Spring 5-2008

About Love

Kerri Ann Quinn
University of Southern Mississippi

The University of Southern Mississippi

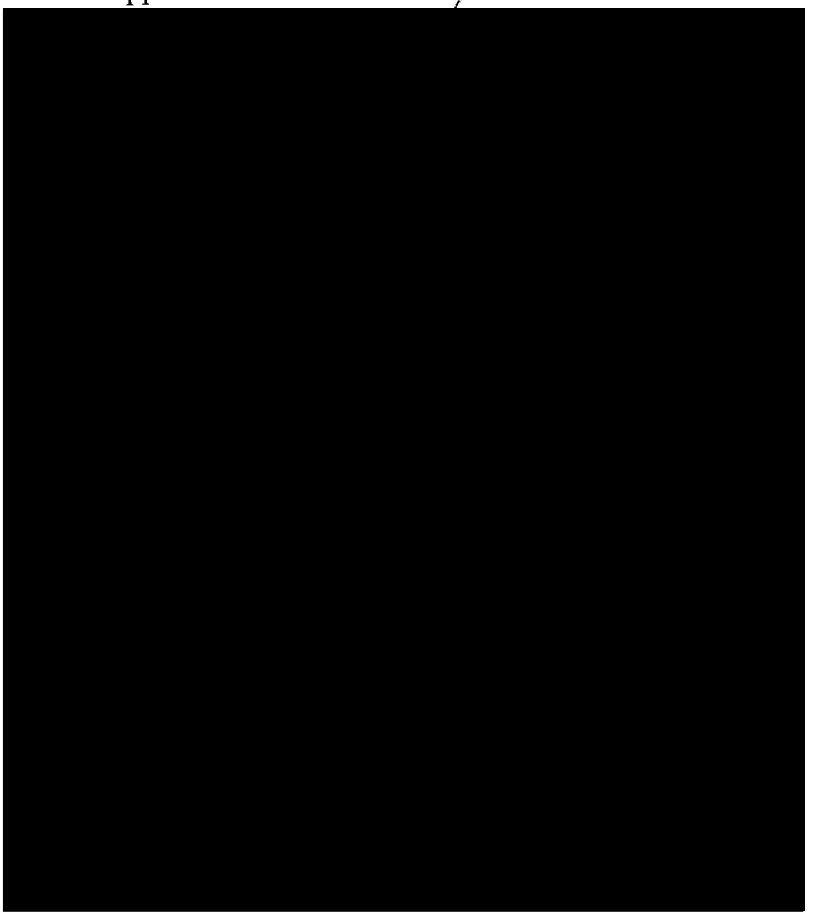
ABOUT LOVE

by

Kerri Ann Quinn

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:



May 2008

The University of Southern Mississippi

ABOUT LOVE

by

Kerri Ann Quinn

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2008

ABSTRACT

ABOUT LOVE

by Kerri Ann Quinn

MAY 2008

About Love is a novella and a collection of short stories written at the University of Southern Mississippi. It is accompanied by a critical preface.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer would like to thank the dissertation director, Steven Barthelme, and the other committee members, Frederick Barthelme, Dr. Angela Ball, Dr. Kenneth Watson and Julia Johnson. I would especially like to thank Steven Barthelme for his patience, guidance and encouragement throughout the duration of this project.

A special thanks goes to Rie Fortenberry for her help and friendship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Before coming to USM, I spent years talking about being a fiction writer. Though I published a travel guide book, and had opportunities to write nonfiction for a small newspaper and local arts and entertainment magazine where I lived in Arizona, this was not the type of writing I wanted to spend my life doing. Still, even when I had decided to return to school to pursue a Master's Degree, I chose to study Applied Linguistics instead of Creative Writing. I did everything I could to avoid creative writing. It was easier to dream about it than to actually do it. During the last year of my masters, I finagled my way into a graduate creative nonfiction workshop. On the first day of class, I took copious notes as I sat and listened to the professor and the students talk about writing. I had no idea what they were saying, but I knew I wanted to be a part of this world. It was during this class I realized I had found a community to which I wanted to belong.

On the last day of the semester, the professor approached me after class and said some people are supposed to be writers, and shook my hand. I was not sure how to respond to this, and I told her I had a job interview in Madrid scheduled for after graduation. She said if things did not work out that I should take her graduate fiction workshop the following fall. So I flew to Madrid and I was torn. I knew if I were to get the job that my writing would fall by the wayside. Again. I knew if I did not make the effort at that point in my life then I would never do it. I successfully self-sabotaged the interview, spent three great weeks in Spain; and when I returned home, I emailed my professor and asked her if I could take her class.

I spent the year between my masters and PhD work as an adjunct English and

Spanish instructor at a community college, taking workshop, and applying for PhD programs in creative Writing. When I received my acceptance letter from USM, I was shocked. I thought there had been some mistake, but did not call and tell anyone, nor did I waste a lot time wondering as I made my plans to move my husband and dog to Hattiesburg. At that time, I thought I understood what it meant to be a writer and how to write a story.

It was the fall of 2005, and I submitted my first story for workshop. A few days before, I asked my husband to read it, and he told me he loved it. That was a mistake. I walked into class under the impression I had written a good story. To my surprise, I was informed by my professor and peers the story was dull, trite, and that it had the potential to be an after school special. I wanted to die. After class, I spent the evening wondering how I could have been so naïve. I was afraid and felt like a fraud. I had changed my life and my husband's to come here and had no idea what I was doing.

The next day I met with my professor. He said I needed to work harder if I wanted to be in this program. As we stood in the hall outside his office, I told him I would not be deterred. I said it and meant it. It is difficult to admit he did not seem convinced but at that moment, I knew I would do what I had to do to improve my writing. I wanted to take the steps to do so, though when I walked away I had no idea what I needed to do next. For the next few weeks, I spent hours upon hours in the library and at home reading, but every time I sat down to write, I was afraid and unable to start anything substantive. I filled five legal pads with nonsense. I started endless files with ideas I eventually found trite or sentimental.

Coincidentally at that time, I received an email from a former literature professor at Northern Arizona University asking me how I was faring. I had taken a survey course on contemporary women writers with him while pursing my undergraduate degree. In his class, for the first time I had read Flannery O'Connor and Lorrie Moore's short story collection *Self-Help*. I went to my bookshelf, found Moore's book, sat on my floor, dog curled at my feet, and read every story in the collection out loud. I liked Moore's voice. I found her engaging and real, and especially liked how she used second person narration. Reading this book showed me that I could experiment, and that was exactly what I needed to do. I needed to break away from what I knew. After I read her story "How to be the Other Woman," out loud for the third time, I sat at my computer and wrote "How to Leave," a story about a woman who realizes her relationship with her husband is over. I wrote twenty pages in one sitting. For the first time in ages, I saw characters moving around in a world to which they belonged. I understood, liked and cared about them. I kept writing because I wanted to learn more about this moment in their lives.

While writing this story was liberating, it was also difficult. At this time, I was coming to a realization that my own marriage was over. Though I had the good fortune to publish this story, I have received varied responses from those close to me: "This must have been easy to write" or "This is you, isn't it?' I argue that this is not my story, but that the story works because I understood my narrator's loneliness and sadness. Flannery O'Connor says, "Art is the basis of truth [...]" (65). This story is about the narrator's truth. I worked to create her world, a world different than mine, a place where she struggles with her decision to move on, as she comes to terms with what she wants.

As a writer, I appreciate Moore's humor. Her stories are funny and authentic. I have often been told that I need to lighten up, and to add some humor to mine because my stories are too serious. What I have learned from Moore is that I too can strike a balance between the humorous and the meaningful, between humor and emotion. Any emotionally intense situation in life has a laugh in it somewhere, somehow. Now when I write, I ask myself questions: where is the funny moment? Shouldn't we laugh here? Where is the emotion, and what do I need to ground my piece in a realistic world? As a rule, I have been trying to incorporate humor in every scene. And the more I do this, the more natural it becomes to let my characters enjoy life and to see the irony in a moment. I know I need to incorporate more wit and humor but for right now it seems like a good place to start.

When I began my second year at the Center for Writers, I continued to struggle with my writing. Instead of writing fiction, I was writing stories about my life, my childhood. It wasn't until I had a piece workshopped with guest writer Amy Hempel that I figured out what I was doing. She said to me in class: "No one wants to read about a victim." I sat, listened, and knew she was right. After workshop, I spoke with my professor at the time about the story and he asked if it was autobiographical. I said that most of it was. He then asked me about one scene in particular and I told him that was fiction. He said, "This is what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to make things up." I left thinking about the stories I had written that semester, and honestly, I was tired of my own stories so why would anyone else want to read about them? Again, I went home and realized I could create anything I wanted, that I could put my characters in any situation imaginable. If I allowed it, they could say and do anything they wanted.

Since this conversation with my professor, my stories have become fiction. It was also at this time that I stopped censoring my writing and learned to trust the characters, as I let them loose on the page. I work consciously not to think about how my mother will react to a scene or how workshop will respond to a particular moment that may border on the sentimental, yet still has the potential to work. I am learning to trust my instincts because I want my characters to live. While there are fragments of who I am on the page, these characters are truly made up. They inhabit a world on the page that belongs to them.

After three years of taking workshop, I am amazed at how much more difficult the process becomes. I am sure my dissertation chair is tired of seeing my eyes well up when he meets with me after class to discuss my work. It is not that I cannot handle the feedback. The fact is the more I write the more personal it becomes. I have reached a stage in my career when people ask what I do, I tell them that I am a writer. I no longer say I teach Composition or World Literature. This may be one reason why my stories come off as too serious, too heavy. What I have learned most from this is I still have much to learn and since I have acknowledged and accepted this, I have grown more patient. This also means I should get a pet, and find a hobby. I am finally ready to trust the writing process, to trust myself, and my characters. It has taken me a while to accept where I am as a writer. And I do. I have faith that the story knows the shape it wants to take. I know I am doing my job when I let my characters speak and act upon their truest wants and desires on the page.

Although I have found workshop to be challenging, I also have found it to be an invaluable experience. As a student, what works best for me is to listen to the feedback

and comments the professor and other students in the class make about other stories. It is less threatening to hear that someone else's character is one-dimensional or that writing is familiar or uninteresting when the story is not mine. We all make the same mistakes, and it sinks in faster when I hear the comments directed at the person two seats down than when it is directed at me. In workshop the question what does the character want comes up almost every week. So when I write that is the question I continually ask myself. Another aspect that comes up each week is that we need to let our characters act and to say what they are thinking. We are constantly reminded that we want our characters to be active, not passive. We want them to take risks and to live a life about which the reader only wonders. In my work, I strive to write stories that are character-driven and lyrical in nature. As I write, cut, alter, and revise, reading every word of my work aloud, I discover who the characters are and what they want. My characters are fallible: they take chances. What bothers me most about contemporary fiction is that writers spend a lot time developing characters who are so disillusioned with life that they are unable to admire the world around them. Characters are supposed to have problems. Janet Burroway says, "Only trouble is interesting." In my writing, I have to remember trouble is necessary, but so is having an appreciation and a respect for the world.

Reading and writing are inseparable. Every time I begin a new story I read a passage or story from an anthology. I choose one, begin to read, and it reveals something relevant to what I am working on. When I turn a page or reread a favorite passage, I have hope, and hope keeps me writing. And with this hope I have faith that I will start a new story, or finish a scene or that if I listen closely and do not try to force my writing, my characters will reveal to me what they want, what they yearn for. Throughout the process,

I also find myself thumbing through Flannery O'Connor's *The Collected Stories* for inspiration. As an undergraduate, when I first read the stories before the class discussion, I was unimpressed by O'Connor's style and her characters. I did not want to read about freaks and the grotesque. However, that changed as my professor started his lecture and as a class, we began to discuss O'Connor's style and her people, and then I understood that she is just writing about folks. Her stories and novels, I discovered, are about the strangeness and perversity of life. I understood that she writes about human nature, and then I was hooked. I went home and read the entire collection.

After reading the introduction to *The Collected Stories* I compared my own writing habits with hers and realized that if I am serious about my craft, I have to work hard. What I have learned as a writer from O'Connor is that with each draft I write, I have to add another layer to the piece. These layers include gestures, movements, and images of the world the characters inhabit. I read her work, analyzing her sentences, especially when I am stuck with my own writing. O'Connor says, "The more you look at a sentence, the more you can learn from it" (69). In the first paragraph of "The River," the story I read the most often, the boy's sadness resonates: "The child stood glum and limp in the middle of the dark living room while his father pulled him into a plaid coat. His right arm was hung in the sleeve but the father buttoned the coat anyway and pushed him forward toward a pale spotted hand that stuck through the half-open door" (O'Connor 157). Not only do I have sympathy for the boy, but I am also introduced to the other two important characters in the story. I also understand the father's feelings about the boy as well as where the "pale-spotted hand" (the babysitter) fits into this relationship. This is all shown and not told. It is this passage that I go to as a writer when

I am tempted to take the easy way out, when I am ready to tell my reader what to think and how to read the scene, instead of using detail and description to render and evoke emotion. I have learned that the more I tell the less invested my reader is. When I do the work, which is the 'showing,' the reader takes away more from a particular passage or scene.

Furthermore, I read O'Connor's work to analyze the dialogue. I have a tendency to write dialogue that is, as I have been told, "Dragnety." When I read a story out loud, I hear the characters' voices, and how natural their words sound. The dialogue is not forced. Moreover, I am still surprised at how candidly O'Connor's characters communicate with one another. As an author she is removed from the scene and the characters are doing the work. As I write dialogue, I read it out loud. Often I will write a line of dialogue, read it and then say to myself there is no way my character *Chris* would say this. For example in O'Connor's "The River" the babysitter says to the father: "We're going to the river to the healing. This particular preacher don't get around this way often. I wouldn't have paid for that," she said, nodding at the painting, "I would have drew it myself" (157-158). This follows natural dialogue, a real conversation, and it moves the action forward. According to Janet Burroway, "Its [dialogue] purpose in fiction is never merely to convey information" (87). Similarly, O'Connor's dialogue firmly reminds me that dialogue must do more than one thing at a time. Furthermore, I pick up this book when I am writing to study the way O'Connor incorporates gestures and movements into the dialogue. The world keeps moving and the characters are kept alive because they are not only talking but moving around in their world.

At the heart of any good story or novel is the character who engages the reader. It is the character who has needs and desires and sets out to fulfill them though at the end it may be either, as John Gardner says, "a win, lose or draw." What I admire most about O'Connor is how she renders her characters. They are the grotesque, the anti-heroes. They do exactly what they want to do and do not care what the world thinks about them. O'Connor's characters live their lives, and then they live some more. They do things that bother the reader, that bother me, but the characters still have morals, even if they are corrupted. Even if they are the most evil characters in fiction, they have beliefs and convictions, and at the end of the day they abide by them.

What she does is to create characters with flaws and turns around and makes them admirable. Why is it at the end of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" that I believe that this man is credible because he is the only honest person in the story? She does this by bringing the reader into the moment. O'Connor does not create a distance between her readers and characters. She invites us into their uncomfortable, ugly world and asks that we spend time with them, not in a judgmental way, but in a way that allows us to experience the life of a wholly realized character. O'Connor says, "My first book was about freaks but from now on I'm going to write about folks" (*Three by Flannery O'Connor*, xv). There is not one character in any of her stories whom I cannot imagine or see.

What also endears O'Connor's characters to me is how each character from major to minor ones is imagined fully. O'Connor flawlessly incorporates direct and indirect methods of characterization and this combination makes her characters real. The details she includes in every passage, in every scene, to make the characters and the story real

are natural. She does not force the world she creates. It is obvious that she was an observer of people, gestures, and objects. Reading O'Connor has shown me that I need to be a more conscientious observer of the world around me. Now when I go to a coffee shop and wait in the line to order, I watch and observe how the woman behind me reaches out and touches her partner on the wrist as they discuss which muffin they want to share. I file away the gesture, the look on the woman's face, the way the man responds to her touch. I listen to their conversation and the way it digresses, listening for unspoken emotions or underlying tensions.

Reading O'Connor has helped me to write a better story. It reminds me that a piece of writing is never really finished, and that with each draft I write, I must add another layer to create a world that is true and authentic. So what I have realized as a writer is that I must be a voracious reader and generous observer of the world. I have learned that I can never really take a day off because each situation or experience is fodder. Each time I walk into a room, talk to a neighbor, or peel a tag off a piece of fruit I am writing and with this, I understand how I must observe the world through my characters' eyes. O Connor says, "One thing that is always with the writer—no matter how long he has written or how good he is—is the continuous process of learning to write" (83). For me the process has just begun. I accept where I am at and am excited to keep learning about what I do.

As I prepare to leave USM, I need to keep my head down and show up at the keyboard every day. Though I have the drive, I am nervous as I wonder what will happen next and how I will balance my two jobs: writing and teaching. While I know I have learned so much, there is still more to do. More reading. More analyzing. More writing.

When people ask me why I just don't sit down and knock out a novel or two, I laugh. What I want to say to them is that I have learned to see and interact with the world as a writer. The characters and their stories will come.

GIRL

The summer of 1968, my mother, Susan, was beautiful. And thin. She taped pictures of Twiggy to the refrigerator, dyed her hair strawberry blonde and ate Saltine crackers while sitting on the fire escape watching the river swallow the night sky. I sat next to her on the cool black metal, my younger sister, Jane sitting between my legs. I took pieces of my mother's smooth hair and pressed them against my face and inhaled. Back then she didn't talk much. Talking was my job. And so was taking care of Jane.

Most nights Susan went out with her boyfriend, Frank, who drove a convertible Cadillac Eldorado, and once bragged to us that he could chew up to five pieces of gum at a time. I wasn't impressed. Jane and I stayed up late, making popcorn and watching TV. I made up stories about fireflies, monster-sized rats residing in the garbage cans outside our apartment, and our father who had moved to Boston after Jane was born. I told her it was her fault that he had left, but she never believed me. Even though I was six when he left, his face had become a bunch of fuzzy lines, and I couldn't remember the sound of his voice.

One night we fell asleep and forgot about the popcorn on the stove. We woke to an apartment filled with smoke and two firemen banging on the front door, Susan and Frank wide-eyed and breathless behind them. She pushed her way in; her hair was long and loose around her shoulders and her white shorts stained green. When the firemen left, she grabbed me by the shoulders and said, "Margaret, grow up. You're thirteen."

It was around the time we moved to Fordham Road so we could be closer to Susan's job at the publishing house, the same summer I found a blue knit cap in an empty parking lot down the street from our apartment building on Fordham Road. I gave it to

Jane and she wore it everyday, even to bed. June slipped into July and we spent our days on the front stoop. Jane in that cap pulled down over her ears, and me wearing Susan's clothes when she wasn't home. We watched water from the fire hydrant cascade down on the bodies of shirtless kids, and waited for Susan to come home from work. We weren't allowed to play in the water. "It's dirty," she said. One night when I complained, she said, "Frank and I will take you to the country sometime. It's not so hot, and the grass is soft there, not like city grass."

Some afternoons Rubén, the guy with the tight curly hair who lived in the apartment below us, would wait on the stoop for her, too. He'd tell us stories about his family in Cuba and how they ate tortillas instead of bread, and sometimes he'd sing songs to us in Spanish.

"What are they about?" I asked one afternoon.

"Beauty and love," he said.

He stopped singing when he saw Susan walk up the block, sunglasses swinging in her hand, her hips twisting from side to side. He stood and bowed. She stepped by him and up the steps. "Rubén, leave me alone," she said. "Girls. Let's go." She never looked back, and I followed, trying to walk like she did. In the elevator she told me not to talk to men, especially black men. "He's from Cuba," I said. She told me it was the same thing.

The morning of July 4th I woke early. We were going to the parade downtown and the night before, Jane and I had painted American flags on the back of cardboard we tore from some of Susan's old high school notebooks. We left the flags on the kitchen table beneath the fan to dry. I walked into Susan's room, which was smaller than ours, her twin bed pushed against the wall. A woven tapestry of some lake in Italy hung from the

slender closet door; on the nightstand there was a stout reading lamp, draped with a sheer black scarf. Susan stood in front of the mirror, holding a red dress against her, a price tag hanging from its sleeve. She smoothed back her hair, swayed the bottom of the skirt, whispering quietly to herself.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To the country." She put the dress down on the bed and picked up a scarf, splashed with red and orange, from a pile of clothes and twisted it in her hands. I stood in the doorway, my fists pressed against the inside of my nightshirt. I wanted to hit her.

"What about the parade?" I said. "Why don't you ever take us with you?

In the bathroom down the hall, Jane flushed the toilet; she never shut the door. She turned the faucet on and ran the water briefly, pretending to wash her hands.

"Not this time," Susan said.

"Not any time," I said.

Jane came into the room, carrying Larry, her pet caterpillar. She kept it in a glass Coke bottle stuffed with leaves and broken sticks. She placed it on the floor, picked up the red dress and slipped it over her head. She stood, back to me, so I could fasten the zipper. The dress trailed down to the floor and covered her feet.

"Go to hell," I said to Susan, and crossed my arms.

She pressed the edge of her palm against her forehead and sat on the bed; Jane spun around. She had that dumb look on her face. Eyes wide open, lips parted. It was the same look she gave me when I told her not to talk to the old man who wore army fatigues and lived behind the used car lot across the street. I could hear our next door neighbors talking behind the thin walls that separated our apartments, and then water rushing

through the pipes. Susan, with her legs crossed, rubbed the tops of her feet, and quietly told me to go away.

I pushed Jane down, because I could, and ran into the kitchen, took the flags, opened the window and tossed them out. The white paint we had used for the stars was still wet and stained the tips of my fingers. Jane was behind me and screamed "Margaret!" as I watched the flags fall past white socks and men's cotton briefs hanging from clotheslines between our building and the next. She hit me square in the back. I caught my breath, tightened my fists. "Go," I said. She did and I was surprised. The center of my back ached. For a little kid she could hit hard.

