

LORRAINE M. LOPEZ
The Personal Nature of Accident and Other Stories
(Under the Direction of JUDITH ORTIZ COFER)

This collection of eight short stories involves the same characters in a family as they relocate from the West Coast to the Southern United States. Elaine and her children, Tina, Teddy and Sanders, travel with their step-father from California to North Georgia during the first few stories to reestablish their lives in the South. The strain of relocation exacerbates familial conflicts, and following Elaine's divorce from her husband Hammond, bonds between characters begin to disintegrate in the middle stories until only Elaine and her daughter remain together at the end to begin rebuilding the family. The collection examines regional cultural differences, disintegration of the family through lack of communication, and relationships with characters outside the family who intervene both helpfully and harmfully, as the family rebuilds itself.

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THE PERSONAL NATURE OF ACCIDENT AND OTHER STORIES

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Jasmine Marie, born February 6, 2000.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My father tells the story of the time his barber--an older Armenian man who also happened to be a professional clown--invited him to a party, a clown party, held exclusively for Armenian clowns. My father, though surprised by the invitation as he is clearly not Armenian and if a clown, surely not a professional one, nevertheless accepted at once. A clown party, he must have thought at the time, perfect!

But as the day approached, he grew apprehensive. What does one wear to a party for Armenian clowns? He looked through his closet, filled with t-shirts, short-sleeve sports shirts, dark, drip-dry, no-iron polyester slacks and baseball caps--dozens and dozens of baseball caps, many printed with excruciatingly kitschy logos and sayings. Finally he selected a favorite navy blue t-shirt which reads: HERE COMES SPEEDY! across the front and THERE GOES SPEEDY! on the back, "Speedy" being a decidedly ironic nickname he acquired on the job.

He also picked a certain cap, possibly the only cap without script on it. Instead this unusual head wear sports an eighteen-inch hairpiece--a graying ponytail--attached to the band at the back. My father, nearly seventy-eight years old and bald for more than half his life, relishes this particular hat for weddings, reunions and family gatherings, where he has not seen the people for some time. Not only a great conversation piece, this was just the cap for an Armenian clown party, where he was certain artificial hair, if not rubber noses and ruffled suits, would no doubt be the rule.

Still he felt underdressed in his special t-shirt and baseball cap. What would his barber be wearing, he wondered? Should he smudge triangles with shoe polish under his eyes? Daub some lipstick on his nose? Eventually, he settled these doubts and questions by taking a nap on the couch.

Just after dusk, he was awakened by the barber, who arrived to pick him up wearing a green and purple striped clown suit with ruffles. My father noticed at once that his host was barefoot. Pointing at the barber's feet, Dad asked, "Should I wear my shoes?"

"Why not?" shrugged the barber. As my father climbed into the barber's Volkswagen, he shot a look over his shoulder and noticed two long slabs in the back seat, which knocked against each other whenever the car turned or braked, "like a couple of two by fours in the dark."

As the barber clown drove through darkened and unfamiliar streets, he didn't say a word, making my father a bit nervous. But my father kept hearing the wooden pieces clacking together in the back seat, and the sound reassured him for some reason. Finally, they reached a residential neighborhood several miles from where my dad lives, and the barber parked across the street from a large tract house. When they entered the front door, the rooms were filled with Armenian clowns.

Dad said the food was incredible. "There was food I never seen before. Strange marinated things that looked like sea plants, little finger-sized sausage things that weren't sausage but flaky like pie crust--and spicy. You *know* everything was spicy." There were drinks and music. Everyone, but my father, was a clown in white face with a red rubber nose. "Man, I had the best time," my father says of that strange evening.

"What were those things?" I invariably ask at this point in the story. "Those long boards in the backseat?"

“Can you believe they were shoes? He put them on when we parked. Big red shoes like skis.”

This is only one of the many stories my father loves to tell, and it is one I love to hear for the sheer silliness of it. Only my father would have an Armenian barber who is also a professional clown. Only my father would jump at the chance to go to a party strictly for Armenian clowns, though he is neither Armenian nor a clown. And only my father would deliberately wear a ridiculous cap dangling a false ponytail at the back to this event, and a t-shirt unnecessarily announcing his arrival and departure.

My father bestows his highest compliment on a situation by saying, “Why that’s pure silly,” or “Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous in your life?” His love for the absurd, the nonsensical in telling a story derails all other considerations, such as making a point or having a message or moral.

This favorite story of my father’s illustrates what I attempt to accomplish in my short fiction. Rather than derailing other considerations, I aim to make my appreciation for the comically bizarre augment message, structure, character, perspective and voice. And unlike my father, with whom I cannot remember ever having a serious conversation, I recognize the seriousness, the losses that confront my characters. Over and over in my stories I try to inject the odd circumstance or detail into a grave or desperate situation, not so much to mitigate the heaviness, but to render the scenes more realistic, more comprehensible, and ultimately more sympathetic.

Hence, in “Mother-in-Law’s Tongue” at the funeral of a senselessly murdered young man--a young father whose second child is yet unborn--the grieving characters are publicly and ridiculously shamed by the paltriness of their floral gift and their failure to write out a gift card for the deceased. In “This Gifting,” a heartbroken mother visits her daughter at the county jail, but because

she is too upset to speak clearly through the faulty window grate, she enlists the aid of a Japanese exchange student who manages to subvert her messages to her daughter and inadvertently improves their communication through his interference. And in “People in the Wall,” the worst tragedy of all--a child slipping into a coma from which he will never emerge--is marked by the squeamish fainting of his overlarge and bombastic stepfather.

Aside from the fact that the eight stories in this cycle involve the same characters and setting and are sequentially arranged, they are also linked in this admixture of darkness and levity, which I cannot--and do not want--to resist. A writing professor once cautioned a seminar in which I participated that if a writer loves a particular thing in a story or in poem, he or she should take it out. This to me seems one of those useless ad hoc rules of writing, like never writing about dreams or avoiding using birds in poems if you are a man, as Judson Mitcham observed in his poem titled “Preface to an Omnibus Review.” A rule for the sake of being a rule. A rule constructed to thwart and punish, rather than to stimulate and encourage writing. I believe that if you love a thing in your writing, you ought to put it in again and again. There is a reason why you love it, and in time, it will pay you back.

One rule that I do ascribe to with regard to writing is perhaps the most basic and obvious: Write what you know. In these stories, I have used my own experiences as triggers to stimulate the flow of story and image, to provide background details, and to work out various themes and ideas that concern me as a person, as well as interest me as a writer. In discussing Anton Chekhov’s background for “The Lady with the Dog,” Tom Bailey writes,

To know certain biographical facts about Chekhov’s life isn’t at all essential to an understanding of this story, but it’s instructive to know that Chekhov was in fact borrowing heavily from his own

life in composing it. For what we can make of our own experiences, including our ambivalent feelings about ourselves is as legitimate a subject as any for fiction. (23)

I believe these experiences and feelings are not only tacitly legitimate, but the appropriate and logical stimuli for my work.

However, these stories are fictional. I thank the fates I have never had to confront most of the Jobian dilemmas which face my characters. It is not my aim to use these stories as autobiographical fiction intended for “no more than score settling or retrospective psychoanalysis” that Valerie Miner cautions against in her essay “Casting Shadows, Hearing Voices: The Basics of Point of View” (97). Score settling holds a rather limited appeal, as exacting vengeance ought to be more immediate, more visceral to elicit satisfaction in my opinion, and I am not trained to retroactively (or presently) psychoanalyze myself or others with any level of competency. Rather I subscribe to Raymond Carver’s insight on fiction writing in his *Paris Review* interview, wherein Carver observed, “The fiction I’m most interested in has lines of reference to the real world. None of my stories really *happened*, of course. But there’s always something, some element, something said to me or that I witnessed, that may be the starting place.” Carver follows this up by saying, “everything we write is in some way autobiographical,” but he does not mean that stories must be limited to what really happened. He suggests stories grow out of what their authors have experienced. Summarily, my stories have grown out of my experiences, but they are not merely my experiences retold. And I have often considered including a disclaimer when, and if, they are published as a collection. This disclaimer will read: *The characters in these stories are fictional. However, if you do recognize yourself in these pages, you may consider changing your habits.*

Nevertheless, I cannot ignore the parallels between my own experiences and the characters in these stories. For example, like the family in these stories, I, too, am a transplanted Southerner. As a writer, I am fascinated by cultural counterpoints between the South and the West Coast, specifically California, which to many--with its deserved reputation for oddity--comprises something of a strange nation unto itself. In my earlier short story collection, "Babysitting in Truth or Consequences and Other Stories," which was my master's thesis, I explored cultural consonance and dissonance between the Latino and Anglo culture in a small city in New Mexico. In this current collection, this particular aspect of inquiry is still present, yet it is notably recessed, as I turn my focus on West Coast and Southern Culture. In two stories, "Teodoro" and "Walking Circles," the family's Latino roots are mentioned in abortive attempts to build connections with other characters. Teddy in "Teodoro" is prey to a Latino classmate's unwanted friendly advances, which are made because they are the only two Mexican-American boys in their middle school. And in "Walking Circles," Elaine strives with futility to build a sense of *comadrazgo* with the other grandmother of her unborn grandchild. And in "People in the Wall," Hammond astounds Elaine by telling her he is dating a woman of color because she does not realize that he is talking about her. These are very slight, attenuated references to this particular area of cultural contact, which I examined rather closely in my earlier collection. In these stories written over the past five years, I have shifted my gaze to a different arena of cultural exchange.

A few years ago, I attended a Southern Women Writers Conference at Berry College, and I sat through poetry and fiction readings by the three first place winners of the Emerging Voices in Southern Women's Writing in both categories. Reader after reader astonished me by "emerging" with what I considered to be the same Southern voice. It was a voice that celebrated mobile

homes, perfidious men and honky tonks. To be sure, this was no elitist cant. Rather it was Dorothy Allison with a truckload of kids and government coupons for milk. I remember rather queasily a poem about pin worms. The voice I heard was one that might be overheard while steering a shopping cart through K-Mart or waiting in line for burgers at Krystal. Still it was only one voice, the same voice. Derivative of Flannery O'Connor, it was a lower class, somewhat whiny, skinny white woman's voice, though all of the readers looked to be educated, middle class, middle-aged and obviously well-tended white women. These observations disturbed me at the time.

This year I had the chance to meet Mary Hood, the well-respected short fiction writer who happened to judge the Emerging Voices competition the year all the writers had the same voice. I took the opportunity to ask her if she noticed this singular voice phenomena. I also asked if she perceived any change in what is usually what is thought of as "the Southern voice" in literature, if she thought that voice might one day come from a Mexican migrant worker pulling onions in Vidalia or a Korean restaurant worker in Doraville. Did she think there might be more than one voice that is representative of the present-day South?

Mary Hood, to her credit, was gracious and only slightly wary in her agreement that the aforementioned voices and many others ought to be represented in Southern literature. If Hood displayed any reservations, they resulted from her assumption of my own sour grapes at not having placed in the competition in question. Truth be told, my grapes indeed had been sweeter on other occasions, but looking back, I believe she was wise not to choose my inexperienced and rough story. My point was that Southern literature has changed to include voices from people of different colors, different classes, different

backgrounds. No one literary voice can possibly capture all that is the South today.

My goal is to augment the notion of voice in Southern literature through my writing. I see the main characters in these stories as Southerners by relocation. They are as much a part of the vast, variegated and conflicted cultural landscape as is old Andy, in “Teodoro,” who walks his Southern neighborhood searching--like Diogenes on his futile quest for the honest man--for someone to read the book he wrote; as are the Hindu twins who are born in the North Georgia Hospital, where Tina gives birth to her own biracial baby in “Walking Circles;” as is Aaron, a Southerner by birth, who never ceases to regard local customs and habits with the detached amazement of an anthropologist in the field. I intend these stories to represent my fledgling contribution to emerging voices in Southern writing.

Indeed, much of my inspiration comes from Southern literature. Long before I moved south, I was captivated by the writing of Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison. My wholesale admiration for these writers’ work, my astonishment and delight in their words moved me and altered me indelibly, and their example reinforces me in my desire to do whatever it takes to be a writer.

These writers have been my best writing teachers. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” Flannery O’Connor taught me more about characterization, suspense and irony in a single short story than I learned from the half dozen books on craft I have read. Through *Absalom, Absalom*, I learned from Faulkner that, contrary to the popular truism, more *is* more. Toni Morrison demonstrated to me how magic--and magical realism--works in writing if you are bold and strong enough. And Zora Neale Hurston showed how to write about community and the individual so compellingly, so authentically and

intimately that reading her work I often have the eerie sensation that I am reading the story of my own life. Though I recognize I am on a journey that likely has no final destination, I dream of accomplishing these things in my own work. Writers like these have not only inspired my work, they have inspired my life.

While inspiration is what prompts me to write, influence shapes how I write, and when I think of influences with regard to my writing, I must acknowledge a different group of writers. Perhaps my strongest influence is not a Southern writer at all, but the late Barbara Pym, an English woman who wrote sophisticated and humorous novels about Anglican church women, curates, dons, and anthropologists. Though she wrote in the twentieth century, Pym is often compared to Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope, for she shares with those novelists a certain subtlety, irony, and love for rich detail. Yet, Pym is wittier than Austen, wrier than Trollope. I confess to rereading Pym's novels yearly with guilty pleasure because I should be reading more contemporary works, but I also read them as a student, as a critic, absorbing what I can to make my own writing stronger and analyzing how these pieces work.

