

2000

# Lawn dogs and other stories

Heather Gaddy

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open\\_access\\_etds](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

## Recommended Citation

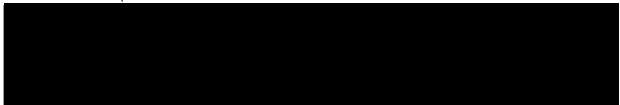
Gaddy, Heather, "Lawn dogs and other stories" (2000). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 6395.  
<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.3540>

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](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

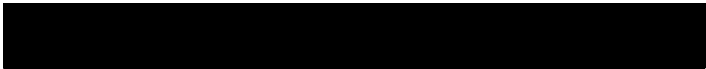
THESIS APPROVAL

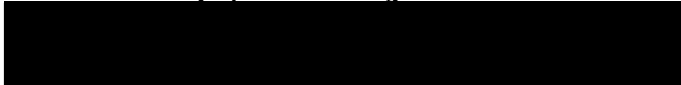
The abstract and thesis of Heather Gaddy for the Master of Arts in English were presented December 6, 2000, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

COMMITTEE APPROVALS:

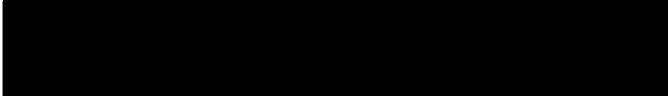
  
Diana Abu-Jaber, Chair

  
Grace Dillon

  
Anthony Wolk

  
Richard Wattenberg  
Representative of the Office of Graduate  
Studies

DEPARTMENTAL APPROVAL:

  
John V. Smyth, Chair  
Department of English

## ABSTRACT

An Abstract of the Thesis of Heather Gaddy for the Master of Arts in English presented December 6, 2000

Title: Lawn Dogs and Other Stories

The wife reminds herself that she must breathe. To find a steady center in the chaos that is her confused rage; this will help to transform her lack of control into that enviable ability to gracefully cope. She knows this from somewhere deep inside of herself, and she also read about it in a book. She takes a big breath, but the calm eludes her. She finds other ways to keep the moment in hand. Counting the husband's movements, watching the crows fly and making decisions about her future according to how they land, combing her hair too hard. Amazingly, he stays near, even with her stinking hate of him; he reaches for her hand on any day and looks in her eyes without fear. She is baffled, suspicious, and secretly relieved. She stays and the days pass. Something grows, her own kind of breathing comes.

Her journey is like the journeys of the characters in these stories. The stories explore the ways close relationships can be awkward, and ingrown, and the kinds of rituals people create within themselves to cope, and even, at times, to change.

(LAWN DOGS  
AND OTHER STORIES)

by  
HEATHER GADDY

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

MASTER OF ARTS  
in  
ENGLISH

Portland State University  
2001

## Dedication

These stories are dedicated to Ness Mountain.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Nick and Rachel .....	1
Zeke and Lerleen .....	9
Me and Faye.....	19
Aunt Kimmy .....	26
The Relocation of Rhonda 44 .....	43
Snow White .....	59
Lawn Dogs .....	63
Harry and Pat.....	72
Lonely Monkey .....	84
The Russians.....	87

## Nick and Rachel

“How much chicken do you think I can eat, Rachel?” he asked. His long arms curved around his plate. The piece he held in his hands was almost gone, just a few strings of glistening bits left, smelling sweet. He smiled.

They’d found a table under an alder tree where she could watch the people and not suffer in the glare of the sun off the white plastic tables.

“C’mon, Rache, really? How many do you think I could eat if like I was really hungry and someone paid me.”

“I don’t know, Nick, but if you touch me with those greasy paws of yours I’ll bite ‘em off.”

She came off sounding like she was having fun, but she really did want to bite him.

He giggled, spitting a little bone onto his plate. The joke of her biting his hand off seemed to hit him in waves. He looked over at her, with his mouth open and head tilted back, sauce leaking out the corners, his hands full of chicken and bread, and laughed.



“Six or seven probably,” he went on. “I’d need bowls of other food to wash it down with. I’d want potato salad, cottage cheese and peaches, grape jello, and French bread. . . .”

They got married six weeks after she was released from treatment for her eating disorder. They’d gone to a few therapy sessions together, but amazingly, and, Rachel had thought, luckily, Nick didn’t want the details.

The way he said “French bread” touched her somehow, through the bad feeling that she’d had brewing most of the day. She found herself going along.

“Don’t forget biscuits, Nick. I know you love those.”

“Only Bisquick. I hate those other kind.”

“Right.” And then, the way he said he hated those other kind chased her good feeling away. Just like that.

She didn’t want to be there when he ate all those chickens. She wanted to be in some clean apartment downtown. He’d be off somewhere hunched over a table. When he’d look up at her for support, or forget to look up at her because he’d forgotten she was there – she’d miss the whole thing.

“Sure you could eat seven?” she asked through clenched teeth.

“I probably could. I don’t know, but this is the best chicken I’ve ever had. I think it’s from the sauce. There must be some spice in here. Who made it?” he asked her, but not her. He looked around not focusing on anyone, chicken in hand, sauce dripping. “I wanna find out who made it.”

She looked around the crowded backyard. The people made her nervous, but she didn’t want to tell him that she wasn’t feeling good. He never seemed to get it fast enough. She figured she would need to talk too loudly – he’d ask too many questions about what she meant. She took a breath.

She should have started breathing before they arrived. Started when they got in the car and Nick forgot the cookies. She’d been keeping her mouth shut about it because she wanted him to remember them on his own, but he hadn’t. Or better yet started taking deep meditative breaths when she woke up that morning and his hand had been trying to worm its way between her legs as she slept.

In the back yard, in the middle of a chicken fantasy in the hot sun under a tiny bit of shade, it was too late to breathe. She searched the yard for anything to get her mind off Nick. The only people she knew at the party were Nick’s boss, who didn’t seem to like her and was a lot like Nick anyway, and Kayla Parducci, the hostess.

She looked at her fork. Sturdy stainless steel with clean edges. She managed a ragged breath and counted to five. When she looked up she made eye contact with Kayla, who patted and smiled her way over to their table. Rachel looked back down at her plate when Kayla was turning the last corner around the hot tub. Rachel moved her potato salad as far away from her beans as it would go and then pressed her fork into the potatoes. The metal prongs cut them easily. Kayla was skinnier than the last time she'd seen her.

“Hey, Rachel! Nick. You're keeping your man well-fed I see.”

“Yeah, she is,” Nick said. “Good chicken! Who made this sauce?” Kayla perked up even more.

“Me, silly!” she squealed. Rachel gripped the fork and found the strength to talk. The house, the party, the decorations, Nick's work on the kitchen. Then Kayla flitted off.

“I hate her,” she whispered to Nick when Kayla was far enough away. He laughed.

“Jesus honey, she's so nice. How could you hate her?”

“She's a bitch,” she said, a little unsure.

“Hey, you look kind of retarded when you nod like that,” Nick said.

“Nod like what?”

“When you were talking to Kayla you were nodding like every word you said, and you looked a little like a retard.”

The fork bit into her palm. “I do not look like a retard.”

He imitated her nodding, crossing his eyes and bobbing his head around like his neck was made of rubber. She told him to knock it off, but he kept on.

“I’m going to do something, Nick,” she hissed. He just giggled.

“Oh c’mon, Rache. I’m just playing.”

She watched his hand resting on the table the way it always did palm down right next to his plate. Thin bits of pale hair coming out of his wrist.

One of those big red moments exploded inside her stomach before she knew what she was doing or whether she’d taken a breath and counted to ten. The fork she’d been holding was sticking weakly out of his hand. Between the wrist and the knuckles, there’s a part where the bones fan out. The silver tips buried themselves in his flesh. It reminded her of frozen butter.

He spit chicken and barbeque sauce all over his shirt. It wasn’t like she slammed it in and then it stuck straight out or anything. She never let go of the fork. After she got it in a little ways and he freaked

out she pulled it right out. The whole thing was split-second, but her heart beat wildly.

A surface wound, she told herself, feeling like she was in a war. He doubled over to look at it and she leaned down to his ear, the fork to his thigh, and hissed like a gangster, “Don’t make a fucking scene or I’ll poke you again.”

“OK, OK,” he mumbled. She acted fast. Wrapped a cloth napkin around his wound tightly, which was bleeding more than she expected. She got up, and guided him from the party. She wove past Kayla and thanked her for the great chicken. Nick’s body weighed on her shoulder.

“You guys OK?” Kayla asked.

“Sure,” Rachel said.

As she led him to the car she tried to look within herself to find the peaceful place like her therapist told to look for and nourish. All she could find was hot red spark.

When they got in the car he was crying.

“You crazy bitch.”

“Fucking baby.”

“Shut up. I hate you. I really do hate you, Rachel.”

She drove. The bleeding seemed to stop by the time they reached the hospital but blood had gotten on his t-shirt and it looked bad.

When they signed in Nick was standing behind her still crying.

“Why don’t you get the hell away from me?” she said, without looking back.

“What? God. You’re so mean. We’re married, Rachel. I can’t believe you!”

The nurse backed away a few steps from the front counter. No one was around except them. It was a slow day. Rachel took the blue fountain pen and filled out the new patient sheet for Nick. She pushed as hard as she could, tearing little holes in the paper. Nicholas Druitt, AGE: 33, ADDRESS: 99 NE Burlingame RD.

The nurse pointed them toward a room down the hall. Rachel said she didn’t want to go. She said she’d be in the waiting room because blood made her nauseous. When Nick walked past her she pushed with her index finger in the small of his back. He turned around and shook his head at her. She flipped him off.

She knew she needed to calm down. She knew she was right on the edge of the edge. With Nick gone and the sound of the music leaking out of the speakers she noticed how clean everything was. The

bright waiting area shone. It's not like I carved out one of his knees, she thought. She walked over to the row of crisp orange chairs. The magazines in a fan. Then, as if she did it every day, she got the fork from her pocket, put it in her mouth, and cleaned it off.

## Zeke and Lerleen

The ad read: "Serve your country! Give skin while traveling with a Realife Wife of your dreams! The one you wish you could afford! She's made to your order! All desires honored! We specialize in the irritated, and mildly deformed! Jungle available! NOW! Skin only."

Zeke felt his dick spasm as he read the words. He usually ignored the skin payment ones. He'd been able to pay for his other Realifes with work money or fluids. It was the specialization in irritability that sent him looking at his forearm, the part between his wrist and his elbow that he always looked at when he was broke.

His building, like all the buildings, had a Collector that would come up and perform the operation. As soon as he bought something on his screen the Collector would be dispatched. Everyone these days walked around with bandages of one size or another. He was behind the times, one of the few who still hadn't sold any. He was standing out more and more, he saw his neighbors stare at him. Someone from work asked him if he cared about the war effort.

His hopes of getting a Realife wife paid for in work money had long since been dashed by cutbacks and layoffs. He only worked part-time despite his skills as an effaced buildings monitor. With the piece



from his forearm he could pay for the trip with the Realife and have some money left over. If not now, when? he thought.

He keyed the number on the screen. A macho-sounding voice. Pictures of the jungle and images of a potential Realife wife pulsed on the screen in front of him. There were all kinds of women. Some with plain faces, some with deformities, some plastic looking, hookers, a cross-eyed one flashed across and he sat bolt upright. "Just like that one!" he insisted to the voice that continued asking questions and prompting him to key in his response. Details, skin information, times, locations, Realife wife physical requests.