Dresser drawers closed in the other room. Susan's voice was muffled as Jane cried. I dragged a kitchen chair to the window and opened a matchbox on the sill, and lit them one by one and threw them out the window.

"You're not supposed to play with matches," Jane said. She was holding Larry, her face red, and her cap tilted to one side, her bangs sweaty and plastered to her forehead. She looked ridiculous. My stomach hurt.

"Come say good-bye," Susan said. She stood in front of the mirror in the hallway, tying a scarf around her neck. This one had swirls of blue and yellow. Her fingers trembled; her lips were thin. "I'll be back before you go to bed," she said and opened the door. "I promise." My heart jumped, and I stood not moving, not wanting her to go. She kissed Jane on top of her crazy blue cap and me on top of my head. Susan smelled salty like the ocean. "Don't make popcorn," she said and closed the door softly behind her.

Jane dragged the stool from under the hall vanity and pushed it against the door. She climbed it, one leg at a time, and fastened the security chain.

"Let's go," I said. "Change your clothes."

"I'm not going with you."

"Then I'll leave you here."

"No," she said and sat on the floor.

I sat down next to her on the cool, scratched linoleum. "We'll go to the park," I said. "Get Larry." I put my hand on her back and pushed her up. We changed into our street clothes, our backs facing each other. Jane grabbed her sneakers and slipped them on. I placed my finger on the shoe lace as she made a loop, and told her about the time I took the bus downtown by myself. "I was only five," I said.

"You lie," she said.

"Maybe." I went into Susan's room, took a twenty dollar bill from her sock drawer, and slipped the apartment key hanging from a yellow string on a nail by the front door over my head.

We lived on the fourth floor. I didn't like to take the elevator; I liked to run down the stairs, but I had to stop on each landing and wait for Jane. My legs were long, thin and I was quick, the fastest on the block. On the third floor, I had to slow down. Mr. Detavio, our super, lived on this floor. If he caught me running in the building, he'd grab me by the shoulders and call me a "hooligan." Outside his apartment, white kitchen sinks were stacked neatly next to each other.

"Will you wait," Jane said as she caught up to me, her cap falling to one side. I fixed it and ran to the second floor but didn't stop. And Jane was right behind me. There weren't many times she could keep up, so we flew down the steps. And as we rounded the stairwell to the first floor, we almost knocked over Mrs. Rodgeski, carrying a bouquet

of white lilies wrapped in crunchy cellophane. "What is the commotion?" She backed up against the wall and placed her hand over her heart. We knew she was crazy. Susan said so. "I'm telling your mother," she yelled to the backs of our heads.

"She's not home," I yelled back and grabbed Jane's hand and pulled her along the faded carpet and burst through the double doors and out onto the street.

It was early and cool, the sun hidden behind the tall apartment buildings. We slipped between old women dragging metal shopping carts and a young couple pushing a baby carriage trimmed with black and white lace. We cruised past two boys wearing t-shirts with no sleeves, fingertips pushing a basketball between them. I let go of Jane's hand. "I'll meet you at the light." I ran, arms pumping, feet kicking up behind me, until I reached the corner of Fordham Road and Sedgwick Avenue, my breath caught in my throat. I bent over, my arms limp as Jane half-walked and half-ran to me. Her face was red and sweat trickled down the sides of her face. I took the bottom of my shirt and wiped her brow. She wrapped her hand around mine and held on tight. And for a moment, I was afraid she would slip away.

"Keep up," I said as we crossed the street. We had one block to go before we reached the park. I walked on the curb, one foot in front of the other, while she walked close to the buildings, running her hand along the open grooves in the chain link fence.

"You're stepping on the cracks," she said and stopped.

A man dressed in a white suit, hands waving over his head, crouched down low in front of her. "Little girl, are you a sinner?"

Jane squinted up at him and said: "No thank you."

I taught her to say that.

The man stepped back. "I didn't ask you for anything," he said and walked away, hands stuffed in his pockets.

"The cracks," she said to me.

"You think I wouldn't?" I dangled my foot dangerously close to the smooth line in the gritty concrete.

"You'd kill Mom," she said.

"Not today." I stepped over the crack. "Maybe some other day."

At the entrance to the park, there was a basketball court to the left with a group of boys running up and down the black pavement. In the center of the park was a kid's playground made of cement and filled with discarded toys and yelling kids. We didn't go there; we liked the shady spot that had rambling oak trees with bended elbows we could climb. We found a place under the tree near the duck pond. Jane pulled a spoon from her pocket and stabbed the edge of it into the ground, and I lay in the sun, arms spread out, and wondered what soft grass felt like.

"Girl," a voice above me said.

I opened my eyes. It was Rubén. I pulled myself up, and curled my legs to my chest. The top buttons of his shirt were open. From what I could see, he had no hair on his chest. I wondered if my father had a hairy chest. I laughed at Rubén and looked the other way. His friend stood above Jane and tossed his cigarette into the grass. "She's too young," he said.

"Litterbug," Jane said without looking up from her pile of dirt.

Boys on matching bicycles looped past us. At the basketball court, two guys started pushing and shoving each other. I took my pony tail and pulled it around to my mouth and chewed on the ends.

"Where is your beautiful mother?" he asked and stretched his legs out next to mine. He picked at the grass.

"Who cares?" I said.

"Man. She is jailbait," the friend said and walked away into the sun.

Rubén dropped a few blades of grass, one by one, on the tops of my thighs and stood up. "Do you know you look like her?" He pulled his hand through the back of my hair. I tilted my chin up, closed my eyes and wanted him to kiss me.

He walked backward, looking at me until he reached the park entrance and turned around. "I look like my father," I said and lay back carefully. I stayed that way so I wouldn't spill the grass off my thighs until I felt Jane's warm breath on my face.

"You didn't brush your teeth," I said and covered my nose with my hand.

"Breakfast," she said. "I'm hungry."

"All right." I took a few blades of the grass and put them into my pocket.

Fordham Road was full of people moving slowly, a group of musicians stood outside Alfonso's restaurant in red berets playing accordions. Street vendors sold fruits and vegetables and chickens caught in small cages that clucked at us as Jane and I ran our fingers across the metal. I held my breath, the air smelled like blood. We stopped and bought some oranges from a man with silver-rimmed glasses and eyes that didn't blink, and pushed our way to the bakery, Jane holding on to the elastic on my shorts.

"Don't talk to anyone," I said. "And yell if someone makes fun of your cap." She shook her head yes.

The bakery was quiet and warm. Mrs. Orlando behind the counter waved at me when I walked in. Two old men sat at a small marble table with slender black legs in the corner. "Where is your mother?" she asked.

"In bed. Sick."

"Again?" She pulled two pieces of wax paper from a small cardboard box. "The usual?"

"Sure," I said, pressed my hands against the glass display case as she selected two cookies that looked like checkerboards and placed them in a small white bag.

"And two onion bagels," I said. "Would you slice them, please?"

When we got to the building, I opened the door and Jane ran to the open elevator. "Race you," she said and slipped in before the steel doors closed. I took the stairs two at a time. As I reached our floor, the elevator doors were opening and I dove for the apartment door and slid chest down across the floor into the front door.

"You always win," she said.

We took our food to the fire escape. Rubén and his friend were sitting below us.

"What are you doing?" he asked and climbed up the stairs. He sat between me and Jane and she peeled pieces off the orange and gave them to him.

"You're babysitting today?" he asked.

"I don't see a baby," Jane said.

"We're hanging out," I said.

Two police cars streamed by, lights flashing. People on the street stopped, pointed and when they passed, they continued walking.

"What about your mother?"

"She's at the store."

"She must have a lot to buy."

"She likes to shop," I said.

A man across the street appeared in his window and dumped a glass of water on a basket of tall red flowers sitting on the sill. Rubén started to sing a song.

"What's it about?" I asked.

"Bugs," he said.

"I like bugs," Jane said.

Rubén opened the window, and crawled inside. I followed him and sat on the blue recliner by the stereo. Jane was in the window. She looked like a bird, legs bent, arms at her side, about to take off. Rubén held out his hand and I wrapped my fingers around his, they were sticky from the orange. He led me to the dining room table, took a bagel from the bag and went into the kitchen. I sat down, head spinning, and moved my finger through the crumbs on the tablecloth.

"Do you want butter?" Jane was behind him, her fingers in Rubén's belt loops.

He sat down across from me, and gave half the bagel to Jane. She broke off a piece and spread it across the top of a stick of butter. "Try it," she said, "it's good."

I got up and stood between Rubén's legs, his hand on the small of my back. On the edge of his nose was a black mark, and I tried to rub it off.

"It always there," he said. "I spent a lot of time as a kid trying to get it off with a washcloth."

"Me, too," I said and pointed to the freckle on the crease of my eyelid.

"You didn't try the butter," Jane said and ran her finger across the stick.

"You've convinced me." He reached over and wiped his finger across the butter.

I put my hands on Rubén's shoulders and closed my eyes again, hoping he wouldn't let go of me. And then he did. He dropped his hand from my back, and went into the living room and put on a record. Jane followed him asking him to dance with her, and I heard a woman's voice singing in Spanish, and though I couldn't understand her, I knew she was sad. Rubén came over to me, took my hand, and spun me around. He leaned me back into his arm, and the world went upside down. Jane on the ceiling and the green carpet the sky. He pulled my leg up and I curled it around his waist, his hand on my thigh. I leaned my head into his chest and he held me for a moment until he said, "Enough."

"Do it again," Jane said. She was sitting in the window.

"Yes," I said, so quietly that Rubén couldn't hear me.

"What are you doing?" His friend was standing behind Jane. "Let's go," he said.

The record skipped and the woman sang the same few words over and over. I rubbed the sides of my arms, and brushed a few strands of hair from my eyes. As Rubén climbed through the window, Jane asked him not to leave, and I watched not understanding why he left.

After college I married a teacher, and later a salesman and a dentist. With the fourth, a balding man named George, I lived in a small apartment in Madrid above a vegetarian restaurant that baked bread every morning except on Mondays. The marriage lasted until our second anniversary when he told me he deserved better and so did I. I agreed. He moved out, and gave me the apartment and the electric toothbrush. A few weeks later I received a letter from my mother, telling me about the aches in her fingers and how her aloe plants had grown, and I decided I needed to see her. I flew to New York and we sat in the kitchen, the linoleum scraped and torn around the bottom of the stove, drinking tea from my grandmother's china cups. And my mother was still beautiful, her hair long and gray, her eyebrows, thin and red, drawn on. I asked her if she knew what ever happened to Rubén, and she told me he was a blackjack dealer in Atlantic City and lived by the beach with his wife and two kids. She tapped her fingers against the gold rim of the cup, and I reached across the table and took her hand.

ESKIMOS

I walked Rubén from my bedroom to the front door. The apartment was dark, the hall narrow, and the linoleum creaked softly beneath our feet. It was the fifth time he had spent the night, and we had to be quiet. My daughters Margaret and Jane were sleeping in the other room. I stopped before we reached the door, wishing he could stay. He pressed me against the cool wall and spoke to me in Spanish.

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"I lose my way in your hair," Rubén said, and slid his arms around my waist.

"What kind of line is that?"

"It was in a poem I learned as a kid," he said. "Don't you like it?"

"I should say no," I said and pulled up his shirt and traced my finger around his navel. I arched my hips into his, his lips on mine. He tasted like ginger.

"Say something else in Spanish," I said.

"Loca Susan."

"I'm not crazy." I opened the door. "And you need to go." Somewhere in the building a door slammed, and the sound echoed up the stair well and rattled the hall window.

"What about that other guy?" he said.

"Frank? He likes to take the girls to the movies." I hit Rubén's arm with the edge of my robe belt. He placed his lips on the top of my head and whispered I was cruel.

He was right, nothing really mattered then. Him. Frank. My daughters. Or my ex husband who left when Jane was born, who only had time for his new family, not the old

one. I closed my eyes and leaned my body against his, and pulled the edge of his earlobe with my teeth.

"Go," I said and pushed him out the door.

He walked to the stairs and turned around. "That's it, isn't it?" he said and pushed his hands in his pockets and tapped the railing with the toe of his shoe.

"How do you know that?"

"I know," he said and walked down the stairs to his apartment on the floor below.

I closed the door and turned around. Margaret, my thirteen-year-old, was standing with her arms folded, her hair pulled up high in a pony tail. Her cotton nightgown was long and white and hung just below her knees. Her eyes, blue and gray, swallowed me whole.

"Did he spend the night?"

"Who?" I said, and walked into the living room and pulled up the window blinds. "Are you hungry?" She followed me into the kitchen, my feet sticking to the spilled strawberry jam on the floor. I opened a cabinet and stared at the clear containers filled with flour and sugar wishing she would leave.

"Did you have sex with him?" Her voice was loud and high-pitched. She sounded so wise and young at the same time, and I felt like the child.

"You'll wake Jane." I didn't feel like explaining to her eight-year-old sister what sex was.

"You have sex with Frank, too. Don't you?"

"Go away," I said and grabbed a napkin from the top of the refrigerator and wiped the bottom of my foot.

And she did. She left the room, crawled out onto the fire escape and shut the window. I sat on the couch and watched her as she stretched her nightgown over her legs, and put her head down on her knees. And I hated that I was jealous. Jealous of my beautiful daughter.

*

I left work early, and instead of taking the bus, I walked home behind a man wearing a blue blazer, sleeves pushed up around his elbows, and a thick striped tie. Every few feet, he got down on his knees, stopping traffic on the sidewalk. People yelled as they moved past him. A man carrying a guitar case hit him in the back, but the guy ignored them as he made the sign of the cross and prayed out loud. Each time he stopped, I stopped, too and prayed with him. Prayed to care about someone. Something. Prayed to love my kids again. After eight blocks and twenty *Our Fathers*, I left the man on the corner of University Avenue and 138th Street surrounded by school kids wearing plaid uniforms, screaming obscenities at one another.

When I turned the corner, the girls were down the block, sitting with Rubén in front of the apartment building. He was on the stoop singing, his voice warm and lulling, and Margaret sat next to him snapping her fingers in the air. Jane danced in the middle of the sidewalk, her arms stretched out, and her head tilted back so far that I thought she might fall. Margaret stood and swayed back and forth in front of him. Her shorts were thin and high-cut, her t-shirt barely covering her stomach. I couldn't remember when she started dressing this way, when she started to wear my clothes.

They hadn't seen me, so I ducked inside O'Connor's Grocery. The air was cold, shocking, and Frank was at the counter talking to Mr. O'Connor, whose gray hair stood up straight in short tufts around the crown of his head.

"What's wrong," Frank said when he saw me. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

I hadn't talked to him since the weekend when we took a ride in his Cadillac Eldorado, top down, to the shore. On the way home from the beach, the girls sat in the backseat fighting over who got to keep the plastic teeth they had won at an arcade, and Frank talked about marriage and wanting kids of his own.

"I don't understand why we keep the windows rolled up when the top is down," I said to the glass, ignoring what he had just said.

On the counter, there was a stack of morning newspapers with a photograph of the mayor of New York, arms stretched out, talking to a sea of people. I ran my hand across the page as Frank kissed my cheek. "I have a headache or something," I said and took a step back. I wanted to smack Margaret for being young. Innocent. Everything I wasn't. And at the same time, I wanted to put my arms around her, to hold her, but I didn't know how.

In the back of the store, the phone rang and Mr. O'Connor disappeared behind a long, red curtain to answer it. His voice was loud as he said, "Yes. Yes. Of course." I was sure he was talking to his wife.

"You should have called me. I would've picked you up in the police car," Frank said. "Sirens and lights. We could have made a real show of it." His eyes were blue and clear, eyelashes, long and dark, like a woman's. He was in uniform, a police officer just like my father.

"Just what the tax payers want to hear," I said. "Can I get a ginger ale, please?" I said to Mr. O'Connor as he came back into the room.

He walked to a cooler, painted with red and white swirls and grabbed a glass bottle. He put it and a pack of gum on the counter and said, "For your lovely daughters, they love strawberry."

We thanked him and Frank opened the door, and I wondered how I was going to get rid of him.

"I was hoping we could have dinner tonight, take the girls to McCormick's for chicken," he said and took my hand, and his was rough and dry. I dropped it and wrapped my arms around myself.

"Not tonight. I promised the girls I would paint their nails." I opened my purse and pulled out my sunglasses, and looked down the block at Rubén, who was talking to Jane.

The sun was strong, the air heavy. A fireman with suspenders hanging by his sides unscrewed the valve of the fire hydrant, and water shot up into the sky, and fell to the cement. The water rained down on the sidewalk in clear, wide sheets and splashed the front of my shins. My white skirt stopped at the top of my knees, but I wished it was shorter. Margaret saw us walking towards them and looked away.

"I could come over and paint yours," Frank said and laughed. It was more of a chuckle and his left eye closed and his right eyelid flickered. It used to bother me that he did this, until I met his mother who did the same thing. It was genetic, he couldn't help it.

"Mom," Jane said. She ran to me and jammed her sneaker into my toes. I grabbed her by the shoulders, dropped my purse and shook her once. Hard. Hard enough to make her cry.

"Susan," Frank said and put his hand on my arm.

I pulled Jane to me and whispered I was sorry into her hair. It smelled like coconut.

Mrs. Rodgeski, my neighbor, stopped to say hello to Frank, and to invite him for tea. He had gone to school with her eldest son. She never invited me because once she told me that my daughters ran through the building like animals, and I told her to go to hell. A city bus pulled to the curb and stopped. The driver hopped off, touched his toes as a line of waiting passengers stared at him. I wanted to get on with them and take the bus to Fiji.

"La mamá," Rubén said and handed my purse to me.

Frank stretched out his hand and introduced himself to Rubén. They talked about how the city was wasting water, that the park should have a community pool. Margaret watched the scene, shaking her head. "Come soon," Mrs. Rodgeski said to Frank, avoiding me.

"Nice to meet you," Frank said to Rubén and turned to me. "My shift starts in an hour, I'll walk you upstairs."

"Or Rubén could," Margaret said.

Rubén leaned against the side of the stoop, his legs crossed at the ankles, and smiled.

"We're fine," I said to Margaret. "I'll call you later," I told Frank.

He squeezed my hand and kissed my fingers. Jane yelled good-bye to him as he walked up the street.

"Let's go," I said to Margaret.

"Will you call me later?" Rubén said and laughed.

"Much later."

"You're the boss."

I opened the door and Jane ran in the building, carrying a Coke bottle stuffed with dried brown leaves and a long thin twig. Inside was Larry, the caterpillar that we had found in the park. I placed my hand on the back of Margaret's neck and moved her in front of me. Her hair was soft and damp with sweat, and a piece of gum was stuck to the ends.

"There's gum in your hair," I said and stopped in the foyer. We stood, me behind her, next to the table covered with a lace tablecloth that reminded me of summer afternoons spent at my grandmother's drinking hot tea with lots of sugar. I didn't know what else to say to Margaret.

"It's Jane's." She reached for the piece and rubbed it between her fingers. "Some god damn peanut butter will get it out."

"Don't swear," I said and pulled at the ends of her hair. "You could rub ice on it. That used to work for me."

At the end of the hall, Mr. Detavio, the super, was sweeping the stairs and talking to Jane as she held the elevator opened. The back of Margaret's shirt was smeared with dirt, and I pushed my hair back behind my ear and looked over my shoulder to see if Rubén was looking, and he was.

"Don't talk to black men," I said.

"You talk to him," Margaret said.

"Not anymore."

"Besides, he's from Cuba," she said.

"It's the same thing." I sounded like my mother, who distrusted anyone with skin darker than hers. When I was kid, she warned me that Puerto Ricans and blacks broke into houses and stole china and the silverware. Neither of which we had.

As we walked toward them, Jane was telling Mr. Detavio how Larry liked to sleep all day. The edge of the broom made a scratching noise as Mr. Detavio swept the same stair over and over. He nodded as she spoke to him, never taking his eyes off of her.

"Your daughters throw food in the halls," he said and leaned the broom against the wall. "But I still love them."

I inhaled deeply. Why did the whole world have to complain to me about my kids? "Thanks for letting me know," I said. He patted my arm and walked down the hall muttering.

"Mom, we don't do that," Margaret said.

"I know," I said.

*

I unlocked the apartment door, pushed it open, the air inside humid and smelling like socks. I had to step on a trail of dirty clothes to turn on the air conditioner. For a brief moment, I wanted some help, and missed my ex husband.

"What's for dinner?" Margaret asked.

"Soup." I said as I walked to the bathroom. The tub faucet squeaked as I turned it on, and I dropped my skirt to the floor, kicked it under the sink and splashed cold water on my face.

"Again," she said as she stood in the doorway.

"No talking. Give me twenty minutes."

She shut the door and I got in the tub as it filled. The room was hot and steam covered the mirror that was smeared with toothpaste and lip prints from the girls when they were playing with my old tubes of lipstick. Jane came in, sat on the edge of the tub, and trailed her hand across the top of the water. "It's too warm," she said.

I whispered to her to be quiet and closed my eyes.

The door opened and closed and she was gone. The phone rang from afar and Margaret yelled, "It's for you.

"I'm in the tub," I whispered to the white-tiled wall.

She opened the bathroom door, her hand covering her eyes, the phone cord long and strained behind her. "It's Frank. I don't like him."

"Cover the phone," I said and sat up.

Jane was behind her. She had Larry in one hand and a stack of books in the other. "Can I come in?"

"Okay, but no words," I said to her. "I'll call him back," I told Margaret.

She left the door open and Jane put her things down and lay in the middle of the bathroom rug, flapping her arms like she was flying. Her eyes were open, staring at the light bulb hanging from a slim wire. I wondered how she could do that.

"Is it time?" she asked and leaned her face into mine. I opened my eyes and she waved her fingers, small and dirty, in my face.

I looked at her round face and shrugged my shoulders.

"To talk?"

"I could paint your nails tonight," I sighed. She looked more like her father than me, short and stocky, not like Margaret who was tall and sinewy. Stretching my leg, I rubbed the bottom of my foot up and down the wall.