I must admit to reading these books too often and having absorbed a little too much influence when I started writing short stories, and when I presented my first long short story (written nearly eight years ago) to a creative writing class, the instructor's reacted with perplexity. All of my characters were Latinos involved in a parish election in a small New Mexican town. "These people are Hispanic," he told me in a private conference, "but they don't sound Hispanic. You are an Hispanic writer, but you are not writing like one." Trying to be helpful, he gave me a book by a Mexican American writer, which was about a domineering, faithless and alcoholic father, his submissive wife and their culturally conflicted, but soulful and sensitive son, who--surprise!--becomes a

writer. “Read this,” my teacher told me, implying that after I finished the novel I would understand how to write in a more culturally appropriate manner. I should note that this professor was a Jewish poet, and at the time he tried to help me write more authentic Hispanic literature, I wanted to ask him why his poetry didn’t “sound Jewish” to me, but I lacked the nerve.

In retrospect, I have to say this professor’s concern was misstated, but well-deserved. The problem in that short story was not with my characters so much as with the voice. What he ought to have asked me was this: What is Barbara Pym doing in New Mexico anyway? That, I could easily answer. At the time, I was living, eating, drinking and breathing Barbara Pym, and I was not experienced enough or confident enough to have developed my own voice. So unconsciously, almost reflexively, I relied upon the voice I trusted most--Barbara Pym’s.

On the subject of voice, Barbara Pym once gave a fascinating BBC broadcast titled “Finding a Voice,” which she ended with this comment about a favorite television quiz show in which contestants competed to recognize authorship of certain literary passages:

There were no prizes for guessing, no moving belt of desirable objects passing before their eyes, just the pleasure and satisfaction of recognising the unmistakable voice of Henry James or Henry Greene, or whoever it might be. I think that’s the kind of immortality most authors would want -- to feel that their work would be immediately recognisable as having been written by them and by nobody else. But of course, it’s a lot to ask for! (388)

Her final sentence may strike readers familiar with her work as disingenuously humble. Pym has a distinctive voice that is immediately and wonderfully recognizable.

While Barbara Pym contributes the strongest influence to my work, other women writers, including Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Ruth Rendell and Anne Tyler have contributed influence as well. Ruth Praver Jhabvala has a sure touch with points of cultural contact. In particular, her earlier novels set in India probe Anglo-Indian relations with the sensitivity, complexity and depth I try to bring to my own observations of cross-cultural exchanges. Ruth Rendell, well-known for her psychological thrillers, influences me through the richness of her language and keen descriptive eye. And Anne Tyler's gift for rendering the human experience with its contradictions, confusions and misdirected motivations encourages me to move toward rather than to resist chaos in writing the human condition.

In regard to Anne Tyler, I have noticed a recent tendency to dismiss her work, which is probably due to her popularity and her tendency to parodize herself with overly cute and quirky characterization. At the Sandhills Writer's Conference in Augusta this year, keynote speaker Robert Ollin Butler went to some trouble to denigrate Tyler's writing and in fact humiliate the participant who brought up her name during a discussion. At another time, a professor of mine complained that Tyler appropriated recognition from "real" writers like Cormac McCarthy. While I admire McCarthy's novels extravagantly, I recognize that he writes romantic fiction--in the tradition of the western--that strikes me at times as ethnocentric and naive in its world view. In other words, every writer has his or her limitations, even my revered Pym, and individual tastes will lead readers to value certain writers over others. But it seems especially in vogue to disparage Tyler's work as though such disdain reflects a heightened aesthetic or more refined literary sensibility. If writing programs are justifiably accused of homogenizing their products--that is, writers---this area is where it is most prevalent in my opinion, the homogenization of taste.

Regardless of the increasing disregard for Anne Tyler as an artist, I cite her work respectfully for the impact and the influence it has had on my own. Specifically, I try to emulate the way in which she renders scene vividly and realistically through use of absurd and comic detail. Tyler also captures character with nuanced and varied motivations, which also results in more convincing creations. Finally, Tyler is unashamedly a woman writer. Her observations and world view are clearly influenced by her gender, and I admire her courage in validating this writing perspective.

Insofar as inspiration and influence in the short story form, I must name Isaac Bashevis Singer, Tim O'Brien, and Raymond Carver as prominent among my perceived masters of the craft. I recognize that my exploration of the form bears almost no resemblance to what these three have done in their work, but reading their stories has taught me a great deal about short fiction and provoked me to experiment in the form. I remember finishing Carver's collection, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, and leaping out of my chair for the typewriter. I had to write immediately. What I wrote was nothing like what I had just read, which is fortunate, as Carver is one of the most imitated short story writers of the last few decades. But the fact is, his writing created in me an urgency to write that was so strong it almost felt like a physical sensation. Tom Bailey writes, "The inspiration a writer takes from a predecessor is usually accidental, like the inspirations of our lives; those individuals met by chance who become integral to our destinies. We meet--we "fall in love"--we are transformed" (16). In my case, with Singer, O'Brien, and Carver, I "fell in love" with their work, which awakened in me a persistent desire to explore the short story form.

In addition to recognizing writers who have inspired and influenced my work and before examining my approach in terms of craft, I feel compelled to

discuss why I decided to write at all and how this project--the stories in this collection--came into being. Recently, I was interviewed by an undergraduate literary magazine editor who kindly solicited from me a story ("It Takes a Whole Fish") to go with the interview. She asked me why I decided to become a writer. My reply--as it was printed--seemed to suggest I had no other abilities, and while that contains an element of truth, it is not the whole truth. I was as young as eight years old, in the third grade, when I realized I wanted to be a writer. I had written a news story about some cats our family owned, and a student teacher suggested I think about a career in journalism. Before that time, I had no idea one could work as a writer. I thought writing pure entertainment, pure pleasure for the writer. When I heard the good news that it was possible to become a professional writer, I immediately decided this was what I would do.

Initially, I wanted to become a reporter, and I worked on school newspapers. In elementary school, I even edited and contributed every article to my own household newspaper which was heavy on features involving cats. As an undergraduate, I took many journalism classes, but I felt limited by the writing I had to do in order to meet journalistic standards. Much of my copy kept getting marked "libelous" or "editorializing," and once I got into a bit of trouble for making up an interview with a classmate. Contrary to my expectation, neither my classmate nor the professor appreciated how I had made the article much more interesting by dressing the subject in "spangly lounging pajamas" and setting the whole thing in a jazz bar. Still, I enjoyed the deadlines and word counts imposed by news writing. Today, my work as a correspondent/book reviewer for *The Athens Banner Herald/Daily News* satisfies my desire for the discipline of this writing, and I have learned not to commit libel.

But my affinity for lying, for making things up pointed me in the direction of fiction writing as I completed my undergraduate degree as an English major. But it was many years from that time before I began to write seriously, before I began to make a stab at a career as a professional writer, and I realize that I am still quite far from that goal. Though I am published bimonthly in the *Daily News*, in all the years that I have been writing--not including my master's thesis--to date I have published only three short stories and eight poems.

While the last stories in this collection represent my most current and most developed work, all of these pieces, while born out of my experiences as mentioned earlier, had very different "triggers," to borrow the term from Richard Hugo. The idea for the title story "The Personal Nature of Accident" occurred to me as I drove to work at various county schools as a substitute teacher during my first months in Georgia. One morning, I came upon an accident similar to the one described in the story, but rather than stopping to help, I drove on to my assignment. Many other people were directing the flow of highway traffic away from the wreck. One ordinary looking young man, in particular, struck me as having been galvanized by the emergency. There was an heroic energy about him that stimulated my imagination. I began to think about what an accident means, the metaphoric associations with collision, the predictive possibilities. For the narrator in my story, accidents work as watersheds in her life. She has three encounters with accidents, and each one is prophetic and liberating; each opens a portal of opportunity for her to change, to find a new way of being.

"It Takes a Whole Fish" was borne out of the tedium caused by scores of meetings and workshops I had to attend as a human service provider. These sessions--though dull and overlong--are rich in absurdity and redundancy. Over and over, I would run into the same people who would utter the same buzz

words about prevention and risk factors and building communities in the same self-congratulatory terms until I feared I would either begin spouting the same drivel myself or lose my mind. I have heard the saying “It takes a whole village to raise a child” so many times that for me it is totally devalued as verbal currency. When this particular African saying is uttered with such regularity and such conviction by well-intentioned, but ineffective white human service providers, it becomes almost laughable. I wanted to capture this absurdity in my story, to show how a reliance upon overused and ill-considered words is worse than constructing a building’s foundation out of feathers. Feathers, at least, have substance.

The idea for “Teodoro” occurred to me when I saw a woman who had a parakeet hopping on her shoulders while she drove her car. The yoke of the her shirt was spattered with bird droppings, indicating to me that the bird had been riding for some time on the woman’s shoulders. This sight reminded me that my daughter once owned a parakeet named Chamaco, which translates into “kid” in English. I began to think about my character Teddy and his kid-hood, how he would change and move toward manhood. That is how that story began to come together for me.

“The People in the Wall” came to me from a series of images--the rotted walnut in the heel of a Thanksgiving cornucopia, a symbol of plenty and privilege containing hidden decay; an abandoned diaper I saw undulating in a mineral bath in Central America; and a film trailer for a horror movie which showed bloodied hands reaching out from the walls of a house. These images are so rich in metaphoric resonance for me that it was easy to fit them into the narrative they spawned.

In the case of “Ivor’s People,” the sound of a distant motor boat prompted the story, as well as the image of a gas station attendant’s shirt left

hanging in a hotel closet. For “Walking Circles,” the strangely familiar name on a hospital door generated the sub-plot, which later bore the entire story. “This Gifting” was stimulated by an actual student gift to me--a maroon silk scarf printed with bronze coins--which was given and received with equal measures of pleasure and embarrassment.

“Mother-in-Law’s Tongue” resulted from an odd funeral service I attended for a friend of my daughter’s. It was so strange that I had to write something in this setting, and I have always wanted to use the elegant sansevieria, the Mother-in-Law’s Tongue plant, in a story since my sister received one from her mother-in-law when she was first married. The gift seemed to offer promise and the idea of lifelong truce, and I wanted my character Elaine to present one to the dead man who had fathered her grandchild.

Though these stories have different points of inception, I have discovered that I am exploring common thematic strands in the group. Ideas concerning the fallibility of human communication constitute a primary thematic link throughout these narratives. Perhaps this is most obvious in “It Takes a Whole Fish,” a story wherein the balky exchanges between husband and wife at the beginning open the door for the main character’s mystifying encounters with the obscurities of technical writing, participation in disingenuous phone calls and ludicrous experience with unproved public relations text. The entire story is rife with perversely errant communication, pointing at the protagonist’s determined refusal to communicate honestly with herself, her inability to take stock of her situation and admit the failure of her marriage.

Also in “Teodoro,” a wrong number or a crank call leads a lonely and neglected adolescent boy on a quest to save a baby. This misdirected communication sends the young protagonist inadvertently on a search and rescue mission for his own younger self, through “a tunnel of memory” to a

time when he witnessed his father beat his mother and he was powerless to help her. The mistaken communication takes him to the truth about his own past, which he is finally able to see with compassion, with forgiveness before taking a step toward his own manhood--no less lonely and no less neglected--but clearer in who he once was and who he will be.

Often, it is the outsider, the alien, in these stories who is best able to communicate between the characters. In "This Gifting," a young Japanese man works as a go-between, mending misunderstandings between mother and daughter. In "Walking Circles," a Nigerian midwife takes up the communication reins and averts a temperamental pregnant girl's emotional explosion. And in "Ivor's People," an enterprising taxi driver in Antigua literally, though unwittingly, surrenders his shirt to help a woman tourist communicate and exorcise her guilt and grief at the loss of her sons. I find the stranger with limited language uniquely positioned to act and communicate directly between these characters who have too much language, too much history, too much familiarity and contempt to say what they mean and mean what they say to each other.

Another recurrent theme I explore in these stories is the idea of gift giving and receiving. The notion that receiving a gift entails a burdensome encumbrance, exacts a high price has been fascinating to me since I first encountered manifestations of this phenomena in the Japanese culture in novels by Yukio Mishima and T.C. Boyle. In *East is East*, Boyle has an unforgettable paragraph on this subject, which I reproduce in part here:

In Japan, any favor, any gratuitous kindness, however small or altruistic, saddles its receiver with a debt of horn that can only be redeemed by repaying the favor many times over. It has become so ritualized, so onerous, in fact, that no matter what their extremity, people are terrified of being helped. You could be run

down in the street and insist on crawling to the hospital rather than have a stranger lend a hand--and the stranger would no doubt run the other way, out of respect for your pain and the impossible burden he'd be laying on your shoulders were he to help. (96)

This idea is one that I examine further in my novel-in-progress titled "Fermina's Gifts," in which an aging matriarch engages a shaman to endow her great-granddaughters with special skills based upon their individual predilections and desires. Something of a feminist King Midas principle comes into play in this work, with similarly disastrous outcomes.