By way of goodbye the voice reminded him of the restrictions and that he would need to cooperate fully with the company staff or he would suffer legal consequences. "You will have a Fantastic trip, Mr. Kidrich!" and the voice was gone. A shudder of excitement shook Zeke as he signed off and stretched out on his couch. He sighed deeply. A knock came at his door.

"Collector," said an older-looking guy in a blue smock with a small metal case. His skin in third or fourth generation. Zeke and the Collector walked over to the kitchen and shook hands. Rules and Restrictions. Fingerprints here, blood sample. Then he handed Zeke the little tube of clear plastic material. Zeke unrolled it and stuck it on

the area he wanted to pay with, the Collector adjusted the size of the square with knobs from his case. Zeke nodded for him to go ahead. A searing white light tore through his arm. Even though it was a relatively small piece the pain exploded inside of him. He motioned for the Collector to increase the pain killing element. The Collector nodded, but Zeke's eyes watered and he squirmed helplessly in his seat. The square filled itself with the first layer of skin, hair, and the skinniest edge of fatty tissue then it lifted off of his arm like a little hover craft and floated over to the Collector, rolled up into a tube again and sunk into his case. Zeke's arm, meaty, with thousands of teeny holes where blood began to erupt, accepted the heal tabs greedily. The Collector held out in his hand as he repeated the two rules Zeke had to remember.

“Do not discuss the concept of Realife with your purchase and Do Not expose the patch of healing skin.” The guy looked exhausted.

Zeke swore for the millionenth time never to get sucked into selling his skin for a living and told the man he'd follow the rules.

“Thanks for your payment. You're going to have a fantastic trip Mr. Kidrich.”

Zeke squinted against the bright light in the hallway as the Collector walked out. He managed to get up and bandage his wound. The last thing he remembered doing. He slept for 48 hours.

When he woke up he inspected his arm. The bandage was red, the patch was swollen. As he rebandaged it he smelled the burnt smell that he'd smelled on other people. He wasn't due into work for another three days – plenty of time for his vacation.

He packed. A baseball cap, Bermuda shorts, and two long-sleeved shirts. He went over in his mind what he'd ordered. The minor eye cross, the easily offended, long-married wife, the wiry build.

He ate breakfast and went to bed again for a few hours. The rate his arm was healing didn't fool him into thinking he should have sold some sooner. He knew that it was like this for virgins. The more you sell the longer it takes to heal. After two times in the same place it takes forever to heal and you can't get very much for it.

He dressed in the outfit he wanted to have on for his Realife. A jungle hike outfit that made him look like one of the guys in the ad. His old-timer cap and shorts, showing off clean legs. He took the tunnels to the vacation company address.

He was ten minutes early for his appointment with the travel escort. The crowded waiting room was full of Realifes. He tried not to

look desperate and tried not to scratch his arm. He put the Realifes in order of the ones he would like to have first. There were a few in particular that he would have switched with the one he'd ordered, if he hadn't signed an agreement not to make such a request.

The travel escort arrived, a short guy, maybe 30, and led him to a room down a hallway. The room had a bed and a window that looked out on a night sky, some people walking by, light clouds, the moon. He lay on his belly and the guy inserted a tester in his ass and asked the necessary questions. The machine registered negative and positive in all the right places. Zeke felt little pain. A very quiet bell went off somewhere in his body, like a security door being rung open. The guy removed the tester. Told him he was ready for his trip. Patted him on the butt and said he wished he was going.

Zeke was led down another hall by a very thin Realife secretary with military boots and a blue smock like the collector had worn. She said her name was Ms. Barker.

When they reached the door marked "Jungle Trip," he thanked her and walked through a door and into the jungle.

He turned around to remember where it was, but the doorway was masked by thick vines and trunks of tall jungle trees. He could barely see it. Birds were making squawking noises.

He heard his Realife wife before he saw her. He turned around. She was in a pick-up truck like they had in the old days blowing her nose. He stared. She was perfect. Her left eye wandered sweetly toward her nose. Her shoulder pointed crisply out of her tank top, exposing her clean, smooth arms. Perfect, he said to himself.

He'd chosen to keep his name Zeke and picked Lerleen for hers. They'd been married for 12 years. It was their anniversary holiday. He started walking toward the truck wondering what the hell to say when her voice, quick and angry, swept him off his feet.

“Get in this car. This instant. There are huge beetle bugs out there that'll take your leg off, Zeke. That's just what we need. What'll I tell the kids when their father comes home with a wooden leg? What will we do for money!” Her thin lips set so hard they'd turned pale against her sunburnt face. Her hair pulled into a neat bun.

I love you, Zeke thought. Thrilled to the deepest part of his body, he walked to the driver's side of the car and got in. Leaned over to kiss her, forgetting what kinds of specifications he'd insisted on. She seemed to consider kissing him for a split second, blushed instead, and then pulled back stiffly. He couldn't help staring.

“What. Do you think. You're doing?! Drive for Godsake.” She pushed herself that much further into the back of the seat and

plastered her eyes forward. Thin legs crossed, both hands clutching one knee. Her bare legs showed no scars, like ever other Realife, no collector had touched her. Her arms, covered by a thin white blouse, looked strong and tan. Zeke sighed.

They drove down a wide curving stretch of jungle road. The truck bounced ridiculously over rocks and through pot holes. They bickered about nothing, both equally excited by the growing emotional tone of the afternoon. Jungle noises and the rattle of the vehicle made them yell to be heard at times. Lerleen's voice, high and ragged, Zeke's deep and withholding. An hour into the drive they were nearing the cabin that would be their love nest for the remaining hours of his vacation. Zeke drove on recklessly.

"You're driving like a lunatic. You'll kill us both!" Zeke didn't respond. Silence – as he'd requested – made her angrier. She screamed on. "And. I don't love you anymore. Not one little tiny bit," she spit out her words and turned to face him.

"Good." Zeke looked over at her trying to look as indifferent as possible. Seeing her eyes crossed drove him wild. A passion for repugnance. He had checked that box.

"You take that look and shove it. And stop this car!"

The pick-up screeched to a stop on the deserted road and he slammed his open palm on the steering wheel. She opened the door and stepped out. She stood facing him, her fists on her hips. Staring.

“This is stupid, Lerleen. You start trying to walk and you’re bound to get bit by one of those beetles. Is that what you want?”

“Quit trying to sound reasonable, Zeke,” her venom weaker by a point or two.

“Get back in the truck. We shouldn’t be out here and you know it.”

“Shut. Your. Mouth,” but she didn’t move away from the door. “It wasn’t my idea to come out here. Wasn’t my idea to come at all.” She brushed her hands up and down her arms as if ridding herself of spider webs and flies.

“I’m real sorry for all that. Now get in. Let’s go. . . Please.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Zeke marveled at the reality of it all. How good the dialogue was. He’d had a Realife that had this kind of sense for a fight. She was perfect. He vowed to come again. The closer they got to the cabin the harder it was for Zeke to contain his frantic desire to pull over and throw her in the back of the truck and take her then and there. He’d paid for a good girl and he knew she’d resist, claw, and scream. A deserted-looking row of thatched

bamboo cabins came into sight. The truck squealed to a stop, spraying dust.

They both jumped out of the truck and bolted for the same cabin. She pushed the door open in front of him and sat stubbornly on the edge of the bed, arms and legs crossed, panting lightly from her run, looking up at him defiantly. He jumped up and down, nearly too excited to stay in character.

“Take off your clothes, woman! Now!”

She sucked in a breath and put her hand up to her chest, blushing again, scarlet. They stared at each other. She spoke first.

“I will if you will.”

It wasn't what he expected her to say but he took it in stride. “Damn those rules straight to hell,” he thought, smiling like a maniac. She stood up and took off her shorts first. He took off his pants. Their genitals radiated at each other like little heaters. Her skin smooth and unmarked.

She took off everything but a simple white bra. He took off the rest of his clothes, tossing his shirt on the floor. His shirt catching on his bandage, he rubbed it quickly. The edges were still swollen.

His Realife wife froze. Her eyes searched his, as if she couldn't understand something. “What? What is it Lerleen?” He felt suddenly



shy but walked toward her anyway with his arms outstretched, his dick sticking less firmly forward.

She shook her head and looked away.

“What the hell is going on here!” He spoke to the cabin. To the jungle doorway. “I paid for this!” he cried. He felt a dull ache forming in his lower intestine. He looked at Lerleen; she seemed to have the same pain, her hand clutched her belly. He looked at his watch: the time looked sadly back him. The trip was nearly over. He blinked hard to try and make it all go back the way it was.

“You paid?” she said. Sad and shocked.

He needed to lay down. She looked at him, and then out the window. Techs from the travel company were coming. She pulled down the front of her bra and exposed her roughly scarred breasts, purplish and burned-looking. Zeke stared.

“So did I,” she said.

## Me and Faye

Today we got a poster in the mail. A circus from Australia sent it to us. It's a beautiful poster that they'd made in preparation for the show they want to do. It's of this big warrior type woman with long Xena hair and muscles and a baby hanging from between her legs. The baby has dollar bills in its hands and a big smile and red eyes. The warrior woman has big round tits that overflow from a sexy bra. I want to go but Faye said even though the poster looks good, she thinks the circus is a shitty place to work because the managers are assholes. Faye said that the stars of the circus especially get treated like shit. "They try to screw with your mind, and make you think you're no good. They give you drugs and make you do sex acts. You want to do sex acts on some dark stage in the middle of nowhere Jenny, is that it?"

She scares me with these stories when I ask if maybe we should just check it out.

"Actually," I said, "Yeah, I sort of would want to do that. It'd be more exciting than home assembly. Jesus."

Faye is my mother, and she never gave birth to me completely. I live between her legs all twisted in her body except from my torso to

my head. I have aged in many ways but I have only grown to be the size of a two year old. My hair is light brown and my eyes are hazel. Doctors say I am underweight for my size, but that's fine because if I ate too much and got fat, Faye's body would get even more sore than it does now. One of the reasons we like the poster so much is that we look good in it. In real life we're pretty gross looking, tubes and rashes and Faye has really small tits and straight brown hair. The skin on my arms and chest and Faye's thighs is tougher than normal skin because of the constant back and forth movement. And Faye has scars all along the insides of her legs from where I scratched her when I get mad or . . . by mistake.

Most of the time Faye wears big skirts that hide me. She walks bowlegged and with a limp on both sides, her pelvis is a little like a seesaw. When we're out walking around I try to stay quiet and tucked. If nothing goes wrong it's just as though she is disabled.

I should describe the practicality of what it means to live between my mother's thighs, how it works - what it looks like when my thin baby hair falls away and points toward the ground when she stands. Do I hang there? How am I a girl? Or maybe I ride when she walks, on some medical seat designed by specialists? How I do I eat, shit, dream? How does she do those things? What does the skin feel

like, callused from being touched in the same places, worn from the weather of a life living there? I know I must do that. And it will come eventually but I will say this for now: I come out of my mother at my waist, like I already said, just above where a normal human belly button goes is where my body is ingrown with my mother's. My hips, legs, feet are entangled tissue for tissue with her vagina, pelvis and chest, my throat is her clitoris, and I have a child's high voice. More than that, and most citizens, as Faye calls them, become repulsed and only stomach seeing me with a kind of liberal determination that they have for all things not pretty or normal. Citizens are easy to figure out like Faye says. But I think I'm better at it than her because she was one of them once. I've always been here. I make her tell me what it was like when she was like them. My favorite story is about the time she rode a horse.