"Blue," she said.

"Why blue?"

"It's my favorite color."

"Oh," I said. I didn't remember that. Sometimes I looked at my children and wondered who they belonged to.

"Can I get in," she asked. Before I could say no, she took off her clothes, climbed in and faced me, her feet on mine. She told me how she liked when Rubén sang to them and that they wanted to go under the fire hydrant and knew they weren't allowed.

"You two are disgusting," Margaret said from the doorway.

"We're just girls," Jane said. "Washcloth, please."

Standing on her tip toes, Margaret pulled one from the shelf above the toilet and dropped it into the tub.

"What kind of soup?" Margaret asked and sat on the edge of the tub. She gathered the long strands of hair that were stuck to the porcelain between her fingers.

"Whatever you want." I reached for her hand and squeezed it. I tried to remember what it was like to hold her as a baby, but I couldn't.

She held my hand for a moment, then bent down and rubbed the tip of her nose with mine, and told Jane to get out. She wrapped her in a towel, Jane's hair heavy with water. Jane leaned down and brushed her nose against mine. "Like Eskimos," she said before closing the door.

The sound of pots banging in the kitchen seemed far away. My skin wrinkled and the water cooled, and I drifted in and out of sleep.

*

"He's dead," Margaret said, standing over me.

"Who?"

"The god damn caterpillar." She lifted her hand, and showed me the bottle with Larry curled at the bottom.

"Don't swear."

"You do."

"Hand me a towel." I sat up, my eyes heavy.

"We have to get her another one." Margaret emptied the bottle on the rug, pulled Larry out from the pile of dried leaves and flushed him down the toilet.

"We'll take her to the park tomorrow," I said and stood up and wrapped the towel around me.

Margaret looked away. "No. Tonight."

"Not tonight."

"She'll cry," Margaret said. "A lot."

I found a flashlight in the hall closet in a box of maps and light bulbs marked *Christmas* in black marker, checked on Jane who was lying so close to the edge of the

bed that I thought she might roll off. I wanted to move her but knew it would wake her up, so I closed the door. The street was quiet, and empty except for a young couple walking arm in arm. I grabbed Margaret's hand as we made our way to the park, past McCormick's Bar where I spent Sunday afternoons as a kid with my father. He always wore a gray suit, and a long skinny tie, and I sat next to him at the bar drinking ruby red drinks with slices of oranges, and listened to him talk about how the neighborhood was going bad.

At the park entrance, two women walked by us, pushing shopping carts piled with clothes, and paper bags teeming with newspapers. "Be careful," the taller woman said to us.

"Thank you," I said.

"Do you know her?" asked Margaret.

"No. She's just friendly."

"Where are we going to find another Larry?" I said.

"I'll show you." She led me to a large oak tree with branches that hung low and brushed the ground.

We crawled around the tree, following the fan of the flashlight that stretched out in front of us. The grass was wet and the blades were soft and stuck to the palms of my hands.

"I don't see a goddamn thing," she said, sitting back on her heels in a pile of wrinkled brown leaves.

"Your words," I said as I crawled by her, my knees sliding through the slick grass and I wanted to blame her father for her swearing, but knew I couldn't. He had left before she started to talk. I knew I needed to give up swearing, like candy at Lent.

Moving around the tree, I stopped at each small pile of leaves as Margaret lay back in the grass and sang some song I couldn't remember the words to. I sat back in the grass, trying to remember if I had taught it to her or if my father had when the flashlight flickered and burned out.

"Shit," I said.

"Words," she said and made her way to me. "We'll come back early in the morning." She placed her head on my thigh, curled her legs into her chest. I rolled the flashlight in the grass with my hand and we sat for a while looking up at the night sky as she drew circles on my leg with her finger.

*

On our way home, we passed McCormick's and Frank was standing outside smoking a cigarette talking to a guy I didn't recognize.

"What are you two doing?" Frank said when he saw us. He sounded like my father.

"I don't know," I said.

"Looking for another Larry," Margaret said.

The guy moved close to Margaret. "Who's Larry?" He offered her a cigarette.

"She's thirteen," I said, grabbed her hand and pulled along with me.

"Wait," Frank said and ran to catch us. "He didn't know."

"Forget it," I said. "It's late, we need to get home."

"Let me come with you."

Margaret pulled away from me and walked to the corner. Frank leaned into me, his lips hard on my mouth. My stomach fell and for a moment I couldn't breathe.

"No," I said. "We have to go."

*

I stood watching Margaret and Jane sleep before I closed the door, and climbed down the fire escape to Rubén's apartment. The window was open, the blinds drawn and he was watching TV with his feet on the coffee table, a rolled up magazine in his hand. I knocked on the windowsill. "Can I borrow some flour?"

"Loca," he said and helped me through the window. He tried to pull me to him but I moved away.

"Sí," I said. "Where do you keep the flour?" I walked down the hallway poking my head into dark rooms. In the kitchen, I opened a cabinet door. He was behind me, my hips against the counter, his lips on the back of my neck.

"Let's go," he said and led me to the couch. He pushed me down, his teeth pulling at my bottom lip. I slid out from under him and held his arms down.

"Stay away from my daughter," I said.

"What about Frank?" He rolled on top of me, and pressed his mouth against mine. I held my lips closed.

"Open your mouth," he said.

*

I woke up, cold, and covered with a thin sheet, Rubén in the shower. I got dressed and walked out into the hallway, and heard the scrape of a broom against the stairs below.

I knew Mr. Detavio was sweeping, and I didn't know where to go. I didn't want to go back to my apartment, so I got in the elevator, and pressed "0" and went down to the basement.

The doors opened into the laundry room. The walls were painted black and there was a row of washing machines against the wall. Someone had hung a clothesline that crisscrossed the room. Cotton briefs and pairs of socks hung from it dripping water on the floor. I climbed on top of a washer and pulled my knees into my chest and rocked back and forth. The elevator dinged, the doors opened and Mrs. Rodgeski walked into the room carrying a basket of clothes. She had on a pale green housecoat and dropped the basket when she saw me.

"Susan, you scared me," she said and started to talk about how nice Frank was and how lucky I was to have found him. "You know he's a dependable man," she said. "If you play your cards right, he'll be a good father to those kids."

I slid off the washer and got down on my knees, hands folded, eyes closed, the concrete floor dusty.

She moved to the clothesline and removed a pair of socks and turned to me. "What are you doing?"

I thought about the man on the street, praying on every corner and wondered what he did wrong. The air conditioner hanging from the basement window wheezed and spit drops of cold water into a bucket on the floor. I stood up, walked to the elevator and pressed the round white button. The girls would be waking up soon.

BEAUTY

I followed Susan into the grocery store, her hair long and loose around her shoulders. We were supposed to be tranquilo, friends, who saw each other once in a while. But it had been over a week, and I was having a hard time keeping my mind off her. She was with her daughters and the younger one, Jane, was singing a song I had taught her, loud and off key. And Margaret, the older one, was between them. She walked like her mother, hips twisting, taking long, even strides in that thin skirt of hers.

"Where have you been?" I said to Susan.

Behind us, there was a soft clap of thunder and it began to rain on the rows of waxed apples. I watched the girls head down the canned meat, paper plate, and bread aisle, their arms in the air as they talked, the backs of their legs pink and peeling from the sun.

"Rubén," Susan said. "Is this is ripe? I can never tell." She handed me a lemon, the peel cool and smooth. "I told the girls I would bake them something, and you know I hate to bake." She laughed, ran her hand through her hair, and down the side of her neck.

"I'm a musician," I said and handed it back to her. "Fruit is not my thing. But if you need to borrow some flour, let me know." I lived in the apartment below her and at night, I sat on the fire escape, her living room window open, listening to her talk to her daughters about dirty socks and how they were tired of eating soup for dinner.

"The girls are on summer vacation," she said. "And I need sugar." She read from the back of an envelope she held in her hand.

I tugged a piece of hair that framed her face, couldn't help myself. She moved her hand across my stomach and told me to grab six lemons and that the girls didn't like Frank, the boyfriend. They had nicked named him Frank and Beans.

"I don't like him either," I said.

"You haven't even met him. Besides the girls like you better, they like it when you sing to them."

"Do I get to vote?" I looked over her shoulder. Margaret and Jane were walking towards us, rolls of paper towels and bags of potato chips in their arms. Margaret was laughing, her hair in her face, the lower buttons of her shirt unfastened. And I looked a little too long.

Susan turned around, following my gaze, and leaned her back into me. "We don't need three bags of chips," she said, but only I could hear her.

"So what do you need?" I asked her in Spanish, knowing she couldn't understand me, and I placed my hands on her hips, kissed the side of her neck. Her skin smelled like grapefruit.

"You have to translate for me." She took my hand and turned to face me. "What were you looking at?"

Margaret dropped a roll of paper towels, her shins scraped and red, and right above her ankle was one of those fake tattoos, a cup-shaped rose, so pretty and delicate.

"Just the scenery," I said, and kissed Susan once on each check and told her I had to go.

As I passed the girls, Jane jumped in front of me, placed her feet on top of mine, and Margaret was by my side. She came up to my shoulder, and reached for my hand, her fingers slim, fingernails painted blue, and I quickly let go and left without looking back.

*

The day was cloudy, hot, July in New York City, and I was late. I left the store and eased my way between traffic. Weekdays I took care of my abuelo while my mother worked the day shift at Mt. Sinai helping patients fill out forms, and listening to stories about missing appendages and who shot who below the waist.

On the corner of 138th Street, I ran into Marco. We'd been playing in bands for years, me the bass, and him the song writer, who wrote about Matilde, our old history teacher who was long, gangly, and had the sharpest black eyes ever.

"Get a cell phone or an answering machine," he said and grabbed my arm. "Do you remember that we have a gig tonight?"

"Of course," I said and looked up at him. He was a foot taller than me. "I'll be there at nine," I said and stepped into the crosswalk and almost got clipped by a cyclist, who yelled some obscenity as he flew past.

"Eight o'clock," Marco yelled to me, as I left him on the corner Fordham Road and Sedgwick Avenue, a couple of blocks from my mother's.

In front of her building, two kids were tap dancing, their heels pressed into crushed soda cans, tin scraping the cement sidewalk. Inside, the foyer was dark, quiet, and I climbed the stairs, two at a time, thinking about Margaret and that brown hair of hers, trailing down her back, just like Susan's. At the top of the stairs, there was my mother, with her cheap plastic nurse shoes on, tapping her foot, and my abuelo in the

doorway waiting for me, lean like a willow tree except for the round taut belly that protruded out and over his belt. He wore heavy wool pants that hung right above his ankles, and held a model airplane kit in his hand. He looked like a kid going to school instead of my seventy-five year old grandfather.

"I'm going to be late," my mother said, and punched me in the arm. She started doing that when I moved out. "Can you stay for dinner?" she asked as she walked to the elevator.

"Not tonight. I got a gig downtown," I said. "You should bring Abuelo and come see me."

"By the time you start," she said. "I'm already in bed." The elevator opened, and she stepped inside. "Come on Sunday. We'll eat early."

"I'll try," I said to her as the doors closed, and turned to Abuelo. "Old man, it's 98 and 98 outside. Why are you wearing those pants?" I took my shoes off by the door, my mother's fast and hard rule, and walked into the living room. The wall behind the couch was covered with photographs of relatives from Cuba I'd never met. They posed, no one smiled, their arms by their sides. No wonder they left.

"Nothing else fits," he said, and followed me into the kitchen. "It's your mother and her cooking." He sat down at the table, leaned back, and crossed his arms.

"You sound like an old woman," I said, but I knew he was right. Cheese and lard were my mother's favorite ingredients.

"I feel like your Abuela. She was always on a diet." He moved his chair closer to the table and opened the modeling kit. "One summer all she ate was hard-boiled eggs."

"I remember that," I said and grabbed a newspaper from a stack below the window, and spread the pages across the table. "What about the time she only drank lemon water?" I set the short, round bottles of paint, red, blue, and army green, in front of him

"For breakfast, lunch and dinner." He picked up an airplane wing from the box. "So were you with that woman I don't like?" He was squinting as he held the wing in his hands, elbows on the table, a heavy steel watch on his wrist. "Pass the glue," he said.

"You've never met her. How do you know if you like her or not?" I handed him the bottle and looked at his eyes. They were brown and small like mine.

There was this photograph of him my mother kept on the fake fireplace that we set up by the living room window about five Christmases ago. He was sitting under a tree with leaves bigger than him. His hair was long, his skin young, no brown spots on his forehead, or creases around the corners of his mouth. It was me in another life.

"Where are your glasses?" I asked.

"Who knows?" he said. "Your mother puts them somewhere and never tells me." He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a folded piece of paper and set it on the table. He liked to ask women in the neighborhood for their daughters' phone numbers. He said they were for me, but I knew better. The women invited him to stay for coffee while they folded laundry and watched telenovelas. "Your grandmother walked up to me at church and told me I should marry her," he said. "So I did. Things are that simple."

"It's not that easy." I picked up the paper, and slipped it into my shirt pocket. I didn't want to insult him. I never called any of the women, and I wanted to tell him about the girl from the bar last week, a soccer player from Iowa with the '67 powder blue

Mustang, who pulled me into her backseat. I asked her what she studied and she told me we didn't need to talk. As I was feeling around the floor for my pants, she asked me to go back to Iowa and plant corn with her. I didn't want him to think I was desperate.

"My show is on," he said and pointed at the radio on the counter behind me. "What's the name of that band of yours again?" he asked and picked up a thin paintbrush.

"Gravy," I said and reached over and turned the dial, searching for *Radio Rebelde* out of Havana. They played adult contemporary music, his favorite. And as he dipped the edge of the paintbrush into the bottle, he reminded me that next time I should bring him grapes, the purple, seedless kind.

*

Outside my apartment building, Margaret and Jane were sitting on the stoop, sketchbooks in their laps, surrounded by colored pencils and sticks of charcoal. I sat down next to Margaret, finger tips smeared gray.

"Please teach Jane a new song. I'm tired of *La Cucaracha*," she said and pulled at the bottom of her skirt. "Are you looking for Susan?"

"Since when did you start calling your mother by her first name?" I sounded like a father, and imagined what it felt like to be a dirty old man.

"I don't call her Susan to her face," she said.

"You do sometimes," Jane said as she eased her way between my knees, and put her hands on my shoulders. "Don't lie," she said to her.

"I just like to tell stories," Margaret said and held my gaze, her eyes blue and gray. "She's going out with Frank and Beans tonight, and I don't like him."

I had to look up at the sky where the clouds were long and stretched thin. Jane jumped off the stoop and started singing. She walked away from us, arms waving, making up her own words.

"I don't like him either, but I like that name." I took a pack of gum out of my pocket, and offered Margaret a piece.

"I'm not allowed to chew gum anymore because it gets in my hair," she said and took a piece, unwrapped it, and dropped the wrapper to the ground. "Remember the song you taught us last week? What was it called?" She pulled at a long strand of hair that lay on her shoulder, and wrapped it around her finger, just like Susan did. I watched Jane dodge an old woman pulling a shopping cart as she made her way back towards us.

"My grandfather taught it to me when I was kid," I said, my back against the stoop, legs crossed at the ankles. "I never knew the name of it. I just know it's about beauty and love."

"Come on," Jane said and grabbed Margaret's hand and pulled her up.

She dropped the sketchbook, the page full of smudged circles, and faces with large noses and no eyes. She kicked off her sandals, her toenails were blue and matched her fingers, and they danced around each other, spinning and laughing, holding hands until Margaret let go and took mine.

"Beauty," I said to Margaret, and her small hand slipped out of mine as Jane pulled her closer.

They stumbled and fell in slow motion onto the sidewalk, laughing so hard that they forgot about me, and I knew I couldn't be a father. I'd have to wrap my kids in pillows and never let them out of the house.

As Margaret stood, her skirt came up, and her panties were white, the elastic loose around the tops of her thighs. Jane laughed and told her she should wear shorts like her. "Be quiet," Margaret said.

I picked up the sketchbook, handed it to her, and walked into the building.

*

The gig ended late, and I didn't get home until three. I was so wired from playing that I couldn't sleep. Besides, the air in my apartment was still and thick, so I went out to the fire escape to breathe. The moon a sliver, hung low in the sky. And there was Susan on her fire escape, knees pulled in, a long skirt draped over them, that white one she wore the time we ate pizza and went to the movies at the dollar theater.

"Hey, loca," I said.

"Did you play tonight?" she asked. "Of course, it's Friday." She stood, her skirt dropped to the top of her feet. "Don't go anywhere. I have something for you." She went inside and came back with a small plate wrapped in aluminum foil. She climbed down the stairs, hand on the railing, her hair wet and heavy.

"Your cake?" I said and unwrapped it. "I guess you didn't need any flour."

"No," she said. "I bought my own." She broke off a piece and fed it to me. "I forgot a fork."

Below us on Fordham Road, a group of guys sat in a rusty old Dodge in front of the building, talking nonsense, girls walking by teasing them about their ride.

"It's good," I said and set the plate down on my lap and smiled at her.

"You lie," she said, stretched her legs out next to mine, and gathered her skirt under her thighs. "I know it's bad because the girls won't eat. It's been on the counter all week."

She took my hand, and across the way, a shirtless man leaned out his window, and yelled at the guys on the street to keep it down. He was always yelling about something. From her apartment, the TV was loud, and the girls were even louder. They were arguing, but I couldn't tell what about.

"They're still up?" I asked.

"Of course. It's summer and they go to bed late and wake up late. I wish they'd go to bed and sleep until September."

"I had an eight o'clock bedtime until I was twelve," I said. "And in the morning, I wasn't allowed to get out of bed until my mother said so." I laughed.

"I envy them, the way they run around, the way they fight and cry. They know what they want, what they need." She ran her nails, each one a different length, along the inside of my arm. "I was never that honest, and Margaret I don't know what to do with her. She changes everyday."

"If I had kids I'd keep them inside all the time," I said. "But I guess you have to trust her, trust the world." I felt like Susan was baiting me, and I didn't know what I was saying. I didn't trust myself.

She moved closer and traced her finger around my eyes, down my nose, over my lips. I wanted her to stay and to leave. I wanted her to be that girl, not some confused woman who didn't know what she needed.

From her apartment, the girls started yelling about who knocked over a glass of soda, their voices strained and tired. Susan stood up and leaned into the railing, and I got behind her, placed my chin on her shoulder. Her hair clung to the back of her shirt, and I wrapped my arm around her stomach, lifted her skirt, and placed my hand on her belly. Below us traffic passed by with windows rolled down, flashes of music filled the air and disappeared.

Upstairs, one of the girls turned the volume down and Margaret started to sing the cockroach song, her voice light and fluting. I placed my hands on Susan's hips and pulled her to me. "No," I said when she tried to turn around, and I pressed her hard against the railing so I wouldn't have to see her face.

*

After Abuelo's doctor's appointment, we went to the park. It took us an hour to get there because he refused to take the bus or the subway. He said they were dirty, and he didn't understand how people could sit so close together, that when he was growing up in Cuba he rode his bike everywhere. I liked to picture him riding through the city's winding streets and down dirt roads that led nowhere. I told him I would buy him a bike and he said I was crazy. I didn't disagree.

We sat on the bench eating ice cream bars that melted so quickly our fingers were covered with bits of chocolate and vanilla. It was like eating soup on a stick. Sweat dripped down our faces and I wished we lived in a cold place like Alaska or somewhere with penguins. Across the park, close to the basketball courts, Susan was walking with a guy, his arm around her, her head fit into the crook of his neck. I was sure it was Frank

and Beans. They stopped, and she looked over in our direction. I waved, and all she did was roll her neck like she was stretching and look the other way.

"These summers are getting hotter," Abuelo said.

"All the time."

"Who's that woman?" he asked.

"Someone I met," I said. "I don't know why you wear those wool pants."

"I already told you, it's your mother's cooking. I don't know why she likes it here so much. She and your Abuela. I never got used to it. The food. The buildings. I need trees and a big, open sky."

"And don't forget about the damn public transportation," I said, and we laughed. "But you came here and stayed, made a life for yourselves." I leaned over and drew boxes in the dirt with the sticks. "Are you ready? I have rehearsal this afternoon, and it's going take us at least an hour to get home."

Susan and Frank walked to the park exit. A black wrought iron gate separated the park from the street. I put my arm around Abuelo and helped him up. He took my hand and held it as we walked home on the shady side of the street.

It felt like forever, but we had nothing else to do.

*

A few days later, Marco came to the door. I was sitting on the couch, bass in hand, playing the tape of new songs he'd made for me.

"It's hot in here," he said. "You don't have an answering machine and your air conditioner doesn't work. What's up with you?"

"It broke about a month ago," I said. "But if you want, you can go ahead and buy me an early birthday present."

"Forget it," he said and walked to the window. "I have to buy the wife a present. Her birthday is tomorrow. Let's go outside, and maybe I can get a look at that woman you were telling me about."

He stepped outside onto the fire escape, and I followed him hoping that Susan wouldn't be out. I hadn't seen her since that day in the park, and went to the grocery more than I should have. I must have bought a case of lemons just to see if she would show up. It was like she had disappeared. That was something she was good at.

"So what's up with la mamá?" Marco asked, lit a cigarette, and tossed the match down to the street.

Before I could answer him, Margaret and Jane came outside. Jane was carrying a small brown paper bag. The shirtless guy across the way came to the window and dumped water on a basket of red flowers sitting on the sill.

"Are you babysitting today?" I asked Margaret.

"I don't see a baby," Jane said.

"Susan's shopping," said Margaret. "We're eating lunch."

I climbed the stairs and sat next to Margaret. She was wearing shorts and a halter top, and had another tattoo. This one was on her arm, it was a sun with droopy eyes and long eyelashes.

"Man, are you crazy?" Marco said as he came up the stairs. He leaned against the railing, shaking his head at me.