In the following collection of short stories, characters give and receive gifts with overwhelming consequences which extend far beyond the simple exchange of wrapped trifles. Most obviously in "This Gifting," Daisuke, the Japanese protagonist, feels as if the gifts and favors he has traded with his English teacher threaten to crush him under the weight of the entailment they imply. Despite the circumspect warning of his parents and his dedication to civil rights work, he has become inextricably enmeshed in the messy domestic tangles of his tutor's personal life. Also in "Walking Circles," a pregnant young woman coolly calculates that her co-workers have "bought tickets" to witness the birth of her child, to be spectators at this intimate moment through the munificent bounty of their shower gifts and promises of financial help after the baby is born. On a much smaller scale in "The Personal Nature of Accident," the narrator Elaine keeps a closet full of gifts from former students. Never opening them for herself, she tries to keep out of the orbit of their influence by redistributing them, unopened, as gifts to other people.

Above all in "People in the Wall," the main character Hammond superimposes his image of who his girlfriend really is by the gifts he selects for Valentine's Day, and in presenting her with a set of dishes, he announces his

intention to move in with her and her children. Throughout this story, Hammond, who perceives himself as the rescuer of this family, repeatedly gives time, trouble, tickets to shows and circuses. He perceives himself giving and giving, but his only reward is misunderstanding and eventual ostracism. Failing to acknowledge what he takes from Elaine and her children, Hammond becomes deluded by a false image of himself and his generosity. I intended this character to exemplify Flannery O'Connor's famous edict: No act of charity goes unpunished. This notion appeals to me, as does the idea that gifts oftentimes are no more than bartered goods, proffered at absurdly high, but hidden costs to the recipient.

In these stories, I am exploring different perspectives in a manner that would likely be intrusive in a longer work. By situating different stories in different characters' points of view, I believe I am able to give a fuller sense of situation. Of course, Elaine's perspective is the most prevalent, but I needed Hammond's and Teddy's point of view to illuminate her blind spots and reveal her inherent unreliability as a narrator. Elaine perceives herself as a benevolent scatterbrain, but through Hammond and Teddy, I can show how she is distant, difficult and obstinate--even passive-aggressive. Short fiction has provided me the perfect vehicle for switching perspectives from character to character or from first person to third person limited without jarring the overall narrative and distracting the reader.

Finally a note on organization: I have organized these stories sequentially and chronologically, which is to say, I attempted to place them in the order of events in the narrative and in the order in which they were written. There is some overlap in terms of the events of the narrative, which I resolved by going with the order in which a particular story was written. For example, "The People in the Wall" describes events which happen before "This Gifting," but the former

story was written much earlier than the latter piece, and I chose to place the earlier piece first to show the development of the entire work. As a consequence, the last stories are my most recent, and for that reason they are the pieces which I feel represent my work today and indicate the directions it will likely take in subsequent stories.

It is my intention to show my progression as a writer in this collection. The earliest stories, which were written when I began to work in the writing program, reflect a somewhat diffuse and fragmentary approach to the story that becomes more unified and controlled with each subsequent piece. As I received more and more feedback on my work in seminars and later in an informal group setting, I found that my writing grew stronger and developed so much that the early stories in this work bear little resemblance to the latter pieces, except for the fact that they involve the same characters in the same setting. Additionally, my work as an assistant to the editors at *The Georgia Review* has shaped and defined my notion of what a story is, what a story should be in such a way that it would no longer be possible for me to write stories like the first two or three I have included here, and that evolution merits recognition. Because I believe it is important to acknowledge this growth and development, I included the first pieces in this collection with the intention of using all of the stories as a personal reference source for my future writing and for my teaching. While I am not a visual artist, I am an avid fan of the visual arts, and it is not uncommon to attend a gallery presentation of a sculptor's, a photographer's or a painter's work-in-progress, which demonstrates a particular artist's movement from initial approaches and experimentation to final and accomplished expression in a medium. This is a legitimate and professional presentation in the visual arts, which I am borrowing as an organizational tool in arranging these stories.

Regardless of their placement in this continuum called “The Personal Nature of Accident and Other Stories,” I have attempted to attach these stories to one another, to have each one lead into the other in terms of my development as a writer and in terms of the progression of an overall plot. Though I intend the events that befall my characters to be accidental, the writing is deliberate. I intend this group of stories to reflect how accident, though seemingly random and unexpected, is personal and directed at changing the design of these characters’ lives irrevocably. But the accidents and the tragedies that occur in these narratives often have ludicrous elements which make them not only bearable, but more real. Like my father, I am drawn to the clown party, but I grow wary with the unfamiliar, shadowy drive, which for my characters is often dangerous, frightening--fraught with loss and danger--and I am always listening for the comfortable sound of clown shoes rattling in the back seat.

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CHAPTER 2

THE PERSONAL NATURE OF ACCIDENT

The day I met Renda Glensi was the day the orange sports car wrenched onto the highway from a farm-to-market road and smashed right into a vanful of maids. I was following the maids as they meandered along in their sparkly new van the color of the night sky--deep navy and salted with stars--with gilt stenciled lettering under the back windows that read, *Comer Cleaners: A Unique Maid Service!* followed by a phone number I didn't bother to read, there being scant chance of my needing maid service.

I did wonder what the maids might charge to come into a person's home as a team. More specifically I was curious about how much an individual maid for this Comer Cleaners might earn. Twenty, maybe thirty dollars a day? If so, as an itinerant substitute teacher, I earned slightly more. It was just as well; I couldn't think of a person more singularly unqualified to be a maid than myself. I would be fired in a week for shoving junk into cabinets, under furniture cushions and beds. Oh, I could keep the counters shining, but drawers wouldn't open the way I'd cram them. So it was with admiration and slight envy that I peered into the tinted windows of the mini-van hauling maids on the highway into Gainesville. At least, they were working regularly.

They were probably on their way to some wealthy person's already well-maintained home to polish the glossy windows, vacuum the dust-free carpet and perform other superfluous acts of housekeeping when the accident happened. An orange compact scudded out from the side road into the

highway, causing the van to smash with a terrible explosive sound into the driver's side door. The orange car then spun a full circle before coming to a stop in the lane for cars coming in the opposite direction while the maids' van coasted onto the shoulder of the highway. Then, there was silence as I sailed to a smooth stop yards from the wreck and sat in my car for a few moments wondering what I should do on this isolated highway into Gainesville, Georgia, for the vanful of maids and the occupant of the orange car, too, come to think of it.

The last house had been a double-wide at least three miles ago. Could I even be sure of a phone line there? Didn't my cousin Dorita live in a mobile home out in the country without a telephone for over six years? I scrolled down my streaked car window, seriously hoping with the first slap of icy air to my face that I would not have to step out of my toasty little car. There are some people, I know, who leap into emergency situations--eyes shining with purpose, cheeks ablaze with determination and their heads filled with useful plans of action--happy as dogs chasing after sticks, but really I am not one of them.

I sat in my car and watched the van disgorge a gaggle of young women who stood wonderingly by the side of the road. The half dozen maids seemed surprised, but unharmed by the wreck. In fact, they reminded me of the fresh-eyed student teachers I watched climbing out of their car pool station wagons, slightly dazed and somewhat daunted at the prospect of another full day at the middle school. The air was heavy with a muffling gray mist and the maids' cheeks looked like taut little pink balloons under their wide wet eyes. There appeared to be an organizing chaperone of indeterminate age who emerged at last from the driver's side. I could hear that person's fluty voice calling, "There, there now, gals, anyone hurt?"

"Arthena?" someone called out.

"Where's Arthena?" another asked.

“Called in sick!” the fluty voice cried in triumph.

“Hmmp . . . hung over more like,” muttered someone else.

“Do you need any help?” I called from my car, but no one heard me.

“Arthena has the flu,” Fluty-voice consulted a clipboard produced from her parka.

“C’mon, ever’ blessed Monday?” the skeptic persisted.

“Yeah, it has been every Monday.” The skeptic had a disciple. “I remember I had to do four bathrooms, instead of my usual, and all the windows when she was out!”

“Ladies, ladies!” cried the chaperone. “Let’s be Christian in our judgments.”

I wanted to roll my car window up quickly and drive around the entire mess at this point. I’m from California, where any mention of organized religion in polite company is akin to making bathroom noises in public. When someone talks church in California, people step back before that person loses any more control and starts handing out *The Watchtower* or shouting quotes from the Bible.

“Need any help?” I called again, stubbornly, hoping they would wave me on and my conscience would be free for my interview in Gainesville. The other car was ominously silent, and there was no movement from the crumpled driver’s door. “Is he okay? The other driver?” I knew it would be a man, somehow, who had plowed so rashly into the van.

“How ‘d we know?” the fluty voice cried, reasonably. A stout young maid wearing a crewcut bobbed towards my car purposefully. “Didja see the accident, then? He hit us. You saw it. You were a witness.” A dough-colored face punctuated with eyes as black as poppy seeds hung in my car window . “You better check on him. ‘Twouldn’t be right if we did. Conflecks of inneres’ and all.”

“Cornflakes of what?”

“Inneres’. We don’t want any questions.”

“Questions?”

“For the *insurance* folks. You know what I’m talking about. If we go in there and say this thing or the other thing, the *insurance* folks is likely to say, well y’all had a confleck of inneres’ with the accused, you know how that goes.”

“So you want me to look in on him?” I had to be sure before I turned off the ignition and my miraculous car heating system.

“You could call highway patrol. I think that car’s got a phone. Got antennae sticking up top.”

“I hope you’re right.” The metallic mist, feeling icier than it looked, sneaked up my coat sleeves like a frost-barbed serpent, bending every body hair in its path the wrong way.

There were a few stray cows snorting small clouds from their nostrils in the field on the side of the highway. I marveled as I always did at their clean flanks and sides. Cows in California always seemed so filthy, crowded and bad-smelling. A baby cow skipped toward a larger one, and I remembered a time when we first came to Georgia, I’d called to my husband Hammond on seeing one of these wobbly miniatures skittering in a field, “Oh, look, Hammond, a small cow!”

“A calf, darling,” he’d said after casting a cursory glance. “They call the little cows ‘calves.’” Hammond always tries to be instructive.

I didn’t think so much cold could seep up through the soles of a person’s shoes, but it can--especially through high heels--as you crunch, crunch your way across a highway. I envied the plumper maids, red faced in just tee-shirts.

I always have the remote hope that if I move slowly enough something will interfere and an unpleasant task will be deferred; besides the faster I walked

the more rapidly my old stockings--the elasticity shot by repeated laundering--made their usual descent to sag in unattractive wrinkles and pouches around my ankles. As slowly as I scuffed my shoes over the frosty gravel, I did eventually reach the orange coupe, and I soon found myself wrenching the car handle of the passenger door open and peering into the darkly upholstered interior. I could see a person slumped against the driver's side window in a manner that suggested weariness more than critical injury.

"Hello?" I piped, uncertain as to the etiquette for entering another person's car uninvited. Should I have tapped on the windshield first? "Hello, do you need any help?" The car's warmth drew me into the seat beside the driver. I slammed the door shut.

The driver, as I expected, was a man in blue jeans and a red and white flannel shirt. He was conscious and moving very slightly in his seat. I could see he had a few superficial lacerations to one side of his face--where it hit the window--but he wasn't bleeding too badly, and I know from experience how head wounds can pour.

"Oh, God," he muttered, "oh, God."

"There, there," I said. "There, now."

"Oh, God. Am I going to die?" He sat upright and looked me in the eye. He must not have been more than thirty years old, thin-faced, but with a big nose that hooked out at the bridge and which was now flecked with pinpoints of blood.

"No, I don't think so." I'm not an expert in medical emergencies, but I could see the seat belt had held him back from serious harm, and the maids' van had managed to brake to a very low speed before impact. He would take some stitches; but he didn't seem shocked or disoriented. "You're lucky those maids weren't going very fast."

"I wouldna tried to pull in front of them, if they'da been going faster."

A small black box--a leather case, really--between the two bucket seats began to buzz insistently. "D'you hear that?" I asked.

"The car phone."

"Shall I answer it?"

"Yeah," he said, closing his eyes in pain for the first time. "It's probably just Delia."

I unstrapped the phone from its case and put it to my ear. "Hello? Hello?" There was no response and the electronic buzz pulsed persistently.

"You have to mash the talk button," the young man murmured. "Mash talk."

I pressed a green glowing button labeled talk and asked again, "Hello?"

"Who the hell is this?" a sharp, high-pitched voice assaulted my eardrum.

"To whom am I speaking?" I intoned.

"To whom? What is this bullshit? Just what the hell are you doing in Lowell's car, huh? Huh? Get me Lowell on the phone and I mean now you low-life, man-stealing wad of dog vomit bitch."

I covered the mouthpiece and whispered: "I think it is Delia."

"Oh, God, not now."

"Has it ever occurred to you that you might have dialed the wrong number?" I asked Delia, more or less rhetorically. "And that you might be wasting your obscenities on the wrong person?"

"Has it ever occurred to you, " she mocked, "to cut the crap and put Lowell on?"

I covered the mouthpiece again. "Do you want to talk to her?"

Lowell shook his head so forcefully drops of blood splashed the collar of my white blouse. "Oh, God, no!"

“Lowell has been in a serious car accident, and he can’t talk right now.”

“Yeah, right! Like I’m supposed to believe that chunk of horseshit!”

“I have to hang up the phone right now to call for an ambulance.” Then I hung up the phone. Or, rather, I tried to. I replaced it in the cradle, but could still hear Delia’s muffled ranting through the leatherette casing like a mosquito humming in the dark.

“You have to mash ‘stop,’” Lowell moaned. “Mash the stop button.”