I'm testing to see if she'll read this. She wouldn't want me to tell anyone the horse story, but last week we were at the counselor's and we agreed it was really important for me to have a chance to talk about my life, without Faye telling me how it is all the time. The counselor is getting an idea about Faye's meanness and she thinks maybe Faye abuses me. She goes, "Faye, don't you think that Jenny should get a chance to express herself a little more. It seems like you really do most

of the talking and Jenny just might have something to add." I was laying like I do when we go to therapy, so I could see Faye's face and the therapist's face in a mirror, and Faye goes, really under her breath, "Jesus," I could tell she was pissed. And so I go, "Faye's trying to detox from sleeping pills lately so she's a little bitchy." I caught Faye's eyes in the mirror and looked at her with my eyebrows up like I wasn't scared. The therapist started breathing a little faster, they like it when drugs are involved.

"Do you want to talk about that, Faye?" the therapist asked.

And Faye just looked at me instead of back at her and smiled and said, "I think you're right, Jenny should get a chance to do what she wants. What do you want to say sweetie?" I knew she meant it even though she was being sarcastic. We like to play jokes on the therapist. Our other one retired recently so we had to switch. The new one's not stupid; she's just new at it.

"So Jenny, what do you want to express yourself about?" Faye asked, looking at me this time like she really wanted to know.

"I want to write an autobiography." I said.

Faye looked real sad. But she signed a contract that she wouldn't read this. But what's a contract written by a geek therapist? So I asked her to promise and she said she wouldn't read it.

The problem is that I can't sneak things from her. All I can do is make noise when she wants me to be quiet in public. She read a diary I had once when I was 13. I had a crush on a girl and she called me a dyke.

"Hey Jen, what's this?" and then she imitated my voice, "Dear Diary, there is a girl at the hospital that is a nurse and she put lotion on my belly today and she smiled at me and I think she likes me in that way." It was one of Faye's darker moments, I think I told her she was a dog or something. I was into that back then. "Just like a teenager", the therapist would say. I still don't understand that.

I didn't know about being careful and lying to Faye, I was still a kid. There comes that point though when your parents can't be trusted. In that way we're just like citizens. She's just as noisy as any mom; she always has to be the one that's aware of everything and in charge.

I am writing this while she's sleeping. She's taking sleeping pills at night so she won't wake up to the sound of the scratching pen. It annoys her so much – any noise I make annoys her. I guess she is hooked on sleeping pills but mostly I just wanted to throw the therapist off the abuse angle and get Faye to be serious in therapy.

She doesn't just say straight out that she hates me at the times she does but I know how she feels. We made an agreement not to say that because it was too negative. But sometimes we laugh about how much we do hate each other. I do everything for her. She says she does everything for me. We are typical caricatures of Siamese twins - our physical connection dictates our psychology almost completely. We nag each other for being each other. But she's getting old and more and more I have to remind her of things.

Faye was twenty when she tried to push me out of her body, she tried. I think she tried. When she is being really weird and controlling and making me do things I don't like to do, I wonder if she really did try. I've never said that out loud to her but I think she knows I think it. My thoughts are sometimes separate from her, sometimes not. This is not explainable. There are pages and pages of explanations of us in the hospitals and somehow this and somehow that. How can my throat be her clitoris, how can she sleep and I write. Where is my clitoris?

There is a lot of walking, there's always been a lot of walking. My mother loves to walk. The rhythm of her hips and the weight of gravity and my occasional treat of seeing the sky as we walk. When we are away from everyone she'll lift her skirt and the air and sky will break

the spell of the blue or the red or the gray of the filter that is the material of her skirt, and I'll be walking, sky everywhere, tilting and swaying with the roll and pendulum of the pillars that are her legs. They quiver as her feet hit the ground and even though she's old, her legs still protect me from everything.

When we take walks nowadays I think about when Faye dies what it will be like for me. They'll make a special seat for me that I'll be propped up in. It will ride on wheels and have a motor. I might even get to ride a horse. I bet they can make a special saddle. The horizon right side up once and for all. That's really why she looked sad in the therapy session. Right Faye? You're sad because the doctors say that when you die they might be able to keep me alive. I might live longer.



hard it wasn't safe to stay. Soon as we moved she got pregnant with our first. Martha, we named her.

It never seemed to get overcrowded, the population always sticking to around 50 people. Folks leaving when it was their time. Honest folks too. Nobody was crooked or specially dangerous. Hard to explain that, we all usually just said it was because the land was blessed and we had God to thank. I always figured it had to have a lot to do with all the money everybody got since we all got a share of the profits and the money handlers were pretty smart and they always bought modern conveniences and we never went without. There were problems sometimes. Sometimes folks had to get off the land and sometimes, every once in a while, someone died.

Not many kids – few families really wanted to drag all the way out there. Or stick around once the kids started coming. Which is probably why Aunt Kimmy was the only extended family member anyone had. Mostly couples and single people moved out there. Some older folks. Some intellectual types from the big cities on occasion, but mostly folks from around Oregon or California who wanted a different life than the one they couldn't seem to get started in any town.

The only person to bother with the outside world was the runner, the one who drove the weed down to a distributor in Grants

Pass. He would pass us news, mostly bad, that nobody seemed to care much about. We'd all come up there to get far enough away so that what was going on out there wouldn't be because of us. Once we came up there we cared more about each other, the plants, and then each other some more. Not a private place in Peachy, anywhere. Everyone knew everything about everyone. And especially when it came to who was sweet on who and where they were getting sweet when. It was just that kind of thing that was the lifeblood of Peachy. Up there in the country like that there's not a lot to do once the work is done. Fooling around starts to get to be a regular thing. But it's exactly the thing that a body likes best of all that gets a body in trouble. At times nasty, bloody, trouble, like what happened the winter I'm talking about. Which brings me back to Aunt Kimmy.

Somebody'd got an idea for a pie contest, only they called it a festival because it would last for a few weeks and there'd be categories and all kinds of pie activities. All the women in Peachy would bake up a pie and everyone'd get a bite and there'd be voting. Everyone would get a prize who entered, but the grand prize winner would get to take home anyone they wanted for the night. The idea was a good one, and you could tell because people started shifting around in their seats,

## Aunt Kimmy

Aunt Kimmy should have never been called that. Kimmy is a name for a gal with a sweet disposition and Aunt Kimmy was a sour thing. Just close enough to fat to be big, but not fat enough to be soft. She was thick and hard and ugly. Body, mind, and spirit. Why no one ever shortened it to Kim was because Aunt Kimmy herself made her preference known. "My name," she used to say, chest all puffed out, all 30 or so years of her. "Is Kimmy LaRue and you'll kindly call me by it in full." But everyone knew her real full name was Kimberly Janus LaRue after her mother. Which got shortened to Aunt Kimmy anyway.

It was winter time. There was still plenty of work, but the sun left for a little too long, and too much weed was getting smoked instead of sold and too many farmers and their wives were getting sick of each other. Something went wrong. No one would have said you could feel it in the air because no one talked like that, but if we did, you could've. The dances at the hall felt a little like a gamble. But what else were we supposed to do? Couldn't stay home all the time. No one in Peachy stayed home all the time.

Winter, 1935. The Peach Blossom Commune, Southern Oregon, or Peachy, to those who lived there. A big meeting hall in a clearing in

the trees: madrone, fir, oak. Houses scattered in a circle around it, different distances from each other, but mostly within half a mile of the hall or another house. We called it a town but it wasn't a town. It was a big farm scattered around in a forest with fields just beyond the trees. Pump, smoke, and green houses, a barn or two, and a road. The bumpiest damn road winding up to it, muddy in the spring, fall, and winter, and dusty in the summer.

We made our money by growing and selling marijuana. We grew it in the fields and in greenhouses using a scientific ways some folks who started Peachy thought up in the 20's. I couldn't explain it if I wanted to. I came on as a picker, and stayed a picker the whole time I lived in Peachy. So I dealt mostly with the weed after it was grown. All I know about the growing is that there was some fancy way of watering, pipes up under the ground that watered the rows from some springs way down deep. With the inside stuff, the sun and sky, gave it warmth and light to give us our off-season crops. Peachy dope was the strongest stuff I ever smoked.

The ones who started Peachy were long since gone by the time I got there. Some, like me, stayed for years, others for just a season. I stayed for five years. Met a gal there that winter named Lulu Brishan and married her. We left in '37 after the law started coming down so

giggling. The women started looking around the room as to who they'd want to take home and the men started looking down at their shoes.

Thing was, most of the fruit was dried and didn't make much of a pie. The runner was gone for another month and wasn't coming up with any fruit anyhow so it wasn't like we could wait for him. We had to make do with what we had. The pies weren't going to taste all that great, but everyone agreed that there'd still be a way to judge a bad from a horrible and let's do it anyway.

So there was Aunt Kimmy, sitting there eyeballing my brother again. Her big red-checkered apron plastered around her chest and middle that she wore everywhere she went. She was one of the head gals who made the dope butter and she carried some influence because she made some improvements on the recipe and as a result the butter was selling like mad that year. There were things about her though that outweighed that. For one, she never really cleaned herself all the way up so when you saw her you could smell the animal fat and the soggy dope smell. And for two, her brown hair was always pulled back tight and her eyes were close set in her big face so she looked dumb as a post even though she was sharp as a tack. She wore a long navy wool dress under her apron and slippers and bloomers under that, like she was living in the olden days.

A sore point for Aunt Kimmy, to my mind, is that she didn't look like her sister whose name was Katrina and who was pretty as a flower. Katrina was happily married to Malcom Ram, one of the long-time growers and unofficial leaders of Peachy. They had a daughter Marie Ram, Aunt Kimmy's niece. They were, minus Aunt Kimmy, one of the most likeable families in Peachy. Aunt Kimmy, even though she worked hard and cooked good, just seemed to be that one scratch on an otherwise nicely painted thing. She rubbed folks wrong and almost everyone had a story about something she'd done or said to them that they held her to. If she minded the fact that no one liked her and talked about her behind her back she didn't seem to show it, unless you count her keeping up with her sour ways, because she did that.

Her niece Marie was the prettiest girl in Peachy and the apple of my brother Tim's eye. She wasn't good for much else back then but folks didn't mind because she was so pretty and she had that good disposition that is so valuable. She was a bad cook, and a lazy worker, and she wasn't even available to get in the sack with because she hadn't shown any interest. Until Tim. Thing was Aunt Kimmy was sweet on my brother Tim. Real sweet. He knew it too. Too well.

He'd called it a weak moment, I called it doped up out of his mind. A year before the winter of '35 him and Kimmy had rolled

around in one of the greenhouses. He'd told me all about it, sounded like she was a real hell cat and I swore off her, not that I had a mind to do anything with her to begin with, but the bruises on his rear end convinced me in a certain kind of way that she was a woman to leave well alone. The way Tim made me promise not to tell anyone about it I even wondered if he wasn't ashamed of how it all happened. Like, did Kimmy make him do it or what.

Tim didn't look back at Kimmy that night we were talking about the pie festival. He was looking at Marie. She was just turning 19 that winter. And it was a surprise to see Marie Ram looking right back flapping those thick lashes of hers.

