at least for a long time, long enough to go to college, get married and have kids of my own. Long enough, now, to be comforted by the belief that just because I remember something it doesn't mean I have to mention it often, or pass it on to my children. The world is full of such terrible business, but there is also great happiness to be reaped and sowed, as He would want us to do. My mother was right, my father was right, and I know--bless him--that God is right in everything he does. I know he had

the whore touch my hair to see whether I would dwell on it or forget it. And I have been strong. I have gained solace in the notion that I do not have to understand everything in the world. All I have the power to do is act to the benefit of my loving family, as my mother and father did that night outside my bedroom, when they decided what was best for me. And if people say that God does not exist, I ask them one question: How can love survive in a world such as ours? Explain that to me. I wish they could all wake up one day and see only the good.

Falling

All day long helicopters passed back and forth but I didn't go to the window. I knew what they were about. No one in New York City could have missed hearing about the two boys trapped in the collapsed building in Brooklyn. But when I bent over to lace up my running shoes, I heard something else: the crack of a tree limb and then some bulky mass plummeting to the ground. The old frame of my apartment building shook with the impact, and the tremendous weight of the thing seemed to fall right through me.

I ran to the window but it was hard to see onto the patio of the town house next door because the neighbors had a lower, annexed room that jutted out into the courtyard. All I could make out was a crescent moon of white patio table, the rest of which was covered by a large tree branch. At first I believed that only the branch had fallen, but then I heard something rumbling around. I saw the branch settle and thought I heard a heavy sniffing sound, like a large dog breathing great gusts of air through its nose. I could still feel the weight of the thing in my stomach and I wondered if a dog had fallen, but that seemed impossible. It was just after four-thirty and still light out, since it was summer, and I wondered why no one else was looking out their window.

Was I the only one who'd heard this thing that sounded like it shook the world?

I thought of going to the neighbor's front door--I couldn't get to the courtyard from the back of my building, and the whole area was cloistered off from the four surrounding streets--but I also thought of doing nothing. It could have been nothing after all. I stood in my room feeling as if there were suddenly two realities and I was to choose between them. If no one else had heard it, then maybe there was nothing to worry about. Maybe it hadn't even happened. I decided to try to forget it, but after a moment I went to the window again. When I heard the strange sniffing sound again, even louder this time, I grabbed my house keys and resolved to at least check with the neighbors on my way out jogging.

Approaching the neighbor's house, I quickly realized what I'd always suspected: they had the entire town house to themselves. I looked up and down at their pink-brick house and a picture of the interior came instantly to mind. Each room would be perfectly furnished and dusted. There would be antique wooden tables reflecting sunlight from nearby windows, vases of flowers, oriental rugs, and huge open spaces everywhere. The rich had a way of keeping things separate, not cluttered. Dust had no chance of falling onto the pristine tables and chairs in the capacious rooms. Many times I had been in

the homes of the rich, though wealth had always been something for me merely to view, as if through a temporary lens.

I had often seen two small children at the windows here and heard them playing on the patio in the mornings, their small voices stirring me from sleep. For a moment I shuddered at the thought that whatever had fallen onto the patio table could just as easily have fallen onto the little pink heads of the kids next door.

Standing at their front door I felt less like a neighbor than a total stranger, a poor intruder come to badger the rich. What if nothing had really happened? What if I were here on some sort of hysterical errand? Were these the imaginings of a shabby graduate student in her shrinking prime? Would I be one of those New Yorkers forever stuck in a circle of futile accomplishment? It wasn't as bad as the life of an actress, but I was a graduate student in English.

A woman who looked Hispanic came to the door carrying one of the children on her hip. I guessed she was the baby sitter, and thought I had seen her before. Behind the glass of the door she looked worried. I called out that I was the neighbor and had she heard something fall out back. A fleeting look of trust came over her face, enough to open the door momentarily. Perhaps she recognized me, too. She said she'd heard the noise but hadn't gone out to look,

and that the owners weren't home.

"I think you should go and look," I suggested. Really I wanted to go with her, to traipse through that house and see for myself. But she closed the door just slightly, as if giving me the signal that I had come too far. She hesitated. Her face seemed to close off to me then. Maybe she thought there was nothing really there except a tree branch. Maybe there wasn't. Perhaps it was strange of me to stand there on the doorstep, worrying, nagging her. But still my stomach felt dragged down by the weight of what had fallen, and I couldn't forget the sniffing sound. I made the baby sitter promise to go out onto the patio and at least look. She said okay, so I went for my run.

It was hot that day and the sky was the color of something sick. It was not blue anymore, but all yellow, as if the yolk of sun had been pierced through and spread to cover every inch of sky. I moved stiffly through the heat, especially on Hudson Street, where the traffic was the worst. I only liked the short part of my run that took me along the promenade, which looked out over the river toward Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. In a little while I forgot about the accident outside my window.

More helicopters passed overhead, as they had for two days now. I wondered if they would ever find the two Westchester boys. They had been playing in an abandoned shoe factory in Brooklyn Heights and it had collapsed

around them. Newscasters said that rescue workers had been there around the clock for forty-eight hours trying to get them out. Experts of all kinds were being flown in from around the country and transported from the airport by helicopter. And there were the news-center helicopters, too, bubbling through the air every few minutes. I had read in the paper about an engineer from Chicago and an architect from Albany. There had even been talk on the news of an earthquake-rescue specialist from San Francisco. No one knew if the boys were alive, but everyone wanted to help extract them from the fragile arrangement of rubble. On the TV news, they showed the same security guard over and over again, Jason Sacco, the one who had seen the boys go in before the building collapsed. Fire fighters thought the collapse could have been caused by a gas leak and explosion somewhere deep in the interior of the city-block large structure.

Now, at the end of the promenade, I turned and started to make my way back. Up ahead I saw a woman I knew, the mother of my old friend, Stephanie. She and Stephanie were the closest thing to family I had in New York. She lived in one of the waterfront condos, so I wasn't surprised to see her there. She put her arms around me and held me for a moment. Normally, this would have been a good thing, but the air was so thick and my body so overheated that the hug made an oppressive fever come over me. Heat spiraled

through me then, settling in my stomach and causing a slight nausea to come over me.

"Walk with me for a minute," she said.

"Sure," I said, not minding the little rest, forgetting that I'd wanted to get back to see what had fallen behind my building.

"How are your graduate classes?" she asked. "Stephanie tells me you're thinking of relocating. Won't that look bad on your record?"

"Well, I haven't exactly decided yet where to go. It's a question of money. New York is so expensive, but I can barely afford to leave. I guess I'm trapped here for the moment."

I hinted around about money whenever I saw Stephanie's mother. She was quite wealthy, but she never seemed to understand my hints.

"And where would you go if you *could* leave?"

"I'm thinking of Oregon," I said.

"Oregon! Oh my, be careful. There are more murders in the state of Oregon than in any other state. I mean, you can't be sure what type of people are out there!"

She paused then, shaking her head absently, and my mind went off to some wooded area in Oregon. I saw a great mass of violence, a heap of bodies flung together, writhing and contorting, pushing up in a whirlwind through the

trees. And just then I remembered the accident.

"Oh my god," I surprised myself by shouting. A few passers-by turned to look at me. "The strangest thing happened just before I left the house."

"Well, what was it, dear?"

"Some kind of accident." More helicopters went by loudly, drowning out the sound of my voice for a moment. "Something fell outside my window. It was really heavy and just crashed to the ground."

Stephanie's mother looked at me a little strangely, and suddenly the excitement of my story fell flat and made me feel self-conscious. I had to think how to explain what I really didn't understand myself. In a second her eyes closed in at their edges, giving me a subtle hint not to say anything more. I went on anyway.

"I don't know what it was, but it felt very heavy." I put my hand on my stomach to indicate where I had felt it. "It was something or someone falling."

She reacted with a polite nod and a faint smile, and suddenly I felt a little crazy. I thought again that I had been silly, that there really had been nothing to what I'd heard. I stopped talking about it and she changed the subject, but still I wanted to know one way or another, whether it had been something or nothing.

As we walked along I suddenly felt it had been a mistake to leave. I

ached to get back, and when I knew I could say good-bye to her I did. I turned once to wave and she waved back, and behind her the long arm of the Statue of Liberty cut up into the yellow sky.

I ran up Hudson Street again, through traffic, through people shuffling slowly in the heat. I rushed as much as I could, but I felt awkward, too, as if someone who knew better was watching me. Maybe it was my friend's mother, or perhaps it was the neighbors, but someone's huge gaze made me feel a fool.

Still, though, when I turned the corner onto my street I wondered if I should look in the neighbor's window or knock on their door. I couldn't decide what to do, but as I approached their townhouse I saw a few spots of blood on the steps. I ran up the stairs to their place. The door was ajar and I slipped inside. The baby sitter must have told the neighbors that I'd come by earlier, because when she saw me in her hallway the woman of the house seemed to know who I was.

"You're the runner who came by earlier," she said, and behind her I saw several people in the house. "Carmen told me a woman came by."