I pressed stop and then dialed 911 for emergency service when I got a dial tone. I remembered to press talk and felt fairly successful about describing the accident and the injuries, but when it came to the location. . .

“That highway that goes into Gainesville from Athens. You know the one. Through that town with the gas station and the signals that keeps making you turn left, or is it right?” I covered the mouthpiece and asked, “What was that place called.”

“Jackson, but I think we’re some ways outta Jackson,” grumbled Lowell.

“Not Jackson. It was something like Replay or Cavalcade.”

“That’d be Arcade, but we’re way past that. That’s before even Jackson.” Lowell argued. “Dang, just tell ‘em to trace the call.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make this harder on you,” I explained, still covering the mouthpiece. “I know you’re in pain and I --”

“Just get ‘em to trace the call, willya?”

“Would you trace this call?” I asked the dispatcher. “We’re not really sure where we are.”

Lowell rolled his eyes. The dispatcher assured me an emergency vehicle was on its way.

“They’ll be here in a little bit,” I told Lowell. “You’ll be fine, really. At least, you know you’re not going to die.”

“How do you know?”

“You wouldn’t be so aggravated if you were going to die,” I explained, reasonably.

“Aggravated people die, too.”

I thought about this a moment, then I said, “At least, you’re not disoriented. You’re not in shock or anything. That’s what I meant.”

Lowell probably decided it was better not to talk to me anymore because he just closed his eyes. Saving his strength, I told myself. Then I had an idea. “Say, Lowell, would you mind if I make another call? I wouldn’t ask, but I’ve got this job interview I’m supposed to be at in a little while and looks like I’ll be late. I hate to bother you, but. . .”

He shrugged, indifferently.

I pulled the phone from its square leatherette nest and hastily dialed home. Hammond could call Renda Glensi and explain why I would be late. I waited, but the ear piece remained mute.

“Send,” uttered Lowell. “You have to mash send.”

I pressed the right button, and the line began to buzz. It buzzed about five times before I gave up and replaced the phone in the box.

“I guess he’s not home,” I told Lowell. “I really hate to seem so self-interested under these circumstances, but I haven’t had a steady job since August, you know.” I felt fairly confident he was not interested in the least, nor really listening at all, so I went on. “And, you see, I really can’t depend on Hammond. He’s studying at the university, working on his Ph.D.; that’s the reason we moved here. I’ve got these three kids. They’re small, shortish, really, for their ages. But they eat a tremendous lot. And Hammond eats like a horse. He even says it. ‘I eat like a horse,’ he says, then he swallows up everything. You’d be surprised what the groceries come to.”

I looked at my hands, wishing for a pair of gloves and wondering where the ambulance was. “I know you’ve obviously got your troubles with this accident and the Delia thing. . .” My pantyhose were slipping even as I sat. I shifted in the cramped bucket seat to correct them, and I knocked the telephone box to the floorboards with my elbow. “Oops, sorry.” I retrieved and replaced it.

Soon, I became aware of the telephone buzzing again, softly and regularly. I reached to pick it up, hoping it was not a return call from Delia. Before I pressed speak, I asked, “If it’s Delia, do you want me to tell her you’re unconscious?” Lowell nodded, appreciatively.

“Hello?”

“Elaine?”

“Hammond?”

“Elaine?”

I was always convinced that Hammond had more intuition than most people, but I couldn’t fathom how he knew to reach me in Lowell’s car. “How did you get this number?”

“What number?”

“This number! How did you know to call me here?”

“Are you losing your mind, darling?” Hammond asked the familiar question that rolled off his tongue like a well-worn length of rope used time and time again to haul back predictably onerous stable beasts. I shot a glance at the tidy cows grazing in the pasture on the side of the highway with melancholic contentment. “You called me.”

“I called you, but you weren’t home.”

“Re-dial,” Lowell whispered. “You musta mashed re-dial when you dropped the phone.”

“Sweetheart, are you there?”

“Yes, Hammond, I’m calling from a car phone. I dialed you earlier, but you didn’t answer so I hung up. Then I accidentally pressed re-dial and I thought you called me. But you were right, I did call you!”

“Right as. . .” Hammond paused expectantly.

“You were right as rain.”

“No.”

“Right as always?”

“Correct!” he crowed. “Now, say the whole thing.”

“Hammond, you are right as always.”

Then the line went dead. Lowell had stubbed a blood-splotched finger into the disconnect button. “Lose that sumbitch,” he hissed.

“Look, Lowell, you didn’t have to do that.” It was really unnecessary and a little rude of him to hang up on me. And then make that pronouncement as though he’s some kind of expert on relationships with a girlfriend like that Delia.

“I hope I do die,” he said, futilely trying to turn away from me.

An insistent rapping on the windshield startled the both of us and I quickly stepped out of the car into the relentless cold again. The bland-faced maids’ chaperone consulted the clipboard, then a watch and asked: “What’s all goin’ on?”

“I called for help. The driver is injured, but he’ll be okay, I think.” I could see the maids flocking around another car, a battered green Chevy which had just appeared at the side of the road. They were giggling and eating glazed and chocolate doughnuts from pink boxes.

“Arthena just turned up a little late with some breakfast for the gals.”

“Look, I know that an ambulance is on the way and this man--his name is Lowell--has some superficial head injuries and a lot of bleeding, but I don’t think

he's in shock. He's very rational, in fact. I know he'll be just fine, but I've got to go. I can't stay; I'll be late."

"You gotta stay 'til the *police* come. That's the law!"

"You're not listening. Please listen this time," I used my exceedingly patient substitute teacher's voice. "I've got to go. I'll give you my card." I fished into my coat pocket and produced my substitute teacher's card. "You want a witness. I'd be happy to be your witness, but I've got to leave now or I'll miss my chance for this job." I wrenched my hose up from the waist band and hurried toward my car. I could already make out the faint throbbing whine of the ambulance, so I lost a little dignity jogging, almost, to get away before it arrived.

* * *

Renda Glensi had scheduled me with great difficulty into her busy day for a job interview and had given me long convoluted directions to her office. Later she called back to change the appointment time and give me yet another set of directions to the same location.

"My daughter," she had wheezed, "lives in Athens and her fiance says this is a faster route." Over the telephone, Renda sounded as though she were gasping for her last breath, but intended to finish the conversation nonetheless.

"This, you see, will get you to F.D.R more quickly."

"F.D.R.?"

"First District Reawakenings -- we're in the industrial part of town," she hacked without covering the mouthpiece, "the other side of the tracks for the time being. Our offices will be relocating . . ."

"Oh?"

"Yes, F.D.R. is so very difficult to find." She made it seem as though that were the primary reason for the projected move. "Where was I?"

“Off the parkway.”

“Yes, yes, then look for the kangaroo store.”

“Kangaroo store?”

“The gas station.”

“Kangaroo gas station,” I mumbled, jotting it all down in the hopes that it would come clear with a detailed street map from Hammond’s extensive file.

“Which way should I turn when I find the kangaroo store?”

“You don’t turn. You just make sure it’s there.” She took some moments to rattle the phlegm in her lungs before completing her instructions. I used two sheets of legal pad paper--much of it crossed out, as she changed her mind or contradicted herself--getting her instructions down.

“Yes, and let’s make that eleven on Thursday instead of ten-thirty. I can never tell when . . .” her voice trailed off mysteriously.

“Eleven, then, on Thursday.”

“Well, I look forward to meeting you then.”

“Thank you,” I said, “I’m eager to meet you, too.”

* * *

These few bewildering exchanges did nothing to prepare me for the older woman who introduced herself as my potential employer when I finally arrived at the offices of First District Reawakenings that morning after witnessing the accident. She had a long sad face--dark and terribly familiar. There were tragic shadows under her eyes and her great nose curved nobly above her somber lips. I found myself thinking of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. She bore an uncanny resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. But, Glensi also had the broad forehead, the small, close-set rheumy eyes and even the downy pigtail of the first father of our country. She looked like Abraham Lincoln and George Washington both. She wore a sweater the color and texture of oatmeal left out

overnight and coffee-colored stretch pants under that. The entire outfit seemed to emphasize intentionally her curious shape, which reminded me of a child's spinning top--narrow at both ends but absurdly broad in the middle. Her large, lumpish nose, like the rims of her eyes, was as pink around the flanges as a white rabbit's. Later, she mentioned she was ill with cold, but I had the idea that she had been crying.

She honked her nose into a frayed and inadequate rat's tangle of tissue in her right fist, then stuffed it into her pocket before reaching to shake my hand. I stifled a fastidious spasm of reluctance before extending my hand to meet hers, which was predictably cold and moist.

"I'm so glad you were able to find us," she smiled.

If she noticed I arrived more than twenty minutes late to the interview or if she were intrigued by the flecks of drying blood on the collar of my blouse, her face did not betray these observations. In fact, I had the sense that she had just arrived herself and, perhaps, feared I had been waiting for her. In any case, I said nothing. I've found that it's much better to be silent than to apologize and draw attention to tardiness in most circumstances. Renda Glensi must have made the same discovery because she offered no explanations for her hasty appearance. We took our seats across a small conference table from one another, both of us beaming in relief--I supposed--at the dispensable nature of apology.

"Well," she sighed, sounding not as terminally ill as she did over the phone. In fact, her voice was quite hearty in person. "Tell me about yourself," she commanded, almost confrontationally.

I told her a few things, and she asked one or two questions designed mainly to ascertain if I were married or not and if I had children. Once I

admitted to both being married and having children, I realized the topics were only segues into long streams of personal anecdote related to her life.

“I’ve been married thirty years.” Her eyes shone like those of a spaniel expecting to be patted. “Yes, thirty years to the same man,” she hastened to clarify when I did not respond at once and in case I mistook her to mean thirty years to thirty different men. “Marriage is a hard row to hoe, but you have to put your shoulder to the wheel and live and learn.”

“Yes, I imagine. . .”

“Of course, you know, you’re married with teenagers. How long have you been married?”

I didn’t like to say. It had only been about ten months to Hammond, and I found it complicated to go into the details. “It seems like forever sometimes,” I quipped. We chuckled as though I’d told an in-joke between long-married women.

Fortunately, Renda Glensi was not really interested in the duration of my marriage. She wanted to talk about her daughters. She discussed them carefully; first, as a group, then, individually. She spoke with admiration about herself as a mother, as a teacher, and as a community organizer. She told how she struggled to get her master’s degree while her daughters were teenagers. Renda Glensi was exactly the type of undemanding conversational partner I could most appreciate. She would blithely talk on and on with a minimum of encouragement to anyone who exhibited the smallest signs of consciousness.

I relaxed in my chair, but tilted my face and inclined my head to show interest while I enjoyed the steady patter of her unusual voice. I did not interrupt nor ask questions, though I did nod periodically when I had the feeling she wanted me to agree with her.

Finally, she worked around to the subject of the job for which I was applying. Here, she became evasive, sketchy in her description as though she, herself, were not entirely clear on what the work entailed. The position was titled "Prevention Resource Consultant" and had to do with "building protective factors while reducing risk factors associated with alcohol, tobacco and other drug use in the community." I expect my background as a teacher and my rather reluctant involvement with the support groups for drug-abusing kids that my previous principal insisted upon made me a good candidate. She told me she had fielded hundreds of applications, but she said it in a such a cagey way that I wondered if mine really weren't the only one. The more she described the position and the work it involved, the more mystified I became. But I did understand the part about the salary and benefits, and I immediately behaved as though Prevention Resource Consulting was my life's true calling.

Renda seemed to struggle even more with her description of the work we would be doing, or maybe she remembered she had something else to do because she ended the interview abruptly at this point. She did take the trouble to walk me across the deserted strip of designated parking, assuring me I would make a valuable addition to the team. I thanked her for the interview, shook her hand much less squeamishly and wished her a good day.

* * *

On my way home, I made a turn too late, but discovered a faster and more direct route--no Kangaroo stores or parkways, just highway. As I drove through the country side, I thought about Lowell and the accident. I wondered how his life might change because of the wreck. Perhaps it would make him aware that his time on earth was short, and he would drop Delia. Perhaps they would both join one of the many churches I drove past on my way from the

interview, rededicate their lives to Christ and behave better towards one another.

Reflecting on how catastrophes do change people in fundamental ways, I remembered my last accident before moving to Georgia, before meeting Hammond even. I had hit a mail box, but I can't really say how. After a fight with my husband, I had been out all night, behaving like an errant wife, a bad mother--though my children were with my sister for the weekend. Somehow I wound up driving slowly on a suburban street at dawn. Maybe I fell asleep or reached to change the radio station when the car climbed a curb, plowing into a mailbox post. Luckily it was too early for anyone to hear the crash, and I backed away and quickly drove off.

Terrible behavior, I admit. I did read the name on the mailbox -- sloppily hand painted in silver: SANDERS-QUADE, and I remembered the street address. I had planned to send a check some day, to write a letter, but I never did. Instead, when my baby was born the next year, I named him Sanders Quade, and no one--not his father, whom I never saw again, not my husband at the time, who left me--could say anything about that. As accidents go, it was a small one. No one was hurt, nothing but a mailbox post damaged, yet this thing wound up changing my life, and I could not go back to what it was before, not even in dreams, not even in memories.

* * *

Returning home after my interview with Renda Glensi, I found my middle son, Teddy in the laundry room pressing a pair of pants. A dark shingle of hair flapped into his eyes while he straightened the legs on the board and ran the hissing iron over them.

"Are you home, then?" he asked, rather unnecessarily, as he was staring straight at me.