Aunt Kimmy saw him watching Marie and Marie looking back. She followed their eyes and then looked quick, back down at her hands folded tight in her apron. Every once in a while she'd look back over at Tim. Seemed like she wanted to just make sure he hadn't changed his mind. I was seeing everything Aunt Kimmy did that night because sitting next to her was a new butter cooker, Lulu Brishan, the gal I liked the first day I caught sight of her. Kimmy was training her. Lulu told me Aunt Kimmy was real nice to her, but I found it hard to imagine, even though I can't say I ever really knew Aunt Kimmy in any friendship type of way. I do feel like I know her in some way on

account of what she did to my brother. Since what she did I have always found it hard to imagine Aunt Kimmy as being real nice to anyone. But Lulu still swears she was.

My brother Tim was one of the guys in Peachy that got around. He'd done it with most every gal in the commune, except Marie. He was a good looking guy. Healthy, hard working, popular with just about everyone. We'd come to Peachy together. He'd heard of it from a friend of ours from back home and we traveled out there. Took us three months to get there from California. We had to hike the last leg of the trip with a map. They welcomed us right in. No questions asked.

Lulu looked over at me at the hall, everyone talking about a pie festival. We smiled at each other. Prettiest thing I'd ever seen. She wore a red apron, but a clean one, and she had all kinds of blonde hair falling around her face. Brown eyes, nice figure. Once Aunt Kimmy looked over my way too, but I saw in time to wipe the smile off my face and play like I was looking off somewhere else.

Aunt Kimmy raised her hand for the plum pie round, which was because Marie Ram had been the only other gal to raise her hand. Tim didn't notice a thing, eyes strapped to Marie the whole time. Aunt Kimmy left in a huff. When I told him later to watch himself because



Aunt Kimmy was fixing to beat out Marie Ram and take him home, he laughed it off like I was the nut.

Despite her disposition and appearance, Aunt Kimmy couldn't be denied to be one of the best cooks in Peachy. And Marie Ram, she was fine looking and all, but she couldn't cook for beans, even Tim knew that. But never minding all that, he never seemed to doubt the outcome. I didn't think much of it at the time. I had my own things to think about. Winter picking was busy with all the weed that'd been stored from the harvest and even some of the off-season plants from the greenhouses were coming ready. I had a few trainees on the hash line, and I was busy thinking about Lulu and meeting up with her whenever we both had time. If not for what happened to Tim, and really the change in the whole of Peachy, I'd could have said it was one of the best winters, but considering the thing as a whole I really can't say that.

Since I was keeping such a close eye on Lulu I saw a lot of Kimmy too. She worked on a plum pie everyday. She'd work the butter shift and then she'd go home to bake. Must have baked twelve plum pies. I tasted a few because Lulu brought pieces around to the pickers sometimes. Considering what she had to work with they were even good.

The contest day for Marie and Kimmy was on the third day of the festival. The apple pies took up two days, four pies each day. Pretty uneventful really. One of the ladies did pick a woman to take home, but that happened often enough. Neither of their husbands seemed to mind. On that third night everyone showed up to the festival to taste the plum pies. Aunt Kimmy had dressed up in a clean apron, but even though she smelled all right and had put a little paint on her face Marie Ram looked about one hundred points finer. I expect we all figured it would turn around in the pie department. Marie's was crooked looking, a little burned on the edges and sinking in the middle, a big puddle of purple. Whereas Aunt Kimmy's had a gleam to it. The damn thing was golden brown with those slits in it and the curls around the edges. I pictured Tim, sulking out the door of the hall by the end of the night, and by the look on Aunt Kimmy's face when she set it on the pie table I think she figured she had it in the bag.

When everyone started filing by the pies to take their bite is when things got a little crazy. It seemed that Marie's pie tasted better. Lulu and me were walking through the line together and even before we got to taste it, Lulu pointed over to Aunt Kimmy who was standing like a hawk right off to the side watching people's faces and she was looking darker by the second. Lulu looked up at me with a worried

expression on her face and I couldn't think of anything to say to calm her down. People gave Aunt Kimmy a lot of space after they'd tasted the pies, taking the long way around to the voting bowl where little pieces of paper and pencils were stacked for writing down the name of the pie you favored. When it came my turn to taste those pies, I admit I was ready to vote for Aunt Kimmy before I even picked up the fork. Seeing her steamed up and knowing how hard she'd worked to get it right, it just seemed like the right thing to do. My sympathy for my brother faded into the back of my mind. I guess you could say I was taking Kimmy's side.

And then I took a bite of her pie. I almost choked. The plum sauce slid down my throat but it was salty. Damn salty. I couldn't taste what must have been the kind of crust that melts in your mouth. No one had the nerve to say anything out loud and we all knew if it wasn't for the salt it was a solid pie. A damn fine pie probably. Like everyone else I couldn't believe it. But it wasn't the kind of place where you think someone's up to no good first off. Then I took a few steps forward, Lulu ahead of me, already chewing and looking back at me with that same worried look on her face, trying to hide it with a smile. Scared. I took a drink of coffee from one of the cups sitting there to clean my tongue off. I shuffled up and sunk my fork in to Marie's, still

not getting the picture. I figured it was still likely Aunt Kimmy's pie would win. I didn't believe the looks on people's faces around me, not even Lulu's that said it all. Marie's was better. The mood in the hall was subdued. The band was setting up and so no dancing was going on and people seemed to hesitate at the voting table. The bowl for votes only part way full. I was careless about the bite I took of Marie's pie. I took a bite off the edge, getting some of the burnt bit even, but it was damn good anyway. No way to deny it. The thing was not what it looked. It looked bad and tasted real fine. Course I'm sure we've all wondered if it just tasted good because Kimmy's tasted so bad.

When the vote was announced a hush fell over that room and no one seemed to know what to do. Aunt Kimmy's eyes were itty bitty black stains on her face. People stole glances at her to try a smile, but, like me, chickened out and just looked away. Except Tim. I saw Tim put a thick smile on and turn his pretty face over to Kimmy who was standing straight as a board, her big belly still bound in red. She didn't look back at him but she stormed out after a minute or two.

The wooden spoon second place prize sat like a fake arm on the table nobody wanted to touch. The music started up once she slammed the door and Marie Ram gave a big whoop and pointed to

Tim. A few clapped but most of us shuffled to the dance floor to try and dance it off.

A couple hours went by. Marie and Tim dancing and flirting like crazy. Me and Lulu sitting around the dance floor at the tables like most of the others, staring at them. I still haven't asked everyone who was there that night but I think it's safe to say we were all wondering what the hell went on with those pies. The place felt like the day after the day after, even though it was just a pie.

At first we couldn't place where the sound was coming from. It was a horrible groaning noise with a high edge to it. Lulu clapped her hands over her ears and so did a lot of people. She leaned over and said "Aunt Kimmy," in my ear. The word spread. A few guys went out and scouted around, they came back in saying it was coming from under the hall. The building sat up on a high foundation. I guess she'd gotten up under there. They'd tried to talk her out but nothing doing, she wasn't interested. Lulu scooted even closer to me and I put my arm around her. Tim and Marie, and the band, stopped. The sound got louder and there was a big thumping under the floor. She could have been kicking up at it or using a hammer. Most of us were still pretty slow to move or do anything. A few smart ones got up and walked out and home. Malcom Ram, Marie's father, was the first to talk.

“Did you put some something in that pie, Tim McGraw?” Malcom called over to him. To his credit he didn’t sound mad. Tim just stood there. Folks started to whisper. The sound under the floor went quiet. The idea that I should defend my brother came to me too slow or maybe I just didn’t know myself anymore if the pie had been fixed. Marie started yelling at her father that Tim hadn’t done nothing to the pie that she’d won fair and square.

Aunt Kimmy came in looking like a demon. She’d changed back into her regular apron and clothes, her make-up was smeared on her lips so it looked like she’d run into a wall going sideways. She was hanging onto her long dress at the knee with her left hand and she had a Remington twelve gauge shotgun in her right. She stomped right out to the dance floor and up to Marie Ram and slugged her in the face with the butt of it. Everyone froze.

Malcom Ram got up and walked toward her. For a second it looked like she was going to shoot him in the chest, she clicked off the safety, pumped it, and pointed right at him, but she shifted her aim onto Tim and pulled the trigger. It hit him right between the legs. Blew his balls clean off. They hit the side of the stage with a wet slap like a pair of plums. And if I hadn’t just eaten plum pie I wouldn’t have made

the comparison. Marie must have passed out because she didn't make a peep. Her pretty green dress laying around her like thick meadow grass. Tim fell in a heap on the floor and Malcom Ram just kept coming right up on Aunt Kimmy. I thought he was the bravest man I'd ever seen. I suppose she'd lost most of her steam by then. I figured even Aunt Kimmy couldn't shoot someone in the balls and not feel it at all. After all, and I think that kind of crime of passion showed this, she really loved Tim.

I was up on my feet and running toward my brother so I didn't see the rest of what happened for my own eyes. But Lulu and everyone else I've ever heard tell it has told me that Malcom got up to Aunt Kimmy and just pointed his finger right past her left ear toward the door. At first Kimmy'd looked at him like she was a little kid, scared and weak. I suppose except for that smoking gun in her hand she could pass for a big orphan. Malcom kept pointing out the door. She turned to go. But before she did she looked around at everyone. I was tending to Tim, who was bleeding so bad I tore off my shirt and shoved it between his legs and held it as hard as I could. Blood seeping between the cracks of wood and him just sucking in air like a fish. I don't know if I heard what she said or I just think I did because I've heard and told the story so many times.

“This place is going straight to hell and it’s taking all you crooks with it!”

This curse she yelled seems like it wouldn’t be all that bad, specially coming from a gal like Aunt Kimmy who no one really liked anyway, and she just shot Tim, but those words just hung in that hall stinking and no one spoke.

Tim came out of it alive. Miracle. There was a doctor-like guy there in Peachy but he hadn’t had to do much of anything all year and no one really knew if he knew anything about what he said he knew about, but he earned his keep that night working on Tim and no one ever doubted he was a doctor again. Tim turned mostly crippled. He showed me once, it’s a mess I can’t really describe. He could still walk a little and sit, but not much else. We fashioned a chair for him so he could get around on the dirt paths and we built up some ramps to his house and some of the buildings. Marie cared for him. Her disposition did change after that. Truth of it is she took on a cast to her that was a lot like Aunt Kimmy. They were related after all. People talked about her and she got sour. She kept her looks though, for the most part, and Tim loved her.

Everyone forgave Tim. Even though he swore up and down he didn’t do it. We just decided to let him think we believed him even



though we all knew he was lying. Even though I am his brother I thought so too. Not to say he deserved to get his balls blown off by any stretch. If he did doctor that pie he got punished more than he ever deserved. Everyone agreed on that.

The hall always had a stain in the wood from where he got shot. No one ever heard from Aunt Kimmy again. I imagine she works in some factory somewhere, probably still a good cook.

Maybe someone should have said she shouldn't, but Marie kept that pie festival going every year. The first couple years she lost, once a plum and another time an apple. Then, I guess it was the third year after the accident, Marie won again, and she kept winning. Every year the girls she beat looked a little prettier than she did. Tim wouldn't go through the line. He'd just be sitting in a chair smiling. After everyone voted, they'd announce the winner and she'd jump up and down with a big smile on her face and point to Tim. He had enough in him to dance to a couple slow songs and then they'd sit and watch the others until it was time to go home.

## The Relocation of Rhonda 44

Texas: Collective 44

The eighty members of the collective played a lazy game of tag in the big meadow. In the early morning the meadow was in the shade of the desert hills, the grass was still wet with dew. Rhonda was one of the few to run when the rock flew through the air. She used Tag to run off her “extra energy” as her counselors called it. Her brown hair was plastered to her forehead from sweat and her green overalls clung to her skinny body.