"Yes, that's right--"

"So how long have you been my neighbor without my knowing it?" she said, patting my arm just slightly.

"About a year. What happened? I saw the blood."

"Oh, the most terrible thing!" She pressed down hard on my arm and then released, as if it were a spring for her own arm to fly up toward her forehead. "A man was washing windows in that building behind us and he fell four stories to the ground. If he hadn't fallen into the tree first I don't know what would have happened."

"Then he's not dead?"

"*Dead?*" she said, with a strange questioning emphasis, as if it could have been something worse. "He was very broken up but he was breathing when they took him out of here. The only way was through our house. You see there," she said, pointing downward. "All over the carpet. Of course we don't mind that, I'm just glad he's okay. I imagine he did have quite a number of broken bones. It's amazing he isn't dead." She looked up now and pushed out her lips, as if thinking about how many feet he had fallen.

Just then I remembered more details, like how slow the fall had been, how long it had lasted. I'd heard the leaves rustle first, then the crack of the tree branch, and finally the tremendous thud below. The sounds I'd heard before the crash of his body had been connected to nothing at first. Now they came back to me. Each tiny fragment of sound wove itself into the whole event, and the woman went on about the fall, and more and more people piled into her house. I didn't know where they were all coming from. As they

entered, she introduced me to each one as the woman who'd heard the window washer fall. I felt hot and uncomfortable from my run, and the room was beginning to fill up.

"Would you like something to drink?" the woman asked me.

"No, thank you." I said.

I wanted to leave but her husband was standing in the doorway slapping the back of another person who'd dropped in.

"George," the woman yelled across some heads. "Put some more beer in the cooler--unless, does anyone want iced coffee?"

"Iced coffee?" she said loudly into my face.

"No, thanks," I said again. I looked past her toward the back of the house and there I saw the baby sitter, Carmen, standing stock still against the far wall. One child rested on her hip, the other ran in circles in front of her, shooting the air with his thumb and index finger. I stared at Carmen for a moment and, to my surprise, she was staring back. She wasn't smiling, and this surprised me too, though I soon realized that she had never smiled at me. At first, on the stoop, she had looked at me placatingly, as if I were over reacting, and now she looked at me as if to say that I shouldn't have gotten involved, in whatever way I had.

I made my way to the foyer as the neighbors moved off toward the patio

with a group of interested guests carrying drinks. "This is right where it happened," I heard the woman's husband say.

I slipped back through the front door, going back down the steps and seeing the blood again. And as I passed in front of their windows on the street, I felt Carmen watching me still.

Later that night I dozed off while reading. A light summer breeze blew over my face from the open window. But soon I woke to the sound of people talking. At first I struggled against consciousness, against the voices that rose and fell, but then I realized that the conversation was coming from behind me, from the open window.

The words fell heavily into the otherwise quiet night, like the voices of actors on a stage, or of children playing after dark in summertime, when inside and outside are practically the same. As I listened more, I realized they were talking about the man who had fallen. I recognized the voice of the woman next door, and that of Carmen, who must have lived there, too. Then it felt as if no time had gone by between when I'd fallen asleep and when I'd woken up, though it was already after ten o'clock. It seemed the neighbors hadn't stopped talking about the accident. And though I had slept on and off during their discussion, I hadn't missed any of the pertinent details about the accident victim. His name was Juan Emilio and he'd been taken to St. Luke's Hospital.

There were two voices I didn't recognize, and when I got up to look out the window I saw that they were police officers, who were perched high up in one of the windows across the courtyard, and speaking to the neighbors down below. The neighbor woman and her husband looked up with raised heads and wide eyes. Their children, I supposed, were tucked safely in bed.

The police said they had to make a routine check to make sure there wasn't any "funny business." They said it was really a matter for the I.N.S., because Juan Emilio was an illegal alien from Mexico, and that when he got out of the hospital he would probably be deported.

"He shouldn't have been working in this country at all," one of them said. "Now he's fallen and someone will have to be responsible."

"There are heavy fines for hiring illegals," the other stated, and he kept asking Carmen if she had seen or heard anything unusual.

"No," she said. "No, no, no."

And the police agreed that there was probably nothing else going on.

I crept behind the curtain in my room, suppressing the urge to yell out that I had heard the man fall and that it was unusual. It was unusual that during such a slow and heavy descent he hadn't yelled out or called for help or anything. "Can you imagine such control?" I wanted to say. "Not even to cry out just a little." And I had a strange compulsion, though I'd only been a

witness, to say that I myself had helped push this man to the ground. I pictured the police looking up suddenly, then rushing toward my door with the I.N.S., the neighbor woman, her husband, and everyone else, all piling into my small apartment.

After a while the police left and the neighbors went inside. I wrote "Juan Emilio" and "St. Luke's Hospital" on a piece of paper and thought of visiting him in the morning. I saw myself by his bedside, on my knees, confessing that I had heard him hit the ground.

I lay back down on the couch. I tried to read but couldn't concentrate. All I could think about was the accident.

Finally I turned on the TV. The first story on the eleven o'clock news was about the two Westchester boys. Rescue workers had finally gotten into the old shoe factory and carefully pulled them out. The blonde anchor woman choked up a bit as she announced that one was dead and the other was in a coma and wasn't expected to live through the night. I think I passed out somewhere between sports and weather. I kept dreaming that I'd shut off the TV and that it would mysteriously come back on. Soon that dream turned into another, in which I heard the sounds of the tree branch cracking and leaves rustling loose from their stems. The dream was more than just my imagination playing tricks in my sleep and more than just

the wind outside my window, but some strange combination of the two, which caused a delirium that oppressed me like a gas penetrating the pores of my unprotected skin.

Negative Space

Tim threw the ball but Mr. Healy didn't get dunked. Twenty-five cents a ball and Tim had been at it seven times. He wanted to see Mr. Healy dunk down, swim with one arm, climb back up with one hand gripping, pulling away from the rungs, and gripping again. His other sleeve hung down, loose and empty. In math class he usually pinned it up. Tim thought the pin must have fallen into the water. He wondered if Mr. Healy would step on it with his bare feet, pierce his skin and fill the tank with blood.

Other kids had hit the bull's eye and made Healy dunk. Woody, Jason, and Leonard had all done it, but not Tim.

"You got bad aim," Jason said.

"You couldn't hit the side of a barn," Woody yelled, just before Tim fired a fast ball off the tips of his fingers.

The ball spun to the right and they all yelled out, even Mr. Healy, his limp sleeve jiggling and twisting as he laughed. Tim tried again, pulling his arm back and concentrating. He could feel his nostrils flare out like two wings, his jaw lock and set. He swung his arm forward, watching his hand release.

His eyes moved to the target, but the ball sputtered and flipped and trailed toward Mrs. Weston's fried- dough stand.

Jason and Woody and Leonard all laughed, Jason practically doubling over.

Mr. Healy laughed, too, and yelled from the tank. "Why don't you just give it up, boy, you'll never hit the mark!"

"Yeah, listen to Mr. Healy," little Leonard said, standing there in his shorts that were all cinched up with a black leather belt.

Leonard was too scrawny for even the smallest sizes. Tim knew he could snap him in half with one hand. "What are you, Healy's best friend now?" Tim yelled, feeling his face flush and burning.

"No one's anyone's friend," Jason said. "What are you talking about?"

Jason's face was clean-looking, his eyes the color of a clear day, his nose straight. Aquiline, Tim's mother had called it once. "Such a good-looking boy," she'd said. "He'll leave this town behind and go far."

Now Tim glared at Jason, "Mind your own damn business. I was talking to Leonard."

"Woody stepped forward, "Come on, Tim, it's just a game. So we all dunked Healy and you didn't, so what?"

For a moment Tim could imagine smiling and moving on to a ride or

another game with the guys. He could think of dropping it, of not caring that Healy the Math Scum was still sitting there grinning stupidly at him from the tank. But he knew what Mr. Healy was thinking: he can't do math and he can't aim. He'll never amount to anything, just like his father and his brothers. They were all grease monkeys and brainless thugs who'd get into trouble and go to jail and the whole town knew, or who'd stagger out of bars in the middle of the day, in front of everyone. You're like them, Healy seemed to say, his one arm aimed like a sword, a finger from his one hand pointing, his mouth gaping with laughter. He'd said as much before, he'd stopped the class, come over the desk, held up Tim's wrong answers and made everyone laugh. Stupid Tim, who couldn't do what everyone else had learned to do a month before.

Tim pushed past Leonard, Woody and Jason. The carnival noises rushed up around him in a dissonant mass, and something sharpened and pierced him from inside. Mrs. Weston's fried-dough stand was smoking, the ferris wheel spun in the distance, clashing with the corn fields that spread endlessly beyond, and a new crowd had lined up to pitch balls at the tank. Behind Tim, his friends' voices rose and then broke off, calling for him.