“Yes, it’s me. What are you doing?” I asked, just as needlessly. Teddy and I sometimes derive great satisfaction from exchanges of completely obvious information.

“Ironing pants. I’m going to Mr. Schuler’s house for bar-be-cue.”

“Is that your English teacher?”

“Environmental Studies,” he murmured, bending to retrieve a pant leg that had slid off the ironing board.

“Oh,” I said, watching him. “Are any of the other kids going?”

“No, just me.” He sponged lint from the seat. “Say, Mom, can I have a gift, you know, from the gift closet? For a woman, I mean? It’s Mrs. Schuler’s birthday, and I thought I should take her something.”

“Sure, help yourself.” I had a closet shelf jammed with wrapped gifts from former students. Most of them were, no doubt, coffee cups, but some of the gift boxes probably held stationary, handkerchiefs and bath salts, too. I didn’t much like receiving gifts, preferring instead to give them to other people when the occasions arose. That way, I would be a little surprised, too, when they unwrapped the presents--plus, it saved money. “Just make sure to change the wrapping paper if it’s Christmas-sy.”

“Hey, Mom, didja get that job?”

“I think so.”

“I hope so because, guess what, Mom? I need some new shoes, and I’m not kidding. Look,” he said, holding up a foot. “See, how the rubber part is flapping up? That’s how my socks get so screwed up. My toes are practically hanging out.”

“Hmmn . . .” I watched as he demonstrated the movement of the lining from the canvass, making almost a smiling mouth of the gap.

“Look, it talks.” He made the shoe flap like a pair of lips. “Hi, how you doin’?” he squeaked in a puppet’s voice. “I’m a shoe.”

“Interesting.”

“I have toes for teeth.” He wriggled his grimy sock.

“Well, I can see it’s a problem,” I admitted. “Maybe next month, Teddy, when I get paid for subbing. Is Sanders napping still?”

“He just fell asleep around half an hour ago.”

I picked up the mail from the kitchen table and began rifling through the bills on my way to find Hammond. I could hear Hammond whistling merrily from behind the closed bathroom door.

“Hammond?” I knocked on the door. “Hammond?” The whistling stopped abruptly.

“Elaine?” he cried feebly. “Elaine, is that you?”

“Yes, Hammond, I just got home.” I ripped open the telephone bill.

“Did you get the job?”

“I think the interview went pretty well. Of course, I have to wait to hear. How are you anyway? Teddy said you weren’t doing too well.”

“It’s just my sciatica flaring again. And that same old business with the bowel obstruction. Plus I think I’m getting strep,” he moaned.

“Poor thing, I hope you’re feeling a little better in the bath.” I said, almost absently, while my eyes scanned the listing of long-distance calls.

“Hammond! What is this twenty-five dollar call to California on Thursday, the twenty-eighth?”

“What, darling? What?” I could hear very ostentatious splashing behind the closed door as though a large porpoise had suddenly determined to frolic in the tub with Hammond.

“The twenty-five dollar call on the twenty-eighth!” I bellowed. The playful crashing of water ceased. One of the advantages of reserving an intensified tone of voice for select occasions is that when it is used, people tend to pay attention.

I heard the glugging sound of water draining. “It was Erica’s birthday, darling. After all, I didn’t send her a gift.”

“Hammond, you can’t keep doing this. You really can’t!”

Great curls of steam rolled out from behind the door as Hammond appeared, streaming water on the carpet and wearing only a bath towel knotted at his waist. “I gave her your best wishes, darling. I knew you wouldn’t want me to forget.” He brushed past me--redolent of moist cloves and bay laurel --slapping his huge naked feet on the linoleum like an out-sized duck. Something about the sight of a large man, especially one in a terry cloth skirt makes me feel like a bully.

“Hammond,” I made my voice quiet again because I didn’t want to wake Sanders or worry Teddy in the laundry room. I followed him into our bedroom. “You don’t pay attention to what I keep telling you. I tell you again and again, you can’t keep spending money the way you do. Teddy needs shoes. I have to pay Sanders’ sitter--”

“Ah, Elaine, such a little thing, such a short phone call---”

“Twenty-five dollars?”

“Really, you can be so petty sometimes. Erica was nice enough to give us that, that, . . .” --his eyes searched the ceiling -- “that big candle for our wedding, remember?”

I did recall a hideous twisting of wax that resembled a rough grafting of a child’s discarded, dusty crayons. It had reeked of mosquito repellent. “You could have sent her a little something from the gift closet.”

There was a gentle knock--a brushing of knuckles really--at the door. "Ma-a," Teddy bleated. "Can I have the Teachers-Never-Lose-Their-Class cup for Mrs. Schuler?"

"Is she a teacher?"

"Yeah, I think she teaches something like aerobics or yoga."

"Okay, then."

"There's something distinctly creepy," Hammond hissed as we heard Teddy's soft footfalls receding, "about a kid who socializes with his teachers."

"So what?" I shrugged. "They like him."

"He should have friends his own age," said Hammond. "It's not natural . . ."

"You should have a job," I wanted to say, coldly, watching him unwrap the towel to rub his head dry, "if you are going to be so careless about money." Instead, I walked out of the room and gently closed the door.

"Anything come for me?" my daughter Tina asked as she came in the front door.

"No, nothing. How was the hospital?" Tina volunteered a few days a week at one of the medical centers in town as part of a vocational studies class.

"It was pretty boring, Mom, like they still don't know what to do with me yet, you know. Somebody died, though, while I was working." She opened the refrigerator and dived in. "Are we totally out of grape jelly or what?"

"A person died?"

"Yeah, and it was like the nurses kept telling me to take in the lunch and I'm like, excuse me, that person is dying. Ah, here it is, hiding behind the milk."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"What?" She plunged a spoon into the economy-sized glass of jam.

"The person who died."

“Oh, it was a woman. And it wasn’t like the family didn’t know. They were all there, just waiting, whispering all these prayers. She kept on gasping and stuff like she couldn’t breathe even though she had that tubing plugged into her nose. And here I was, you know, bringing in this lunch. They looked at me like I was crazy or something.”

“Was she very old?”

“Kind of old, I guess, like you. She did it to herself, the nurses said. It just took a long time, like a day or so. Snorted some kitchen cleaner in a spray can -- chemical pneumonia, they said. Huffing, like the stoners do. She did it on purpose, though, the overdose I mean.”

“How horrible that must have been!”

“I knew she was dying, so I was prepared.” Tina gobbled up a spoonful of jelly. “I did feel pretty stupid bringing in the lunch, though. The family was, like, do you mind? The lunch looked pretty good, too. I hated to waste that. And I was starving!”

“But, it’s terrible that you have to see such a thing.”

“It’s my job, Momma. Besides everyone on that ward is either half-dead or insane. She actually got to die, so she was a little lucky, if you think about it.” She brought out a loaf of bread and slathered half of it with peanut butter before dolloping on the jelly.

“I had to keep asking this other woman what she wanted for lunch, and all she could say was, ‘I don’t know what to do with myself since they took down all the pictures.’ She kept just kept picking and picking at her bed covers. ‘They took all the pictures down, and I don’t know what to do.’ She said it like a zillion times, and I’m, like, okay, do you want the salmon patty or the fiesta platter? Fries or cottage cheese with a tomato slice? Then, Momma, this old guy laughed at me.”

“An old guy laughed at you?”

“Yeah, this entirely old fart, just started laughing at me. I don’t even know why. He kept saying, ‘you’re new here, ha, ha, ha!’” And I said, like, yes, I’m new, and I’m not that friendly like you’re probably used to, but please give me a chance. But, all he wanted to do was laugh at me. Just kept laughing at me.” Her voice caught. One by one, she dropped her peanut butter sandwiches into the garbage pail and ran toward her bedroom. I started after her, but afraid of waking Sanders, I didn’t want to call at her through the closed door. Besides I knew she would not talk to me until she was ready. So I thought I would get the sandwiches out of the garbage before they absorbed too much odor. They would make a good late night snack for Hammond.

“What are you doing in the trash, Mom?” asked Teddy, materializing suddenly in the doorway in his pressed slacks and a white shirt and tie.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Why are you getting those sandwiches out of the trash, Mom? Ugh! You’re not giving those to me, are you?”

“No, they’re for Hammond.” I said, flicking a bit of eggshell from the crust of one.

“Better not tell him they came out of the trash,” advised Teddy.

“I probably won’t mention that. But you know how he hates to waste food; he probably wouldn’t mind.” Though oblivious about money in all other areas, Hammond was the kind of person who gobbled up everyone else’s leftovers as he gathered plates after a meal.

Teddy rolled his eyes. I could tell he thought everything Hammond ate was a waste of food, a tossing of perfectly delectable sustenance into a black hole. “Well,” he changed the subject, pirouetting in the middle of the kitchen, “How do I look?”

In his neat pants, his short-sleeved sports shirt, his little tie and his bicycle helmet, he looked . . . a little odd. “You look very nice, honey.”

“I don’t look like a Jehovah’s Witness, do I?”

“Not that much.”

“Am I too dressed up?”

“Well, do you need a tie for a bar-be-cue? That’s my question. I mean, what are the teachers wearing?”

“I just want to show respect, Mom, that’s all. It’s Mrs. Schuler’s birthday and all, besides they’ll be people there who might hire me to cut their grass or rake.”

Teddy was an ambitious weekend landscaper, who already managed a nice private business in our neighborhood, and was looking to branch out. He was in the process of saving a good sum of money to buy a riding mower he’d had his eye on at Sears. Sometimes he had me drive him out to the mall to visit it in the lawn and garden department. “You wouldn’t want someone who looked like a slob to mow your lawn, would you?”

“I suppose not.” I said, thinking I wouldn’t want anyone in a tie either. “Well, I hope you have a good time, honey. Don’t get back too late.”

“I won’t.” He kissed my cheek, quickly, and was gone.

* * *

Hammond mixed a pitcher of martinis before dinner and gave me a tumblerful while I fixed dinner. Before I met Hammond, I could count on one hand the times I’d had mixed drinks, but I could no longer do that. I found myself swallowing the first drink quickly to get to the sour green olives at the bottom. I had not eaten lunch and I was hungry, but after the first drink, my hunger disappeared.

At his size and weight, it was nothing for Hammond to swallow four or five martinis a night, but after two drinks, I could no longer feel my face when I touched it with my fingers. My cheeks felt stuffed with cotton. Before Sanders woke up, I made an excellent pasta with pesto, sun-dried tomatoes, onions, mushrooms, and I tossed a fresh salad. I fixed Sanders his favorite food--plain noodles with steamed carrots and broccoli.

He woke groggily just before dinner, and climbed into my arms, straddling my waist as I finished preparing the meal.

“He’s too big to be lugged around like that,” Hammond told me.

“No, I’m not,” said Sanders, tucking his sweaty little head under my chin more firmly. “I’m not too big. I’m only three.” He put out three fingers to show Hammond.

When I called Tina to dinner, she said she wasn’t hungry; she would eat later. She often refuses to join us at dinner, preferring to eat privately late at night like some secretive, nocturnal creature. She complains that Hammond clicks his teeth and breathes too noisily when he eats. “It just ruins my appetite, Mom. Nothing against Hammond, but it’s like eating with a broken-down vacuum cleaner.”

During dinner, I gave Hammond the details about my interview with Renda. My face felt flushed with the drink as I gushed excitedly about the prospects of the new job. The duties and opportunities associated with being a community consultant seemed to elucidate and expand upon themselves as I spoke. Mainly, I was nearly giddy with relief at the hope of never having to substitute teach again. At my last assignment--a middle school--a husky, redheaded boy knotted the Venetian blind cord into a noose and blithely informed me: “We hanged our last sub.”

“The thing is, Hammond, there’s all this opportunity for travel!”

“Of course, travel,” he murmured, shoveling great greasy spoonfuls of pasta into his lips, clicking his teeth and breathing like an anonymous caller late at night.

“She seems like a pretty nice person to work for if you like to listen to people talk like I do.”

“Naturally, she would.”

“I mean, she seems like such a hands-off kind of person. Here, Sanders. Here’s some bread.” I handed the baby a chunk of my garlic toast. He had eaten all his noodles, and he was banging his fork on his cup restlessly. “She’s really too self-absorbed to bother others very much.”

“Exactly what I thought,” he nodded; I could see him filing Renda comfortably in his index-card mind, “I know that type so well.”

Suddenly, his clicking, his breathing, his easy agreement and his superior knowledge of everything I said, crushed in on me as though a giant had gotten a grasp on my ribcage and my windpipe and started squeezing.

“Hammond, how can you possibly know everything there is to know about everything? Nothing is ever a surprise to you, is it?” My eyes roving wildly fastened inexplicably on the bright yellow cylinder of Easy-Off which was visible under the kitchen cabinet. “If I thought I knew everything in the world, I would just kill myself. I really would.”

“Really would,” repeated Sanders. “Really would.”

I scraped my chair away from the table and lifted Sanders from his chair. I carried him to the bathroom and began running the tap for his bath. Still carrying Sanders, I went to his room for the plastic net bag I kept filled with his bath toys, which we dumped -- with much loud splashing that always delighted Sanders -- into the filling tub.

As I bathed Sanders, I thought a little about Hammond and I said his name a few times softly, thinking how perfectly it fit him. Ham-mond, Ham-mound. He wanted to be an actor when he was younger, “not so long in the tooth and more studly,” as he was fond of reminiscing. But he confessed he never succeeded in acting because he “didn’t have the temperament for it,” as though it really required a coarser, less refined nature.