This was the second time in days someone called me crazy. He was right. I felt slightly out of control.

He took a drag of his cigarette and said, "I've got to call the wife. I'm supposed to meet her downtown. I'll be right back, so don't move." He turned and headed down the stairs.

"When will Susan be home?" I asked Margaret.

"I don't know," she said.

"I have this new dance I could teach you." I stood, not waiting for an answer, and she followed me through the window into their living room.

Margaret sat on the blue recliner and Jane crouched in the window. She looked like a bird, legs bent, arms by her side. I found an album in a stack by the stereo, one I had given Susan, and put it on the turntable. It was a slow song, a bolero, with a woman singing about cornfields and smoky bars. I led Margaret around the room, and she stepped on my feet, looking down the whole time. When the song was over, I leaned her back into my arm, her hair so long it brushed the floor.

"One more time?" she asked as I helped her up.

From the window, Jane clapped and said, "Again, please."

Then Marco was behind Jane, and all these eyes were on me, and the album started to skip. It was a cheap one I had bought from a guy on the street downtown. When I gave it to Susan she told me she loved the woman's voice, that she felt like she knew her.

"Let's go, man. Let's go," Marco said.

"Enough," I said. I had to get out of there. I spun Margaret around, my hand on her waist. I kissed the side of her neck, her skin smelled like Susan's.

I stood behind her waiting, but I wasn't sure for what. Maybe for Susan to come home. Maybe not. I walked to the window, and Jane said good-bye to me and hopped down. I crawled outside and turned around. The song was playing again, and the woman's voice was soft and low as she sang about her dreams. Jane put her arms around Margaret's waist, and they danced around the room, moving from left to right. Jane was so small, and Margaret so thin, delicate, just like her mother.

BREAKFAST

Late for Frank's grandmother's eightieth birthday party, we stood with my apartment door open, his hand cupping my elbow, and I didn't know what to do. Margaret, my thirteen year old, had locked herself in the bathroom, screaming she hated me. She wanted to call her father, to go see him, and I told her no. Jane, my youngest, who was eight, sat on a metal stool in the middle of the living room, chin in her hands, and said, "I don't care if I ever see him again." I walked over to her and kissed the top of her head. She started to cry.

"You're too old for that," I said, and caught my reflection in the mirror hanging above the couch. I pushed my hair behind my ear, walked to the door, tears in my eyes.

"Are they going to be okay?" Frank said as I closed the door behind us. We had been dating for a year, and he was always wanted to take care of me and my problems.

"They'll be okay." I leaned my head against the closed door, the wood cool, calming. Michael, my ex, and I had been divorced when Jane was born. One day he just disappeared; his mother was the one to tell me that he wanted a new life, with a new wife and kids, and I still didn't know if I would be okay, or why all of a sudden Margaret wanted so desperately to talk to him. I had taught myself not to think about him.

Frank and I walked a few blocks, the August night clear. The sky was full of faint stars and the flashing lights of planes passing over. He stopped in front of a hardware store window.

"I want to marry you," he said.

He said he would make a good father. I turned to face the window, the strap of my shoe had slipped under my heel, and I reached down to fix it. He leaned into me and kissed the side of my neck, and I thought of Rubén.

I checked my watch, the clasp kept opening. I took it off, and asked Frank to hold it. "We're going to be late."

In the glass, I watched a man walk toward us wearing a ruffled shirt, a black bow tie, a coffee mug in his hand. He stopped and yelled *Suckers* at us and kept going. Frank brushed his hand at him like he was brushing away a fly.

"That's all I get?" Frank said, put the watch into his pocket and stepped back. "Most people get excited about stuff like this." His voice sounded far away, and he walked ahead me, hands in his pocket, stepping over pieces of Monopoly money, red, green, and blue, spread out like a fan on the sidewalk.

I caught up to him and took his hand, the heels of my shoes clicking against the cement. "I'm trying to cut back on coffee," I said. "I think it makes me nervous. Did I tell you that?"

"Twice this week," he said. "Try green tea."

We walked past the Catholic church and the pizza place that sold slices for fifty cents where the air smelled like tomatoes and garlic. We were quiet, and the street was empty, except for the strained voices, and the occasional clatter of plates that came from open apartment windows. I wanted Frank to tell me to go to hell, to walk away, and then I wouldn't feel bad for not loving him, and for letting my kids grow up with just me and no father.

"I like things how they are," I said as we climbed the stairs to his mother's house.

"Of course you do," he said and opened the door.

Inside, the music was loud, kids ran from room to room, a small girl in a red dress and white stockings with a hole on her knee slipped and fell. Two boys with shirts untucked, faces flushed, helped her up and told her she would be fine. A crowd of cousins, I could never remember all their names, stood in the middle of the scratched white wooden floor, drinking wine from jelly glasses, arms entangled, legs kicking, dancing to a jig. The chandelier above them shook, the glass beads shimmering in the light.

Frank stopped to talk to his cousin Nick, with curly hair and a pale face, and I walked through the kitchen, smiled at his mother who stood by the stove stirring something. She looked just like Frank, stooped shoulders and small narrow eyes that sank into the folds of skin when she laughed. I walked out the back door, through the dark yard, and went home.

When I got there Margaret was on the couch, wearing one of my nightgowns, torn and old, and Jane was on the floor asleep. I lay next to Margaret, my head in my hand, and listened to neighborhood kids as they kicked a soda can up and down the sidewalk. I rubbed my fingers through her hair and told her I was sorry. I wished I was sitting next to Rubén, on his couch, listening to him play his music, but I knew I couldn't trust him with my heart or my daughter.

*

I was working for a publisher downtown. The office was loud, my phone rang incessantly, and I decided that I hated green tea. I went to the kitchen and poured a cup of

coffee and took it back to my desk. I wasn't good at quitting things. I reached for the phone and thought about calling Frank; instead I turned off the ringer.

Jennifer, my assistant, walked in my office and sat on the edge of my desk. Her long hair looked like nylon. Pretty gray eyes. "Turn your phone on," she said and crossed her legs and fanned herself with a manila folder. She was a runner, her legs strong and muscular. I coveted them. "The girls called the main number. They said there's no food in the house."

"Again?" I said and leaned back in my chair. On the wall behind Jennifer was a poster of two grandmothers wearing aprons, holding wooden spoons, eyebrows raised. "I went shopping last week."

"Well, they're growing," she said, "and they eat more. I told them to come here, that we had donuts." She stood and pressed her finger in the plant next to the window. "It needs to be watered."

"I don't want them to eat that crap," I said and poured the rest of the tea over the dry leaves, then reached for the phone. "They are probably almost here. We only live a subway stop away."

And I was right. I looked up and Margaret and Jane were coming down the hall, pushing each other with their shoulders, their voices loud and high as they talked over one another. They stumbled into the office, and Jane came over and sat on my lap.

"We don't have any food," Margaret said and threw herself into a maroon leather chair in the corner of the room. She never braced herself. She just fell, weightless, onto the couch, her bed, onto the blue chair by the living room window. I worried about her hitting her head.

"Good luck," Jennifer said and reminded me about a three o'clock meeting.

"Thanks," I said and turned to look out the window, the girls talking about wanting to go to swimming at the park pool. "This weekend," I said. "Are you sure we don't have any food?" I watched a man in the office across the alley. He stood in the window of a white-paneled building, hand on his hip, phone tucked between his shoulder and his ear, one finger tapping the glass. I thought I had seen him before on the subway.

"We have tuna and olives with those things in them." Jane took off the blue cap Margaret had found for her in a parking lot, and placed it on my desk. I washed it three times and soaked it in something Mrs. Rodgeski, my downstairs neighbor, had given me, but it still disgusted me. I didn't like to touch Jane when she wore it.

"The olives have anchovies," I said, and turned on the ringer. "I think we should go to lunch."

"We haven't had breakfast yet," Margaret said and placed her feet on the corner of my desk and stretched her red-nailed toes. Her jeans shorts were too short; they were mine. "Can we go to the diner?" She threw her hair, the color of honey, over the back of the chair. She dyed it the other night after I had left to go to the party with Frank. She looked beautiful, like someone I didn't know.

"We have eggs and red food coloring." Jane ran her finger over the sharp corner of the desk. Her face was round and checks full. She reminded me of her father.

"But the eggs are expired," Margaret said. "I checked the date."

She reminded me of mother, and I couldn't believe that she had been dead for a year now. I missed how she'd call me and ask if I were organized. If Michael answered the phone, he would tell her never. He said he liked that about me.

"I hate eggs," Jane said.

"I don't understand why we can't talk to our father?" Margaret said and leaned forward in the chair.

"Don't say hate," I said to Jane. "You have to trust me on this," I told Margaret. I opened the desk drawer and took out my purse. I didn't know how to tell them that I didn't even have his number. At the beginning of each month, we got a check in a white envelope, my name scrawled in blue ink, with no return address. I knew I could get his number from his mother; but since he left she told me it was better if she didn't talk to us anymore. I didn't argue with her. We never got along.

"Can't I just have you to myself?" I asked.

"What about Frank?" Jane said. "Do we count him?"

"Good question," I said and the phone rang. Maybe I should let them decide I thought. "What do you think?"

Jane shrugged her shoulders and Margaret pulled at the gold buttons on the leather chair.

"He's okay," she said. "He's growing on me. But what about Rubén?"

"What about him?" I picked up the phone and for a moment I hated her. I couldn't stand that I blamed her and not Rubén for how he looked at her. "Hello," I said forgetting I was at work. It was Frank.

"So you just leave?" Frank said. "That was three days and I haven't heard a word from you. I don't understand you."

I paused, not knowing what to say, and picked up a pen and tapped it against the leaves of the plant. "I needed to go home," I said. "I felt bad that I left them."

"There are eggs in cake, pancakes, too," Margaret said. "You eat those."

Jane told Margaret to shut up and stood in front of her, pulling at the strands of hair that hung in her face.

"I don't know why I didn't tell you." I put my finger over my lips and raised my eyes at the girls. They ignored me.

"What about what I asked you?" he said. "It's pretty cruel not to say anything, don't you think?"

"Can we talk about it later?" I sat back in the chair. Jane crawled into my lap, twirling the hat on the tip of her finger, and I leaned back so she didn't hit me with it. "I need some time to think and right now I have to get the girls something to eat. I'll call you this weekend; we're going to the pool." I said good-bye and hung up.

"Why can't we just call grandma?" Margaret asked. "Do you think she'd want to see us?"

"Okay," I said, grabbed my purse and stood up. I had a hard time telling everyone no.

*

On Sunday, we had breakfast, scrambled eggs with red food coloring. I still hadn't gone to the store. After we ate, the girls went in their room to put on their bathing suits. Margaret wanted to borrow one of mine and I said no. She told me to go to hell, and slammed the bedroom door. I remembered once when I was sixteen I told my mother the same thing. She grabbed me by the hair, pulled my face toward her, her chin against mine, and wished that I would have children like me. After that something had changed. She stopped holding my hand when we walked down the street and sometimes she would

look at me with wide blank eyes, like she didn't know who I was. I never said that to her again. Margaret came out of the room wearing long shorts, and a baggy shirt like Jane. They both had braided their hair. Margaret looked like a young girl.

We walked through the park, towels under our arms, the girls chatting about some TV show. I was glad they weren't arguing. It was hot, almost noon. By the basketball courts, a guy sitting on a wooden stool with a straw hat pulled down low played the guitar, a tin cup by his foot, silver change scattered on the black asphalt. As we made our way around the courts, I saw Rubén walking in front of us, his arm around a girl. She was short and chunky, a tattoo on the back of each leg. My stomach ached.

"Isn't that Rubén?" Margaret asked.

He and the girl sat down on a bench under a tall oak tree, its branches low and green.

"Can we stop and say hi?" Jane asked. "We haven't seen him in a while."

"He looks busy, " I said, and stopped in front of a garbage can, opened my purse and started throwing away pieces of gum, a red comb, the grocery receipt from the last time I shopped. "Let's go the other way, past the pond. It's shorter." I zipped my purse and started walking, and then turned around.

"Where are you going?" Margaret asked. She stood next to me. We were almost the same height.

"I don't know," I said. I looked up at the sky, the sun bright, and I realized I forgot my sunglasses.

Jane walked over to Rubén and she stood on her tip toes. I could hear her tell him that we were going to the pool. He smiled at me, the girl leaned against him, and glared at me. I turned away, heart hurting.

"Let's go," I said to Margaret, took her hand and yelled to Jane to hurry up.

At the pond, miniature white boats moved across the glassy water, and Margaret reminded me that I didn't call Frank.

"Why didn't you remind me?" I asked and watched as two small kids sitting on a blue blanket threw blades of grass into the air. "What if Frank moved in with us?" I turned and looked over my shoulder at Rubén. I thought I might be able to handle Frank moving in, that we could be roommates and maybe he would cook dinner. But I knew I couldn't marry him.

"Frank chews with his mouth open," Margaret said, "and we have a father. Why can't we call him?"

"Why now is this so important to you?"

She shrugged her shoulders and leaned her head into my chest. Jane came over and said that she was hot. I put my arms around Margaret, my chin against her hair.

*

Mrs. Rodgeski was at the pool, on a lawn chair in a bright pink bathing suit, arms and legs splayed. Her skin was so pale I thought she was dead and I had to look away. She sat up and waved when she saw us. Jane went running to her. I walked over and set my purse and our towels on the chair next to her. Margaret stood at the edge of the pool, took off her shirt, let it drop to the ground and unbuttoned her shorts. They dropped to her ankles, her bathing suit strap hanging from her shoulder, and I wanted to wrap her in a

towel. She dove in, legs straight, body long and thin, and she disappeared under the blue water. She came up in the deep end, hands on the concrete edge, blinking, and rubbing her eyes. They always put too much chlorine in the water.

"Go sit on the edge, and I'll be right there," I said to Jane. She walked to the pool and dragged her foot across the top of the water. She didn't like to swim, not since a wave had knocked her down in the ocean. She flailed about until I grabbed her, her eyes red, nose running, body shivering. She slept with me for a week after that happened. She also refused to wear a bathing suit. She was the opposite of Margaret.

"Frank said he might come today," Mrs. Rodgeski said. "I saw him at the store yesterday."

"I don't know," I said, took off my shorts and kicked them under the chair. "I forgot to call him."

The life guard stood in her chair, her nose covered with zinc oxide, and blew her whistle at kids throwing a ball across the pool.

Mrs. Rodgeski gave me that old lady knows everything look and picked up a big straw bag next to her. "I think Mr. Smith is too hot in here," she said and pulled out her cat, gray with yellow eyes, from the bag, and ran her hand through his tail.

"He looks hot to me, too," I said.

Jane came over and said, "Come sit with me."

"Mr. Smith would rather be with me," Mrs. Rodgeski said as I walked away. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "He doesn't like for me to leave him at home."

"Did he tell her that?" Jane asked as we put our feet in the water.

"I am sure she hears lots of things,' I said and we laughed. My mother couldn't stand Mrs. Rodgeski. She complained that she talked too much about nothing. I used to agree with my mother, but for some reason the old woman was starting to grow on me.

I climbed down the ladder into the pool. The water was too warm, and there were kids everywhere bobbing up and down, yelling and screeching, their voices tinny. I looked over at the gate and Frank came in wearing a button-down long sleeved shirt.

"He looks hot," Jane said.

"I know," I said and felt bad for him, for us.

"What happened?" he asked, standing over me. Sweat trickled down the sides his face. "I thought we said Sunday."

"Jane, wait for me here." I climbed out of the pool, my skin pimpled with goose bumps. I grabbed a towel from the chair and followed Frank outside the gate by the side of the pool. We stood not saying anything. It was hot, the screaming kids were making my head ache. My body felt heavy, water dripped down the back of my legs. I was suddenly weary, and I wanted to go home.

"People get married," he said and rubbed his hand through his hair. "They call each other; they want to spend time together." He turned away from me, and crossed his arms.

I reached and touched his back. His shirt was white and soft. "It's not that easy," I said and wasn't sure what I meant.

"It is that easy," he said and pulled away from me.

I turned to walk away and his hand was on the back of my towel and he pulled me to him.

"Don't touch me that way," I said and took a step back. "It was just a phone call. Why are you being like this?"

"Don't you get it?" he asked and let go of me. He closed his eyes, squeezed his fingers into his hands.

"I need some time." I looked over at the pool. Jane was sitting next to Mrs. Rodgeski, their feet in the water, Mr. Smith lying on the concrete next to them, fanning his tail up and down. They were laughing, and I wished I was sitting next to them. "Don't you feel like we're rushing things?"

"The thing is," Frank said, "I don't need any more time." He turned and walked down the street.

He disappeared around the corner. I walked back to the pool. Somehow Margaret had convinced Jane to get in. They were swimming around with Jane on Margaret's back, Jane's t-shirt stuck to her skin. Mrs. Rodgeski yelled to them to kick their legs. I sat next to her, and she put her hand over mine and said she thought I was right that maybe it was too hot for Mr. Smith.

*

I left a note for the girls on the kitchen table telling them that I went food shopping, and took the subway to Michael's mother's house in Queens. I walked up the concrete steps and she was kneeling on the sidewalk, pulling leaves out from under the bushes on the side of the house.

"I don't want to buy anything," she said as she looked up at me.

"Carol, it's Susan," I said.

She sat back on her heels, put her hands on her hips. "I didn't recognize you."

"It has been a couple of years," I said, suddenly missing Michael so badly that it hurt. "I brought pictures of the girls." I pulled some photographs from my purse and handed them to her. They were taken at the pool, by the beach, in front of our apartment building.

"Very nice," she said and looked at the top one of the three of us, hair wet, sun in our eyes, smiling, but she didn't extend her hand. "They're big."

"They do that." I put the photographs back in my purse. "I need Michael's number."

"Why do you want to do that?" she asked. "He has moved on, Susan, so should you. Didn't you?" She looked at me and smiled. How I hated her then.

"The girls, Margaret, she wants to talk to him," I said. "This is about the girls and their father."

"I don't agree with what he did." She picked up some dead leaves around the bushes, dropped them on the ground. She took off her gloves and rubbed her palms on her thighs. "But he's still my son. I keep meaning to buy the girls presents. Bring them by and I'll make them a pie."

She stood up, and laid the gloves across a bush with small white flowers and walked up the stair. I followed her. She opened the door, and turned around. "Wait here," she said and went inside the house.

The steps leading to the second floor were lined with green carpet. The same plaid chair was pushed into the corner by the TV. I used to sit there on Sundays when Michael and I came for dinner. I was pregnant with Margaret, and so shy then. I watched Michael move around the room, his arm around some cousin, wanting him to look over

and smile at me. He never did. And then I felt tired, tired of being alone, and I wanted some help raising my kids. I wanted to wake up in the morning and have an adult to talk to. Why couldn't I marry Frank? What would be so bad about it?

Carol came outside, a yellow piece of paper in her hand. She handed it to me and I folded it in half and slipped it into my purse without looking at it.

"Like I said, bring them for dessert. I'll make them a pie."

"They like Jell-O," I said and walked down the steps and did not bother to look back.

*

I went to the store and bought marshmallows, Jell-O, whipped cream and popcorn. I stopped at a phone booth, picked up the receiver and leaned my head against the scratched glass.

"Collect," I said when the operator came on and I read the Michael's number to her. "Susan," I said when she asked my name.

The phone rang a few times and I heard a woman's voice say hello. The operator asked if she would accept the call and she said no.

"Wait," I shouted. "It's Susan," I whispered. "Susan."

There was a pause. The woman said yes and I heard her yell for Michael. He got on the phone and said, "Hello."

"They want to talk to you," I said.

An old woman in a heavy gray coat, a purple cap pulled down low over her forehead knocked on the door and pressed her face against the glass of the booth watching me. She was carrying a glass jar filled with coins. I wanted to smack her.

"Who?" he asked. "Susan? Why are you calling me?"

"It's Margaret and Jane," I said. "They want to talk to you. It's just a phone call or one day at a park somewhere." I turned away from the staring woman. "Just one day," I said again.

"I can't," he said.

"Or ice cream and a movie?" I said.

I ran my finger up and down the wire phone cord. A short man in a tattered black suit walked up to the woman and they started to talk. He was holding a jar of change, too. I wanted to ask Michael why he left, why he didn't want to see them, but decided I didn't need to.

"I have to go," Michael said and hung up.

I opened the door and stepped onto the sidewalk. The woman pushed past me and into the booth. I walked down the street, the grocery bag hitting the side of my leg, the phone number in my hand. At the corner across the street from the apartment, I ripped the piece of paper into tiny pieces and when a bus rode by, I let them go into the wind, and they scattered above the sidewalk, like small yellow butterflies.

*

Margaret and Jane sat at the kitchen table with a box of cereal, sketchbooks and pieces of charcoal. I forgot to buy milk. I put the bag on the table. Margaret took out the box of Jell-O. She went to the counter and told Jane that she needed to stir. Jane pulled the metal stool over to the stove as Margaret filled a pan with water. I sat at the table and broke the marshmallows into small pieces.

"Mini marshmallows," Margaret said, scooped some into her hands and put them into the pan.

The doorbell rang and Jane ran to get it. She walked in pulling Frank behind her. He sat down at the table across from me.

"Popcorn?" I said and pointed to the bag on the table.

"For breakfast?" he asked.

"Of course," I said.

He shook his head and smiled. He picked it up and walked to the stove.

"Can we call him today?" Margaret asked, her back to me, her hair pulled back into a ponytail.

Frank measured the oil, and Jane poured in the kernels. I kept pulling apart the marshmallows. Margaret poured the Jell-O into a glass bowl and placed it into the refrigerator.

"Don't forget the whipped cream," I said.

Jane set four bowls onto the table, and spooned whipped cream into each one. Frank stood at the stove moving the pan over the burner. When the popcorn was done, I handed him a white plastic bowl, and we sat down to eat.

"You didn't answer my question," Margaret said and tapped her spoon against the side of the bowl.

"I don't think it's a good idea," I said. "I guess I just want you all to myself."