The clear, plastic tank was right in front of Tim. Mr. Healy sat perched above it, looking out at the line of people and smiling like everyone was his friend. Tim was surprised that Healy wasn't watching him, and hadn't seen

him get right up to the tank. Tim felt his heart pound, his throat clench like a fist.

"Hey," Tim shouted, and just then he heard a clicking sound, a metal clunk. "At least I have two arms," he said, but Mr. Healy had gone under. Water splashed out near Tim, and he watched Mr. Healy spin and toss behind the glass like an old rag in a washer.

Then Mr. Healy emerged, head poking over the side of the tank, a smile spreading to his ears. "What was that, boy?" he said, panting and still grinning. "I didn't catch what you said."

Behind Tim the line of people was shouting. He heard snatches of sentences: "Hurry up," "Get out already," "Give someone else a chance!"

But Mr. Healy just stood there grinning, and staring into Tim's eyes. "Well, speak up," he said, as if he weren't going to move until Tim answered him.

Then Tim saw it, the drenched shirt sleeve draped over the side of the tank. Mr. Healy couldn't have seen it there, couldn't have felt it because it wasn't part of him. But still, Tim couldn't help thinking, as his eyes moved up the sleeve to Healy's shoulder, there must be an arm in there somewhere.

"Take care you don't say the wrong thing to the wrong person," Mr. Healy said in a harsh, throaty whisper that sliced through the air and landed

deep inside Tim's ears. Then Healy spun around in the water and reached for the ladder.

Tim turned to look behind him and it was suddenly as if everything had halted. People stood still, in small clusters here and there, the ferris wheel was between turns, even the smoke from Mrs. Weston's fried-dough stand had settled, clearing a view of the horizon behind it. It seemed for an instant as if the world had paused. Tim looked at the line in front of the tank. A few people were looking at him and smiling, and just then it occurred to him that they might have mistakenly thought it was friendship that had made him come right up to Mr. Healy. Tim felt his face go red and he wondered how, in that moment of stillness and staring, he could explain to these people that it was something else altogether that had brought him right up to the dunking tank. But then the action started up again. The first person pitched and missed. The crowd shouted and whistled. All around Tim the activity grew frantic again, and he thought that somehow the crowd would be blinded by its own energy and would not notice him wander off past the ferris wheel. Then he knew that they weren't seeing him, and that his friends weren't calling out his name, or coming after him as he stepped beyond the boundary line of the carnival. He knew that Mr. Healy didn't see him either, then. And he'd stopped thinking about him so much anyway, except to wonder, as he crossed

the corn fields to nowhere, exactly what it was that had brought him so near to the man.

Homeland

The biggest wreck of a car I ever rode in was Ben Hummel's '74 Plymouth. It had no windshield and a front seat held up with a two-by-four stuck in the floor of the back and shoved into the upholstery like an arm rammed in between two shoulder blades. On the first scorching day of summer, the Plymouth took us all the way from Allston to Nantasket beach. It's true the sun blazed over everything that day, but its rays seemed to hit that car the hardest, cooking the exterior till it was too hot to touch.

I chose the back even though Ben wanted me to ride shotgun next to him and his girlfriend Denise--he was always making cracks about a threesome. At school Denise was considered a slut, but she never seemed bothered by what people said about her. Girls like her didn't, I thought.

"I'm not sitting up front with no windshield," I said.

Ben blew a soft spray off his lips and rolled his head from side to side.

"Like we're gonna have a fucking accident."

"You don't know what could happen," I said. I was always saying things like this about our little capers. The group said I was cautious because I always hung on the edge and waited while the real action took place. I remember

many nights spent standing in the darkness, listening to the rustle of leaves, watching the flickering lights of a TV in someone's living room. I felt alone and free standing on a quiet lawn, waiting for the others to emerge from somewhere with stolen items in hand. Once it was the American flag from inside the high school, another time a kitten from somebody's basement. Denise carried the kitten around in her jeans jacket pocket all night and wouldn't let Ben and his brother tie a rock to it and throw it in the river like they'd planned.

Standing alone in the darkness I would just begin to enjoy the feeling of the night, when the others would appear in a kind of quiet fury, a cluster of shuffling arms and legs. Then Ben and his brother Brian, Denise and her sister Cathy would run toward me in the darkness and pull me off with them. We would be gone before porch lights came on, dogs barked, people yelled, "Who's there?" We were the unexplained noises and shadows that such people had to come to terms with before bed. Sometimes I stopped while the others ran off, turning to look at the spot I had just inhabited, trying to recall all my thoughts, to see them in the fixed quietness of the outside of houses at night.

Now the five of us sat in the car, not moving. Ben turned to face me, to make sure I was serious about sitting in the back. He swung his arm so that it rested over the seat, and I could see the fresh burn marks from where he'd won

at chicken the night before. He made a faint sigh and I looked up from the cigarette burns to his face. At first I was going to laugh and tell him to stop his stupid act, but instead his eyes locked onto mine. Then everything fell away around us. Denise, the others, the views to the sides and in front of me all drifted off like things lost and floating. I imagined two parallel lines stretching from my eyes to Ben's, strong, invisible lines that sometimes came to rest in the distance between us. During moments like this I was pulled away from and reminded of myself at the same time. In a moment Ben gave up and turned toward Denise.

"Well," he said, as if he hadn't noticed what had passed between us. "Get your sister up here, she'll do in a pinch." Ben let out a deliberate laugh and looked into the rearview mirror at Cathy. I could see a glint in his right eye when the sun hit the mirror. If he moved at all it would flash away.

"What do you say, little sister? Wanna get your tush up here?"

"Fuck you, Ben," Cathy snapped. She crossed her arms and looked out the window.

Ben laughed until Denise shoved him in the shoulder.

Then Brian sat up in the seat next to me. "I'll ride shot-gun!" he shouted, practically climbing over the seat.

"You ain't sitting up front, young buckaroo. Sit the fuck back down."

Ben always used his singsong voice when talking to his younger brother. He used the same voice with his mother, and made it more obnoxious when she'd yell at him.

On the way down the hill to their apartment one time, I saw Mrs. Hummel and Ben face to face in the street. Mrs. Hummel's finger was inches from Ben's nose. "We're all the supers around here. Do you think I'm taking the tenants' garbage out all by myself?"

"I don't care what you do," Ben said, his voice going up and down like a cartoon character.

"Well, you better learn to pull your weight, you little son of a bitch."

"That's right, Ma, I'm a son of a bitch," Ben said, backing away from his mother and doing a short dance step in the street, making sweeping circles with his arms and legs.

Ben never screamed back at his mother like Brian did. Once Brian even threw a brick through his own living room window, just missing his mother who was in watching TV. For weeks the brick lay next to the couch where it had landed. When it got warm out, Ben used it as a door stop for the front door of their basement apartment, so that he could hear his heavy-metal music out on the street. That summer I often saw him reclining on a chaise lounge in front of the apartment building. He lay sprawled out, wearing a wide-rimmed

hat and a pair of sunglasses. Sometimes he'd have a cool drink in his hand.

Once he didn't notice me until I got right up next to his chair. Maybe his music was too loud, or maybe his mind was off in some distant place. I thought he didn't see anything, then, not the street, the apartment buildings, the scraggly maples, or the cars parked at angles on the hill. I watched him from a distance. I liked to watch people without them knowing, to see how they looked all alone. When Ben saw me he got up and offered me the chaise lounge. Then he gave me the hat and glasses. I lay back and my body felt a little stiff in the chair. Ben leaned over while I put on the hat and glasses.

"Pretend you're on the beach somewhere and I'm the waiter."

I started to answer but he stopped me by putting a finger to his lips.

"Wait," he said. "Wait. You look like a queen."

The record landed between songs, and all was quiet except for the hum of air conditioners in the building and the dull buzz of machinery in the distance. I closed my eyes and pictured the hill on which the Hummels and my family had always lived. My mind traced the cracks in the sidewalk all the way down to the main street that ran below, the street which spread and twisted, past a clump of stores and houses, past the warehouse district, and right into the city that lay beyond us. I rarely thought about the city, except as a thing that drummed and throbbed in the distance, a thing that made lights

flicker on the horizon at night. The lights were shimmering and quiet from the top of the hill.

In a moment a new song started up, "The Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress." I pictured the record spinning inside the Hummel's apartment, its sound filling up the space there, competing with the ever-present television. The TV flickered constantly and sometimes reminded me that there was life elsewhere.

Now, in the car, Brian settled back down next to me. I was in the middle with my foot resting on the two-by-four, and we still hadn't gone anywhere.

"Okay," Ben said. "If neither of you girls will sit up front, I'll just share the seat with my woman, just my woman and me." He curled his arm around Denise's shoulder and jerked her toward him.

"Watch my earrings!" she shouted, and then we were off.

Nantasket beach was fifty miles away. If Ben did eighty like he promised, we'd be there in about half an hour. I kept my eyes on the speedometer, but as far as I could tell it never went above sixty.

"We're moving at a good clip," Ben said.

But it was no eighty, eighty-five like he'd planned.

The wind blew everyone's hair back in strips that seemed to dance to a

frenzied beat.