I remembered the first time I’d met him. He was reading a page or so aloud in a class we shared. He seemed at least six and half feet tall and reminded me of a great, shaved bear who’d been shoved into a man’s clothes for a special circus performance. I suppose some considered him handsome; people tend to grant extra attractiveness points for tallness, I notice, but his hair was the color of dirt and his eyes sometimes reminded me of hard-boiled eggs, the way they glisten unappealingly when you first remove the shell.

But the worst thing about Hammond was his voice. He affected many corny ripples and inflections like a lounge pianist who is showing off, but not playing very competently at all. I remember thinking, “What a stagy, overly dramatic voice that old guy has! What a big old side of ham!” When I learned his name later, I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing.

As I got to know him and I found out how pleasant and flattering he could be, I started to ignore the undesirable aspects of his appearance and demeanor. For me, Hammond was like the mirror in Snow White, the one that always tells her she the fairest in the land.

Hammond, also, listened and understood when I told him my story about the jailer with the ice cream and the whip and living like this for ten years with my first husband. I told him about being cursed in the face, slapped, spat on, pushed down flights of stairs, choked, punched and kicked for things like forgetting to replace a kitchen sponge when it began to turn grotty.

I explained how you never knew if the jailer would be coming to visit with the ice cream or the whip under his great coat. But in the end, I did get to know what was coming and I would send Tina and Teddy's to the neighbors as soon as I could tell.

Only one time after that did I fail them. My ex-husband came to breakfast on Christmas morning and stubbed his toe on Teddy's high chair. He boxed my ears until they bled and Teddy, poor Teddy, in his baby nightgown and his wet diapers sagging to his knees, stood up in his high chair and put his arms out to reach for me. He was only fourteen months older, and he was trying to comfort me.

Unlike the policemen who came to our apartment so many times, unlike my sisters, Hammond never asked why didn't you just leave? And he never wondered about Sanders, never had to know whose child he was. He tried to treat him like Hammond's own father had treated him, a little suspiciously and jealously, it's true, but he watched Sanders and cared for him as though he were his own son. True, Hammond made a lazy stepfather, but he was little lazy in everything. And laziness in a father, I learned, is much, much better than viciousness.

After Sanders' bath, I felt calmer. While I read Sanders his favorite books, I heard Hammond cleaning up the kitchen, putting dishes in the dishwasher and opening and closing the refrigerator door, perhaps eating the sandwiches I'd rescued for him. Sanders and I sang our songs, and then I tucked him in bed, kissing him good night, hoping he would be up only two or three times in the middle of the night,

When I turned out the light to Sanders' room and returned to the kitchen, I found Hammond reading at the table. I gave him a smile, and his ears veritably twitched in relief. For all his size and his bluster, Hammond, I believe,

is a little scared of me, and something of the physical coward about him that provoked me to meanness.

He looked so relieved, in fact, that I let him cast the I-Ching for me. He shook the jar and threw the sticks on the table. When he read the sticks with his book, they predicted much travel. A wanderer's prophecy.

"Hmmm . . . maybe you will get that job, after all," he said, as if he'd never really considered it a serious possibility before he'd gotten a good look at the sticks.

* * *

After two months of neither hearing from Renda Glensi and nor having my calls returned, I resigned myself again to the itinerant life of substitute teaching. A pregnant teacher at one of the outlying county schools took a liking to me, and I got her job when she went on maternity leave. The classes were special education--usually small in numbers, especially in the mornings.

I sat with a few students every morning adding and subtracting the same very low sums each day. One of the boys was a Boy Scout with a very distinctive hare-lip. He liked to bring me pictures of himself at various Boy Scout functions, and we would look at these and talk quietly about the Boy Scouts and their activities in the chilly mornings while the radiator hummed behind my desk.

Our class won a contest for best door decoration around Christmas time. I penned farm animals hovering about a stable for a nativity scene; but when it came to the Baby Jesus, I was stymied and settled for a score of lemony stripes radiating from a batch of glued on hay. The Boy Scout brought the hay. Most of it wound up strewn all over the hallway. But, when we talked about it in our hushed way in the morning, we decided it was the hay that did the trick. We never did get a prize of any kind.

In the afternoons, I had the Behavior Disorder Boys, or the BDB's, as I came to think of them. There were about a dozen of them, and they weren't so quiet. One of the boys had been raped behind the school the previous year by another student named Beau, so at various times during the afternoon the class would rustle with whispers of: "Who knows? Who knows? Beau knows. Beau knows." Another boy fled to the woods whenever his step-father came home after a binge, and came to class with twigs matted in his hair. In those interminable afternoons, the class learned to spell compound words and that spiders weren't really insects at all, but arachnids from the piles of milky blue mimeograph sheets conscientiously provided by the regular teacher.

Once a burly BDB named Derrick had a tantrum when I asked him to stop teasing the one female student--a homely girl named Cassandra. Enraged he overturned his desk and threw books from the bookcase.

"You can leave now, Derrick," I told him. "You can go to the office."

He shouted obscenities as he stalked to the door. But that morning the custodian had installed an air hinge at the top, so the door would close slowly, and when Derrick left the room, he tried to slam it, but the door wouldn't swing shut. The other BDBs giggled at his frustration. Derrick was so angry spit flew when he cursed. The vice-principle happened by and escorted him to the office where he was suspended for a week. During that next week I had a phone call from "my husband" the secretary told me as she relieved me from the class to take it. When I got on the line, it wasn't Hammond at all, but Derrick promising to kill me and my family.

"Life is dull," I said into the phone, "and when you aren't bored, you hurt so bad you can't stand it. I hope you live a long, long time, Derrick. I hope you live forever." And I handed the phone back to the office clerk.

“Anything wrong?” she asked.

“No, not really. Thank you for asking, though.”

* * *

At home, Hammond developed a mysterious respiratory illness which somehow ailed his back and his bowel, but defied diagnosis. And often depressed by the marks he received on his papers, he would lie abed most days drinking special teas, taking vitamin pills and watching the small black and white television in our bedroom.

One day as I drove on the two-lane highway back from the middle school, I saw another car coming at me from the opposite direction. At first, I thought it was an optical illusion because the other car just seemed to emerge on the rise of a slope where both sides of the highway appeared to converge. But in an instant, I realized it was headed straight for me, and for an instant, I thought I was on the wrong side of the road. Sometimes I make mistakes like this. For example, I'll get to an intersection and sit staring at the light as it changes colors because I've forgotten what red means, what green means, or wonder if I've mixed them up in my mind, and I have to wait for a cue from other drivers.

But this time I checked myself, and I was on the right side of the highway. The other car careened at me. I thought it would swerve into the right lane just in time. I couldn't be sure, though. So, I yanked the wheel and bumped onto the shoulder and then into a field where I'm sure -- though they were too dignified to show it -- I startled some cows and some little cows eating grass near the fence. I could hear blasting radio music and laughter in the wake of the car that had driven me off the road, a beer can flew out the open window and danced briefly on the pavement. The car was still on the wrong side of the highway as it flashed past.

When I got home, I told Hammond that someone had tried to murder me. I described the near-accident and he listened from the bed, nodding expectantly as if it were something he had known about all along.

“Darling, ” he said when I’d finished. “No one tried to kill you.”

“Yes, they did. I just told you.”

“Darling,” he breathed patiently, “it wasn’t anyone you knew. It wasn’t personal.”

“Just because I don’t know who they are doesn’t mean they aren’t trying to kill me,” I told him.

“You take everything so personally.”

“How else should I take things?”

“I’m just trying to tell you that no one intentionally set out to kill you. You just happened to be in the way,” he explained.

“So?”

That’s when he sighed and pinched the skin between his eyes as though they pained him. “By the way,” he said after a pause, “a Dr. Glensi called you.”

“Dr. Rensi? She’s not a doctor, is she?” It had been a while, though I doubted enough time had elapsed for Renda to complete a Ph.D.

“I really couldn’t understand what it was the woman was trying to say. She sounds very ill, but I gather she wanted you to return her call.”

I dialed Renda straightaway and after much meandering conversation I finally extracted from her the information that I had been hired and could start in two weeks. Of course, she’d been too busy to call me before.

I could have dived through the phone lines to give her noble face a great kiss. As it was, I was doing the Highland Fling while I clutched the telephone in the hollow of my shoulder, thanking her profusely for the job.

Then I hung up and went to tell Hammond that he was all wrong because if an accident almost happens, a person has to take note because there is always a reason, a very personal reason, and it's a good time to make some changes, to get ready for when one does hit. I had to hurry to tell him while I was thinking about this that everything--to me--is personal.

CHAPTER 3

TEODORO

“Mom?” Teddy called hopefully as he slammed through the kitchen door. His mother’s car was missing from the carport, but so strongly had he willed her to be home all day that he believed she would be there somehow, even if her car were not aligned with his stepfather’s primer painted old Mustang. “Mom?”

“Not here,” mumbled his stepfather, Hammond, from the depths of the refrigerator.

“Where is she?”

“How should I know?” Hammond pulled a purple onion from the vegetable bin and began to cleave it to bits with a large, spangly-bladed knife.

“Working, I suppose.”

Teddy wrinkled his nose. “I don’t like onion.”

“Who asked you?” Hammond’s voice rasped on Teddy’s nerves like one of those rusted files hanging on a strap in the toolshed.

Teddy couldn’t figure how his step-father always managed to sound sissy and nasty at the same time and why he never talked to him as harshly when his mom was home. This was something Teddy just couldn’t seem to communicate to her.

“What do you mean he talks differently?” she would ask.

“I don’t know, he just sounds like it’s such a big deal to have to use his voice on me when you’re not here, and you’re never here, Mom.”

“Where is my mom?” Teddy asked again, absently, yet hoping for a different answer.

“I told you working.” Hammond narrowed his pouchy little eyes as if he was wondering whether Teddy was an idiot or merely being obnoxious.

“Are you making dinner?”

“What if I am?” Hammond turned to hack the onion.

“Nothing, I guess . . .” Teddy hated when Hammond made dinner, usually a pulpy mess of vegetables peppered with strong spices, covered with onion and doused with garlicky oil. Hammond seemed to know a thousand recipes for foods that Teddy and his sister, Tina, made no pretense of eating.

“When is she coming home?”

“I don’t know. Whenever she feels like it, I guess.” He rolled some mushrooms out of a plastic bag and began to behead them mercilessly.

“Where’s Sanders?” Teddy asked after his little brother.

“Daycare. You know your mom picks him up.”

“Oh,” said Teddy. “Guess I’ll go to my room.”

“Don’t you have any work to do?” Hammond seemed to believe kids Teddy’s age should always be working, serving adults in some way. And Teddy, who worked harder than most kids with his landscaping jobs and his personalized training to become the shortest basketball star ever, felt too angry to respond. “Off the top of my head, I can think of a few garbage cans that need emptying,” Hammond persisted, “and a whole mess of leaves that need raking.”

Teddy dragged his bulging backpack to his bedroom. “Homework,” he mumbled over his shoulder. He would throw himself on his bed, stare at the dusty peaks and dips of plaster in the stucco ceiling that reminded him of meringue pie and think of how he could use the hedge clippers on Hammond’s big, crooked toes.

Maybe Teddy fell asleep, but after what seemed a few seconds he stirred to darkness, Hammond pounding on his bedroom door and darkness parting the curtains by his desk. “Ted,” barked Hammond, “I’m going to the library, Ted. You hear me, the library. Tell your mom, if she bothers to ask.”

Teddy mumbled, closed his eyes again and turned to the wall. Minutes later, the persistent bleating of the telephone roused him. He stumbled from his bed and bumped his knee on the door frame trying to get to the phone. He ran from the kitchen to the back bedroom to finally find the cordless phone wailing in the bathroom, of all places, on the toilet tank, where Hammond probably had left it.

“Mom?” he breathed eagerly into the mouthpiece.

“*Mom?*” an unfamiliar voice repeated. “Is this Safe Room?”

Teddy, blinking sleep from his eyes, glanced at the innocuous looking tub, the soft beige wallpaper and the cream-colored tile. “Yeah, it’s pretty safe.”

“Look, I never called here before. I don’t know how you do these things, but---” the voice whispered. “Look, it’s my husband. Well, he’s not really my husband, but he’s acting crazy.”

“Acting crazy?” echoed Teddy and the clean tile reverberated.

“Yeah, really crazy. That’s why I called,” the breathless voice rushed on. “He says he’s gonna kill me and he’s gonna kill the baby. He already smashed my head with the remote on accounta I got a little Kool-Aid on it.”

“You have a baby?”

“Yeah, but it’s not his, see, so he wants to kill it. It makes him so mad when it cries. Look, he’s downstairs at the bar, see, and he swears he’s gonna kill it if it’s still here, you know, when he gets back.”

“It? What do you mean?” wondered Teddy.

“I already told you, a baby, just four months old.”

“No, I mean, is it a boy or a girl? Does it have a name?” For some reason, Teddy flashed on the image of a baby boy nearly two years old, standing barefoot on the sticky seat of his highchair, cold, cod-stinky diapers slapping at his small buttocks as he reached out his arms and cried, “No, no, no!”

“Pookie, about four months old.”

“A boy?”