“Release Words!” The Tag Leader screamed. Pink cheeks and shiny bald head. The rock they played tag with flew by his face and fell somewhere into the field, hitting no one.

“What’s going on today!?” he yelled.

The players mumbled to each other. Some burped wetly or massaged their temples as they made their way toward the Tag Leader.

Rhonda looked for her partner Mark. At the northern end of the meadow was the housing circle and mediation rock. She could see their two-room brick cabin with honeysuckle winding around the front door. The meditation rock stood at the center of all the cabins. A gigantic stone surrounded by flowers and benches. The meeting halls

were scattered beyond. She locked eyes with Maggie, one of the neighbors she played Gardenglove with sometimes. She shut her eyes and looked away, but not fast enough to see Maggie's mouth make "see you later" with exaggerated lips.

Everyone gathered around the Tag leader who took a deep breath, lifting his hands over his head and easing them down as he exhaled. Everyone imitated him. As Rhonda let out her breath she heard the heavy thump of Tag Rock. The shiny, black, baseball-sized orb fell at her feet in the grass. She looked to either side for who had thrown it but no one seemed to notice.

The Tag leader always said if you got the rock during the chant then it meant you had a throw that would give you a big liberation. Rhonda took an extra deep breath.

"Throwing Tag Rock we learn something about each other!" the Tag Leader called out. He looked around the half circle at people's faces. Rhonda was in the third row back.

"And learning about each other means learning about ourselves!" they all responded. After two rounds of call and response Rhonda bent down and picked up the rock.

\*

No one noticed the cluster of young men hidden behind the border brush. After an hour of crouching, watching the game, Charlie, one of the oldest and strongest, hushed the group when he saw Rhonda.

“Look,” he said, pointing her out to them. “The one with the short hair and the green.” They peered out and watched her pick up the rock. Charlie held a rumpled photograph of a woman with a baby. He pointed a grubby finger at the woman in the picture. They all agreed it was a match.

“We get her. Take her to Dallas and we’ll probably get enough money to stay,” Charlie said.

“What if she’s not really the right one?”

“She looks right to me. There’s no way they can prove it. It’s been so long. Besides there’s no more time. We’re going to get caught if we hang around here anymore. This is our ticket out.”

Some nodded.

“You go get her, Charlie. We’ll wait here in the car,” one of them said.

\*

“What are you doing?!” Mark demanded.

“I have to throw it. I’m going get a big liberation from it,” Rhonda said.

“We can walk like we’re getting ready to get back. He won’t see,” Mark suggested, spooked. He’d been hit a week before in the chest by Fredrick, a co-worker and he’d been jittery every morning at the field since. It was this jitteriness that gave her the idea.

“It’s been a bad Tag day. Tag Leader’ll notice if we just start leaving,” Rhonda said. The rock was cold in her hand, and heavy. She held it up in for anyone to see and stared at Mark.

“Rhonda. Don’t!” he begged.

“I have to throw it. I won’t throw it hard.”

He walked backwards, first slowly and then trotting away from her. She took her time, let him part the crowd, let him turn his back to her and start running before she lifted the rock in her right hand. People had stopped chanting and were moving out of the way. Some ran. She saw the Tag Leader spot her and watched him clasp his hands together.

“Whose it going to be, Rhonda!”

“Tag Rock will release you, Mark.” Rhonda said, smiling to herself, keeping a sharp eye on which direction he was going. He couldn’t get very far.

The sound of it hitting was usually a thump and then a moan, or a scream. Mark was no different. She nailed him in the back of his leg. She felt a little excited for a moment and put both of her hands on her stomach like she'd seen the others do. She took a breath and looked over at the leader. The Tag Leader took a breath and stared at her, nodding, saying some quiet invocation she couldn't make out. Everyone stopped where they were. The only sound on the field was Mark, groaning softly. Rhonda walked toward him.

“Until tonight. Bless the big rock,” the leader said.

“Bless the grass, and bless Tag Rock. Together we are peace,” they responded.

Everyone got to run off the Tag field and except the ones who'd been hit badly, everyone always did. That morning Rhonda walked off with Mark even though she could tell he didn't want her to. She didn't know what she felt about hitting him so hard. She quoted Tag rules to him to try and comfort him. The Tag Leader patted her on the shoulder on his way out. She flashed him a smile and turned back to Mark.

“You get first throw next time, Mark. Remember, really it's Tag Rock that picks who to hit. Not the thrower.” She knew he couldn't get too mad because he'd been given his final treatments and he'd get too sick.

“Hey, Rhonda. Don’t give me that. Don’t give Me that. O.K.?” he limped away. They were the last ones off the field.

Like most couples, Mark and Rhonda had been paired for their compatible psych cores, but they still hated each other most of the time. As members of the Collective they played community Tag in four-week rotations, had sex on the weekends, and went to group like every other couple. People found ways to deal with their longings and hostility despite the treatments. Mark dealt with his by masturbating to blue and yellow porn every night after Rhonda was asleep. Rhonda played Gardenglove with the next door neighbor Maggie when Mark was out with his group.

Rhonda and Mark had an ongoing fight about their coping strategies. Mark's had been put on restriction by the current leader and if he got caught they would both have to go to program, which would totally screw up their advancement schedule. He always said he never would get caught because all the men in his group did it. He said this even though he wasn't supposed to repeat anything that was said in group except to leader members if questioned. Gardenglove, on the other hand, Rhonda always said, was very popular and encouraged by the collective among women and men. Mark always

rolled his eyes. That was before he'd had his final treatments and he could still use foul language and insults. He still got sick, but not too bad.

"What's the fucking point, Rhonda? I never liked putting on those gloves and pretending some fat hag's naked body was a garden. It doesn't turn me on, it doesn't fix it." At which point his chest would bulge and he'd throw up a little for using force words about someone in the Collective. Rhonda would say, always in a rasping whisper, since she had had her final treatments too and always got very sick for hostilities, "I hate you, Mark. I hope Tag Rock hits you everyday," and she would clap both of her hands on her ears to try and stop the needling headache and so she wouldn't hear him laugh between heaves and mumble through his bile "Yammer, yammer, yammer."

\*

On the third Friday of every month Mark and Rhonda parented one of the children in the community for six days. If they got good reports they could advance to level four, giving them a parenting range of two to fourteen, and then their turn at leading would come. Better house, better jobs, less Tag and eventually no parenting at all. Every month they got a different child. Rhonda hated parenting days as secretly as she could, but inevitably she'd get headaches or throw up.



The motto of the collective ringing mercilessly through her mind: “We can’t hide from our true feelings.” Usually it was after she got asked Mommy questions. A lot of times she just didn't know what to say and really didn't want to deal with having to make things up. And the Mommy questions were only part of it because all the kids made her sick with their salty smell.

She'd mentioned her secret feelings at group and been stared at by Jana, a leader who didn't seem to like her. But Darian, a woman from the fourth sector had brought it up again when they were walking home.

In a shy voice, Darian said, “I know what you mean. I think they smell like salt too.” When Rhonda tried to look supportive and given intuitives, Darian clammed up.

In the past few weeks the Texas Collectives had issued warnings: mummies should be on the alert. “Relocated,” they said when someone left or got taken. At group Jana said to watch out for one of the boys that comes for parenting.

“He’s off. We don’t know his name or what he looks like, but we’ve gotten a message that one of the boys has been to more than one Collective and he’s too old for parenting. One of the mummies has gone missing.”

“Off?” Rhonda had asked everyone. “What does that mean?”

But the subject was dropped and the meeting resumed. Self reports, partner exposure, blah, blah, blah.

\*

Caregiver Otus showed up the same day Rhonda had hit Mark with the rock. Mark was still at work. It wasn't how it was supposed to go because both parents were supposed to be home to welcome the child. Rhonda was out in the yard. She worked the early shift at the big rock and had just gotten there.

"His name is Charlie," Otus said as he approached her. She waited for the rest. Nothing came. He seemed exhausted. The ribbons on his overalls were crooked and he didn't have any luggage for the child. Rhonda felt the sting of heartburn well up in her throat.

"But you're so early."

Otus didn't say anything.

"Any tips for Mommy?"

"Any problems, call your leader, Rhonda." He tried to tell her something else but the door to the van opened. Otus jerked around back toward it. When he turned she saw a thin streak of blood on the back of his neck.

"Otus?"

"I'm fine," he mumbled and started back toward the van. Everything was going wrong. Charlie had already broken the first rule as far as Rhonda could see. He wasn't supposed to get out of the van by himself. Before Otus could get back to him and give him his introspection minutes for it, Charlie started coming down the path. He passed Otus without even looking at him. Standing in the walkway, she got a good look at him as he walked toward her. He looked too old to be in their parenting range. His head was shaved and he had muscles. He wore the orange overalls of a teenager. She thought about yelling after the Otus, but he was already driving away. When Charlie didn't bother to drop his eyes, Rhonda shuddered but resolved to deal with it. She promised herself she would go to the meditation stone for twice as long the next chance she got.

She performed the Mommy welcome for him, trying not to let the cocky smile on his face scare her. Squatting down with her elbows on her knees so he would be taller than her she said,

"Welcome to Collective Forty Four and Mark and Rhonda's home. Our home, your home, and everyone's home. Are you hungry young one?"

He didn't say anything, just looked down at her with his mouth and eyes flat.

Rhonda saw Mark coming up the path. Before she could be relieved, the bald kid broke every rule she'd ever heard of for children in the collectives.

"I'm not hungry. But you can quit bending over. You smell bad. I can smell your privates." The combination of the boy's tone and the fact that he spoke of her privates sent Rhonda into such a quick feeling of rage that she fell to her knees and began heaving. She wanted to kill him. Charlie stepped around her and walked up the short path into the house.

Mark ran up to her.

"Who's that? He's huge. Is he that one?" He bent down and put his hand on her back. Rhonda wiped her mouth with her forearm.

"Did you hear that?!" she slobbered.

They both looked anxiously at the door where Charlie was standing at the end of their hall staring back out at them.

"Go get someone," Rhonda managed. But before Mark could leave, Charlie walked up, softly, behind Rhonda. Mark stood up and took a few steps back.

Charlie hit her on the back of the neck and she collapsed. Mark yelped. Charlie grabbed Rhonda's arm and shot a string of force words

at Mark that sent him clutching his head in pain. Mark followed Charlie as he dragged Rhonda into the house.

When she gained consciousness she was in the kitchen leaning over the table trying, through her throbbing head, to understand what was going on. He was talking into a tiny machine about Dallas and getting paid for a mommy. The right one this time. Rhonda looked at Mark who was tied in a chair, bile drying on his chin, nearly passed out.

“Be ready. I’m coming.” Charlie said into the box. He grabbed her arm. She dropped to her knees and tried to hold on to the door jam but he pulled her out onto the walkway. His big hand gripping her wrist like a vice. She watched Mark struggle lamely with the knots.

“Tell them to come look for me,” she said to Mark on her way out the door. “Don’t let them relocate me. I don’t want to live in the city.” But she knew no one would come. No one ever left the Collective for anything.

“Where are you taking me?” she begged.

Charlie dragged her like a rag doll. She looked for someone, anyone, but no one was around. Where were they? In the distance she saw another boy like Charlie in teenage overalls standing in the Tag field watching them come. He was even bigger.