"Better than air conditioning," Ben said.

Denise turned toward the back seat and rolled her eyes.

When we hit the highway everyone grew quiet, as if we were all silently wondering if the car would make it. Or maybe we were just all stunned by what we were doing, all a little embarrassed to be leaving our neighborhood, because none of us really knew about other towns and other people.

After a few minutes, Brian cracked open a beer and downed it quickly. Then he opened another and so did Denise, and soon we were all yelling and singing songs about being on the highway, and Brian reached up and pounded the roof with his fist, shouting, "This is it, this is it!"

"Whoa there, little laddie," Ben singsonged from the driver's seat.

But Brian still bounced up and down on his seat. He opened another can of beer and foam sprayed all over Cathy and me.

"You stupid shit!" Cathy shouted.

And Ben called back from the driver's seat, "Watch the interior, Hummel boy."

Then Brian laughed and stuck his head out the window. And as he yelled the wind muffled his shouts, and his words seemed like things dropped from the windows at intervals and lost along on the highway.

"Your brother's a fucking idiot!" Cathy said, wiping beer off her face.

"Don't tell me, tell my mother," Ben piped out.

I laughed until Cathy shot me a look, eyes squinted, lips drawn as tight as the edges of a wound. She was angry all the time, and had once cried bitterly on a park bench, while the rest of us drank in silence. She had cried at her sister's reputation, at her father's drunkenness, and mostly at the belief that she would never be much of anything in her life. And as she cried we looked at each other and at our own hands and feet.

Cathy slumped down onto the park bench. "None of us will ever be shit," she said.

From the back seat of the car, I looked out the window and watched as the scenery changed around us. Now, off the highway, industrial parks spread low and wide, overhung with a web of cables; now, more green and some houses, scattered among trees like things strewn at random; here and there a piece of a town, a church spire, a windowless research lab, a light-bulb-shaped road flanked by homes. I imagined the people inside those homes, silently roaming from room to room.

In the car, Denise and Ben began to sing a Led Zeppelin song (their song, the one they always sang), Cathy sat squashed up against the door, pissed off, staring out the window, and Brian raised his arm out the other

window, shouting more and more while he pounded the roof again and again. I looked at them all and I listened to them, and for a second a thought flashed into my mind. It was a thought I'd had before. And it was a strange feeling, like I wasn't fifteen or sixteen or even seventeen, but had already been grown up and gone places, many places, and now I was back riding in this car, watching, as I had many times, the way Denise poked at Ben's shoulders or twisted his ears until all the blood ran to one spot. I had watched as Ben shoved Denise away, or pulled her to him with the crook of his arm, ramming his tongue into her mouth. I had seen Cathy get angry for the millionth time, hating us all but hanging around anyway. And I had watched as the Hummel brothers held forearms side-by-side, a cigarette burning between them, burning toward their flesh, until Brian inevitably pulled away first. I had watched Ben laugh, I had seen it all, time and time again. And now I sat back and let the wind from the glassless windshield blow against my face. And I felt I knew these people not by their names or faces, but by the familiar repetition of their actions, and I knew I would remember the day not as anything special, but just as more of the same.

Matador

I got a job down to the Safeway 'cause them snotty kids went out on strike. Hey, for twelve bucks an hour you bet your ass I wouldn't have gone on no strike. Oh yeah right, it's benefits they want. Well I'll tell you, I ain't been to a doctor or dentist in six years and I feel tip-top, A-one. Even Sylvia used to say I have the body of a thirty-five year old. I laughed and said, how would you know? Anyhow, I drive around looking for stray shopping carts belonging to the Safeway and I haul them up onto a flatbed. Them bums leave them everywhere. Sometimes I have to wrestle them away, but I never push and shove anymore. That cart's private property, I tell them nice and easy. I find all kinds of crap in them, too. Once when I was picking some up in an empty parking lot I almost shit because I thought I saw a baby in one of them. It was all swaddled up and I could see two little pink arms and a face. For a second I even thought it was dead. When I got right up close what do you think it was? A doll. Some looney bitch must have put it there thinking it was her kid and that the shopping cart was a baby carriage. I seen no one around, so I took the doll and the baby blankets and all that junk and I shoved them into the bushes. I made sure the doll was covered up good so that no one else would

think it was a baby. Even though it was just a doll, I needed a drink all the sudden. That night when I told Sylvia the story she got upset and even started to cry a little. And I says, Sylvia please, would ya, it was just a doll and she says that ain't the point. So I go, what is? standing in the middle of her bedroom with my arms spread out like I've had it with her. For months she was on me about this and that, saying I didn't love her enough, didn't *put enough into the relationship*.

Sylvia's good people, I thought to myself next day, as I rounded up them carts, but soon I'm going to be looking for a new lady friend. Plenty of gals down to the Matador always squeezing their bodies up next to mine, then going oh excuse me, like it was all an accident. Don't ask me why, but I'm considered a catch around here. Maybe it's my good health, my thirty-five-year-old-looking body. I don't dwell on how old I really am. Doing that I'm apt to feel a little depressed. I got no kids and nothing to fall back on when I'm old. Pension? Not this hombre. I should hook up with a lady with a life insurance policy, some little gal who will love me no matter what. And they're out there, that kind. They're just waiting for me down the Matador. Pearl might even still have me, even after what I done, and rumor has it she's got a tidy little nest egg, but I still sometimes can't stand to look at them burn scars on her neck, even though I thought I could after what happened. She tries to

do up her hair to hide them but that only makes me see them more. The skin's all tight under there, like something's pinching it. Hell, I'm a big man, seen a lot, but that's scary. I heard a couple different stories on how that happened to Pearl, and a couple different opinions on how far down them scars go. People say some guy did that to her, some old husband or boyfriend or something, a long time ago. Still, that gal's got a pretty face and a nice rump. Who would want to do that to such a pretty thing? But maybe that's the point. I heard about them guys, so angry at their mother or sister or someone that they can't tell the difference between one gal and the next. The sons of whores, I think some of them must be. A pretty girl to them is like a deadly thing, something they got to crush before it crushes them. These gals got to watch out them types of men. Someone ought to warn them.

I sometimes have a crazy thought like I'm standing at the top of Grand Street, right in the center between the traffic, and I'm real, real big, like a tree or something, and I'm shouting at everyone what to do. You ladies watch out for them killer men; you bums go get some jobs, quit living off the rest of us. Then I tell them to round up them shopping carts and put them right by the side of the flatbed. Then I know the thought is over because the last part includes my job. Ain't all funny thoughts like that though? There's always a point where something ordinary comes to drag you out of it. Maybe bums and

killer men don't have that little ordinary bit to their dreams.

One night I'm having my first drink at the Matador and Pearl plants herself next to me. I buy her a drink and we're talking friendly and I'm trying not to dwell on them scars, but I'm also trying to see how far down they go, even though I know the only way to do this is to undress her first. But I'm looking at her shirt a lot because she's in a good mood and so she's lifting up her head and laughing and looking all around her as she talks, like for a minute she forgot she got them scars to hide. And when she lifted up her head to laugh real big a couple of times, I knew I had the chance to look down her blouse and try to see where them scars begin and end. And I know that Rudy, the bartender, is looking at me, and so are some of the other guys. Everyone sees me looking at Pearl's shirt but Pearl, who I never seen in such a good mood. She was talking about I don't know what, some movie or something, and I was feeling courageous all the sudden and so I hauls out and says, how'd you get them burn scars, Pearl? And then Pearl's face dropped down toward mine, and the whole place got quiet. For a second she looked so angry I thought she was about to slap me. And it's funny but I heard myself, then, heard how I sounded a second before. I hadn't planned for the words to come out the way they did, but I sounded fresh and flip, like I didn't care at all but just wanted to know, like it was the answer to a big riddle, and like it was all I was thinking

about as she was talking. I would have took back them words, said them again so they came out right, but Pearl just took off out of there before I could stop her. Then everyone was looking at me and shaking their heads. Rudy leaned over the bar, too, and he goes, why'd you do it, Joe? but not like he wanted an answer. And I kept hoping that he would say something else, add something to those words instead of leaving them hanging there all by themselves, like some orphans I got to pick up. Then it was like I gave Pearl them scars myself. Well hell, I said, I was just asking her a question. Like you didn't want to know and you didn't want to know, I said, swinging all around, shooting them words like they were bullets. But everyone just stared and was quiet. I couldn't stand that, so I slapped a couple of bills on the bar and left.