“Listen, I don’t care if he does kill me. I’m got a warrant out and I’m going to jail next week for bad checks. But, I gotta save Pookie. Look, can you come over here? Do you people do that? Can you come over here and get Pookie? Can you do that for me, please? Oh, God, tell me you’ll come get my baby. *Hear that? That’s him coming!*”

“I’ll get the baby!” Teddy shouted into the phone. His hands trembled, and sweat tickled his hairless armpits. “You have to tell me where---”

“I’ll take Pookie to the gas station at Princeton and Vernon, you got that?”

“Princeton and Vernon.” It was about a mile and a half from his house. Teddy could be there in about seven minutes on his bike, but how would he bring a baby, four months old, back on the ten-speed? He pushed the question from his mind. “I’ll be there.”

“Okay, I’m trusting you, girlfriend, you hear. Oh, God, he’s here!”

Teddy heard a cry that twisted through his stomach like a sharp blade. And it reminded it him of something. He remembered another baby in the deep tunnel of a memory, buried long ago. Then the line went dead.

He twisted the tap and splashed water on his face. He had to hurry.

Hammond had returned already, or maybe he hadn’t left for the library. Teddy found him in the kitchen again, mixing a drink in his special silver shaker. “No, she’s not here, yet,” he said in a bored, sing-song voice.

“I have to go. Tell my mom . . . that, that, that I’ll be right back.”

“Did you throw out the trash? I know you didn’t rake, but tomorrow is trash day.”

“I don’t have time for trash,” he said, directing a meaningful glance at his stepfather. Gladly, Teddy left Hammond standing over the sink with his mixing vessel and a glass with some green olives and ice in it on the counter. “I forgot something,” he lied. But when he said it, it felt true.

It wasn’t until he wasted a few minutes searching the garage that Teddy remembered his bike had been stolen a few weeks ago and he had been riding his sister’s old, discarded girl’s bike with the stuffing busting out of the worn vinyl seat and the bent frame that made him look like he was limping as he rode. He sincerely hoped that woman on the phone would not be standing around the gas station waiting for him. He couldn’t bear to hear her laughing at the front tire squeaking in one direction, the back in another.

He hadn’t even ridden it out of the driveway before he heard great hacking howls of amusement from Old Andy, who had chosen this humiliating moment to parade his Yorkshire in front of Teddy’s house.

“That’s sure a stoopit-looking bike, son,” he wheezed, pointing at Teddy.

“Yessir,” agreed Teddy. Teddy figured Old Andy must be close to a hundred years old and feared the old man could drop down dead any moment. So he forced himself to be agreeable. Besides he was sorry for the elderly man being led through the neighborhood on a skinny rhinestone lead by the not-much-less feeble Yorkie.

“You look like one of those clowns at the circus on that thing. With a bike like that, you oughta have a long horn that goes, ‘Arrugah! Arrugah!’”

“Yessir,” Teddy squeezed another strained little smile. “Well, gotta go, sir.” Teddy saluted Old Andy, who had served in World War One and had

written a dull book about his experiences. He even paid some company to publish it and kept it tucked under a bony elbow on his walks, trying to find someone he could talk into reading it. Teddy wobbled off on the mangled bike, before Old Andy could come up with new reasons for Teddy to read his war book.

Teddy almost made it without being noticed to the big intersection which would shield him in anonymity, when he heard a soft, but distinctive, “Teodoro, Teodoro,” from the bushes at the edge of the church parking lot. Spumes of blue-gray cigarette smoke curled up from the thick brambles. Teddy pushed at the pedals of the bike, but a stout brown arm struck out like a club and grasped the handlebars.

“Where you goin’, Teodoro, eh? Where you goin’ in such a hurry, man?” A bull-sized boy followed the brown arm out of the bush. Not Esteban, moaned Teddy inwardly.

Esteban was a boy Teddy knew from school who was so large and heavy he had to sit at the teachers’ desks for every class. Teddy’s mother liked to say, “Here comes the boy with chi-chis,” whenever she saw Esteban lumbering across their lawn. Esteban had flaps of flesh as plump as a woman’s breasts that bounced against his mountainous stomach when he walked. He was always doing things like stealing cigarettes from the gas station or blowing up frogs with cherry bombs or knocking mailboxes off their posts with his baseball bat.

Esteban thought that he and Teddy should be great friends because they were the only Mexican boys in school. “*Eh, vato,*” he’d say when he saw Teddy, or “¿*Que tal, amigo?*” He never seemed to notice that Teddy was always busy doing homework whenever Esteban came over to play nor did he notice the long circuitous routes that Teddy took to avoid running into him.

The only good thing about Esteban was that he was the only person other than Teddy's mother to call him by his full name--Teodoro.

His mother had picked that name for him before he was born. His father wanted to call him Victor, as the family legend had it, so that whenever he fought he would be prepared to win. Somehow knowing before he was born that Teddy would be the kind of person who would never want to fight, his mother decided to christen him Teodoro. "It sounded so lovely," she said, "like the Spanish *te adoro* which means: I adore you."

When a nurse brought his mother a sheaf of papers to fill in before she took her baby home, she didn't hesitate to indicate the name of her choice on the birth certificate application. Some months after Teodoro's birth, his father was entreating him to crawl. "Victor," he kept saying, "you can do it, champ. C'mon, Victor. That's a boy, Victor."

"Victor?" his mother had asked, wryly. "Don't call him Victor? His name is Teodoro."

"Oh, no it isn't."

"Oh, yes it is!" And she had hurried to find the birth certificate, to fling it in her husband's lap.

"I'll bet Dad was pretty mad," Teddy always said at this point of the tale.

"You could say that," his mother would reply, tracing, always tracing the herringbone etching of scar tissue under her jaw as she spoke. "But it was sure worth it."

"Eh, Teodoro," Esteban wheezed in his ear while he still gripped the bike. "Eh, Teodoro, guess what I got here." The stout boy pulled a few Polaroid photographs from the breast pocket of his straining t-shirt. "Ever seen anything like this?" Esteban breathed heavily, waving the snapshots so close to Teddy's face that he could not focus on them for a few moments. Then he saw.

They were pictures of a wide-eyed woman with brown hair. In the first one, as she stared in terror at the camera. In the next shot a hairy ham fist held a bloody knife to her throat; her eyes were closed. In the third photo she lay on a bed in a shiny green dress, her head a sickening distance from her torso, separated by sheets splotted by great puddles of black-clotted gore.

Teddy made a sound that frightened him and hit the pictures from Esteban's hand. As they sailed to the dirt, he stumbled forward on the bicycle. "Hey!" cried Esteban. "What'dja do that for, man? My uncle brought these all the way from Mexico. You're gonna get them all dirty." Teddy could still hear Esteban's cranky complaints trailing after him, blending with the whine of the rusted bike chain as he rode bumpily across the church parking lot.

As Teddy pumped the pedals, he tried to regulate his breathing to match the thrusting of his heels. He feared he would fall off the bike in a faint or vomit into the grass. That Esteban, he shook his head, what a huge creep. He was the kind of kid who was biding his time, just waiting to get old enough for prison. Teddy's mother liked to say that Esteban was a "walking heart attack" because of his weight and the smoking. "Here comes Cardiac Arrest," she'd say when she felt redundant from saying, "Here comes the boy with the chi-chis," so often. But Teddy disagreed. Esteban was the type who gave heart attacks much more often than getting them.

Teddy envisioned of Esteban as a massive adult thundering like Godzilla through an imagined metropolis, innocent bystanders fainting away at the sight of his rude, bulky presence. He shook the image from his head, shuddering, nearly losing his balance on the lop-sided bike.

Pay attention, he admonished himself. The tottering nearly drove the bike tires over a handful of carpenters' nails strewn near the newly-constructed church marquee which spelled out a curious message about making reservations

for the “Smoking or Non-smoking” sections of the hereafter. The fat boy would no doubt opt for “Smoking,” Teddy thought, still struggling to push Esteban out of his thoughts, as he rolled the front tire over a single upturned nail which had strayed from the scattering. The mournful hissing of punctured rubber brought him off the bike. Damn, he kicked the bike in fury, catching his raggedy tennis shoe between the spokes. Shaking his leg to release his foot, Teddy hoped no one were watching his ludicrous dance with the falling bicycle. He glanced about cautiously and saw only Esteban marching slowly across the church lawn, the Polaroids still clutched in his dimpled brown fist.

Quickly, Teddy leaned the bike behind the marquee so that it was mostly concealed from the street. Then he turned on his heel and ran as fast as he could toward the intersection, thinking he might evade Esteban and head home to cajole Hammond into giving him a ride to the gas station. But his imagination couldn’t supply him with the words he would need to get through to Hammond. Walking the remaining nine concrete blocks in the late afternoon sun seemed a far simpler project than the task of extricating a small favor from his step-father. No, he would rather walk to the intersection than hitch a ride to the gas station, a major decision for a boy like him.

As a small child, Teddy feared strangers deeply. When he was in kindergarten, his mother had bought him a picture book called *The Dangers of Strangers*, which had been a bedtime favorite. He never tired of the eerie ink drawings of treacherous adults--men and women with shadowy faces--luring youngsters into their cars “never to be seen again.” He always remembered that part. It seemed worse than dying, this idea of never being seen again.

As recently as last summer, Teddy had hesitated getting out of the car to buy tickets to a popular movie while his mother hunted for a parking space. “What if someone tries to kidnap me?” he had asked, seriously. For the world

seemed a place brimful of dark, darting strangers ready to swoop down on a solitary boy and snatch him into invisibility forever.

Lately, though, he sometimes felt he was in fact losing some of his visibility or that he had somehow failed to materialize fully, appreciably, whenever he tried to speak to Hammond and his mother or to his sister, Tina, or even to Sanders, for that matter. Teddy remembered being the boy who brought everyone together when they were living with his father, before his mother married Hammond. He recalled being the one to make everyone smile at his silliness, the one to hug the anger away. “He is the cuddlingest boy,” his mother would say, responding to his outstretched baby arms. Before he left the family, his father had even written him a letter saying that Teddy had “done a good job,” but even he couldn’t hold them together as a family anymore. Teddy had the feeling that the more he grew, the more invisible he became, and he just wasn’t big enough, strong enough or smart enough to stop it.

So the decision to hitch a ride, though a major one, was a natural one for Teddy. He no longer really believed anyone would kidnap him. Who, after all, would want him? And who would come looking for him when he was gone?

Yet, his thumb wobbled indecisively as he juttied it from his fist. Car after car whooshed past. Teddy walked backwards as he attempted to hitch, believing he might cover the entire distance in this fashion.

After he walked two blocks, a small station wagon scooted to the curb and a woman with sand-colored hair reached across the passenger side to roll down the window and ask: “Are you running away?”

“Not exactly,” said Teddy.

“Me, too,” she replied, unlatching the passenger door. “Where you going?”

“Princeton and Vernon Street. The gas station.”

“Hop in.”

Teddy scooted into the car, noticing the suitcases and boxes jammed into the flattened-out back seats. He had to scrooch into the seat with an empty bird cage.

“Just put that cage there on the floor,” the woman told him. “You can set it on my purse.” Teddy obediently settled the cage on an over spilling black handbag at his feet. “I only put it there while Chamaco was waiting for me to load up the car.”

The woman nosed the car back into traffic and Teddy turned his best smile to his new companion. He was a great smiler renowned for the infectious nature of his *sonrisa milagrosa* as his mother called it. But his famous grin dipped a little when he saw that the woman had been crying. Her nose was puckered and pitted in like some hideously overlong strawberry, and her eyelids were fat and purplish, the rims traced in blood pink.

“Why are you sad?” he asked.

“Listen, I bet you know what *chamaco* means,” she said, wagging a finger. “I bet you know why I call him ‘Billy.’”

That was when Teddy noticed the parakeet huddling on the woman’s shoulder. The plaid yoke and collar of her shirt were splotchy with runny traces of the bird’s droppings. The blue-feathered face peaked out, the black eyes punctured Teddy’s soul like target darts.

“Good boy!” the bird whistled. “Good boy!”

“Darn it, Chamaco, that’s right in my ear!” the woman cried. The bird danced briskly on her shoulder pad and snuggled again under the collar. She turned briefly to Teddy as the car idled at a red light. “I saw you walking with your thumb out and I thought I could talk to you,” she said. “That’s why I

stopped. I thought I could talk to you and you would know what *chamaco* means.”

“Because I look Mexican or something?”

“Yes and no,” she hesitated. “Because you looked scared and because you looked like you would understand.”

“Doesn’t *chamaco* mean “kid” or “half-man” or something like that?”

“Not quite a person, I think it means,” she said. “There’s your gas station across the street. Do you want me to pull in?”

“No, please, just leave me here. I’ll walk.”

“I lived in Mexico for a while,” the woman said, pulling to the curb. “I know how it is to be in a place where no one speaks your language. But I learned. I learned to speak some Spanish. Do you speak Spanish?”

“A little. I know a few words.”

“I’m teaching him to talk.” She jutted her chin towards the collar that hid the parakeet. “Aren’t I, Billy? Billy, the kid.”

“Thank you for the ride,” said Teddy, extricating his legs from around the cage.

“No problem.”

“Good boy! Good boy!” piped the parakeet.

“Don’t be sad, okay?” Teddy called before slamming the car door.

The small station wagon sped off. Though Teddy couldn’t be certain because he only saw the shadowy back of her head and the parakeet brazenly strutting across her neck, he had the idea the woman was crying again.