Rhonda flung her legs wildly back and forth, but Charlie didn't slow down. She couldn't believe his strength. She kept fighting, reaching over with the arm he wasn't pulling to scratch at his ankles. He stepped on her fingers. She squealed in pain. He spoke counselor at her.

"Rhonda. You really just need to relax. None of this has to be painful."

"Who are you?!" Rhonda demanded. The anger and fear inside of her pressing against her throat. "I like it here!"

At the big stone a few gardeners swept the surrounding stones and hunched, weeding, over flower beds. Kevin the head gardener was polishing the big rock. Rhonda saw him and called out. He came toward them like he was going to try to stop Charlie. She could only see his rubber boots come near and then retreat when Charlie yelled at him.

"Hey, asshole, shoo," he said with a wave of his arm.

Rhonda tried to clear her throat to call out again when Charlie slapped her gently on top of the head.

"Don't think about it Rhonda, you'll just get a headache."

They made their way across the circle. The big kid in the Tag field met them half way.

“That her?” He asked.

“Bitch tried to scratch me.”

“Better not try that shit on the guys from Dallas,” the other boy cautioned.

Charlie dropped her. Rhonda’s body fell to the grass like she had no bones. She felt the grass on her bloody toes. Exhaustion and nausea held her down. The meadow was bathed in sunlight now. No one was supposed to be on the grass unless there was a tag game. No one from the Collective was coming to rescue her. The boys argued over where she would sit and how much they’d get for her. “She’s a mommy alright,” one of them said.

Charlie grabbed her wrist and he dragged her to the car. Rhonda’s hand slid over Tag rock and she picked it up without thinking. In her bare hand the sleek cool of it fit perfectly.

“Throwing Tag Rock we learn something about ourselves,” she whispered and hurled it up at her captor.

The black rock hit Charlie weakly in the back of the neck. He staggered, but didn’t fall. He slapped her hard across the face, she bit her tongue. He dropped her back on the grass and kicked her sharply in the gut. “Stupid Bitch!” he yelled. She screamed out in pain. He picked up the rock, and shoved it in his pocket. He handed Rhonda off

to another boy who managed to get her in the car seat. He got her wedged against two others, older than Charlie. Both tall and thin, eyes bulging out.

The driver was saying something Rhonda couldn't hear. They all looked out the window. She willed her body to move. They let her look. Mark was running across the field. He was limping and holding his stomach with one hand like he was about to be sick.

"Look, it's that guy she whacked," the driver said. The car began to move off the field. Charlie took the rock out of his pocket, and rolled down the window. Rhonda struggled madly out of her seat and jumped on top of him. The other boys pulled her off as she clawed at Charlie, trying to get the rock back, her kicks and scratches barely made contact with his body. One of them complained of the mess her blood and vomit were making. The other called her nasty names.

Charlie didn't throw the rock. Instead he yelled, loud enough for Mark to hear him.

"Just be glad you're rid of her."

All the boys laughed. Their voices bouncing off of each other like mean balls. Rhonda pressed her face against the glass to get closer to her rescuer, hoping. But Mark slowed down, and then stopped and



stared at the car as it bumped off the meadow and onto the dirt road.

Rhonda closed her eyes and smelled salt.

## Snow White

You're in a clearing. Shadows fall as the sun sets over the tops of trees. The grass grows yellow out of the dusty earth. You're Snow White, and the seven dwarves are running around waiting on you hand and foot. It's the one day of the week they are so busy for you instead of the other way around most days. Making their beds, doing the laundry. Sweep, sweep, sweep. They look happy working so hard for you and you relax into it for awhile, feeling large and taken care of. They pick weeds right next to your toes and comb the rocks nearby with black pocket combs. They watch the ground. You watch them. They fluff your dress and one of them sneaks his hand under and touches the backs of your knees, it feels nice. His hot chubby hand, like a paw, low to ground. Animals, fluffing.

You go through all their names. You rename them like you do a lot of times, in your head, without thinking. Mean names they'll never know. Dopey is Druggy, Sleepy is Sleazy of course, and Bashful is Asshole.

There's a sound off in the distance, everybody stops what they're doing and looks. You catch a whiff of him over the smell of the summer weeds and shade trees. He smells like booze. You haven't

seen him in months. You thought he didn't care. Your prince the trashoid. You feel stern. You're horny. The dwarves have been looking like drumsticks lately and you've been imagining some orgy on the wood floor of the cabin or maybe in the mines. He's coming through the forest toward you and your seven. He looks ugly from far away; you try not to watch.

You look down at Sleazy and concentrate on the back of his furry neck. They all hate the Prince for the way he treats you. They've iced your black eyes and listened to you cry yourself to sleep. They've all wanted to be your prince. A breeze comes and you can smell him for sure now, it makes you look up.

He's holding up a sack with a heavy round shape in it. You start to feel excited, the apple in your stomach churns a bit, making butter for your drunk, gift-bearing prince. The sack drips. You can hear him breathing and laughing a little to himself. He's close. The dwarves scatter. Bashful steals a look – he's scared for you. Your hair is shiny black and your skin is pearl white. You keep your face still and try to meet Princy's eyes without looking happy, or eager, or afraid, or hateful. The sack drops to his side and he takes you with his free arm and holds you in the one-armed prince hold he practiced as a boy. For the second before your mouths touch everything is clean. Then it's

dirty, dirty, dirty. His lips are stale and the stench is unbearable. You feel a wetness on your side; the bag he's brought is leaking muddy water. It smells like old meat and metal. You and Princy lock eyes. He gives you the sack and gets on his knees. You feel the weight and see the brown hairs coming out of the holes in the weave and know with complicated fear that it's stepmama's head.

Prince looks up at you and forgets his lines. You look at the sack and then search the periphery for your friends. You feel the expanse of the clearing, how round and far away the forest is. The Prince is drooling. He's wasted. On his knees he's as tall as the dwarves. Doc'll know what to do. You can't see them and the sack is getting heavier, you're all alone with him and it's getting darker. Your knees feel weak but you swing stepmama's head back. All those days of sweeping up the log cabin have paid off. You hurl it against Princy's head. The momentum gets you running, you hear the squish and know that he's fallen down. He lies there and you run with all your might into the forest.

Over big rocks and around fat trees your feet carry you back home to the dwarves. Inside they're praying with one candle on the wooden table. Nothing to eat and nobody to soothe their heads or ladle soup into crooked clay bowls.

You fall against the door, wailing in relief and sadness. Seven men come to you. They tell you he's a monster. You deserve better. Then they carry you with squat hands and strong legs to your bed where you sleep and sleep.

## Lawn Dogs

Debbie wove through the main leisure mall in a crooked dance, her hairy arms hung stiffly in front of her, bent at the wrist. Blood dripped from a wound on her chest. She made as if to speak, but nothing came as she stumbled along the shiny white tiled floors on the balls of her feet. Pet shops, restaurants, bars, and clothing stores, on either side. Old people and their pets on leashes turned their heads and stared.

When the security guards caught up with her she had fallen down, her legs and arms curled in against her body. She was licking her right hand and smoothing it over the scratches around her breasts. Her mother showed up as they were trying to lift her. She growled when she saw her mother's eyes blinking down at her with a sweetly troubled look. Darkness enveloped her.

Hours later, she woke up in the bedroom her mother had given her and Rich to sleep in. Her chest was thickly bandaged. Her head hurt. She smelled something cooking, rolled over and threw up on the clean wood floor. She sniffed at it reflexively. She heard her husband

sniffing under the door. Spied his nose and lips, a splash of pink, squeezing against the space. He barked softly. She passed out again.

When she opened her eyes the next time she was lying uncomfortably on her back on the couch in the living room, her body covered by a knitted blanket. A big “Happy Birthday Debbie!” banner was tacked on the wall.

Her mother was talking to her friend Lena. “How’s your Sheila?” . . . “On the shoulder?”. . .”Not too bad. I’ve got her bandaged up”. . . “Let me know how much the bill is. I’m real sorry. She’s just going through that last rough phase.” Debbie gritted her teeth. Her husband crawled across the carpet to her. He sat his butt on the floor, lifted his paws up and rested them on the couch and licked her cheek. She leaned into his tongue. The roughness soothed the new hair that had grown on her face. His tongue was as long as it was going to get, his nose and mouth merging into a muzzle.

Hearing her mother’s footsteps coming, Rich stopped licking and got back down on all fours. Debbie felt his breath on her neck. If she turned her head she would have seen him squatting and staring up at her mother. His hairy face not yet totally furry, barely exposing eyes that still held the hint of what he used to be.

“Back off now, Richie,” her mother said. “I don’t want you messing up that bandage. Debbie’s real sick.”

He crawled back out of sight.

Her mother’s place was fancy. Huge ranch style house. A Sector Plus house in Love Lawns retirement community. Identical to all the others in Love Lawns. A very exclusive, big money, locked down facility with the highest-grade landscaping money could buy.

When Debbie’s father died, her mother got grossly rich on some stock market buy-sell thing, gambling with the life insurance money. She and a rich friend of hers moved into Love Lawns. The rich friend had given Debbie’s mother the brochure that showed pictures of the homes, and the huge lawns, and their slogan: “Get What You Always Wanted. Finally!” When her mother told her about her plan to buy a house there, Debbie had said something like, “As long as you’re happy.” It was the last she heard from her for well over a year. Then, out of the blue, she called Debbie and asked them to visit.

That had been nearly a year ago. Now, she lay on the couch and ached to scratch her chest but couldn’t get at it though the tape and gauze. She’d gotten in a fight with Sheila, one of Lena’s dogs. The one Rich liked to play with lately. Sheila’d torn the skin around Debbie’s chest to shreds when Debbie charged her. Her only comfort was that



she'd sunk her teeth into Sheila's shoulder, felt the skin give way, and didn't let go until someone pulled them apart. She'd tried to escape then but only made it as far as the mall.

Her mother hummed in the kitchen, and Debbie looked over at Rich, who looked back. He knew how good it felt to fight. He knew about trying to run away. He looked away and made a tight circle, getting ready to lie down. Behind him was an enormous picture window that showed off a rolling hill with a sturdy-looking gazebo painted white. There were no trees around, just grass. Debbie wished she was out there.

"I'm talking to you, Missy!" her mother called from the kitchen. "Do you want to get us kicked out of Love Lawns?" Her mother's voice took on a stern tone that meant Debbie was in trouble. "I got a fine you know." Debbie turned over on her side and sunk her face into the cushion. "And I'll tell you this much. If I didn't want two dogs so bad that husband of yours might have had to go to school again. And you and I both know he might not have survived the trip. He tried to bite me when you were off making a fool out of me at the mall. Didn't you Richie! Bad boy!"

Rich whimpered. Debbie felt her teeth with her tongue and imagined biting her. How her old skin would give. It was nice to know

Rich'd tried. Before he'd changed too much to talk to they made a plan to kill her. But one night she'd kicked him for trying to eat off the table and he tried to bite her. All teeth. But she was ready, somehow, with a weird knitting needle she carried in the pocket of her apron. She jabbed it at him. Got him in the jaw. And then sent him to "school." The obedience program for any dog that misbehaved. He was gone for weeks. When he came back he had a big scar on his stomach, and some other ones on his face, and his eyes looked different. He didn't talk about killing her mother anymore. When she mentioned it, he'd sulk away.

"I don't know where you thought you were going Debbie. There's no way out of here, silly," her mother said. "But since it's your birthday I'm not going to send you to school. Just don't do it again. Debbie. Bad Girl!"