I went up Grand Street, not looking back at the Matador but still feeling like everyone was out in front of there watching me. And then all the memories of all the wrong stuff I ever said crowded around me like thick walls. Damn, I kept saying, damn, damn. And I was kicking stuff, too, little pieces of garbage and things. Then I started thinking about how all them little pieces of garbage got to be where they were. I got dizzy thinking about all the people who used up all the paper, bottles, tin cans and shit that I seen wasted all over the sidewalk. And then I thought about all the guys I know and all the gals, and how they all have people they love and hate. And I started wondering what

happens to people, what makes them end up alone and bitter or crazy as shit. I can't stand it when my mind gets reeling like that, it's like after awhile it don't got nowhere to go, except in bigger and bigger circles. And at the center of all them big circles of thought was Pearl and the look on her face when I said what I said. I didn't really mean it, and I thought I'd make it up to her. Hell, I thought maybe I'd take her out to a nice dinner or something. I thought, them burn scars ain't so bad. I kept wondering why I used to think they were. I even thought of kissing Pearl, kissing her all over her naked body, no matter what it looked like. I got so worked up I began to think she was beautiful, the most beautiful gal I ever seen. Then what do you think I did? I went right over to Sylvia at the place she's a waitress and I told her, it's over 'cause I'm in love. I expected her to cry, but she just goes, well I figured something was up since you didn't come scratching around my door for a week (even though that had nothing to do with it). I never heard her talk that way, and all the customers were looking. I go keep it down, and she goes, I will not keep it down. But then she's all quiet anyway, like she's stumped for something else to say. She's not crying like I thought she would. It's like she's not Sylvia anymore. Then I go to say something else and she cuts me right off and yells, get out of here, get the hell out. Then Guy, the owner, comes out from the kitchen and goes, you ain't allowed back in here, buster. And I don't

want to go in there anyway, but next thing I know I'm outside pounding on the glass and yelling that his diner's a greasy shit-hole. Then I walk away and all them words are running through my mind. I couldn't figure out what was happening to me that day, so I just went home and crawled into bed with my clothes on.

Then that night I had a dream that I was with Pearl and we were running outside somewhere. She was all laughing and pulling my arm, and when I looked down I seen that her hand was all red, especially where her fingers were curled around mine. Then I looked closer and her skin was all creased up and wrinkled, like something dead and dried out. It was real red, too, and I seen that she got burn scars on her hands. And I just knew, the way you know something in a dream, that them scars were all over her. Then Pearl was squeezing my fingers so hard it started looking like I had the scars on my hand too.

When I woke up I wasn't scared or nothing, but you would have thought I was. Instead, I wanted to see Pearl and put my arms around her and tell her how sorry I was. And that was hanging over me big all day, even when I went to work. And pulling shopping carts out of bums' hands I felt bad doing it. Suddenly I didn't like the way they looked into my eyes. Bums got eyes like rocks bobbing on the water, and no matter where you look they might

follow or they might just stare straight ahead like there's no mind behind them. But one of them two ways of looking is worse, I can't figure out which.

That day in the parking lot I wanted to wave them bums away from me with my arms, because they kept coming closer and closer, nine, ten of them crowding around me like walking corpses. They were making a big circle like they wanted something from me. Everywhere I looked I could see them. I wished I could have screamed and pushed them away, but I couldn't somehow. They were staring and quiet, just shuffling toward me like they was planning to walk right through me. One of them muttered something and my heart flipped up like a window shade. But I just kept working all slow and steady, even though my hands were shaking. I started putting them carts up onto the flatbed real quiet and gentle, like I'm not myself anymore. I pulled the rope around them and tied it good, and then I got into the cab and started to drive nice and easy. And the whole time I can see them bums in the rear-view mirror. But I swear they're not normal. They're not just standing there anymore, each one is lifting off the ground slowly, floating up and disappearing out of my view, like they're all going to heaven in the reflection.

Metatarsus

His mother bragged that he had the highest I.Q. in town, but secretly Stephen knew better. A bit of guilt, like a small geyser, rose up in him whenever he heard his mother tell that slight untruth about him. He had been in the gifted students' program since he was five, and had been the star of his grammar school until crazy Nancy Lawrence moved to town.

Nancy lived in the apartment upstairs from Stephen and his mother. At night Stephen could hear her through the old dumbwaiter shaft which reached from her bedroom to his. She made eerie noises which seeped into the unused space between the walls. Often Stephen woke from sleep to hear her voice, which was filled with a kind of sadness, a longing which he could almost know the meaning of, like when he'd hear the sad strains of a Beethoven symphony. When he heard Nancy cry at night he thought of sweeping winds that sound faintly of human voices. Sometimes her words were muffled; other times they started off confused-sounding and slowly became clear, like some tangled mass unraveling. "Me is me is me is me," he often heard her cry, at the end of a long bout of sobbing, and sometimes she would add, "I am Nancy Ilene Lawrence!" Afterwards Stephen would lie perfectly still in the darkness of his

bedroom, trying to keep alive the faint chill that passed through him, because it was somehow sweet to feel that way.

Nancy went without shoes whenever she could, except in winter, and her feet were calloused and stiff. They were as hard as bricks and at recess kids lined up to touch them. But if they weren't touching her feet, they didn't seem to notice her much, just as they had never seemed to notice Stephen. Teachers tolerated Nancy's eccentricities, as they called them, because she was a straight-A student, like Stephen. And, though crazy, she would give the most lady-like answers in class. There, Nancy was neither the wild-haired, bare-footed girl she was at recess, nor the same one whose cries could be heard through the dumbwaiter at night. In the classroom, she raised her hand high and was transformed. She was oddly grown up sounding, and at times this made Stephen catch his breath, as if he had suddenly been punched. He looked around quickly to see what other people thought of this change in Nancy, but no one else seemed to notice that when she acted normal, Nancy seemed craziest of all.

Stephen's own memory was exceptional of course. Everyone said so, and at math and science he was nearly college level, soaring past everyone but Nancy. But things didn't come easily to him. He didn't sleep much, watch TV, or have friends. Nancy, on the other hand, didn't seem to work hard at

being smart. Stephen wished he could see into her room when she was alone, and know how she stored so much information in her head. He knew there was a secret, and he was going to get to the bottom of it.

Once, Stephen wondered if Nancy's father helped her study, but when he looked at her father, this didn't seem likely. He was a thin, bitter type of man, not studious looking at all, who came and went with a briefcase glued to his palm. His presence seemed to change the mood of the neighborhood, like a bit of bad weather sweeping though. He stared down at his shoes and moved quickly, and he had a habit of shaking his head back and forth as he walked, as if he were witnessing a senseless accident. He rarely spoke to anyone, and Stephen's mother thought this strange.

"That man's an odd one," she said one day, absently placing a cookie in Stephen's outstretched palm. "What do you make of him, Stevie?"

Stephen stood at his mother's side by the kitchen window, watching too. He noticed the way Mr. Lawrence kept shifting his grip on the briefcase handle, how he grasped and re-grasped it, as if trying always to hold it more tightly. Stephen pictured the muscles, veins and capillaries of Mr. Lawrence's hand, all working together to keep the fingers clenched around the leather handle, as if it were for this one minute activity alone that the man existed.

"Well?" his mother said. "What do you think, my little genius?"

“He’s just quiet,” Stephen said, momentarily becoming annoyed with his mother’s habit of gossiping about the neighbors.

“Well, if you ask me he’s too quiet,” she said. “That man’s got something to hide.”

Once when Stephen was behind the apartment building, Nancy surprised him, walking up and showing him a photograph. “She’s going to come back and get me when she has the money,” Nancy said, pointing to the picture and explaining that it was taken in California.

In the photograph, Nancy’s mother was sort of pretty, with a pouty red mouth and a chest which spilled out over the top of her dress. She didn’t look to Stephen as if she’d once had a family she’d left behind. He couldn’t believe that the woman under the palm tree in the photograph could have ever been Nancy’s mother or the wife of the small man who seemed to exist only to come and go from his job everyday.

“She had to leave but she’ll be back,” Nancy said. “My father won’t talk about it. He’s afraid.”

“What’s he scared of?”

“He’s afraid she’ll come and get me in the middle of the night. He told me to yell for him if she ever shows up when he’s not around. But I’m not afraid like he is,” she said, skipping down the back stairs with the photograph

held loosely between her fingertips.

Stephen wondered about his father, would he ever come and try to take him away in the middle of the night? It seemed unlikely, but the thought filled him with a strange kind of panic. He'd hardly known the man that his mother sometimes said was dead, and he thought it odd that somewhere in the world his father was doing something at the same time that he was. He looked around him then, suddenly feeling watched. But there was no one there, only Nancy, who sat in a far corner of the backyard picking at her foot with a stick.

Sometimes Stephen watched as Nancy stuck sharp objects, thumb tacks and shards of glass, into the calloused, bloodless soles of her feet. Once she put a nail, sideways, into each one. Stephen stood by with his mouth hanging open as she tapped around on the linoleum floor of her kitchen, the nail heads sticking out of the sides of her feet like spurs.

"People in India can walk on hot coals," Nancy announced, clicking toward the window and looking out as if she were expecting someone. "And in Tibet there's a group of people who can swallow swords." She turned from the window to face Stephen. She looked gravely serious for a moment, as if she'd been holding something back from him. "Every part of the human body has a corresponding point on the foot," she said in a quick spurt of words.

The sound of the words broke up and then became clear to Stephen. He

sat silently thinking about what she'd said, but he wasn't able to picture it.