She stood, knocked the chair back to the floor and told me I was an unfair witch. She walked into the living room, and Jane followed her. They turned on the TV, the volume on loud, and they argued about who could watch what.

"Someone could go in my room," I said, "and watch my TV."

"Why don't you let her call him?"

"Because he doesn't want to see them." I was tired and didn't want to explain. I stacked the bowls and dishes and brought them to the sink, and filled it with water. I held my finger under the faucet, testing the water.

Frank stood behind me and said, "You don't need more time, do you?"

I shook my head no. He pressed his forehead into the back of my hair, his arms around my stomach. I turned the water off and looked out the window and into the kitchen across the way. The curtains were white and lacy, a small green plant sat on the sill.

"Here." He placed my watch next to the sink. "I fixed the clasp. Your wrists are too skinny," he said.

I could hear the phone ringing in the apartment next door and Margaret tell Jane that she wished they had a nicer mother. Frank rubbed his hand across my stomach, and I closed my eyes. We stayed that way for a long time.

*

I went to the library and checked out some cookbooks. Chinese. Italian. Desserts. I decided to buy some spices, some fruit. I was going to be more organized. Coming home from the library, I walked up the stairs and Rubén was walking down. He was with that girl, the chunky one, and I said hello. He stopped on the landing and turned around. "Let's go," the girl said and pulling him away by the arm.

ABOUT LOVE

I stole Mrs. Rodgeski's cat from her apartment. I knew the door would be unlocked, the whole building did, and that she was downstairs in the laundry room, feet stuffed into those white plastic slippers, housecoat, no bra, sorting whites from darks. The cat, Mr. Smith, was for Rubén. The last time we had talked, we agreed Mrs. Rodgeski treated her cat like a tea pot or a vacuum, not like a cat should be treated. I had tried to avoid Rubén, but given up, and found myself waiting for him by the elevator, on the stoop, or in the stairwell outside his apartment.

I walked down the stairs to his apartment from Mrs. Rodgeski's, the cat a lump under my blouse, its fur soft against my skin. I was barefoot, and the steps were damp and smelled like bleach. As I rounded the corner, Rubén was on the landing, a newspaper under one arm, a plastic bag in the other hand, talking to himself.

"Do you always talk to yourself?" I called down to him.

"Just when no one is listening," he said, and rested his elbow on the banister.

I asked him what was new, and he told me something about a gig but I wasn't listening, thinking about how I could convince him to make love to me in the stairwell, or to get on a train and go to the Arizona desert. Since I was a kid, I had this affinity for the heat and spiny plants. We could buy a house with a porch and Adirondack chairs and live there for years, maybe a hundred, and raise chickens instead of kids.

"Susan, what are you doing with that cat?" he asked.

"This is Arlo," I said and pulled it out from under my blouse. The cat was gray with yellow eyes and a long wispy tail. "He was in a box by the dumpster."

"He looks just like Mr. Smith," Rubén said. "Who found him? You or did Margaret and Jane?"

The whole building knew Mr. Smith. When he was younger, he had the run of the place and waited in the foyer under the mahogany table for Mrs. Rodgeski to return from the store. I didn't know how I was going to get away with this, and I had just lectured my daughter Margaret not to take money from my purse.

"Sure looks like Mr. Smith," he said and placed the plastic bag down by his feet, and crossed his arms.

"He looked sick, so I thought I'd take him to the vet." I set the cat down. It curled its tail around my leg and lay by my feet. "The girls are camping with their cousins in the Poconos." I imagined them with the squirrels and no hair dryers and ran my hand through my hair, down my neck. The back of my blouse was unzipped and I pulled at the zipper, but couldn't reach it. The girls were the ones who helped with me such things, zippers, bracelets with slim clasps.

Rubén smiled and told me to take care and walked down the stairs. His smile reminded me of the last time we talked on his fire escape, when he told me I was too much for him. We had sat watching the moon and we could hear Margaret's voice coming from my living room window, and I knew he was distracted by my thirteen-year-old daughter, and I told him he was too much for me.

I sat on the steps, the cat at my feet, poking at his stomach with my finger. The sun came in through the window behind me, warming my back. I never really liked cats. I was more of a dog person, and I knew I had to do something with him before Mrs. Rodgeski finished her laundry. I heard Rubén say good morning to someone downstairs,

their voices echoing in the hall, then a pause, and then the slam of the heavy front door. I kicked at the pieces of red and pink candy on the step below me.

*

I left the building and walked to the corner, where Rubén was first in line at the bus stop. And there I was with no shoes, no purse, and a cat. I got in line behind a short man in an ugly blue suit, holding a folded newspaper at eye level, a briefcase between his legs. He reached in his pocket and a creased dollar bill fell to the ground. The bus arrived and the man walked forward, and I grabbed the dollar and waited on the top step as he paid, my hand on the metal banister. I was glad my daughters could not see me.

"Lady, you can't bring the cat on the bus," the driver said as I handed him the bill. He sat there, looking at me, shaking his head. He had dark patches of skin under his eyes and he needed a shave. "And it's a dollar fifty to ride."

"It's just for a couple of blocks," I said and looked down the aisle. Ruben was watching me. "It's sick. See." I held up Mr. Smith, its head hunched between its shoulders.

A voice from the back of the bus yelled he was going to be late for work. A middle-aged woman with gold hoop earrings and a long thin nose sitting in the first row of seats opened her purse and handed me two quarters and said, "Hurry it up, honey."

"It better not get sick on my bus," the driver said as he shut door behind me.

I nodded, thanked them both and made my way toward Rubén.

The grooved floor hurt the bottom of my feet and I sat down next to him, and put Mr. Smith in his lap. "This is for you," I said. "It's a cat." I crossed my legs and placed my foot on the chrome post smeared with finger prints.

"What's going on with you?" he said and gave me back Mr. Smith. "I'm allergic to them and Mrs. Rodgeski is going to kill you for taking hers." He tapped his black canvas sneaker flecked with white paint, no laces, against the bottom of my foot. "Where are your shoes?"

"They're in my closet, and yours have no laces," I said and turned my head. "We agreed that Mrs. Rodgeski shouldn't have a pet if she couldn't treat him well, remember?" I looked out the window and thought I should have gone to the park and dug up a turtle, something without hair. "Are you sure you're allergic? It's a gift."

The bus slowed to a stop. Outside on the sidewalk, two girls turned the ends of a jump rope, and a third girl with a long braid that hung to her waist, feet skimming the concrete, spun around in circles.

"I was kidding about Mrs. Rodgeski," he said. "And I am sure that I'm allergic, not just to cats, but to dogs, and my sister hates me for it. When we were kids, my mother gave Buttons, our dog, to our neighbor thinking my sister could visit it any time she wanted."

"Did she?" I rubbed the back of Mr. Smith's ears. He stood, arched his back into a c, and sat down again.

"For about a week and then forgot about him," Rubén said. "So what's going on with Frank and Beans?" he asked.

"I told him it wouldn't work out," I said and stood and wrapped my arm around the post.

"You'll probably change your mind." Rubén stood up and pulled the steel cord that hung in front of the color advertisements for podiatrists and typing classes.

"What's in the bag?" I said, and turned my back to him, and I wished I had stayed in bed. I pulled at the back of my blouse, trying to reach the zipper. "I don't like cats either," I whispered.

He leaned into me, and zipped my blouse, and said, "Oatmeal for Abuelo. He eats it every morning standing by the sink. I have to remind myself to be patient with him."

The bus stopped, and we swayed forward and back, and Rubén got off. As I rode on, he walked down the street, swerving between clusters of people, head down, the front of his shirt tucked in, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, the plastic bag in his hand.

*

At the next block, two elderly women dressed in matching long pink coats got on and sat down across from me. As the bus merged into traffic, I pulled the cord, the cat asleep in my arms, and the bus stopped. The driver yelled good riddance to me as I stepped onto the pavement, the concrete warm from the sun. I waited under the *No Parking from Here to Curb* sign as Rubén walked towards me.

"I think I should start eating breakfast," I said as he stopped in front of me. "And coffee. Coffee would be nice." I thought about Mrs. Rodgeski at the top of the stairs calling for Mr. Smith, my kids in a tent in the woods. Miserable.

"I don't know," he said, and turned and looked away. "You really want to meet Abuelo? He's not a big fan of yours."

"Or I could go home," I said. "And you can sit with Margaret on the stoop when I'm not around and wave to me in the grocery store." It was hot. I was sweating, my face flushed. I was ready for the leaves to fall and for it to snow and cover me whole.

"You forgot about Jane," he said.

"I didn't forget her," I said. "I just wish you'd forget about Margaret."

We stood in the middle of the street, elbows, briefcases, newspapers brushing against me, and I remembered that I forgot to pack jackets for the girls. A woman walking with a small boy, his hand cupped inside hers, his face hidden by a red hood, rubbed the side of my leg as he walked by.

Rubén took my hand and rubbed it against his cheek. We walked slowly past a row of fruit vendors wearing white aprons, talking with their hands and the air smelled like oranges. "What do you think she's playing." He pointed to the window across the street where a young woman sat, cheek pressed against the face of a violin, elbow bent as her arm swayed back and forth.

"I wish I could play. I took piano lessons for about a week, and then quit because the teacher told me I was tone deaf." I moved Mr. Smith to my hip, holding him like a baby.

"I didn't know you were tone deaf."

"I can't sing or play an instrument, but I'm good with plants." I rubbed the back of my hand across my forehead. The cat was getting heavy and I wanted to go home.

"Can you walk faster?" Rubén said, checking his watch. "Abuelo gets cranky when he has to wait and then I have to put up with him like that for the rest of the day."

"So why don't you have laces?" I asked.

"They make me claustrophobic," Rubén said.

"Me too," I said. "I mean feet. I have to sleep with them outside the blanket."

Rubén opened the door to the apartment building. The foyer was damp, the carpet thin and rough. I followed Rubén up the stairs, Mr. Smith under my arm, and I couldn't believe I took an old woman's cat.

*

Rubén's grandfather was at the kitchen table eating purple grapes from a large ceramic bowl. He glanced at me and popped a grape into his mouth. Rubén looked just like him. They had the same eyes, brown and small, and I imagined Rubén old, standing by the sink, eating oatmeal from a metal pot. I thought I would look like my grandmother, stooped way over, breasts hanging against the tops of her thighs, hand stretched out, feeling her way from one piece of furniture to the next.

"Who's this?" Abuelo asked. "That better not be her."

"This is Susan," Rubén said. "It's okay. I asked her to come." He put the bag on the table, handed Abuelo the newspaper and kissed him on both cheeks.

"You can't have pets in the building," he said to me as reached his hand into the bowl. "And we're out of oatmeal," he told Rubén.

"I thought Rubén would like it." I sat down and placed the cat on the floor. It walked over to Abuelo, and batted the hem of his pants.

"I'd rather have a fish," Rubén said.

"He's allergic, you don't know this?" Abuelo rubbed Mr. Smith behind his ears. "Did I tell you I was hungry?"

"I'm making it now, you won't starve." Rubén poured oatmeal into a blue measuring cup. "She should know." He turned and looked at me and walked to the refrigerator and took out a can of coffee.

"I stole it," I said, looking at the picture on the wall of a woman carrying a basket of lilies on her back. "Walked in and took it right off the couch." I didn't know how I was going to return Mr. Smith to Mrs. Rodgeski and thought I could hide him in the closet until the girls came home.

In the middle of the table was a spiny plant with brown leaves. I pulled it to me and began removing the dead leaves, making a pile in front of me. Rubén was opening and closing cabinets, and Abuelo reached across the table and turned the radio on, adjusting the white knob until he found the station he wanted.

"I stole a wooden red rooster for my wife." He picked up a knife from the table and sliced a grape in half. "It sat on the porch of this house we walked by every day on our way to town, and she kept talking about it. So one night I snuck in the yard and took it. When I gave it to her, she called me a thief and didn't talk to me for a week."

The cat jumped on the window sill behind his chair and brushed the glass with its paw, its tail swinging back and forth.

"Can I have a grape?" I asked Abuelo.

He told me no and put one in his mouth. His fingers long, his hands red and wrinkled. He chewed slowly, keeping his eye on me the whole time. "Rubén, I want to go to the beach today. Is that too much to ask?"

"Old man, how are we going to get there? I don't have a car." Rubén gave me a cup of coffee and placed a sugar bowl shaped like a small frog on the table in front of me. "Will you give her a grape, please?"

Abuelo picked one from the bunch and rolled it across the table to me. "We could borrow your cousin Rosario's. She just got it back from the shop. You know she never

puts oil in it and I told her so, but she didn't listen." He stood up and walked to the window.

"My daughters love the beach. We haven't been all summer." I turned around and looked at Rubén. I took them last year. We went by train and came home tired and sunburned and he was on the stoop. The girls had walked on the boardwalk barefoot, the bottoms of their feet covered with splinters. I had to carry Jane up the stairs and Rubén helped Margaret, his arm around her, laughing about something I couldn't hear. "Don't you know, I don't take sugar," I said.

Rubén smiled, shook his head, and sat down across from me. He reached his hand across the table and I folded mine around my cup, and closed my eyes.

"Mrs. Rodriguez across the way died last month," Abuelo said, looking out the window. "She used to hang her black slips on the line. I miss them." He placed his hand on the cat's head and moved it back and forth. "Her kids never took her anywhere."

"You'll outlive all of us," I said and brought the cup to my lips.

"Tell me about it." Rubén picked up a spoon, stirred his coffee and asked Abuelo to turn the radio down.

*

Rubén borrowed his cousin Rosario's Datsun B210, and I borrowed a pair of his mother's sandals, the color of celery, that we found in a box in the hall closet. They were perfect for the beach.

I sat in the back, so I wouldn't have to talk, the cat in my lap. Abuelo sat in the passenger seat, a tall brown bag between his legs. He wore wool slacks and a cap, white and crocheted. He took the cat from me, and gave me the bag.

"We should have bathing suits," he said to Rubén. As we left the neighborhood, a group of boys banged on the side windows. "Did you bring the sunscreen? I don't want to get burned."

"I brought it and your grapes. Do you even remember how to swim?" Rubén asked him. "Do you?" he said looking at me in the rearview mirror.

"When I was five, my father threw me in a lake and told me to move my arms and to kick my legs," I said. "That's how I learned. That's how my kids learned. My father held the city breast stroke record until last year."

"I threw all my kids in the ocean," Abuelo said and rolled down the window. "We lost a couple that way." He smiled and rubbed the edge of his chin with his thumb.

I laughed and leaned forward, my hand on the console. The cat stood up and jumped in the back with me.

"We should have returned the cat." Rubén said. "Mrs. Rodgeski already doesn't like you."

"I'm getting used to him," Abuelo said. "We'll give him back later." He adjusted the seat back and closed his eyes. "Wake me when we get there."

"She pretends she doesn't like me, but then she asks me to change her light bulb or to kill the spiders in her bathtub," I said. "She even likes Margaret and Jane when they're not running through the halls. She's just a cranky old woman." I knew I would be the same way, and I wondered what my kids were doing and if they wanted to come home. And at the same time, I wanted them to like it so much that they didn't want to.

"She needs her cat," Rubén said and glanced over his shoulder as he changed lanes.

"You think she likes you?" I placed my hand on his shoulder.

"No way," he said and reached for my hand. "She calls and tells me I play my music too loud."

"You do." I kissed the tips of his fingers.

And then I thought of Margaret and the way he looked at her. I sat back against the seat, watching the cars pass by, and counted the smokeless smokestacks that lined the highway.

*

We drove through a small neighborhood with clapboard homes and chain link fences. The air was cool and smelled like charcoal and lighter fluid. We parked on a dead end road, in front of a sand dune with long, wispy grass moving in the breeze. A young couple walked by the car carrying rolled up towels under their arms.

Rubén and Abuelo walked across the street to a house with a For Rent sign in the yard. On the sidewalk, there was a box with *Take it, it's yours* written on its side.

"I need a new toaster," Abuelo said bending over the box, the cat tucked under his arm. "The one we have keeps burning my bread." He turned the box over and sorted through a pile of bungee cords, folded maps, and broken flashlights.

I walked to the porch past bushes covered with yellow and purple flowers and sat down on the top step.

"I don't think there is a toaster in there," Rubén said. "Besides, the other one works, you just need a new spring for it."

"I like how this house feels," I said. The house was like the one I imagined. It had a yard and plenty of room for a dog. "I want to move to Phoenix, buy a house and grow old."

"The porch smells like old winter clothes," Rubén said and sat next to me.

Mr. Smith lay down in the sun on the brick sidewalk and flipped over on his back, his legs stretched to the sky. Once the super had locked him in a closet in the basement, Mrs. Rodgeski had come to my door, tight-lipped, and quiet, asking me to help her look for him. It took three days to find him. I hoped I wouldn't go to hell for taking him.

"I could never live here, so far from the city," Rubén said.

"Couldn't you go somewhere else?" I asked. "If you had a house, someone to live with you and a couple of hundred years, why not?"

"Things are easy right now." He sat, looking straight ahead. "I play my music, have my friends. I take care of Abuelo."

Abuelo turned the box back over, rolled his neck from side to side, and complained he was getting old. Mr. Smith lifted his head and watched him and then dropped its head down again.

"Let's just go," I said, "get on a train and go anywhere we want. Even since I was a kid I've wanted to go to desert."

I grabbed his hand. He took mine and rubbed his hand over the inside of my palm and let it go.

"I can't stand the heat," Rubén said.

Abuelo walked toward us, stopped and touched Rubén on the shoulder, then he climbed the stairs and sat on the porch swing.

"What about Margaret and Jane?"

"I could leave," I said. "Go without them."

The music of an ice cream truck sounded far away, and I took a deep breath. I knew I meant what I had said.

"I'm hungry," Abuelo said. "And I thought we were going to the beach."

"Once we'd get there, you'd want to go somewhere else, somewhere cold, like Alaska," Rubén said to me. He got up, went up the steps and sat next to Abuelo on the porch swing.

"What are you two talking about?" Abuelo asked.

Rubén told him it was nothing. But I knew he was probably right. The ice cream truck sounded closer and two boys wearing shorts, no shirts, ran by. I sat between Abuelo and Rubén. He placed his hand on my thigh, leaned his head against the back of the swing, and closed his eyes. The swing creaked as we moved back and forth, my feet barely touching the ground, and I wished I was old and gray.

*

Rubén bought pretzels from a vendor who stood under a yellow umbrella bent to one side and walked to the beach. Abuelo took off his shoes and handed them to me.

"Give me the cat," he said.

"Sure." I handed Mr. Smith to him and put his shoes inside the bag.

The ocean was calm and green. The beach was quiet and we sat near a group of women playing badminton with thin black racquets, wearing long sleeved shirts and rolled up pants. The sand was grooved with tire tracks and a garbage can overflowed with crumbled paper bags and green beer bottles.

Ruben spread his mustard on the wax paper, dipped the edge of his pretzel in it and took a small bite. I brushed the salt off mine into the sand.

"You eat like a girl," I said.

"You waste the salt." He took another bite. "That's the best part."

"Your Abuela had the nicest legs," Abuelo said.

"I just remember her hands and how she talked with them and that she was always playing with my hair," Rubén said.

"My grandmother's legs were like logs," I said and dug my feet into the sand. "And she had these thick blue veins. They looked painful."

"I didn't look at Abuela's veins," Abuelo said, petting Mr. Smith's tail. "That's the thing about love. One day you're old and sitting at the kitchen table, and you look up and see that the other person is old, too." He stood and picked up the cat. "I'm going to say hello to the ocean." He walked to the water, one hand in his pocket, Mr. Smith on his hip.

I stood up.

"Come with," I said and put out my hand. "We'll take the old man and go."

"It's not that easy," Rubén said.

"It's that easy." I nodded my head and dropped my hand and looked back out at the water. A long silver tanker floated on the horizon. This is what Frank, my boyfriend, had said to me when I said I wasn't ready to get married and now I believed it.

I watched two women walk down the beach in the tire grooves.

"I'm going to say hi to the ocean," I said to Rubén.

I dropped my sandals in the sand next to him and walked toward Abuelo who stood on the edge of the water, his pants rolled up, Mr. Smith by his feet. We stood for a while watching mother and daughter skim their hands across the top of the water, laughing loudly, and then I asked Abuelo if he wanted the cat and he said of course.

*

Mrs. Rodgeski was in the hall when I got home. We spent the next week searching the building, walking up and down the stairs calling for Mr. Smith. I did her laundry twice and she made me tea, and we sat in hot kitchen eating cookies, listening to my girls run up and down the hall stairs. I told her about Arizona and she showed me photographs of a trip she once took to Venice. It took me a while to convince her to go to the rescue shelter, but I finally did, and we brought home two black and white kittens. We named hers Arlo and I said mine was for the girls.

TRUE

I cut school, went to the park, and sat two benches down from Mr. Ryder, the man who put his wife's head in the oven two summers ago. The day he was arrested, a white ambulance waited outside our building, lights flashing red and silent, and the air smelled like hot pretzels. I held my mother Susan's hand, my younger sister Jane held the other, as the ambulance drivers came out of the building, the body draped in a light blue sheet. Susan tried to cover my eyes, the tips of her fingers cold and soft, but I could still see them pushing the gurney to the back to the ambulance, the sheet dangling against the metal leg.

Mr. Ryder and I sat across from the duck pond, in the shade, the trees heavy with dry brown leaves. He took a piece of bread from a plastic bag, broke it into chunks, and threw them on the ground. Mrs. Rodgeski, our downstairs neighbor, told my mother he had just been released from some country club jail in New York State or that he had been in Africa. She wasn't sure. I just knew my mother told me I was supposed to cross the street when I saw him.

"Ducks don't eat the heels, you'll get the pigeons," I said and kicked at the leaves on the ground with the tip of my shoe. "Would you eat the heels?" I moved to the bench between us. "And ducks don't like white bread."