The first week that Debbie and Rich visited her mother they were amazed at all the space the old people had, their huge houses, spread over miles and miles of green grass, and how much everyone seemed to love dogs. Everyone, it seemed, had at least one. The only people that didn't were new, like Debbie's mother had been at the time.

They were also amazed at how much her mother seemed to have changed her mind about Rich. Big hugs all around. Cookies waiting.

She hadn't come out and said she didn't like him before, but Debbie knew she didn't. At Love Lawns she acted like Rich was the best husband in the whole world, fed him anything he wanted, gave him the best chair for T.V. and waited on him like a maid.

By the third week they were ready to go. The big house felt crowded, her mother was getting on Debbie's nerves, and the noise of the lawnmowers, buzzing all day over the acres of grass was too much. Debbie told her mother they were leaving. Her mother, through sobs, convinced them to stay, "Just one more week. Please Deborah," her mother begged.

"She's lonely," Debbie'd told Rich. "Just a few more days." Her mother left them alone mostly, but still doted on them at meals and gave them special fruit juice. They hid out in their room, had a lot of sex, took walks at night when no one was out, and played in the lawns that seemed to go on forever.

By the end of the fourth week. Rich was going outside to pee on that wide open grass, and he could touch his heel to his ear. They walked almost all day long and noticed the dogs more. The dogs were really tall and unlike any breed they'd ever seen. Her mother told them they were called "Lawn Dogs."

“Never heard of that one,” Rich’d said. “Ugly critters, huh Deb?” Thin mangy coat, small teeth, short muzzle, back legs much longer than the front legs, and big staring eyes.

Debbie always reminded herself that her mother had been drugging them from the first day. If not for the drugs they would have left. She had to believe it. She only wished Rich would have waited for her to catch up. Now, they’d missed their chance to kill her mother. They could have torn her apart.

Instead of thinking about it too much, she thanked God for Rich for the millionth time. He was a good husband. She looked at him, framed by the big window with the big grassy hill outside. His brown coat looking shiny in the fading sun, and she knew, even though he had changed since obedience school and gotten the neighbor dog pregnant, he was a good dog.

Before Debbie fought with Sheila, Debbie’s mother told her she was in the last phase. “Should be anytime, honey. Once you turn completely you’ll get to come on walks with us. Right, Richie?” her mother soothed her with this when the cramps got bad, or she was crying because Rich was outside playing. It was against policy to let a pet out that hadn’t changed all the way over. Debbie was lonely and jealous of all the dogs Rich met when her mother took him on walks.

She acted out and tore up a leather chair and shit on the floor. But her mother never got really mad. Sometimes she'd put Debbie in her room by herself without dinner, but usually she just gave Debbie lots of pats on the head and toys to chew.

Debbie's mother could have won a prize for best pet owner. Most residents at Love Lawns hired a groomer to come in and wash and massage their new pets, but her mother did it herself, spending hours soothing their skin with ointment and massaging their aching muscles and joints as they changed shape. She knitted special blue and pink placemats that went under their eating dishes one said, "Richie's Recipe" and the other, "Debbie's Dish." She even cleaned up their messes around the house.

"Ok, everybody," her mother chirped from the kitchen, scooping something wet into porcelain dishes and setting them down on the floor. "It's time for Debbie's Birthday dinner. Richie? Debbie? Come."

Without thinking, Debbie barked. Her first real one. A high pitched happy sounding bark. She felt hungry. Hungrier than she'd ever been. Rich hopped up from his spot by the window and scampered into the kitchen. Debbie rolled off the couch, her feet and hands clicking as she walked to the kitchen. Rich wagged his butt, where she saw a little tail was growing. Debbie bent her head over her

bowl. Her mother patted her head and promised to take them out together the next day. Debbie looked over the edge of her dish and saw her mother's ankles poking out of her shoes. Two round bones.

## Harry and Pat

Pat put the glass down in front of Harry and watched as some of the tea spilled out onto the placemat. Harry took his napkin from his lap and dabbed at it like a wound.

"Whoops," he mumbled. Pat clenched her jaw. He picked up and set down bowls, serving himself, never looking up. Harry got his plate just how he liked it. He picked up the ice tea and took a long draw. The beads of water on the outside of the glass seemed to soak into his hand. It reminded her of the sweat that collected under the edge of his glasses and made her think that if Harry were a place, he'd be a desert. The water disappeared into his furry chin. She caught the hint of his smell, lamb. Then she thought about his ass.

Pat did not feel disgust or jealousy. Lately she'd taken to speculation. The hairy bulk of his butt and the way their son in-law might or might not touch it. David, all 31 years of him. Her anger about the sex between them had mutated into kind of a hobby. Thinking about them together had even made her horny, once or twice.

She dropped her elbows from the armrests and served herself. It was their custom not to serve each other. They'd agreed that it was too

much trouble to try and do the portions. Pat served herself second because she didn't want Harry hurrying her.

With her plate done, she prayed.

Harry stopped eating and looked at her. Whenever she closed her eyes at the table he liked to watch her. He thought she was praying, but he never really could tell. Her graying hair was shiny and her eyelids trembled a bit. For the most part she was very still except for her breasts that spread out over her belly and moved just barely toward and away from each other as she breathed. He was looking at her when he put a piece of bread in his mouth and started to chew it.

Pat opened her eyes and Harry looked away. They sat in silence for a few moments, Harry eating and staring down at his plate knowing he was in trouble for looking at her. Pat was deciding whether or not she had the energy to say anything when Emily's car drove up to the house. Harry stood up, nearly knocking over the tea.

"Dammit, Harry."

She left the spill and followed him to the front door. Their daughter scrambled out of the car crying and ran toward them.

Up the sidewalk she came, the marigolds on either side like the round orange lights on the little runway: Emily the jet plane with her arms stretched out in the air.



She was choking on the words, but as she got closer to Pat's embrace Harry started to make sense of them. He'd been preparing to look on as Pat comforted Emily like she had so many times before, and was simply noticing that his daughter looked a little older, and was only wearing one shoe. Married life hadn't been easy for her. When he made out what she was saying he locked his eyes at the sky and put his hand inside his cardigan sweater and clutched his heart.

"David's having an affair. . . With a maaaaannnn," she wailed and shook in Pat's soft arms, her head tucked perfectly under Pat's chins.

If she knew it was me, he thought, things would be different right now. She would have yelled at *me*, shrieked and clawed.

He tried to let out his breath slowly but inhaled with quick, short sips inflating him as he stood there, looking back down on his daughter and Pat like they were bombs. He closed his eyes and tried to calm down, but he choked somewhere in his chest and he couldn't believe he was feeling pain. Not pain for his daughter or for the horrible thing he had done to her and to his wife, but because David was having an affair with a man that wasn't him. Some young, muscular fag probably.

He squared his shoulders and took his hand out of his sweater and jammed it in his pocket. On the small porch, he was lost.

"I'm going inside," he said.

Pat and Emily ignored him and clung to one another.

The tea spill wasn't too bad. He wiped it up and sat down to eat. The meat on the plate, surrounded by gravy and peas, looked special, designed to make a circle inside of a circle, staring back at him like an eye. The meat, and then the plate, and then the placemat, and then the table, and the round ring of light coming down on them. Everything outside of the circle of light from the overhead seemed dark and scary. He kept his neck stiff so he wouldn't put his head down into his arms and cry. "Quit being faggy," he told himself.

Pat and Emily walked in and sat down at the table. He watched them pull their chairs close together. Pat holding Emily's hand. Their dinner was cold and ruined. He caught Pat's eye and noticed she'd noticed that he wasn't doing what he usually did when Emily came over upset at David, which was to get up and pace back and forth calling David a jerk or just going to another room. He watched Pat's mouth turn up a little. He tried to get up but his gut turned.

Harry listened to Pat purr to Emily.

"What happened, sweetie. Tell me what happened. Go ahead and let it out. . . OK?"

Emily took her hand out of Pat's and now held both hands to her face and sobbed into them in earnest. She talked, but many of the words were unintelligible, squishing in her tear-filled palms. As she whined on about what she could have done wrong to lose David, Harry wondered about himself. His clothes, his aging body and his refusal to leave Pat when David had said he wanted that. He rubbed his socked feet together under the table.

Since the first blow-job he got from David he'd started to read about gays. He was grateful that he'd never read anything that sounded exactly like him. He hadn't had "tendencies" when he was a child or even as a teenager, and he'd been happily married for a lot of years to a woman with big tits, and that meant something. She was soft and getting old with him.

It happened in the parking lot at the mall two summers before. He and David had gone to the car to wait for Emily and Pat while they shopped. They'd been waiting for a long time, maybe even an hour. It wasn't that he and Pat never did it, they did. What him and David did was something else that didn't seem related to him and Pat. David had asked him if he could lie down because he was getting tired. Harry'd never felt anything like it. At first he was a little surprised that David laid his head down on Harry's lap but he didn't say anything. And

when David's head worked its way between his legs and he started to kind of chew on Harry's crotch around the zipper part of his pants Harry didn't do anything then either. He didn't know what to do so he just sat and stared out the window and sometimes strained his eyes down through the bottom edge of his glasses to watch the back of David's black curly head burrowing under his belly, pumping up and down. Harry had carefully reached down and moved the seat back a notch so David wouldn't bump his head on the steering wheel. Harry bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood as he came. When it was over and David got up and slid over to his side of the front seat Harry didn't look at him right away. He just zipped his pants back up and was trying to get the seat to move forward when Emily and Pat opened the back door. Harry tasted blood and turned to see David staring at him, wiping off his mouth with his sleeve.

He tried to think of Emily and how what he had done was wrong. He took a big swill of tea. Emily was breathing in little huffs and her tears smeared her make-up. Her light brown hair looked greasy, and her dress was sort of twisted around her body like she'd been in a fight. She looked a little like the hooker from the movie he and Pat had watched the night before.

David had confided in him just the other day that he noticed Emily was wearing make-up and he'd speculated that she was trying to seem sexy to him, and he was feeling more guilty than ever about being homo. He hated it when David talked about Emily that way, especially when they were messing around.

"I don't want to know about that. Don't talk to me about Emily. I won't talk to you about Pat."

"I don't care if you talk about Pat," David had said.

The fact that he didn't care should have been a clue that David didn't really give a damn about him. He always thought David was kind of stupid or just a little slow but now he knew it wasn't that David was an airhead. It was that he just didn't care.

Emily's voice broke through her sobs more clearly, ". . . home from work because I forgot my other shoes and when I came in the living room David was with some guy."

He closed his eyes tightly and leaned back his head and let out a moan of sadness and envy.

Pat looked up at him. "Now, let's just all calm down," she said. "What happened? It's OK. Just talk it out."

He thought he heard a smile in her voice; he put his right hand over his forehead to massage his temples, and noticed how fat his arm

was, and how funny he must look in his sweater, how round. He put his arm back down.

"What'd he look like?" Harry asked.

"Oh, Dad. I don't know. Jeezus! He looked like a fucking fag, I don't know, what does a fag look like?!"

He couldn't answer. What does a fag look like? He felt outnumbered like he always did in his stupid house, with his wife and his crying daughter.

"At least they weren't having sex!"

Pat let out a sigh. No one spoke. He'd said it too loud, said it like he knew something about it. Emily shook her head and blew her nose.

"What!? What would you know?" Emily said. "What is this mom?"