In a moment Nancy's face turned red and she looked annoyed. "If you don't believe me just go look it up," she said, her face turned upward in the proud gaze of the mentally victorious.

Nancy walked around with the nails in her feet until both she and Stephen heard the front door slam and Nancy's father make his way down the hallway. Nancy bent over quickly and pulled the nails from her feet. Then she sat down next to Stephen at the kitchen table, leaned toward him, and slipped the nails into the pocket of his jacket.

"Don't tell anyone or I'll kill you," she said, and then she waited, hands crossed on the kitchen table, for her father to come into the room.

In a moment Mr. Lawrence's small, thin frame was in the kitchen doorway. The briefcase hung down from the end of his arm as usual. He motioned for Nancy and she came over and gingerly took the case from his hand.

Mr. Lawrence cleared his throat. "Son," he said. "I suggest it's time for you to go."

Stephen got off the chair and crossed the kitchen toward the door, trying to figure out how to get by Mr. Lawrence's body, which was still in the doorway, and trying not to panic when he thought the man was eyeing his

jacket pocket and the two-inch nails inside it.

On Sundays, Mr. Lawrence took Nancy by the hand and led her down the street. Stephen guessed they were going to church. His mother wasn't religious, but he knew plenty of people who were. He recognized the pastel-colored clothes and unscuffed shoes of church-goers. Even Nancy wore shoes on Sundays, though, as Stephen could see from his kitchen window, they were unbuckled and her heels pressed down on the backs of them.

One Sunday, after he watched from the window until Nancy and her father were mere specks at the end of the road, Stephen put away his books and went out the back door. He climbed the stairs to the third floor, and when he got to the Lawrence's back door he gently tried the handle. The door was unlocked, but Stephen hesitated before stepping over the threshold; he hadn't expected it to be that easy to get in. Once inside, he felt his stomach tighten, and he had the strange sensation that he'd done something irreversibly wrong by being there at all. He had never been inside a family's house without their consent. He crossed the kitchen with a tingling anxiety in his limbs, and stopped whenever he thought he heard someone coming. But after a while, going from room to room, he began to smile. He ran his hands over the surfaces of things, turned lights on and off, even flushed the toilet, just to see how it would feel. And when he found himself in Nancy's room, he grinned

uncontrollably and even laughed out loud. In her room he would find the secret to her intelligence, find out how she scored as high or higher--though he didn't like to admit it--than he did. He looked into her closet and down into the dumbwaiter shaft; he peeked under the bed, beneath the bed covers, even in her laundry basket, but did not find anything unusual there. The room was neat, almost too neat, and this made Stephen believe more strongly that there was some secret there. But he found nothing strange in the dresser drawers, the desk, or the cedar chest at the end of the bed. There was nothing in the backs of the book shelves, either, and Stephen soon grew tired of searching. He stood in the middle of the room, hands on hips, thinking hard about Nancy's secret.

He sat on the edge of the bed, closed his eyes and tried to think. In a moment he lay sideways on the bed and let his mind drift a bit.

Light broke up and colors swirled behind his closed lids, and the silence of the room surrounded his head like a helmet. And in a moment, amid a soothing delirium, thoughts seemed to come to him without his consent. But they were not so much thoughts as information, facts, really, like ones he would find in a textbook or drawn on a chalkboard. Math problems rose up before his closed eyes and were quickly solved for him. Compound fractions, differential coefficients and exponential equations, speedily flipped through his

head. Points, lines, planes and solids, were tossed about in the three-dimensional space of his mind. The Pythagorean Theorem and the Quadratic Equation rose before him, and Cartesian principles made themselves clear. The exact and perfect properties of numbers were clearer to him now than they had ever been, and soon new information filled his head. Scientific facts came to him as effortlessly as the math had come. He travelled past rows of plants, ferns of a hundred varieties, cacti, conifers; he saw lichen and algae, all ordered and named for him. He looked into drops of water and saw protozoa, amoeba, paramecium; his mind went deep into the ocean and named squid varieties, urchins, crustaceans, and mollusks. Then he was inside the human body. Bones and organs gave themselves names, calling out what they were; cells announced their parts; DNA gave a tour of its spirals. And then Stephen was deep inside his own body, searching through the vermiculated paths of the small and large intestines, perusing the contours of his own heart, feeling the thumping beat, and understanding as never before the force and function of the great chambered organ. He moved up through a network of veins and arteries, the vena cava, the carotids, the jugular. He began, even, to creep up the medulla oblongata and slip into the haphazard quilting of his own grey matter.

Time passed in gentle spurts and a peaceful softness came over him.

* * *

When he woke they were standing over him. Nancy with hands covering her mouth; Mr. Lawrence with arms crossed over his chest.

“Get up,” Mr. Lawrence shouted. “You have no right to be in here.”

Stephen sat up on the bed and caught his breath quite suddenly, as if in sleep he’d hardly breathed at all. He felt his heart race as Mr. Lawrence’s thin fingers fastened around his arm and pulled him off the bed and into the hallway.

“Let go,” Stephen said, freeing himself and running back over the threshold into Nancy’s room. He wanted to explain what he’d seen in his head, wanted to know if she saw the same things while in this room, lying on this bed. He ran toward her. She stood by the window moving nervously back and forth.

“I saw it, I saw what you see!” Stephen said. He came closer and tried to touch her head, but she moved out of his reach.

“Just one minute, young man,” Nancy’s father yelled.

Stephen ignored him and reached for Nancy again, who had wedged herself between the desk chair and the desk.

Stephen felt as if his head were about to explode. He thought he had to get closer to Nancy before he left the room, believing that all his newly-discovered knowledge would be lost to him if he didn't. He could feel Mr. Lawrence's hands reaching for his shoulders, but he squirmed away from him, still concentrating on Nancy, who was by now on top of the desk, her skinny knees in front of her face.

"I forbid you to be here!" Mr. Lawrence shouted.

And Stephen slid out of his way again. He was moving in a narrow space between them both now, and feeling almost as if he could go on existing there, perpetually dodging the hands of Mr. Lawrence and forever reaching out for Nancy, who inched away from him like a fly defying his grasp.

Mr. Lawrence kept shouting and Nancy had begun to make loud unintelligible noises that sounded like words in a foreign tongue. Stephen was mesmerized by the sounds coming out of her mouth, but still he could see her feet rising, one and then the other, over and over again, as if she were riding a bicycle in the air. Her feet spun faster and faster, turning into mere flashes of white. Stephen could hardly make out what was coming toward him, barely understand what he now saw.

Soon all physical reality became abstract. Sound grew unintelligible and light was reduced to tiny spots of color and shade. Nothing made the kind of

sense it had before. Stephen felt invisible waves of sound and light, and saw motion as a mere stirring of the air.

The white flashes kept coming toward him in spurts. Building. Furious. And then it all became clear.

"Metatarsus!" he announced, letting himself fall backward into the frantic arms of Mr. Lawrence.

* * *

"Crazy," Stephen's mother said that night. "They're both a little crazy, if you ask me." She was making his bed now, and laying out his favorite pajamas on the pillow.

Stephen watched her from his desk chair across the room. A weariness had settled on him. His chest and arms felt heavy and tired, and the pit of his stomach seemed sour. He felt as if he had been on a strange trip, a trip that had taken him far away, and that even though he was home safely now, watching his mother fluff his pillows and straighten the sheets, part of him was still far off in that other place.

The walls of his room were not the same anymore, it seemed as if they'd

disappeared and that he'd been left on some high plateau with the wind whipping around him. He wanted his mother to take him in her arms and hold him until the heavy sadness passed out of him. But when he went to her and she did hold him close, all he could see was the angry face of Mr. Lawrence, and somewhere in the distance the odd face of crazy Nancy Lawrence, now crying, now laughing, but mostly looking mockingly at him. His mother said to forget it, to get it out of his head, but he was smart enough to know that all experiences would be in him forever, as fixed as the equations he now knew how to locate in the convoluted pathways of his mind.

Your Daddy Loves You

I was trapped. I didn't have any money and I was trapped. Aunt Helen had just dropped me off at the train station when I realized I didn't have enough for the fare. I ran down the steps to the parking lot and tried to stop her, but she only honked her horn and waved, and my cousin made a blowfish face on the back window.

"I can't get home," I yelled, my arms raised in the empty parking lot, but it was too late, they were on their way out of Quincy Center. In twenty minutes they'd be back in Cohasset fixing dinner.

I looked toward the two-story, brick subway terminal, the beginning or end of the line, depending on where you were from. There was a set of wide steps that led up to it, like the steps of a library or a court house. And here and there were columns wide enough to hide behind. At one end was the entrance to the subway, and the rest of the first floor was taken up with shops: a dry cleaners, a deli, and a hairdresser's, all closed because it was Sunday. Inside were two change booths and, down below, the subway screeched in and out, reaching in and pulling away like an arm in a sleeve. There was no way past the change booths. The change collectors sat like sentries at the gate,

watching kids, girls like me, who often tried to slip past them. They could make it out of their booths in seconds and grab hold of you. I'd even heard they kept guns in there, though I had never seen anything like that. They seemed to see everything, and when I went inside the terminal and stared at turnstiles, trying to figure a way under or over the metal bar, I could feel the men in the booths watching me, waiting for me and almost wanting me to try to slip by them.