"I never eat the heels." Mr. Ryder, bald, jaw round, nose flat against his face, wore a navy blue suit with a wide red tie, like he was going to church. He looked like a nice man, not a murderer. He set the bag down on the peeling green slats, crossed his legs, his arms on the back of the bench. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses and a Panama hat with a red felt band lay next to him. "How do you know that?"

"I speak duck," I said, "and you can get wheat bread at the A&P down on the corner." I got up and sat on the edge of his bench, hands under my thighs, fingers picking at the chipped paint. "I live on Fordham Road too, three apartments down from you."

Before school started last month, I sat on the stoop in the mornings. Watching. Mr. Ryder would walk past around ten, carrying a brown grocery bag in one hand with some leafy green vegetable sticking out of the top, the other hand in his pocket, head tilted to one side. Like me, he was always alone, and I thought he needed someone to talk to. I knew I did.

"I speak French and Mandarin." He crossed his ankle over his knee and pulled at the tips of his shoelaces. "And I lived in China, but that was a long time ago."

"With your wife?" I was hot in my school uniform, blue socks pulled to my knees, brown shoes scuffed. I took off my tie and wrapped it around my finger. "I remember she had long red hair."

A few pigeons landed by his feet, feathers tucked, red feet scurrying across the asphalt as they pecked at the air. I unwrapped the tie from my finger and dropped it through the slats of the bench.

"That was before I met my wife," Mr. Ryder said. "You go to Sacred Heart? I went there, too. I hated wearing that tie."

"I'm in eighth grade," I said. "I don't mind the tie." Rubén, who lived one floor below us, the guy my mother was in love with, the one she told me to stay away from, that it had to do with the way he looked at me, walked over to the pond with a black dog attached to a long red leash. The dog barked at the ducks as they glided one in front of the other over the chocolate colored water.

"My sister can't stand Chinese food. We can never get take out because of her." I picked up his hat, rubbed my fingers over the red band. "My father speaks French. He's a pilot." I lied. My father left when I was three and all I knew was that he didn't want to see us.

"My mother was French and she always made me wear a hat when I was growing up. She didn't want me to get sunburn." Mr. Ryder picked up his glasses, and wiped them with the cuff of his jacket. "Egg rolls are my favorite."

Rubén walked to the park exit. I stood and pulled my tie from the slates. I wanted to talk to him.

"Mine too," I said and reached out my hand to Mr. Ryder. "I'm Margaret."

"I'll remember to get the wheat bread." He shook my hand, his was warm and calloused, and bowed his head.

*

I grabbed Rubén's hand as he was leaving the park. We stood on the corner a few blocks from our apartment building. A man sat against the black wrought iron gate that surrounded the park, wrapped in a plaid sleeping bag, singing Happy Birthday. A woman on a bike with rusty hair and bright red pants rang her bell at us as she rode by. Rubén let my hand drop.

"When did you get the dog?" I asked. It was hot. I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. I squinted my eyes to see him.

"I got him from the pound a few weeks ago. His name is Charlie," he said and patted the dog on the head. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

The sun was bright. A plane flew through a patch of gray rolling clouds. Traffic rolled by. Car breaks squealed. Horns blasted. I could hear an ice cream truck coming from around the corner.

"No." I bent down to pet the dog, its black coat course and thick. As I rubbed its ears, it tilted its head back, and sat on my feet. "It's some Catholic holiday."

"I'll have to check with my mother about that one," he said. "Was that Mr. Ryder you were talking to?"

"It was just some nice old man," I said. "Maybe you could come over and show Susan Charlie? I keep asking her if we can get a dog." A small white flower lay on the sidewalk by my feet. I picked it up and handed it to Rubén.

A garbage truck pulled up to the curb. One of the workers wearing an orange vest, a yellow baseball cap, jumped off, picked up a metal can and emptied it into the back of the truck.

"It looked like him," he said.

"It wasn't Mr. Ryder. I forget his name, but he told me he is a pilot."

Ruben eyes narrowed. "Be careful, will you?" He took the flower, brushed a strand away from my face, and placed it behind my ear. "Tell your mother I said hi."

I nodded like I would. Rubén walked down the street, hand in his back pocket, red leash taut, dog leading him forward. The garbage truck pulled away, gears grinding, and the man in the vest waved. Before I could wave back, he turned around, the back of his shirt flapping in the wind as the truck eased into the traffic.

*

The next morning was Saturday. My sister Jane was in bed next to me. She was eight and afraid to sleep by herself. For a while I called her a baby until I got used to feeling her back against mine. She lay on her side, one arm over her head, the other holding a blue hat, the one I had found for her in an empty parking lot. She had started to sleep with it since her pet caterpillar, Larry died. After he was gone, we bought some fish, tropical ones with yellow tails and eyes like black olives that never closed. The fish died, too. Then we got Howard, the kitten, and it disappeared. We searched for him under beds, inside closets, and finally found him in a cabinet under the bathroom sink. He was lying in a puddle of bleach, eyes open, paws curled under its mouth, its teeth white and pointy. Mrs. Rodgeski had helped us pick him out, and that's why Susan told us not to tell her. Susan also said no more pets, that death was tiring her out.

When I walked into the kitchen, Susan was sitting at the table reading the paper, legs stretched out on a chair across from her, hair piled on top of her head, fingers wrapped around the handle of a blue coffee mug. She looked up, pursed her lips and asked me for a kiss.

I waved to her, opened the refrigerator, and took out a carton of milk and smelled it.

"No kiss for me this morning?" She folded the paper in half and dropped it on top of a pile on the floor.

"What about oatmeal or eggs?" I said. I threw the carton in the garbage and walked to the table. She pulled me to her, and I stood on top of the papers, moving my toes up and down, rubbing the ends of her hair. It was blonde again.

Susan had just started asking me for a hug, a kiss, some kind of affection, when I promised I would stop asking to see my father. But I still thought about him. I just wanted to see him, touch his face, the skin below his eyes, to see if he was real. She didn't understand the sudden attraction to it. I couldn't tell her that I was looking through her dresser drawer for nothing in particular and had found a photograph of the three of us at the beach, hair in our faces, his arm around her shoulder, me in the other arm. He looked like a nice man.

"Whatever you want. That's why you're in charge. If you didn't cook, we'd eat Saltines everyday."

"I think I want oatmeal." I leaned into her, my lips against the top of her head. Her hair was warm and she smelled like sleep. "And some cinnamon toast."

Jane shuffled into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes, complaining that we woke her up. She pinched my arm, and crawled into Susan's lap. "Let's have donuts," she said.

"Why are you always touching me?" I asked her, and picked up the comics from the table.

"Remember you love each other." Susan tugged my hand, as I moved away from them and went to the sink. "It's a tough one. Donuts or oatmeal?"

"I thought we were eating healthy, no canned soup, dinner at the table," I said. "What about cereal?" I turned on the water, the faucet creaked, the water cold as I let it run over my hand.

"I love her. I just don't want eggs." Jane reached her hand behind her and rubbed the bottom of Susan's chin. She opened the paper and asked if we wanted to hear our horoscopes.

I looked out the window, four floors down, and saw what I thought was Mr. Ryder's Panama hat heading in the direction of the A & P. "We should have donuts." I turned off the water and turned around. "I'll go get them. Do you want powdered or glazed?"

"Are you serious?" Susan said looking up from the paper.

"I want both and I want to go too," Jane said. She turned to Susan. "What kind do you want?"

"No. I'll get them," I said. "I want to go ask Anna if she wants to come over later." I made that up. I didn't really like Anna. She lived up the block, had bad breath, and tried to kiss me when we were alone. I opened Susan's purse that was next to the toaster and pulled out a ten dollar bill. She watched me, but didn't say anything. She told me before I couldn't take money without asking her.

"Let Margaret go," Susan said to Jane. "Someone has to keep me company." She pulled Jane to her and reached for the coffee cup. "Don't forget the change this time," she said to me.

"Okay." I left before I had to kiss her again. The kitchen door closed behind me, rattling in its frame. In the living room, the sun shone through the slats of the window blinds, dust particles hanging in the air. Susan and Jane's voices were muffled, and Jane's laugh, high-pitched and loud, followed me to the front door.

*

As I ran down the stairs, Mrs. Rodgeski was standing outside her apartment on the second floor, bent over, a canvas bag hanging from her shoulder, trying to unlock her door.

"Help me," she said when I reached the landing. She handed me the key and the bag. "I'm old and I can't see a thing." She stepped to the side and let me to the door. "How's Howard? He must be getting big."

"I don't know. He's been hiding a lot." I unlocked the door and placed the bag on the floor in the foyer. "I was thinking I'd rather have a dog."

"He's dead, isn't he? I asked your mother about him the other day and she didn't say a word." Mrs. Rodgeski took the bag from me, pulled out an orange and handed it to me. "First the fish, then the cat. You can't get a dog because you live in an apartment building. And tell your mother there are more cats at the shelter."

"She said she was tired of death." I walked to the stairs. The elevator stopped at the floor, it dinged and the door opened. No one was inside. I wondered if my father liked dogs or cats. "I'm going to buy donuts, do you want one?"

"I'm on a diet," she said. "Just come by and let me smell the bag." Before she closed the door, she told me to stop running in the halls.

I dropped the orange and the ten dollar bill. Rubén came down the stairs, the bottom of his jeans frayed, hair wet and pulled back, carrying his bass guitar.

"Did Mrs. Rodgeski give you that?" He stopped, picked up the fruit and the bill and handed them to me. "When I saw her she told me she was concerned about my vitamin C intake and gave me an orange, too."

"She gave it to me, and she told me she was on a diet again and that we should get a cat."

Rubén and I walked down the stairs, my hand brushed against his leg, my other hand on the banister, the metal polished and smooth.

"I thought you wanted a dog." Rubén held the front door open for me. What happened to Larry?"

We stood on the stoop. Two women sat on the one next to us. Their voices loud. Hands waving in the air as they complained about their kids. On the street a man with a blue wig, a long gray coat, stood in front of us, holding a cardboard sign with JC loves you too written in red marker.

"He died and the cat died." I looked down the street and didn't see Mr. Ryder. "Who is JC?" I asked.

"He probably means Jesus Christ." Rubén walked down the steps and placed his case down on the sidewalk.

"That guy sounds like the nuns at school."

"Speaking of nuns, yesterday was not a holiday," Rubén said. "And that was Mr. Ryder, wasn't it?"

"Maybe." I stepped off the stoop and stood next to him. Close. I wished I had another flower to give him. "I was just talking," I said and looked up at him.

"Margaret." Rubén stepped away from me and picked up his bass. "Promise me you'll stay away from him." But he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the cars in the street as they drove by.

"Sure," I said.

"Promise." He turned and walked away, the bass case hitting the side of his leg as he went around the corner.

*

I waited until Rubén was gone and then I went to Mr. Ryder's building. I knew I was going to get into trouble for taking so long, but I didn't care. Outside the front door, two girls drew orange moons and purple suns on the sidewalk with large pieces of chalk. I was careful not to step on them as I watched Mr. Ryder sitting at a table in his first floor apartment through the window, the black security bars covered with thin green vines.

A woman wearing a long slim white leather jacket, a small white rat on her shoulder, came to the front door of the building and unlocked it.

"Is that really a rat?" I said and followed her inside.

We stood in the foyer by the gold mailboxes built into the wall. I ran my finger over the names until I found Mr. Ryder's. It said 1B.

"His name is Ted. He's an albino. I ordered him from a catalog." The woman took the rat from her shoulder and held it in the palm of her hand. "Want to hold her?"

"No thank you," I said.

"Suit yourself," she said and walked down the hall, heels clicking on the tile floor.

The hall was bright, sunlight coming through the stained glass windows. I knocked on Mr. Ryder's door. I heard heavy footsteps and then sound of the security chain falling against the door.

"It's you, Margaret," Mr. Ryder said. "I followed your advice and bought wheat bread, but I didn't go this morning."

"Neither did I." I leaned to see into his apartment. "I wanted to go, but I got up late." Bookshelves filled with green encyclopedias lined the hall. A yellow cat, belly scraping the floor, came to the door. It curled its body around Mr. Ryder' feet, brushed its

head against the hem of his pants and lay on the top of his brown shoe. "We had a cat, but it died."

"This is Peter," he said. "I am doing a puzzle right now, but if you want I can give you a loaf of bread." He turned around and I followed him down the hall. The apartment smelled like an old person, stale and like Vics.

Once time I asked Susan what my father liked to do and she said he would do crossword puzzles all day if he could.

"Crossword?" I asked, dragging my fingers across the gold lettering on the leather book spines.

"Jigsaw." His voice sounded hollow. He stopped and looked over his shoulder at me when he realized I was behind him.

"My father does crossword puzzles," I said. "Do you want this? I don't like oranges."

"If you don't want it. I don't like to waste food," he said and took it. "They're my favorite." He tossed the orange in his palm. "I never liked crossword puzzles. They always hurt my eyes."

One of the living room walls was painted red. The wood floor was blonde and sleek. Black and white photographs hung on the walls. In the middle of the room there was a faded brown leather couch with yellow pillows. From where I stood, I could see into the kitchen, a small white table was pushed against the wall, a green bowl sat in the middle of it. I imagined Mrs. Ryder and her red hair. I looked up at Mr. Ryder, his eyes blue and smiling. I wondered if he did it.

"Is that you?" I said and walked across the room, and smoothed my hand over a photograph of a young man standing on the edge of a pier. "My father travels. He's a doctor." I couldn't remember what I told Mr. Ryder the other day.

"That was me in France in my twenties. Before I lived in China, I went to visit my grandmother before she died." He said, sitting down at the table by the window. It was covered with a jagged puzzle pieces. "I thought your father was a pilot."

"What's this?" I said, sitting across from him. I pulled in the chair. It scraped against the wooden floor. I slipped the ten dollar bill into my pocket.

"It's supposed to be the Eifel Tower." He laughed. "Right now it looks like a mess."

"My father really is a pilot. He's real, it's true."

Outside the window, people walked by. I could see their torsos. No heads. There was a photograph on the wall behind Mr. Ryder of his wife sitting in a chair, wearing an evening gown, holding a folded Chinese fan in her hand. I wasn't sure anymore if he was a nice man.

"She's beautiful." I whispered, remembering the gurney, the light blue sheet. I held my breath and knew I had to get out of there.

"She's real, too," he said, pushing his chair away from the table. "Do you want the bread? We can meet at the pond and feed the ducks, not the pigeons. Right?"

"No," I said. "I have to go to the store." I took the ten from my pocket to show him, and dropped it on the floor. I bent down to pick it up and looked out the window, the sky ribbons of purple, gray and blue. Rubén and Susan were on the street, talking, their arms were crossed. She walked away from him, and I knew they were looking for me.

In the kitchen, the phone rang and I jumped. I left the money on the floor and ran to the door, and shut it behind me. It shook in its frame. I raced down the hall, heart beating, hair in my eyes.

As I came out of the building, Rubén turned. Susan was standing on the corner next to a police officer. I wasn't sure how long I had been gone.

"What were you doing?" Rubén grabbed me by the shoulders. He sounded far away and I felt I was going to drown.

"I don't know," I said.

*

I spent years imagining my father, the pilot, flying to places that began with the letter T. Toronto. Tahiti. Toledo. When I was eighteen, I convinced Susan to tell me he lived in a small town outside of Boston. I bought a bus ticket to go see him and when I got there, I had found five Michael Monniers in the phone book. At the first two houses I visited, no one was home. But at the third a man with two kids, a boy and a girl, was in the front yard, playing with a deflated yellow ball. I opened the mailbox and put in the crossword puzzle I had bought for him and walked back to the bus station.

HOW TO LEAVE

Stare at the waitress as she walks by. She's all legs under a black mini skirt. Dark hair piled on top of her head. Compare the size of your right thigh to your left as your husband checks his voice mail. Pull crumpled sticky notes from your purse and toss them under the table. Pretend they're not yours.

"My sciatica is acting up," he says.

"What do you think about dessert?" you ask.

The waitress arrives with two steaming plates and smiles. You're relieved her bottom teeth are crooked, that her parents couldn't afford braces. He tuck a white dinner napkin in the front of his shirt and dives in. You ponder poverty in India, the price of gas, and the long thread of cheese hanging from his chin. Gulp red wine, and stir the lumps out of your mashed potatoes. Watch as he uses the back of his hand to wipe his chin and you're suddenly not hungry. Order one, two after-dinner brandies.

"Mom's coming for dinner on Friday," you say.

"You told me," he says.

In the car on the way home, he hums along with the radio but you don't recognize the song. Is it Dylan or Lennon? Begin to ask him who it is, but don't. Gaze out the window as the snow falls against the dark sky.

*

Sneak into bed wearing an old turtleneck and the pair of paint-stained sweat pants you retrieved from the bottom of the Goodwill bag. He puts his book down, turns off the light, slips his hand under your top, and draws figure eights on your stomach with his finger. His tongue, wet and irritating, is in your ear. Close your eyes. Try to breathe.

Imagine the computer whiz down the street who mows his lawn shirtless. Clinton giving his first inaugural speech. Nothing. "I have an early meeting," you say and turn away. He groans, pulls you to him, and presses his chest against your back. He tucks his arm between your breasts. It's heavy, distracting. Stretch the blanket up to your chin and hope the feeling goes away.

Toss and turn until four when you slink out of bed. Search for studio apartments on the Internet. The price of a one-way ticket to Madrid. Consider taking a break, a breather. Your synapses have taken a vacation, why not you? Google the cute gynecologist who offered to buy you coffee at your last appointment. Get 3,789 hits. Curl up on the floor with your legs tucked under you. Cry.

*

At Gary's office party, the room is full of male accountants who loosen their ties after one drink, and their wives who wear pearls and think volunteering is a full time gig. A large man with freckles the size of raisins bumps into you and spills red wine on your pants. Swear at him under your breath. He runs across the room to his wife, and points at you. They whisper behind cupped hands, heads tilted together. Smile and move discreetly to the buffet table. "I love the quiche," you say to the boss's wife. She asks if you want the recipe. Say no.

Saunter to the bar. Smile at the single accountants as they tell jokes. The guy next to you takes off his jacket, swings it over his shoulder, and pushes his glasses up on his nose. He looks like Clark Kent. You want to introduce yourself as Lois Lane, and ask him where the nearest phone booth is. A man who resembles your husband comes over and rests the palm of his hand on the small of your back. Squirm. Take one step away

from him and tell the one about the rabbi, the priest and the redhead, the only joke your father knew. Clark Kent laughs, turns to you and introduces himself as your husband's new intern.

*

Gary comes home from work complaining about his boss or is it the car? Corner him by the front door. Listen to the rain tap against the metal roof. Take a deep breath. You've rehearsed all day.

"I need a change," you say.

"What kind of change?" he asks.

"The quit our jobs, sell the house, retire in Tahiti, and spend all the money kind of change."

He rubs his hand through his hair. His coat is wet, dripping on the imported Italian tile, and he's still holding his briefcase. Accuse him of not caring, not listening. "Can I at least take off my coat?" he says and follows you to the living room. He suggests a movie, a night out. Call him detached. Oh, no, that's you. He calls you crazy. Storm out of the room, hands waving in the air. Retreat to the bedroom where you watch reruns of *I Love Lucy* on the portable TV he found at a garage sale two summers ago. After three consecutive hours of bad sitcoms, he comes into the room, slides into bed and murmurs he's sorry, that he doesn't need a change. Whisper you have other plans as he falls asleep.

*

Friday. Your mom arrives for dinner, carrying a loaf of French bread and wearing a green beret. "Cute, Mom," you say. "Moi?" she asks. Mix three Manhattans straight up with extra cherries. Sit at the kitchen table while he makes lasagna, her favorite. They

talk, argue, and laugh like old friends. You practice tying a knot in a cherry stem with your tongue, the only essential skill you have. Your mother reaches across the table, holds your hand, and tells stories about your father. How bad his driving was, how he couldn't tell a joke, and that he cried for days when Marilyn Monroe died. "I can't believe he's been gone for two years," she says. Pull your chair closer to her and tell the one about the rabbi, the priest and the redhead. Gary stands behind you with a dish towel draped over his shoulder, hands caressing the back of your neck. Look up at him and wonder who he is.

*

The next day you stay in bed until you hear the bottom of the car scrape against the driveway as he leaves to run errands. Wander to the bathroom. Remove strands of gray hair from the top of your head. Give up after ten; there are just too many. Consider dying your hair blonde or changing your name to Samantha or Lola. Something exotic. On the bathroom counter, Gary keeps his Rogaine, and body lotions with names like Citrus Mint, Papaya Musk, and Hydrating Magnolia. Take the bottles and hide them behind the towels on the bottom shelf of the linen closet.

Shuffle to the kitchen like your thirteen-year-old blind terrier, Marley. Make a pot of coffee and a list of the pros and cons of being with him. Pros: He fills the windshield wiper fluid, reminds you to get your teeth cleaned every six months, and your mother loves him.

Cons: He's vain, a homebody, and chews with his mouth open.

And then there's that feeling. It's one half detachment, one half run, get out. Feel guilty, deceitful, and smothered like chicken in a casserole dish.

The phone rings and it's your mom calling to thank you for dinner. "That Gary is something else."

"Hmmm," you say.

"When am I going to get some grandchildren?"

Don't admit you dislike kids because they're short and noisy. But the truth is you're afraid if you picked one up, you might drop it on its head or worse. If it cried too much, you'd give it away to that nice couple down the street, the ones who leave their Christmas tree up till spring. Instead laugh and tell her how lucky she is to have you.

"Where's Gary?" she asks.

Twist the phone cord around your finger, and peek through the blinds at the world outside. It's snowing, but not sticking. Feel like a kid who runs outside to make a snow angel, and finds there's only mud to roll around in. "Errands," you say.

"Tell him next time I want something ethnic."