Pat looked up at him. He saw she knew something. He stood up. Emily looked up at him too. But she wasn't middle-aged, she hadn't been married to him for 30 plus years, she wasn't psychic yet like middle-aged women get, she was an apprentice wife, and not even that anymore. Emily just looked at him like she had for so many years. He usually hated that look, and felt guilty for not spending enough time with her when she was small and never knowing how to say the right

things like Pat did, but this time he just lifted his eyebrows and shrugged.

"Shut the hell up, Dad. You don't know what you're talking about. Can you just leave now. Me and mom are trying to talk!" Her face collapsed, and the tears came again in raking heaps.

He tried to shake his head like he was tired of the conversation anyway, but it didn't come off and no one was looking. Before he turned around he looked down at Pat's graying head and tested it as an oracle. If she looks up at me on the count of three she knows I've been doing it with David, if she doesn't, then she doesn't. Whenever he tested Pat for an oracle, which he was prone to do when he couldn't make up his mind about something, he made sure he tuned everything out. He just watched Pat's straight hair with its black and gray strands, nodding up and down so slightly it could have been a twitch. One. . . two. . . thr . . . and there it was: her wife eyes turned up and him. Her eyebrows reaching for her forehead, it only took a glance and she condemned him for the slimy old fag that he was.

He turned around carefully. Their two bedroom-one-and-a-half-bath had become a labyrinth, and he shuffled out of the orb of light from the kitchen and down the hall into the darkness until he found the bedroom where he sat on the edge of the bed.

It could have been hours later. It was cold and dark when Pat opened the door to the bedroom. He remembered all the times he'd promised to install a better heating system and he cursed himself for ever letting her get cold.

Pat walked over and stood in front of Harry. Sitting there with his back curved, he looked like a bear whose head had been shaved and someone had dressed him up like a man.

All he could see of her was her feet, but he heard her laugh a little and he knew she had that expression on her face that always upset him so much, but he looked up anyway. Her pear-shaped body and her dark eyes reflected the streetlight outside. She was so light on her feet. She should have been a spy, he thought.

"Why aren't you in bed?"

Looking at his face as he stared at her, she imagined, as she had so many times before, what he must look like with David's curly hair between his legs and his pants around his ankles.

"I feel like I can't move."

She walked over to her dresser and took something out from the back of the drawer. From the light shining in the window he could see what she was holding. It was the little orange butt-plug that David had given him for his 59th birthday. He'd lost it in the boat last time they'd



gone fishing. He thought it had fallen in the water. He'd been mad at himself for being so careless with his gift and blamed his age.

"I don't care. I've known for at least a year now. You think I don't know when my husband's off with someone else?"

He looked back down at his lap. He'd have to just take it. Whatever she was going to say, he vowed not to defend himself. "I love you Pat."

"I know." She walked back over to her dresser and put the butt plug away. "I love you too."

He hadn't moved in hours, his feet were numb, and he felt the pain in his back. As much as he loved Pat he couldn't help being sad at losing David. "I hate myself for it. I swear I'm not a homosexual Pat. Oh God, I can't believe I'm saying this."

"I'm going to go brush my teeth. And you're going to get in bed. You have to work tomorrow. We'll talk about it later. Emily's in her room."

"Pat, please come back."

She stopped at the door. He went to her. The two of them standing nearly filled the tiny room. He held out his arms and wrapped them around her. At first she didn't move to hug him back, but after a moment she gently grabbed some of the sweater, she smelled the lamb

smell on his shirt and felt his beard touch the top of her head. He felt her mumble something into his chest, something he couldn't quite make out. He thought she might be crying, and hoped she wasn't saying something about leaving. "I promise I'm not gay, Pat, I promise."

## Lonely Monkey

I'm a monkey. Everyone in my monkey tribe has shunned me for chewing my fleas sideways. The frontal bite is the way they all do it. It's the way I was taught to do it same as everyone. But one night, while dangling from a million feet up in a tree, I turned my neck in a certain way and I filled my teeth with twenty fleas in one bite, so much more than the usual one or two.

I wanted to show everyone, even though my best friend Doogga Monkey told me not to. He warned me to keep it to myself and he said it would be even better if I just never did it again.

"But this is it," I told him. "This is why I was born."

When I showed everyone they made that loud screaming sound and Big Monkey came over and yelled at me. He kicked me out of the tribe. He kicked me all the way out of their part of the jungle.

Now I live on the outskirts of everything familiar, in a patch of jungle that monkeys aren't meant to go. On windy days I can smell my old family. I can smell my past life.

At first I chewed my fleas only once or twice a day; my new technique was so efficient it left me with hours and hours of free time to do other things. I built an amazing banana dream machine. I told

monkey stories to all the other animals. They seemed interested. Some of the stories were good. But after awhile my solo paradise went sour. The stories started being about sad things all the time and no one wanted to hear them any more. I used the dream machine so much I broke it and sometimes it would go on when I was awake. I started experimenting with other ways of chewing my fleas – I came up with even more and better ones but I got too many in my throat and almost choked. I couldn't breathe.

After what seemed like a really long time, I sent word of my promise to go back to the old ways. They sent Doogga to the edge of the part where I live to tell me to forget it. "That's what being kicked out means. I means you *never* get to come back," he said. He was sad when he said it and I was too. I cried for a long time.

Many days after that I was lying on a big thick branch up in the jungle. My legs and arms were dangling down under me, ny flealess body feeling the chill of exile. I was thinking about death. I decided to let myself fall. It went against everything in my monkey nature to do it, but I was determined to die. To fall and not grab some branch with part of me.

I took a deep breath, and just as I started to roll over – just at that precise second when my fur was turning over the branch and into

the green abyss, a big huge monkey hand nudged me back over. At first I thought that my monkey nature made me turn over. That I wouldn't be able to fall even though I wanted to because of what is inside all monkeys, even me, even though I got kicked out of my tribe. But that was not the case. Because I tried to roll over again and the same thing happened, and again, and the same thing. It was a big fat monkey finger pushing me back onto the branch. The fourth or fifth time I tried to fall I opened my eyes really fast and I saw it. And to me, the loneliest monkey in the whole jungle, it was the thing that saved my life. I was staring right into the face of the nicest looking monkey I ever saw. Huge eyes, big as clouds, and just that one finger pushing me back on my back like he'd do it forever. And he nodded to me, like he knew I knew. We knew together. That's all it took. I saw him and I stopped trying to fall. He looked at me for a second more and then he left.

I started making up things again. I made up a thing for the snake that hangs out on this tree sometimes, it's a bed with a special snake ladder so he doesn't have to stress out getting back in bed after he eats something big. I chew my fleas sideways when I need to. I dream of the Monkey Visit sometimes. I remember that I know and someone else out there knows too.

## The Russians

The train that stops inside of me to is an old Russian one with grease and coal smoke. Army green with a red stripe down the middle. The workers on it are men just days from retirement that never got anything from Communism but this job on the train, which kept them from the cold streets of Leningrad but far away from home. Their wives are still lonely and they still have pain in their mouths from bad teeth. When the train stops, and it never stops easy, they trip the passengers, call the fat women names, and play grabass with the old men. Fuck 'em. What difference does it make? They laugh and nod from Boris to Vladimir.

There is no schedule, exactly. The passengers never ask when or where they are, but they're always in a hurry. Each station is dark except for a row of bulbs by the stairs somewhere. There is no outside of the station. There are some stairs that the passengers go down after they get off, but the train is always taking off as soon as they exit, and I have to go with the train.

The tracks run from somewhere right around the softest part of my ears to the backs of my knees, and right in the middle of each eye. The tracks aren't bound by technicality or machine, they just run, all

through me. The whole thing, tracks and train, were built a long time ago, in my mother, and in her mother, and on and on.

When it runs I hold on and try to remember the spring or something. Flowers, moons, pretty nature. But I have a stepson and so the train runs too often to put the flowers in my heart. Sometimes instead of running it just stays stopped or, if I feel guilty about the train starting up for my stepson, I try to stop it. But it doesn't work like that. It fuels it somehow. Just trying, just thinking that I want to stop the big iron bulk of it brings out the conductor and he's the real burn-out. He's a red-faced skinny man of about 35, he's drunk but he's trying to act like he's not, this means he never lets me finish what I have to say and what he says makes no sense, but he yells it and rolls his eyes if I say anything. He's always holding hands with a little girl and she looks tired, like a little girl only looks if something bad happened. I try not to look at her when the conductor and me are fighting because she just distracts me and I know that's why she's there.

There he was anyway, even though it would be better if he wasn't: my stepson, mocking me by just being alive, all twelve years of him. He's never doing anything remarkable when the train starts moving. He's just feeding himself by leaving food and dishes at the table like he's got a maid. If he's not eating, he moves as if there were a basketball game

going on around him. He likes to pretend he's playing basketball. Someday he hopes to make it to the NBA and to do that he must practice, practice, practice.

His pudgy hands reach up with an imaginary ball, and his wrist relaxes toward the ceiling, into the empty space. He doesn't wait for the ball to make it into the hoop because all those guys that play basketball with him in his mind are coming at him. Offense, defense, the coach must be yelling. When the ball goes up, he turns to block someone else who is trying to shoot. There are hundreds of balls and millions of players charging him. Since he knows he will win and be the NBA player of the year because of all the perfect moves he made, he's not really looking at his opponent, he's trying to look good for all the sports cameras, and the audience that roars when he makes a point. I know this like I can see into his mind. This sports dance my stepson does brings out the train and I have to stop myself from telling him he will always be short, that his parents are short.

Tuesday he was practicing, I could tell it was a tense game, the balls and the teammates sweating like mad - he had to stop to look at his hair in the mirror a couple times so there must have been a lot of media. I was doing something - reading something important about something important and I didn't want the game around me. Basketball disgusts



me. It is a shameful disgust. Basketball and a twelve year old pretending to play it are some of the most innocent things in the world I am told, but I hate it. I am not proud of this. He took another shot, a long shot, and racing from my ear with sure climax came the big iron bulk, conductor's blood-shot familiar eyes, and the little girl.

"Can you stop that please?" I say. I sound like I wish I were a good person but I know I'm not. He doesn't seem to hear me. He's left, he's right, there's no ball. The points are all his.

He mumbles something I can't hear.

Time stretches, tracks burn, it seems to be stopping in my heart and the passengers are tripping off to exit, tickets gripped tightly, running out as fast as they can before the train starts up again and the wind from the train body sucks them under. Whispering in the back of my mind is my voice, my coping voice that reminds me that it is really not a big deal, none of it. It's saying to me, "he's just a kid, see how much he likes what he's doing? Just leave him alone."

"Uh, Yeah, I said, can you stop doing that here? I'm trying to read."

I bite my upper lip and think about what prayer might be. Dear God, please help me be a better woman, women like kids, women want kids to play basketball.

The shot is taken.

My eyes follow that nothing ball up to the ceiling and I hope he missed. But before he can get it passed to him again or see if he's made the shot, he's dribbling anyway and going from foot to foot. I can't help it, I think he looks stupid. A result of bad breeding on my part.

"C'mon, just go outside or just quit for a while."

"Whatever."

He looks at me then, all slow mo, neck turn, through me like I'm a girl he called ugly at school that day, and he's not sorry. For a second I think I'll get him. I'll catch him and end basketball once and for all. With a slap and a butter knife to the seams of the round orange demon he holds in his hands. But he looks away from me and the game and all the cameras and walks out of the room, leaving me alone with my train and the Russians.