"I'm fifteen miles from my town and I can't get home," I wanted to say to them. I thought of pressing my face up to the glass and pleading. If I said the words in just the right way at just the right moment it might work. But then I imagined what they would say back, "Liar! Don't try to hand us that."

I looked behind me at the row of pay phones and thought of calling my mother collect, but she didn't drive. How could she come to pick me up? She might not even be home anyway, or she might answer but tell me to go to the police station, or to call Aunt Helen and ask her to come back with the fare; my mother was always asking her sister for things, but I found it more difficult. I imagined my aunt's face if she did come back. She'd slam the car door and come toward me, wagging her finger and shaking her head. Then she'd say that my mother should learn to drive and get a car already, that everyone's mother had a car. And she would say, like she always did, that she was sick and tired

of taking care of relatives. Then my cousin would stick her head out the car window and giggle, and my aunt would stop yelling and just stand there, sort of but not exactly waiting for an answer, like adults often did.

I wandered back outside and looked around at the people standing on the steps of the terminal, people waiting for rides or the bus. There were two women in their twenties, women who looked like girls except that they didn't speak loudly or laugh a lot. They looked nice enough, but I was afraid to ask them for money. Beside them was a married couple with three small children, who kept running up and down the steps. The father was reading the newspaper and the mother was rearranging groceries and packages in various bags. I thought the family was waiting for the bus because the man kept checking his watch. Occasionally he'd yell at the little boy to stop running down the steps, then the mother and the little girl would chime in, too. I didn't want to ask them for money, either. The mother looked as if she might yell at me, and the father didn't seem to be very friendly, the way he kept folding his newspaper and slapping it on the crease. Further along the top of the steps were some teenage boys, who wouldn't have any money, a heavy-set man sitting on one of the benches with his eyes closed, and a middle-aged man in a suit, who was reading a magazine and taking no notice of anything around him. He looked like he was from Hingham or Cohasset, or one of the other,

nicer suburbs further south, because his shoes were polished and his suit was neatly pressed. I didn't understand why he would be dressed in his suit on a Sunday evening in summer but I figured he must be important. I walked back and forth along the top of the steps, looking at all the people, the two young women, the family, the man in the suit, and trying to get up the nerve to ask someone for money. No one seemed to notice me walking around, in and out of the columns, up and down the steps. I was a kid, too old to be helpless, too young to be hanging around in groups, smoking. It was always the same everywhere I went, people either decided I was a trouble-maker right off the bat or they didn't notice me at all. The only people who seemed to notice me that day were the men in the change booths, who watched each time I got down to the far end of the steps and circled into their section of the station. I went through there so many times that I could see them exchanging glances through the booths, eyeing me and then eyeing each other, getting ready to catch me if I ran for the train. Each time they looked at me it was as if an invisible set of bricks were being stacked in front of the turnstiles.

After a while a bus pulled up and the family disappeared onto it. Then the two young women got into a car that stopped for them. Now there was only the group of teenage boys, the fat man sleeping on the bench, and the man in the suit. It was getting late and I worried that they would all disappear

and leave me there alone.

I went along the top of the steps again, stopping occasionally to lean against a column and try to think of how to ask for money. In my mind I settled on the man in the suit, but when I got to the end of the steps he was gone. If only he were still here, I thought, looking past the empty parking lot to the street and wondering where he could have gone. I wandered into the change-booth area again, and I felt like saying to the men inside, "Quit staring, I'm not about to jump the turnstiles."

I looked over at the pay phones and thought of calling my mother collect, and then I saw the man in the suit. He was standing there searching through his wallet for something. I took a deep breath and went over to him.

"Hey, mister," I said.

"Yes," he said, not looking at me, and still thumbing through his wallet.

"I don't have enough money to get home. I live all the way in Brighton. Can I have fifty cents?"

I said the words quickly and felt my face turn red. The man didn't look at me or say anything. There was a long pause, and then he reached into his pocket and handed me two quarters.

"Thanks a lot," I said, and I started to back away.

"Wait," he said, pulling a piece of paper out of his wallet. "I gave you the

money, now you do something for me."

A strange feeling came over me then, as if suddenly I remembered having expected him to say something like that, as if our whole meeting had been arranged.

"What is it?" I asked, feeling the men in the change booths watching me.

The man in the suit picked up the receiver of one of the phones, held a card in front of his face and began to dial. He still did not look at me, but only stared straight ahead as if trying to get a better look at some invisible thing.

"I'll dial the number," he said. "And when she answers, you say, 'Your daddy loves you.' Have you got that?"

I nodded my head and gently took the receiver from him. In my other hand I held the quarters tightly and could feel them getting hot in my palm.

The phone rang several times. I glanced quickly up at the man in the suit. He was still staring blankly ahead, but now the corners of his mouth were flickering into a smile and at the same time his eyes were opening wide.

The phone continued to ring until someone finally picked up.

"Hello?" a woman on the other end said.

I pictured a young woman, slim with blond hair and a pretty face. I saw her sitting in a big chair by an open window. I could see her whole apartment, neat but small, with thin curtains blowing gently in the breeze from the open

window.

"Hello?" she said again. "Is that you, Jerry?"

The man in the suit bit his lower lip and raised his forehead. I thought maybe he could hear the woman through the receiver, because he kept shifting from foot to foot, as if waiting for me to say the words. I pictured the woman looking confused, and then I saw myself: a scruffy, twelve-year-old girl making a call to a complete stranger for another complete stranger. At that moment I pictured my aunt, my cousin, my mother, all at separate points on some vast, open plane, not seeing each other and not seeing me, and all seeming to recede from the center, where I stood at this pay phone with this man. I didn't know what kind of complicated arrangement the man and woman had, or even if there was an arrangement at all.

"Look, Jerry, you're right, we should talk." She paused as if waiting for an answer. Then she sighed heavily and continued. "Come on, be a good boy and talk to me. I'm ready to talk about it now."

I looked up at the man to see his reaction, and was surprised to see that he was looking over his shoulder, distracted by something behind him.

"Jer-ry," the woman said.

And I began to think she'd hang on forever. I looked at the man again. His head was still turned. Then I felt a fluttering in my stomach and I quickly

hung up the phone.

The man turned around and let out a small wheezing noise, like the sound of a drain being pulled. I ran for a turnstile and slipped the money quickly into the slot. Then I felt the hard arm release and let me through.

* * *

When I got home to our apartment, my mother had the door opened, as she always did in the heat. I passed into our front hallway and could hear the hum of the TV in the living room. I went in to tell her I was home.

"There you are," she said. "Man, it's hot," she said, taking a sip of wine and fanning herself with a magazine. She smiled and stared me up and down for a moment, and then went back to her show. She always said I grew each time I was away from her, even if it was just for a weekend. When she looked me up and down she was playing an old game of ours, trying to see which part of me had changed.

"Get yourself a cold drink and come watch TV with me," she said. In recent weeks she'd had me watching *I, Claudius* with her. I was secretly bored with it and hadn't really been sure what was going on, but I usually sat there with her anyway.

I was beside her on the couch now and we both watched as the snake

slithered across the mosaic, at the beginning of the show. Then Claudius came on, stuttering and drinking, almost falling off his chair. Soon it flashed back to when he was younger and his grandmother and everyone made fun of him. They were all stuttering like him and poor Claudius just sat there and took it.

As we watched TV, I kept trying to decide if I should tell my mother what happened at Quincy Center.

Finally I said: "Mom, something weird happened to me today."

My voice sounded kind of strange, and my mother put down her wine glass and turned to face me.

When I finished telling her the story, she got up and paced back and forth. She picked up the phone, and then stared at the receiver like it was some foreign thing in her hand, like she didn't know who she was going to call or what she might say. She hung up the phone and came toward me on the couch.

"You should have gone straight to the police," she said. "Why didn't you go to the police?"

"But it was okay," I said, wishing I'd never told her.

"I got the money and ran away. I never said what he wanted me to say."

"That's not the point. There are people out there who do all sorts of terrible things," she said, and then she pulled me to her again.

"I'm okay," I said.

"Jesus Christ, sweet Jesus," she kept saying, more and more softly, beginning to quiet down, the way she always did after something bad happened.

Soon we stopped talking and watched the rest of *I, Claudius*. My mother put her feet back up on the coffee table and poured herself another glass of wine. She let me take a couple of quick sips--"small, small"--and soon I began to feel a strange quietness come over me.

That night as I lay in bed I thought again about the phone call. I ran the words over and over in my mind, searching for something more in them. None of it made much sense to me, but I could see now how rough and ungraceful the words had been. I thought that I could have said or not said "your daddy loves you" to the woman and it wouldn't have made any difference to her. She was the kind of person, I thought, who would think that most things were fine, that most things weren't a problem. I seemed to know that about her at the first sounds of her voice. I knew it, but still something had stopped me from saying it to her.