*

He walks in from running errands with a newspaper under his arm and takes his shoes off by the front door. Contemplate ripping off your clothes and throwing him down on the kitchen floor that's covered with dog hair. Instead give him a hug. Rub your hand up and down his back until you find the edge of his boxer shorts. Trace the elastic with your finger tips. Listen to the refrigerator hum. Lean your head into his shoulder and glance down at his feet. His socks match and have no holes like yours. For some reason your big toe is always on display. Wait for something warm and sugary to happen. Nothing.

"What do you want for dinner?" he asks and grabs you by the waist. The kitchen is suddenly smaller, closing in on you. You want to jump out the window, but you can't. It's painted shut.

"I'll go to the store," you offer. He wants to go, too. Tell him no. Grab your purse, forget your jacket. Outside, it's cold and damp. Race from the porch to the car. Turn the heater on and wait for it to purr. He runs out of the house. You roll down the window. "Peanuts," he says and hands you a sticky note. He smells like peppermint. Pull away as he says good-bye. Add peanuts to your list of cons. You hate the sound of shells cracking open in the other room, the tiny pieces of red skin that stick to his teeth. He will only eat the kind grown in Virginia and shared this with you on your first date. Did you think it was strange then? No. You thought it was quirky and slept with him. Wonder if the black jeans you wore that night still fit.

Take the back way to the grocery store. Linger in the frozen food aisle. Mint chocolate chip or vanilla? Get both. Thirty minutes later, you have ice cream, a can of WD-40, and baked beans. The line at the check-out extends as far back as the canned meat. At the register, the manager greets you by your first name. Smooth your tongue over your top lip as he scans your items. You like his dark curly hair. He puts your groceries in plastic instead of paper, hands you the change and an extra weekly circular. Ask him for a pen and write your phone number on a dollar bill. Hesitate. Slip it back into your wallet. The old woman behind you with fake eyelashes pushes the front of her cart into your hip and says, "My butter is getting soft."

In the car, spot Gary's sticky note on the passenger's seat. Hide the evidence in your purse. He meets you at the door, takes the bag, and puts everything away in

alphabetical order. The Ben and Jerry's goes behind the Aunt Jemima waffles. The baked beans in front of the cinnamon raisin cereal. Take a pint of ice cream, and go to bed while he watches TV in the living room, volume turned down, dog curled at his feet. Close the door to block out the silence.

Hours later he walks into the bedroom, and sits on the edge of the bed and says, "Things aren't right."

"Should we go to a movie?" you ask.

He's hurt. Grab his hand. Hold on tight. The bottom of your foot is itchy. "Moving won't help," he says. Scratch the itch with your big toe. He plays with the ends of your hair. Pray for the mattress to swallow you, whole. Blurt out: "I'm unhappy." But don't tell him you want to leave. Go. Close the book on this chapter. His reaction is calm, cool, rehearsed as he pulls a card, like a magician, from his back pocket. Wish for a rabbit but he hands you the card. It's smooth, glossy, and "Marriage Fitness for Couples" is printed in red block letters. "It's a good idea," you say and leave the room. Call yourself a coward.

*

Dr. So-and-So is young with pale eyes and sooty lashes, and wears gold barrettes in her hair. You admit you feel disconnected, detached. Gary clasps his hands behind his head, crosses his left leg over his right, and nods in agreement. While she recommends you spend more time together, you watch the clock. "Schedule a date night," she says. He shakes his head and smiles at you. The session ends five minutes early. Feel relieved.

It's Saturday night. "Dinner and dancing," you say. Wear tight jeans and a black blouse, no bra. You want seafood. He wants Mexican.

"You know I don't like dancing," he says.

"What do you like?" you ask.

Sit at the stop sign down the street from your house as cars of happy couples pass by. They have reservations. After twenty minutes, decide on fast food and bowling. Spend seventy-five cents on a pair of false teeth from the gumball machine. Drink lite beer. Shake your hips. Wink at him over your shoulder. Feign connectedness. Roll the ball like your eighty-five-year-old mother-in-law and get two strikes in a row. He's annoyed because he has to add up the scores.

"What's the big deal?" you ask.

"You're drunk," he says.

Tell him he's no fun.

Drive home in silence.

*

It's been days since you've spoken to each other. He sleeps on the couch. You leave for work early. After the third day, call a truce. Wave a pair of white socks at him while he reads the newspaper. He laughs and pulls you onto his lap. Suggest a romantic dinner with fish sticks and broccoli. At the table you sit across from him as he tells you about his day, his exercise routine. Interject a "hmmm" in all the right places. Offer nothing. Your tank is empty. He talks until you yawn, stretch, and kiss him on the cheek. He follows you to the bedroom.

"I'm tired," you say.

"I know," he says and takes the dog for a walk.

*

At your next appointment with Dr. So-and-So, she says, "It may get worse before it gets better."

*

Three a.m. You're rearranging the pantry. Put the kidney beans where the sugar is, the raisins where the peanuts are kept. The freezer is next. Move the fish sticks to the door where he keeps his decaffeinated coffee. Drink espresso until the sun comes up.

Leave for work before he wakes up. The phone rings as you put on your coat. It's your mom calling to remind you about the time your dad backed the car into the garage door.

"Remember, I came home and he was painting it," she says.

"With the wrong color," you add.

You picture her, alone, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea in front of her, and promise you'll stop by to see her later. Think about Gary and the last time you missed him. You can't remember.

That night he cooks. Complain the pasta is not al dente. How he never cleans the bathroom. Make fun of the way he pronounces *it soder* instead of *soda.* He tells you that you are never happy, never satisfied. You know.

*

Stand in the hallway while he works in the office. Stare at the photos hanging on the wall. You're at the beach, his arms around you, the sun in your eyes. Walk in and pick up a stack of papers. Put them down and pretend to look for something in the closet. "What's wrong?" he asks. The words spill out and over. Pace the room. Nose runs. Eyes

swell. Press your hands against your face. Tell him how it's you, not him. End with I'm sorry. He watches you with legs crossed, stroking the dog behind his ears.

*

The next morning you find Gary in the backyard, standing in the wet grass, socks no shoes, and he asks how long you have known. You don't have an answer.

*

Give him the house. The dog. Take the espresso machine, the juicer. Promise yourself you'll give up caffeine. Slowly. Learn to cook Vietnamese. Chinese. Ethiopian. Spend more time with your mom, taking long walks in the snow. Men of all shapes and sizes find you attractive and ask you out. Say no. After six months you bump into Gary at the video store. Hug in the foreign film aisle. His lips graze the side of your cheek, and his aftershave smells like lemon meringue pie. Take his hand, ask about the dog, the house. He tells you how he's painted the living room blue, that he's training for a marathon. Insert a "hmmm" in all the right places. Nod. Smile. Realize that it really is you, not him.

REST STOP

Two months clean. It was a week after Thanksgiving, and Chris had thirty days left of rehab at a recovery center in Phoenix. He was finally getting used to his twin bed, fried chicken Wednesdays and ten p.m. curfew. His days were spent in group talking with other guys about why they wanted to disappear. And that roar inside him had dulled. Subsided. At night he went to a downtown coffee shop and played checkers, checked out women, nodding as the same guys told lies about what they were going to do with their lives when their three months were up.

He had just shown up at the coffee shop when a woman he had had his eye on for a while walked in. Her hair was long and brown, her nose slim, covered with freckles. She carried a stack of books and a black bag with long wispy threads hanging from the handles, and sat on small plaid couch by the door. She came in the evenings like he did, and he liked to watch her read, lips moving as she turned the page, chin in the palm of her hand. He thought she looked nice. Harmless. Pretty. Someone he wanted to talk to.

"My mother is moving to Peru." Chris sat on the couch across from her. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, not looking at her, but out the windows at the rusted orange Volvo parked outside. "To be a missionary." He didn't know what else to say, couldn't believe he was talking to her, but it was the truth. He was supposed to tell the truth.

"I hate those stickers that they put on fruit," she said. "You know the ones that say inspected by number 461, or three? What a waste." She closed the book and crossed her leg, swinging it back and forth, a black sandal hanging from the tip of her toes.

The kid working behind the counter with pale skin let out a high-pitched laugh as he waited on a couple of girls wearing tight jeans and blue eye shadow. Chris looked over, jealous of him for being so normal.

"Why are you telling me this?" Chris asked the woman. He thought she was good looking but nuts.

"Why are you telling me about your mother?" She traced small rectangles on the book cover with the tip of her finger and smiled.

"It's just talk. Practice." He picked up the sports section from the coffee table, folded it in half and put it down. "That's all I'm doing. Having a conversation."

He sat back, crossing his leg like her. He knew he had to start connecting with something, someone soon, but he just wasn't sure how to do it.

"I guess you could call this a conversation," she said, and extended her hand across the table, her eyes never leaving his. "I'm Gracie. I've seen you here before."

"Chris. Obstetrician." He shook her hand, her fingers thin and long. He thought she might play the piano. "Demerol Addict."

"So you're a gynecologist?" She took a piece of hair that framed her face and wrapped it around her finger. "Why didn't you just say that?"

"It turns women off," he said. He liked her eyes. One was blue, the other grey, and that she made him laugh.

"And so does that ring on your finger." She took out a pen and a black notepad from her bag and wrote down her phone number. "You probably have a tribe of kids at home, too."

"Only one. Mary's five."

Gracie handed him her number, picked up her books, and stepped to the door. "Call me if you want to practice talking. Or listening."

She held the door open for an elderly woman with short red hair wearing a white linen suit. Thick glasses hung from a silver chain around the woman's neck.

"Just talking, right?" he said to her.

"Sure," Gracie said and followed the woman outside.

The sun had started to set. The sky red and orange. Gracie walked across the parking lot to her car, books resting on her hip. Slowly. Legs long. Lean. A buzzer went off behind the counter, and the kid, phone tucked between his ear and shoulder, put on a gray oven mitt and pulled a tray of muffins from the oven. The shop smelled like cinnamon. Chris folded the paper with her number and slipped it into his pocket. Listening. Waiting. The roar inside him quiet.

*

The next day he called Gracie during her lunch break. She taught eighth grade and told him that she had twenty minutes to eat so he had better talk fast.

"Meet me later for coffee, or a scone," he said. It was between meetings and he stood in the afternoon sun, rubbing his arms, trying to keep warm. Since he got to rehab, he was cold all the time. "Or for coffee and a scone?"

"You can't boss me around," she told him. "Besides I'm busy. I have thirty-five eighth graders, and papers to grade, unlike you who are in group therapy all day." But she stayed on the phone, telling him about who punched who and why and how the class pet, a ferret named Abe, died. "We kept him in a tank. I came in the other morning and he

was dead. Maybe instead of getting a new pet, I should fill it with plastic flowers. It's too much for the kids," she said.

Chris listened, nodding his head in all the right places. It was easier talking to a stranger, someone he hadn't betrayed. Since rehab when he called his wife Trisha, their conversations were taut with long pauses. They stuck to safe subjects: their daughter Mary, her swimming lessons. The house with its clogged kitchen drain. He missed the way Trisha made him laugh, the priest and rabbi jokes she used to tell him.

"You could plant a tree, or a garden," he said. "What about a lawn? Maybe you won't kill that."

"Too late, we killed the tree last spring." Gracie laughed, low and wonderful.

He gave her his number and called Trisha and agreed to meet her at the coffee shop the next day. He walked back inside for a nap on the sway-backed bed.

*

When he arrived, the shop was empty except for two young girls slouched down in overstuffed chairs, headphones on, lips moving, heels tapping the floor. Chris sat in the back next to the window so he could see when Tricia pulled up. He was nervous and wasn't sure what to say to her. He hoped she would tell him that she had met someone, a nice guy like their next door neighbor Rick. Safe. Reliable. Rick was the kind of guy who would check her oil. Put money in his IRA. A nice guy. Not someone who sat in the den late at night, T.V. on, sound off with a needle and a prescription of Demerol. Naked. Colors flashing. Family asleep upstairs.

The kid who worked the counter drove a large white van past the window in reverse and disappeared behind the building. A few minutes later, he walked in. The back

of his shirt was tucked into his pants, a folded white towel hanging from his back pocket, brown hair tangled. He grabbed a clear plastic bottle filled with blue liquid from the counter and walked toward Chris, spraying the tops of the tables.

"Nice driving," Chris said. "It only goes in reverse?"

"It's a sweet ride," the kid said. "I got it for two hundred dollars." He took the towel from his pocket, dropped it on the table and sat down across from Chris. "The problem is that I can't get it into drive, so my boss lets me leave it here until I can get it fixed." He drummed his fingers under the bottom of the black table top.

"Gary," Chris said as he read the name tag on the guy's shirt. "Sounds like you got ripped off."

"Maybe I did," Gary said, "that's what my mother tells me, but only she can say that." He pointed the bottle and sprayed it into the air. They watched the sunlight catch the liquid before it landed on the floor.

"My first car was a Gremlin." Chris put the heel of his hand against the edge of the table, stretched in his chair. "You probably don't even know what that is." Chris laughed, remembering how ugly it was. Electric blue. And how the driver's door wouldn't open and he had to climb through the window to get in or out.

"I've seen pictures of it." Gary picked up the towel and wrapped it around his hand. "That's an ugly car."

"You think that was bad?" Chris checked his watch, five minutes to Trisha. "My next car was a white Pinto with a red racing stripe. An old woman hit me from behind. I closed my eyes and waited to die," Chris said rubbing his arms, cold and surprised he was still alive. "At least I could get it into drive."

"You're funny," Gary stood, and hit the side of the table with the towel. "Maybe if you're lucky, I'll give you a ride."

One of the girls, black hair, round face, shoulders rounded, walked to the front door and pressed her face against the glass. She turned and stared at Gary who called her a trouble maker from across the room. She laughed and sat down. The girl reminded Chris of Gracie. Her laugh, the way she moved. Gary walked to door, sprayed the door with the blue liquid, and wiped it, leaving white streak marks on the glass.

When Trisha walked into the coffee shop, she took off her sunglasses and stopped to say something to Gary, who held the door open for her. They laughed, then she touched his shoulder lightly. She looked around the room until she saw Chris. She was too skinny, and taller than him by a couple of inches. She wore heels, a pale pink t-shirt and tight pants that clung to her ankles. A pretty woman.

As she walked toward him, he couldn't remember what she felt like. How she tasted. It had been a month since they had last seen each other and he hadn't missed her. He watched her, shoulders back, sunglasses swinging in her hand. He felt empty inside. Hollow.

"I talked to your mother," Trisha said and sat down. She folded her hands on the table. "She said that she coming is next week."

"Before she leaves for Peru." Chris reached his hand across the table. He wasn't sure why. He thought that was what he was supposed to do. "You look like you're at church."

"The funny thing is that I've been praying." Trisha put her hands in her lap and leaned back in her chair away from him. "Well sort of. When Mary's sleeping, I sit on the

back deck, and talk to the sky." She laughed and shook her head, a strand of hair fell into her eyes and she moved it behind her ear. "I'm still waiting for some answers."

"I would have liked to have seen Mary," he said. "We could have taken her to the park, or something." It was true. He wanted to see her, hear her laugh, feel her fingers as they traced the skin around his eyes, his nose, his mouth.

"I told her you were in Africa helping sick kids." Trisha opened her purse and pulled out a piece of construction paper with red swirls and a black sun. "She made this for you." Trisha put the drawing on the table and pushed it towards him.

On the other side of the coffee shop, Gary sat down across from the girls, folded his hands behind his head and talked. So young. So easy in his skin.

"You make me sound like a good guy."

Trisha, silent, rested her elbows on the table, her chin on the heels of her hands, and rubbed the side of her face. She looked tired, like a small child, like Mary.

"I wish I were in Africa," he said and folded the edge of the paper.

The girl with the black hair stood and danced in a circle in front of Gary, arms in the air above her, snapping her fingers, long hair swaying, hips moving from side to side.

"I signed up for an art class, plein air," Trisha said. "I haven't painted anything yet. I think I just like carrying the easel around." She nodded at the painting hanging above the table. "That's horrible. What is it supposed to be? Mary's drawing is better than that." Trisha peered closer, squinting.

"I don't know. A guy and a horse?"

"Me too," she said.

"You too what?" Chris asked.

"I wish you were there." She pressed the palm of her hand against the edge of the table. "In Africa. I told a few people you were. Neighbors. But no one believes me. What was I supposed to say? My husband shoots up and I pretended not to notice."

Gary got up and put his arms around the girl. They rocked back and forth to no music.

"I'm thinking about getting my own place when I'm done." Chris let out a breath. He hadn't planned on saying that. But there it was.

"How do you know this already?" Trisha checked her watch, stood up, not looking at him. "I have to take Mary to swim lessons."

"I just do." He folded Mary's picture and put it into his back pocket.

"I told her that you live in a tent, and she was worried about the elephants eating you." Trisha stroked the top of his hand.

"What did you tell her?" Chris sat still, not moving, hoping he'd feel something.

"I said they just eat grass." She moved her hand, reached into her purse and pulled out her sunglasses.

"And peanuts." Chris sat back in his chair.

"Peanuts," she whispered and walked towards the door.

Chris used to be the one to take Mary to her swim lessons. He would stand in the water, shorts ballooning around his legs, holding the small of her back with the palm of his hand. Her eyes were red and glassy, laughing that hysterical out of control laugh that she did when she was tired. Scared. He wanted to laugh that way now. Trisha was getting in her car, hand on the door handle, hair in her face.

*

Gracie called. It was after midnight, and she left a message for him to meet her at the coffee shop the next day. He replayed the message a few times, listening to her voice, the way she said her name. She showed up, an hour late, hair down around her shoulders. Her lips were lined and pink. She wore mascara and a slim black dress, pulling at the hem as she walked towards him.

"I want to go for a ride." She sat down next to him and smoothed her hand back and forth across the scratchy yellow and brown cushion. "I've been inside all week and need some fresh air. Let's get fast food and sit on a park bench."

"You're late, you know. You made me wait."

"I know, but you're a doctor. You make people wait all the time."

He shook his head, and rubbed the back of his neck. "I have to be back by five for a group meeting. I have things to do." It's talking and listening he thought and reminded himself that it wasn't a date.

"Me, too," she said and laughed. "I have parents to call. Students' weekends to ruin." She stood, gave him her hand and helped him up. "I'll drive. I am worse than a backseat driver."

Her car was a faded grey sedan with tinted windows. She pulled out of the parking lot, glanced into the rearview mirror and ran her finger over her bottom lip.

"I never liked to drive," Chris said. "And I hate planes. When I am finished I'm thinking about getting on a train and going somewhere. Maybe to Canada. It would be nice to see some snow." An orange rolled from the back of the car and stopped next to his foot. He picked it up, the peel bruised and soft. "Saving this for something?"

"I've been looking for that." Gracie took it from him and tossed it in the back seat. "It's better that you don't like to drive." She laughed. "We would never go any where. I'm a lot like my mother. She's the driver and puts my father in charge of the radio."

"I can man the radio." Chris fastened his seatbelt, and grabbed the handle above the door as Gracie cut off a black Coupe de Ville. Before rehab, he never wore a seatbelt. "Or peel your orange for you."

The guy in the car leaned out the window and gave Gracie the finger, which she returned. "And feed it to me?" she said, smiling at him. "Don't worry. You can let go of the handle. I'm a safe driver, really. I drive like your grandmother."

"Why mine?" Chris let go of the handle like she told him, and felt like a child for listening to her.

"Mine are dead."

He wondered why he gotten into the car with her. If she killed them, Trisha would never forgive him.

They stopped at a small park on the east side of town and sat under a tree near the tennis courts. A young couple dressed in cut offs and tank tops stood talking over the net. The guy, bald, a trim black beard, tossed the ball in his hand, and the woman tapped the edge of the racquet against the side of her leg.

"When I moved here, I drove around for days looking for an apartment and couldn't find one, but I find this," Gracie said and lay back on the grass. "It reminds me of home in Kentucky. I close my eyes and listen to the families chatter and the air smells a little bit like corn."

"I am not a big fan of corn," Chris said, his back against the tree. "It doesn't taste like anything. Give me a Brussels sprout any day."

"You've never had sweet corn," she said. "You have to pick it and eat it the same day. Anyway who admits to liking Brussels sprouts?"

The couple started playing a game. The muffled sound of the ball hitting concrete bothered Chris.

"We forgot to get food," he said. "I thought you were hungry."

"Is that all you have to say?" Gracie rolled to her side, her dress falling to the top of her thighs. "So your mother is moving to Peru?" She reached up, ran her finger over his jaw, around his mouth.

"Should I ask you about school? Your students?" He closed his eyes.

"No, that's dull. I want to know about Peru."

"She goes in June with her church. She called me about six months ago and said she needed a change." Gracie was next to him, her breath on his face. "Food might be good," he said and opened his eyes, but he didn't want to go. He felt comfortable with her, like he had known her for a long time.

A man walked across the grass in front of them, carrying an opened black umbrella, his arm flexed in the air. Gracie lay back again, her forearm covering her eyes.

"Can you take a train to Peru?" she asked. "I don't think you can. Forget eating. It's nice here and besides, I really don't like fast food."

"But that's what you wanted."

"I changed my mind." Gracie placed her finger on his lips and told him to be quiet. He stretched out next to her, their legs almost the same length. The grass under the

tree was wet and cool. He picked up a piece of bark, and ripped it in half, the edges curled and brown. Kids on bicycles raced by screaming: "On your mark, get set, go."

*

Chris sat in Gary's van behind the coffee shop, under a street light, next to a green dumpster. It had rained all day. The asphalt was slick. The inside of the van smelled cold and moldy. Shag carpeting, yellow and green, the color of Chartreuse, the liquor Chris's grandfather drank when Chris was a kid, covered the floor. The walls. The roof. Gary talked about how he wanted to be a race car driver or to dig holes. Big holes with a yellow Caterpillar. The doors were opened and Chris lay back on the floor, legs dangling, ankles crossed.

"Here," Chris said and sat up. "I figured you needed this." He took an air freshener shaped like a cactus from his back pocket. "What died in here?"