I lay awake in my bed with my eyes open. "Your daddy loves you," I said outloud to no one, and the headlights of a stranger's car bent over the walls and ceiling of my room.

Gums

The things that happen to Sherry seem dark and distant. When I hear about them they cut into me, as if a mesh surrounding my life were being snipped here and there. Like when she had all of her teeth pulled. The gums, one of my other sisters said with authority, had rotted down to nothing. I ran my tongue slowly over my teeth and gums, and the inside of my mouth seemed a remote and distant place.

I picture my sister Sherry in the dentist chair, toothless after the last one came out. For a while she sits there with an empty mouth. The dentist and the hygienist have left the room for a few minutes. Stranded, helpless in the chair, Sherry runs her tongue along the uneven mounds of pulpy flesh. The room is sparsely decorated, as county dentists' offices usually are. The walls are some kind of imitation stucco, painted green and rotting, small mountains of paint going on forever. No art on the walls. Nothing but the generic, local-government signs and photographs of the stages of tooth decay. Sherry doesn't get up to look at the oral-hygiene charts, the pictures of bleeding gums, the white, off-white, yellow, brown, and black teeth. It is more like her to sit there for those many minutes, letting her thoughts run back to when we were kids

and we looked up to her, to when she had the three of us, all younger, fastened, as if for always, in her control. She called herself the queen, and we were her royal servants, who did everything for her. Those years seem long when I think back on them. The belief that my place was happily under hers faded slowly, imperceptively at first, until it was completely gone.

From time to time I hear about Sherry's life in the shit-hole town where she lives, running welfare scams with her husband, putting her kids in foster care for months at a time, as if they are rings going to the pawn shop, and I wonder when and how she became so weak.

I always see her in that dentist chair. She's alone but she won't open her mouth for anything. She is keeping her thoughts from completing themselves. She starts to run her tongue over the lower gums but there is no feeling there. She circles the room with her eyes once more, seeing the closed door again, the green stucco walls. Then her chin drops and her eyes flicker a few times. She is falling asleep. I have slipped in from underneath the paint that I've created, and from high up in a corner of the room I watch her. She could do as I say now, but I can't move her out of this room. All I can do is watch her sleep, and wonder, as I do, why this is the worst moment of her life for me.

People on the Edges of Dreams

Even when we were kids I saw death in her eyes. You can see these things, see them in family photographs, know who's dead, who's angry, who's the prosperous one. When I looked I saw her dead, an angel. My sister was willowy and soft, thin and pale. She was something less than life and more than death for her thirty years. I saw it in a dream before it happened, and though death in dreams is not always death, I felt the heavy sadness of it. And having never known it I said, so this is death. And I forgave all that had come between us because, you know, you just do. You forgive the emptiness that has now become your kin.

So, yes, in the end I forgot all the rivalries, and all the times she pushed me away. When we became less close, had less and less to speak about, I still wanted her there. But I think she didn't want me then.

I remember her wedding, how thin and pale she looked that day, how she didn't have fun like she should have. The whole family was fighting then, not just the two of us. At the reception I skipped the dinner and just drank. I danced and talked to everyone and smoked cigarettes in the bar with the other

bad girls. I got so drunk I forgot that I was angry, forgot even why I was there. I spilled white wine all over my bridesmaid dress and went around telling everyone about it. I saw my sister here and there, eating cake, dancing, having money shoved into the little bag around her wrist, and through it all managing to follow my every move through narrowed eyes. Toward the end of the evening I saw her taking a breather in the women's lounge. How beautiful and fragile she looked, perched on the edge of the counter. It hit me with a kind of drunken rush how much I loved her. It was simple: I could have said anything to her then, I could have said everything and things would be good between us. I went toward her and asked if I could put my arms around her. But she looked me in the eye and crossed her arms over her chest.

“No,” she said. “You’re too drunk and you’ll slobber all over me.”

I can still picture her face, closed-mouthed and squint-eyed. She had a harness that I’d always lacked, tough as I seemed sometimes. I had been jealous of her stubbornness since childhood, and knew it as a thing that only she and I could see. To the rest she was the sweet one and I was the one with an edge, but I could never master cruelty the way she could. She shrugged herself loose from the cloth of life and I was left somewhere in the folds. She could withstand and also give the hardest of blows. Perhaps, then, she *was* made for death, preparing to take its finality before the rest of us.

One night I dreamt I died. I was in a room lying on a large table. I was passed out and my eyes were closed, but I could see and hear everything around me. Life was leaving me the way the last drops of water might evaporate from a glass. My friends and family stood over me, touching me, crying. In a moment I opened my eyes. I was still in the same room, lying on the same table top, my hands and feet, my clothes, all the same. Even the way the light came in the window was the same, but everyone who had been there was gone. I lifted my head and looked around. Across the room were three or four men lined up against the wall in profile, as in a relief. They were all wearing black and white, and one of them had on a gray fedora. They were like characters in an old Humphrey Bogart movie: tough men who said little. I looked to the one in the gray fedora because he seemed to be the leader. He moved away from the wall slowly and I swung my legs around and jumped off the table. Everything was in slow motion, then, the men, my thoughts and movements. I don't remember speaking, only communicating somehow. And before the men thought it or said it, I knew I was dead. I looked into their faces. "What happens next?" But they only cocked their heads in unison and looked at me. I was making the wrong assumptions, the way you do at a new

job when you don't know it's going to be quite as bad as it is, or when you lose all your money and can't understand the implications of that. Their faces told me that, yes, while there was something beyond after all, even to the dead it was not clear. I was doomed to a death of waiting, they said. No one was sure what was past the walls of that room, or beyond any room or field or city. Instead we are all unsure, as misdirected in death as we are in life.

At first I took my place against the wall with the men. I thought and thought and tried to recall what my life had been, but the memories faded like a pattern on an old china plate. Soon the others began to slouch against the wall, but I became restless and paced about the room. In a moment I turned to them again. I want to go back, I said loudly, shocking them awake. They stared at me and then began to perk up a bit. They even seemed a little excited at what I was saying. They said I could try if I wanted to, that none of them had ever tried to go back, but as far as they knew it was not too late. I said good, then I was going to go back. I turned around with resolve. I walked across the room toward the table, and then it hit me: I didn't know how to get back, just as I had never known how to get back to a dream after waking. I turned to the men again. I said, I don't know how to do it. But immediately I knew from their faces that this too was a question without answer. They shook their heads and raised their palms in confusion, but I knew that in their

own way they were wishing me luck, rooting for me without bitterness. And though I didn't know how time passed in the province of the dead I took an extra moment to stare at them. Then slowly their faces grew unclear, like figures seen through a rain-swept window, and the one in the gray fedora said, just because we're dead doesn't mean you have to be afraid of us. And I said, I know, and I wondered why now he chose to point this out.

I turned once more and walked toward the table. I climbed up and lay down. Closing my eyes, I tried to concentrate. Everything went blank for a moment and then I opened my eyes just a crack. I lay there with my lids barely opened, not knowing whether I was dead or alive. How could I know? I was afraid to look around the room because that would give me my answer right away. But soon the difference between life and death became clear to me. Something was back that I hadn't known I'd missed, my breath. I opened my eyes and looked around at the same room, but now my friends and family were back.

When I woke from the dream it was strange and hot in the room. I wondered if I had actually died in my sleep. Had I stopped breathing and gone into death, and then from death back into life, and from there into a dream?

* * *

I wish I had said more to my sister when she was alive. After a while I just gave up. She lived on her coast, I on mine, but we did soften enough to send greetings through the mail. Cards and packages passed between us, cookies she made with her daughter. Pictures arrived of her kids but I had nothing equivalent to send. I chose to not have any children, still hold fast to that rule. And I have no husband because I can never seem to find the right man--this has become the family joke. Instead I have my books and my writing, which make poor subjects for photographs. But it was only when my sister would call and talk about her house and her kids that my life seemed somehow wrong. I wouldn't have minded so much, but a change came over her in those last couple of years, and I thought I felt pity coming through the wires. "If you need anything," she'd say, almost as a question. Or, "Come and visit anytime you need to, you know, get away from it all." She had taken to saying "I love you" at the end of every phone conversation, and I found myself pausing before saying it back. I was uneasy with the change in her. It was as if she'd forgotten who she was. I'd hang up the phone and look around at my things. Still living like some kind of vagabond, I'd think, not in her voice but in a voice of my own. Still alone, still making a living to feed my dreams.

When she died I did not feel that I was the lucky one. I thought instead that she had won and left me in a crueler place. But when she'd been gone a

year I had a thought. It came to me as I woke from the shadowy edge of a dream. I never believed that she thought about me much, but suddenly I had the feeling that through all of her hardness and even her pity she was trying to teach me something about myself. But soon I saw that it was not the lesson, but only the feeling of a lesson that mattered.