"It's not as bad as it was," Gary said. "I think maybe a squirrel crawled in the engine and died." He opened the wrapper and hung the air freshener from a small white knob on the dashboard.

"I think you should be a race car driver," Chris said. "Travel around, have seasons off." Chris opened the checkers game and set the black pieces on his side of the board. "I haven't played in a few days, so go easy on me. Alright?"

"I played all day with that girl from the community college," Gary said. "My mom would hate it if I raced cars. She worries about me when I drive."

"How bad can it be?" Chris asked. "You only drive in reverse."

A car pulled next to them and turned around, windows down, music rattling from the stereo, tires splashing through puddles.

"You're telling me to race cars? You don't even like to drive." Gary stacked the red pieces one on top of the other. "Maybe I'll just be a florist and grow geraniums in old coffee cans."

"That sounds like an old man kind of job," Chris said. "You're only eighteen."

"Seventeen," he said. "When I was a kid my grandfather had a green house and grew all kinds of flowers. Gigantic red ones. Purple ones bigger than me."

Chris laughed and thought it sounded okay. Calm. Quiet. He wished he was seventeen again back when he wanted to be a Viking. Not the kind who pillaged or terrorized. A nice one who sailed around the world in a big wooden boat. He wondered if it was too late.

A white cat jumped onto the dumpster and rubbed its nose against the metal edge, its tail arched, swinging, the tip slightly curled.

"I want to get a place with lots of windows and maybe a cat," Chris said. "Maybe I could be a gardener, mow lawns. Trim bushes." He lay back on the floor. "That air freshener isn't helping."

"Tell me about it," Gary said and picked up a couple of checkers, and shook them in his hand, the pieces scraping against each other.

*

It was a week before Christmas, Family Week at the program. Trisha came and sat across from Chris, looking over his head, distracted, thinking about what, he didn't want to know. She told the counselor, a heavy man with deep set eyes and a high voice, about the day Chris was fired for writing his own prescriptions.

Chris remembered how they stood in the parking lot, Trisha wearing her gym clothes, no bra, and she refused to get into the car with him. It was raining, the drops soft and sweaty, her t-shirt clinging to her skin. Back then the roar filled him, covered his heart, filled his lungs. He was relieved he had gotten caught. Two hospital security guards, the ones who escorted him from the operating room, sat in their car waiting for them to leave. Chris took off his suit jacket and draped it over Trisha's shoulders. She shrugged it off and it fell into a puddle. "I really hate you," she said, staring at the wet jacket.

The counselor listened, his eyes on Trisha. Chris wanted to leave. Go. Trisha sat looking at him, shaking her head, hands under thighs, fingers tapping the bottom of the chair. "I had no idea who he was."

When the session was over, Chris walked Trisha to her car.

"You need to get your tires rotated." He bent down and rubbed his hand over the worn down tread on one of the back tires.

"You can visit after the holidays," Trisha said. "We'll make it brief, have coffee. Then we'll talk about when you'll move back in," she said.

"I told you, Trish, I'm going to get my own place. A cat," he said. "That's what I want."

"What about a dog?" She got into the car and rolled down the window. "A small one, a puppy. It could sleep with Mary."

Chris leaned his head against the door. He felt crushed for her, for them, and couldn't believe he had done this to her. He started to apologize, to tell her he'd take it back if he could, but she shook her head and put the car in gear. He stepped back, afraid

she would run him over. He wouldn't blame her. She looked straight ahead, hands on the wheel, the radio on, a female announcer with a British accent.

"What am I supposed to do?" Trisha said. "We're supposed to be a family."

"I know," he said.

Trisha drove away and stopped at the gate, brake lights on, tail pipe hanging low. One more thing she needed to fix. Chris knew she was waiting for him to do something, to love her, but he couldn't. He put his hands in his pockets, looked up at the sky and kicked at the air. The sun was white and high. A police siren whined in the distance. She put her blinker on and pulled out into the street.

*

The next Saturday, Chris and Gracie drove a hundred miles north of Phoenix. The road was curved and steep, green bushes dotted the red dirt, snow flakes tumbled from the sky. Heavy white clouds cradled the horizon to the east.

"Did you wake up one day and decide you wanted to be a gynecologist?" Gracie asked, looking over her shoulder before she changed lanes. "When I was a kid I wanted to be a nun. My first grade teacher Sister Mary Katherine played the guitar and sang. I wanted to be just like her."

"I wanted to be a champion basketball player, but I'm too short." He didn't care what she had to say. He was tired of people asking him about why he took drugs, why he had become a gynecologist. It had nothing to do with women. He liked babies. Life. And he had just started to figure that part out.

A small rock shot up from a tire, and hit the windshield making a quick popping sound.

"Maybe her name was Sister Bernadette Marie? Anyway, she told me I had to marry God." Gracie pulled into a rest stop at the top of the hill. "I was okay with it for about a week or so until one day I looked up at this photograph that hung next to the clock above the blackboard. It was God with lots of white hair and that billowy robe. And I didn't know what he was wearing underneath it." She pointed to her purse on the floor beside his feet and Chris handed it to her. "So I signed up for piano lessons instead."

The rest stop was empty. The sky was wide and bluer than Chris had ever seen.

He picked up some gum wrappers that were next to her purse. "Why don't you clean your car?" he asked and tossed a wrapper to the floor. "You teach. What else do you do all day? Drive around and pick up strange guys?" He couldn't stop himself. He was on a roll. It had been a bad week.

"What's wrong? Look at that view. I brought you here to show you this." Gracie got out of the car and Chris followed her to a row of vending machines under a red awning. The back of her dress gathered in folds at her waist, a soft brown mole on her shoulder blade.

"You don't look like a grade school teacher," Chris said. He leaned his head against the machine, the glass smeared with fingerprints.

"What should I look like?" She took some quarters from her purse and slipped them into the thin slot, and pushed a button. "You know, you don't seem like an addict." A clear plastic container with a yellow top popped out. Inside was a set of fake crooked teeth and she handed it to him.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"That's up to you." She walked over to a sagging bench, took her sunglasses from her purse and sat down.

A silver sports car pulled in, and a young couple got out of the car and sat against the hood. The woman leaned her back into the man, his hands on her shoulders, chin pressed into the back of her head. They made it look easy.

Chris sat down next to Gracie. At the bottom of the hill there was a cluster of saguaros that stood tall, straight. The arms were draped with pieces of red ribbon with small silver bells tied to their ends. The wind blew lightly, and the bells clinked and sounded like metal spoons.

"The thing is you don't really want to know about me or my life," she said. "Don't answer that, please. I don't want to know the truth."

Chris turned his head and the couple got into the car, and drove away. The truth was that he was just figuring out how to care about himself. He looked up as a hawk, its belly the color of chocolate, its tail long and striped, flew right above them, talking loudly.

"I like those pens with those fuzzy tops and I hate country music," she said. "That and bluegrass. I guess I'm supposed to like it being from Kentucky."

"I love bluegrass." He stretched his arms across the back of the bench, the paint warm from the sun. "And I'm getting really good at checkers, and I'm the only person in the world who will admit that he eats Brussels sprouts." He squinted, and wished he had his sunglasses. He took hers and put them on.

"Hey," she said and turned to him, her face against the folds of his shirt. "You smell like lemon."

"It's my detergent." He moved his hand, ran his fingers along the hem of her dress and checked his watch. It was after four, before dinner. He missed his home. Another car pulled into the rest stop, tires on gravel. "I could be a gardener," he said, his voice low. He knew Gracie couldn't hear him so he said it again. Chris pictured the cat he wanted, orange with white ears, and a house, his. He could see himself on the roof of his new place replacing some loose shingles. And Mary could come on weekends and help him plant flowers in the yard.

*

Christmas morning. Chris sat on a red deck chair outside his room and checked his voicemail. He had two from Trisha, who called to tell him that the kitchen sink was backed up again, and none from Gracie. He dialed her number, and picked a pine cone from the wreath that hung on the front door. He pulled at the scales and dropped them one by one on the ground next to him. She answered on the first ring.

"Get in the car and come get me. I need to find a church," he said.

She told him that he couldn't tell her what to do, to wait by the front gate, and not make her wait. "Then I want breakfast. Pancakes," she said and hung up.

While Chris was waiting for Gracie, a car, Trisha's car, pulled in. She stopped and got out. She was wearing a long black coat and low heels, lips red, a small gold tree pinned to the collar of her coat.

"You're taller than me as usual," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I left Mary with my parents and got in the car," she said. "I wanted to talk."

Gracie pulled in behind her and stopped. She shook her head and looked down, then eased the car forward and rolled down the window. "Do you know how to get to Highway Seventeen from here?"

Chris looked away, praying she wouldn't say anything.

"Go two blocks north, make a right, and the exit is down the road a bit," Trisha said, pointing.

"Thanks," Gracie said. "I'm going to decorate some saguaros on the hill." She held up a spool of green ribbon to show them, rolled up the window and drove away.

"I always wondered who did that," Trisha said.

The Catholic church down the street from the center was in the middle of mass. Chris and Trisha sat in the back next to a family dressed in velvet with two young boys who held new trucks tucked under their arms. Trisha took his hand and placed it on her lap.

"I didn't send Mary any presents," he said. "It's cold in here." He rubbed his arms and kept his coat on.

"She gets enough from my parents," Trisha said. "I don't think it's cold." She took off her coat and folded it next to her, and took his hand.

The priest walked in wearing a purple robe, his hands in the air, singing off key.

"Your fingers are cold," he said. "I guess it's hard to send gifts from Africa. We'll have to tell Mary the truth. She needs to know."

"Not now," she said, and let go of his hand. "She doesn't need to know."

"Not ever," he said and stood up from the pew.

The congregation stood, clothes rustling, shoes scraping the cement floor, and looked down at their folded hands. Trisha looked at him, love or pity trapped behind her eyes, her skin, her bones. Pity, he thought, and walked to the back of the church and watched Trisha.

A woman walked to the altar, sat down at the organ, and pressed the keys, music echoing in the cold room. The priest instructed the congregation to hug the person next to them. Trisha turned to the boy with the truck and patted him on the shoulder. Chris pushed open the heavy metal doors. He stood on the sidewalk in the sun, the breeze cool on his face, and waited, wanting to feel what the people inside were feeling.

*

On his way to the rest stop, the clouds moved quickly across the sky. He wished for snow. He wanted to make a snowman. When he pulled into the parking lot, Gracie was on the bench, but she didn't turn around.

"I'm hungry," she said as he sat down next to her. "What about my pancakes?"

"I have a candy bar in my glove compartment," he said. "And then there's that bar down the road, but I can't go in there until my month is up."

"You're getting off easy," she said. "I wanted pancakes with strawberries."

"Get up," he said. "I have a plastic knife, too. We'll eat like kings."

"I don't know why I listen to you," she said and stood up. "I'm usually the bossy one."

"You know you like it," he said and they walked to the car. He took her hand and liked how it fit into his. He opened the door for her and walked to his side of the car and got in.

"I do," she laughed, and took her shoes. She gathered her skirt together and climbed into his lap.

A car with two older women pulled in next to them. He could hear their music through the windows and he thought he knew the song, some Christmas carol he could never remember the name of, one that always reminded him that the holidays were okay.

"I'm thinking about going back to Kentucky." Gracie leaned her forehead against his, the tips of their noses touching. "It's too hot in Phoenix and I miss my family. Come with?"

The women wore matching brown coats, and carried streams of ribbons to the saguaros at the bottom of the hill, arms linked, leaning into each other, signing.

"I could," he said and pulled his hand through the back of her hair, "and plant some corn."

Gracie laid her head in the crook of his neck. Her stomach grumbled and Chris slid his hands to her back. He didn't tell her yes or no. The sky was clearing, endless and huge, pillows of white clouds surrounding the sun. Gracie pulled his hands between her breasts. He wanted to feel her heartbeat, but couldn't. He couldn't feel his own yet. But he knew the roar was quiet. Calm.

LINGER

I leave a note for my husband, Robert, on the kitchen counter next to his subscription of *Popular Mechanics*. It says I know he's been sleeping with my best friend Michelle. And by the way, she's also sleeping with Mark who lives two doors down. I'm taking the espresso machine I gave him for his last birthday. It was really a gift for me, not him. And the Mustang we bought with our savings, it wasn't stolen. I took it.

I drive through Flagstaff and head north to the Navajo Reservation, where I spent two years working at a health clinic taking temperatures and recording patients' vital statistics in tattered manila folders. It was there I decided I wanted to be a pastry chef, that I preferred the company of soft, pasty dough to wheezing adults and sniffling children.

Hugging the white line on the four-lane highway, I have one hand on the wheel. The road is quiet, empty except for scraps of blown out tire lying in the middle of the lane, and the occasional truck driver wearing a baseball cap pulled down low who honks and waves.

Once I'm on the reservation, the sky opens wide; the horizon is dotted with specks of houses and bent, twisted trees. The scenery has become scenic. I pass a few fast-food restaurants; and slow down when I see a sign for May's Diner. I refuse to eat fried food. The building is long and yellow like a school bus. Two teenage boys lean against a parked truck. Stray dogs run through the parking lot, dodging cars and sticks the boys throw at them. There's a line of people outside the door. I pull over and ask, "What do they serve?"

"Fry bread," says the taller boy. He's wearing a t-shirt that says "Define Boyfriend."

"What else?" I ask.

"Fry bread," the other one says. They laugh and slap each other on the arm. I laugh with them, and take off.

A few miles down the road, I pass a man, tall and slight, standing in a cluster of green grass, backpack at his feet, hands in his front pockets. I tap the brake, there are no cars around, and watch him in the rear view mirror.

In the seventies my father, a former altar boy, stopped for every hitchhiker on the Garden State Parkway. My childhood was spent sharing the back seat of the family Ford LTD station wagon with strangers carrying their life's possessions in a bag clutched to their chest. I remember one Sunday when I was twelve, we drove a former NFL draftee to New York City instead of going to the store for bread and parmesan cheese like my mother asked. When the man got out of the car on the corner of 42nd and Broadway, my father turned to me and said, "Only give a ride to a person who looks you in the eye."

I put the car in reverse and back up in the middle of the road. I lean over the seat, roll down the window part way, and keep the door locked.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

The guy takes off his sunglasses and bends down to talk to me, hands on his thighs. His face is thin, freckled; in the center of his chin is a brown mole, the size of my thumb. His t-shirt is streaked with white paint; a flannel shirt is tied around his waist. "Colorado. Rico," he says.

Since I left Robert, the husband, two hours ago, I have made a new rule: I won't give a ride to a person from Texas, his home state.

"I'm Clyde," the man says and tries to stick his hand through the window to shake mine.

"Okay Clyde. I'm Elaine." I keep my hand on the wheel. "Where are you from?"

"Texas."

I shake my head and think of my father. I consider breaking this new rule if this guy's not from Austin, Robert's hometown. Besides I like this guy's tattoo. It's a rose, centered on the soft spot of his neck, right below his Adam's apple. I take inventory of his eyes: they're shaped like walnuts, gray and clear, and he's able to maintain eye contact.

"San Antonio born and raised, but I've lived in Phoenix for the last five years," he says.

"I went to culinary school in Phoenix," I say. "You're hitchhiking from there?"

"No. The Greyhound broke down in Tuba City."

"Get in," I say, and flip the lock.

Clyde places his pack on the backseat next to the espresso machine, takes off his flip flops, and sits crossed-legged in the passenger seat. His toenails are painted pink. "Nice ride," he says. "It's a Camaro, right?"

"It's a '68 Mustang GT with a 351 Windsor, and a Jasper Class Two Racing Motor," I say.

"What does that mean?"

"It's quick." I rev the engine, glide the car onto the highway, push in a CD, and adjust the volume. We drive over a ridge and come upon a *Men at Work* sign. I pump the brake. Clyde puts his hand on the dashboard. A man, wearing an orange neon vest, waves a flag with his right hand and holds his left hand parallel to the ground, motioning for me to slow down. Along the side of the road, workers talk and drink from white Styrofoam cups. I stop the car and wait for the guy to wave us through.

"They're pretty," I say and point at Clyde's feet.

"I did it for my daughter, she likes it." He reaches behind him, grabs the pack, and pulls out a photograph of a young girl who looks about eight, dressed in flowered overalls and a white shirt. "This is Caroline."

"She's sweet."

He puts the pack on the floor. "Nice espresso machine," he says.

"I saved it from my husband and his new girlfriend who drinks decaffeinated."

A truck, with no camper shell, and a bed full of kids passes the car, crossing the double yellow line. The wind crisscrosses their hair against their faces. The kids smile and wave, and the back tires of the truck throw up stones that bounce off the windshield. I close my eyes and pray for no cracks.

Clyde adjusts the seat back, takes off his sunglasses and uses his sleeve to clean the lenses. "What are you going to do about that husband?"

"Let him stew for a while until I figure things out," I say and press the button on the edge of the lever on the steering wheel. Blue wiper fluid shoots across the windshield. I push the lever down, the blades fan the fluid away.

"My ex did the same thing. Twice," he says.

There's a stop sign at the junction ahead. There are no people, no cars, but I stop anyway. To the right of the sign is a dirt road that winds up and over the top of a red-faced ridge. I turn to look at Clyde.

"The first time I sold her clothes at a swap meet."

"And the second time?" I ask.

"I kicked her out," he says. "She left and took Caroline with her."

I think of my house, and how I don't want it anymore and of the flower garden where Howard, our German Shepherd is buried. Robert will forget to water it.

"Why did you leave?" Clyde asks.

"What else was I supposed to do?"

*

We stop at a gas station. It's a low, wide house. White paint is peeling off the clapboard in large pieces, revealing spots of rough, cracked wood beneath it. It's the only building for miles. There's one pump centered on a concrete island in the middle of the dirt parking lot with a note taped to it that says: Prepay or die. Before Clyde gets out of the car, he presses crumpled bills into my hand. I go in to pay, and a young girl behind the counter talks on the phone and turns pages of a celebrity magazine. She takes the money and punches register keys without looking at me.

I walk back to the car and shade my eyes with my hand. The sun is high, and bright yet, seems close enough to touch. Maybe because there's nothing else around. The clouds, the color of limestone, race by. Clyde pumps the gas, one foot against the curb of the island.

"I think it's another hour to Rico," he says. "Do you have a map?"

"I do, but I think Rico's farther than that."

I open the trunk and find the atlas next to the quilted plaid jacket Robert and I found at a garage sale. I said it was ugly, but he made me try it on. And when I complained it was itchy, he bought it and told me I needed to keep something warm in the car, just in case. I fold the jacket in half and shove it a bag of old clothes that I forgot to take to Goodwill.

I walk around the car, get in the driver's side, and open the atlas. Clyde sits in the passenger seat. "You're right," I say, "Rico's about sixty miles. I worked at a clinic west of here, back then things seemed so far away."

"You're a doctor?" he asks.

"Thought I wanted to be, but decided I didn't like people that much."

Clyde takes out a pack of cigarettes from his backpack.

"You can't smoke in my car."

He opens the pack, sticks his nose inside and inhales. "Here," he says and shows it to me. It's full of half-smoked cigarettes.

"I collect them. My way of helping the environment." He leans out the car door and picks up some cigarette butts off the ground and tosses them inside the pack. "Caroline's other idea to get me to quit."

"She lives with her mom in Rico?"

He shakes the pack in his hand. A car pulls into the parking lot sending brown plumes of dust into the air.

"Until her mom's boyfriend skidded off the road in a snow storm. Caroline went through the windshield."

We watch a woman with her hair pulled back in a bun get out of her car. She opens her purse, and drops her keys in. The young girl comes out of the store, points to her watch; the woman shrugs her shoulders and walks inside.

"I don't know what to say."

Clyde slides the pack into his front pocket. "Me, too," he says and shuts the car door.

*

At the edge of the reservation near Cortez, there are patches of snow on the side of the road even though it's May. A couple of cars have pulled off to the side. Adults stand around and talk as two small children grab fistfuls of snow and throw them into the air. I pull into a drugstore parking lot.

"I'll be right back," I say and leave Clyde with the car running and wonder if my father ever left his car with a stranger.

In the front of the drugstore, there's a gift shop. The shelves are stocked with pottery bowls and plastic see through containers filled with rubber snakes and plastic rings. I spin the postcard display and choose one with a family making jewelry on it. 'Navajoland' is printed across the top of the card. I ask the man wearing a striped smock behind the counter for a pen and write: "Robert, Have a kid or two. And don't forget the latch on the fence doesn't work." I buy a stamp and ask the clerk how long it will take to get to Flagstaff.

"About two weeks," he says.

*

We follow the Dolores River as it sways and winds its way toward Rico. Once we're in town, Clyde directs me past a liquor store, a couple of closed restaurants and houses with front porch swings and toys scattered in the yard. The streets are empty, it's almost sunset. People must be inside cooking dinner and I remember last week when Robert and I were in the kitchen. He was chopping vegetables and I stirred the sauce, simmering on the stove. I talked non-stop about my day and when I put my hand on the small of his back, he stepped to the side and asked me to get him some more onion.

I make a left at the last street in town and drive to a creek bed and stop. Clyde carries his backpack to the water. I walk with him and sit on the ground. The earth is cold, dry, and I pick up a short stick and draw circles in the dirt. He unzips the pack and takes out a plastic boat, a Barbie doll, and a comb missing most of its teeth. "Open this, will you?" he says and pulls out a small package of cookies. I tear it open with my teeth. He takes the package, and hands me a cookie. We eat, watching the sun dip behind the trees. Next he breaks an arm off the doll and places it with the comb on the boat. I get up and walk to the edge of the creek bed, bend down and move my fingers across the top of the water. Clyde follows me and places the boat in the creek. "Some of Caroline's favorite things," he says. The boat lingers by the side of the bank until he pushes it with his fingers and the current takes it away.

REFERENCES

Burroway, Janet, and Elizabeth Stuckey-French. Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft. New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007.

O'Connor, Flannery. Three by Flannery O'Connor. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Inc., 1983.