As he crossed the street to the gas station, a number of questions cropped into his consciousness. Where exactly would he find the baby? How would he get the baby home? Should he have called the police? The police could be

touchy in these situations. They might accuse him of kidnapping. And what would he -- a thirteen-year-old boy -- do with a baby, anyway?

The weather seemed to change as soon as Teddy stepped off the curb with the green walk signal. Cottony clouds turned the color of iron teased the last slatted strands of sunlight and obstinately blocked the sun. Steamy splotches of rain bounced off his round flat nose.

“Great,” he murmured, wiping his nose with a pinch from his t-shirt sleeve.

He noticed a phone booth on the far corner of the parking lot and thought he might use it to call for help when he found the baby, but remembered he had, as usual, no money in his pockets. As a safeguard against spending the money he earned he kept it tied in a sock between his mattress and box spring. It was a great deterrent; but as a consequence he never had any money when he needed it. Teddy hoped 9-1-1 calls from pay phones didn't cost the caller. He had never made such a call before before.

He walked cautiously around the square white gas station convenience store. Diesel fumes wafting from rainbow puddles stung his nose. Teddy hoped the baby would not be too wet, as the rain fell heavily now, soaking his thin shirt and fine black hair.

In back of the station, Teddy saw the usual trash bins and oily bits of scattered trash. A nest of weeds half concealed a crushed cardboard box. Teddy jogged toward the rain-darkened carton. “Pookie!” he called, wondering if four-month-olds recognized their names when they were spoken by strangers. “Pookie?”

But the box stood empty. A swath of cloth -- burlap or a blood-rusted tatter of blanket? -- was caught in one corner. Teddy lifted the rain-swollen box and shook it as if to upend and dislodge hidden clues. In frustration, he raised

the box over his head and hurled it with all his force toward the garbage bins. It struck the metal stem propping a bin flap open and collapsed it as neatly as a kick-stand before disappearing into the huge container with a satisfying slamming sound.

A clap of thunder reverberated the metallic blast. Teddy raked the littered alley with his keen thirteen-year-old eyes for any traces of a baby and he noticed the two shadowy humps rising from the bushes near a wall behind the station.

Rottweilers! Teddy jumped and dashed for the garbage containers. The slathering dark beasts snarled. Teddy could almost feel their hot breath through the seat of his worn Levis. But his personalized basketball training had made him a good sprinter and a great jumper. He leapt up the bin like a deft lizard, as the two hounds howled and snapped like demons dancing at the base.

“Shoo!” cried Teddy, feeling only slightly safer atop the metal bin. “Go home!”

The dogs continued to bounce at the bin, throwing their thick brutish bodies at the metal sides. Teddy thought he heard sounds and movement from within the hollowed container, and he remembered reading a news story about a baby discovered among garbage and considered that the distressed mother on the phone might have hidden Pookie from the dogs inside of the bin.

He pried open the flap he’d slammed tossing the box, rasping his knuckles on the rusted metal as he pulled it wide. Teddy could see nothing in the shadows, but he could hear rustling and, now, squeaking sounds--the kind a baby rousing from sleep might make.

“Pookie?” his voice echoed in the damp hollowness. “Pookie?” He perceived a distinctive squeak. The dogs, exhausted by now, sat panting watchfully. Their ear flaps perked at attention.

Teddy saw no choice but to climb into the bin and search about with his hands for the baby. He lifted the flap to prop it and swung a leg into the gap just as the squad car flooded the dark wet alley with its bright blue throbbing lights and eerily whining siren.

“Step out of the trash, son!” a megaphone blared. “Keep your hands above your head and do not make any sudden movements.”

“The baby!” cried Teddy. “There’s a baby in there!” He blinked his wide black eyes, and he felt like a sleepwalker awakening in very bizarre circumstances.

“Step out of the trash! Keep your hands above your head!”

As Teddy scrambled out of the bin, the officer wielded the flashlight and shone its light into the bin. In a corner near a greasy paper bag, a nest of newborn rats writhed blindly, mewling like kittens under the bright beam.

Teddy knotted his fingers over his head as he had observed people doing on television in crime shows. He hoisted his leg out of the bin and slid down the slanted siding. The rottweilers had vanished, yowling in pain, at the approach of the screeching squad car.

“What did I do?” asked Teddy.

“You have the right to remain silent,” recited a young police officer, with fat cheeks sprinkled with light brown freckles, as he grasped Teddy’s elbow.

“But what did I do?” Teddy wanted desperately to know.

“You have the right to an attorney--”

“I didn’t do anything. I was just looking for a baby.”

“If you cannot afford--”

“Knock it off, Harold! Can’t you see he’s just a kid?” an older officer in glasses took hold of Teddy’s other elbow. “What are you arresting him for anyway? Playing in the trash?”

“That’s just it, Dennis. A kid is a perfect foil.” The younger officer relinquished his hold on Teddy.

“Son, what exactly were you doing in the trash there?”

“This lady called my house. She told me to come get her baby. She said her husband, well, not her husband, but her boyfriend said he was going to hurt the baby. She was going to put the baby behind the gas station.”

“Hold on a minute, son. Why did the lady call you in the first place? Do you know this lady?” The older officer called Dennis removed his cap.

“No, I don’t know her. She just called.” Teddy felt he could talk until the sun came up the next day, and he would never be able to explain adequately why he had been rummaging around in a trash bin for a baby after dusk.

“I think he’s lying,” commented the younger one, whose badge identified him as Officer Harold Hekkleman.

“Son, were you looking for aluminum cans to recycle?” Officer Dennis asked. “You know it’s against the law to take trash for profit?”

“It is?” Teddy, his hands still clasped over his head, asked in amazement.

“Is it?” asked Officer Hekkleman, also intrigued.

“Of course, it is. That trash is the property of the station ‘til trash pick up day.”

“But, it’s trash pick up day today!” exulted Teddy, remembering Hammond’s directive. “The trash men work their way west, don’t they? Our neighborhood is tomorrow. Look, look at all those recycling bins lying upside down across the street. Today is trash day!”

“Cut the crap, son,” the gray cop sighed.

“Who do you work for?” Hekkleman demanded, suddenly. “Just tell us who it is you’re working for?”

“Lots of people,” Teddy shrugged. The rain stopped as unpredictably as it had started.

“Name names.”

“Well, the Harrington’s next door, the Van Brock’s down the street, the Platt’s, Old Andy -- but I don’t remember his last name but he wrote a book on the war, and those two unmarried ladies with the really steep backyard--”

“Sweet Jesus, Dennis, it’s bigger than we thought.” The younger officer smote his forehead with his palm.

“Just what is it you do for those folks?” asked Dennis, who seemed like he already knew.

“Different things depending on the people, the weather and their yards,” recited Teddy. “In the spring and summer, it’s almost all strictly mowing. Late fall and most of winter, I rake. Things like that. Can I show you my card? Can I put my hands down and show you my card?”

The policemen, fascinated, nodded in unison.

Teddy reached into a rear pocket of his Levis and produced a slim plastic case from which he extracted two business cards. He handed one to each of the officers. “I also feed and walk dogs and I water plants. In case, you ever have to go out of town.”

“Regular little entrepreneur,” the one called Dennis pronounced the word in a way that made Teddy think it was some kind of dinner in a fancy restaurant.

“Looking to expand?” Harold narrowed his eyes.

The older officer scratched his belly and burped. “My gut tells me this kid’s legit.”

“Oh, yeah?” Harold countered, “then what’s he doing here this time of day?”

“Look at his shoes, Harold. He’s wearing cheap sneakers from K-mart, for God sake!”

The younger officer did a double-take when he glanced at Teddy’s shoes. For the first time in his life, Teddy was almost glad that his mother had shod him inexpensively. “Gosh, kid! How much did those shoes cost?”

“Sixteen ninety-nine with a coupon,” said Teddy.

“Kid, you been set up,” Harold smirked.

“And what about you, guys?” was Teddy’s deadpan reply.

The old officer guffawed until he started wheezing, holding his sides in pain. “Harold, go into the store there and get me a milk. No, make it a Maalox. We better take this kid home and make some kind of report. Get the kid something, too.” He turned to Teddy, saying: “It’s a little service the county provides.”

“Want anything, kid?” called Harold over his shoulder as he headed for the convenience store inside the gas station.

Teddy thought for a moment. He thought about all the things he wanted ranging from his yearning to have his mother at home, waiting, looking at the watch on her slim brown wrist and worrying, to his desire for less embarrassing sports shoes. But he said: “Candy, I suppose. Chocolate, anything without coconut!”

“This is a drop off spot, son, ” Dennis explained, stroking his stomach through his uniform with broadly splayed fingers, long and patchy with wiry gray hairs. “This is the crack postal service in town, you see.”

Teddy’s literal mind fixed on the idea of an excellent post office. “But there’s not even a mailbox--”

“Kid, kid, either you are smoother than my own wife’s sweet behind, or you are one mighty stoop-it son-of-a-gun.” The older officer took off his hat for good and began fanning his face with it as he leaned against the squad car.

Thinking of Old Andy and his own crooked bike, Teddy hung his head and admitted, “I guess I fall into the stupid son-of-a-gun-category.”

“You heard of crack cocaine? You heard of drug dealers?”

Teddy nodded both times.

“This is the time and the place they drop the cash and drop the crack. We had a tip.”

“You don’t think there ever was a baby?”

“What baby?”

“A woman called my house. She told me . . . well, never mind. I just wanted to help the baby, that’s all.”

“There never was a baby, kid.”

But, here, the experienced policeman named Dennis made a mistake. There had been a baby, a boy, standing in his highchair, arms outstretched, crying: “No! No! No!” as he helplessly watched his father fill his mother’s ears with blood and push her out of the apartment, cursing: “Whore! Slut! Bitch!” while she clawed at the door. *“My children, my children! Please don’t hurt my children!”*

“Got you an Alka Seltzer.” Harold pitched a box at Dennis.

“You ninny! I can’t take a seltzer with ulcers! And what am I suppose to dissolve it in? Spit?”

Nonplused, Harold tossed a wrapped bar into Teddy’s hands, saying: “Here’s a Coconut Crispy, kid.”

“Let’s run this kid home and see if we can’t catch a burger before shift change.”

The officers drove Teddy home, alternately complaining about being underpaid for overtime and discussing their chances of seeing the tail end of a baseball game after work. Teddy sat silently in the back seat, his mind skimming over the afternoon like a pebble skipping over water. He thought of the desperate woman on the phone, old Andy with the Yorkshire, Esteban and his photographs, the crying woman with the parakeet, even the rottweilers and, of course, the two policemen who were driving him home. He wondered what the neighbors would think seeing their lawn maintenance provider escorted home in a squad car. He hoped it wouldn't hurt business too much.

CHAPTER 4

THE PEOPLE IN THE WALL

The first time Hammond visited Elaine's apartment he had to admit that her furniture frightened him. She had an unattractive collection of heavy wooden pieces--book cases, coffee table, end tables--stained, or bleached a dull white oak to conform with the popular style that was loosely considered South Western. This was a style Hammond associated with the working class, "the lumpen proletariat," as he joked to his friend Erica, the hoi polloi who vainly harbored middle-class aspirations. He was a little shocked and unnerved to find these hideous pieces in the apartment of a woman he dated. Her couches--cheap and Scotch guard shiny new tweed jobs that crackled when you sat--scared him too.

The apartment itself jarred him on first approach. It was a tiny townhouse, really, across the street from a high school in Sylmar, California, a confused suburb in the San Fernando Valley. Sylmar, Hammond recalled, had been the epicenter of the Big One, the Earthquake of 1972 that destroyed so many buildings, took lives and caused property values to plummet to the point that Sylmar, once the home of genteel suburban olive farmers with race horses and Olympic sized pools, was now no more than a truck stop situated squarely on Highway 5, with only migrant families, poor whites and first-time home buyers to fill its spacious, but foul-smelling neighborhoods. Diesel exhaust, sulfuric pockets erupted by the earthquake, and faulty mobile home sanitation combined to infuse all of Sylmar with what Hammond described to his Erica as "the effluvia of a stale fart."

Elaine's neighborhood, Hammond surmised, was a newer addition to the area. Graffiti scrawled cinder block apartments, condominiums and townhouses hastily thrown up around a few strip malls and a mental hospital to house the rapidly growing population. Her townhouse itself was a tacky two-storey with depressingly dark paneling and deep green industrial carpeting, which was flat enough to putt on. When Hammond described these horrors to Erica afterwards, she had shaken her head, rolled her eyes as though to say, what did you expect? "A woman like that--and from Sylmar," Erica said, "you're lucky she doesn't have big hair and a Camaro."

Clearly Elaine had neither big hair nor a Camaro. She had lank dark hair and a used Toyota which she housed with the washer and dryer in the garage. She also had three children who were with her sister for the evening. Hammond noticed their pictures on an end table after that first date. Two attractive preteens and a toddler who looked as if he might be Asian. The entire evening, she spoke slowly and quietly, as though she were very sad or very tired. Elaine didn't seem to notice Hammond's distaste with her surroundings, and when he asked her how she liked the area, she just smiled and said, "The olive trees are nice, don't you think? And it's a very quiet walk around the mental hospital."

* * *

When Hammond finally got over Elaine's furniture, her townhouse and Sylmar, he found that he liked her very much. He liked the children too from the first time he met them. Tina, just turned thirteen, had startled him with her heavy make up and teased black bangs. She had worn a filmy black crop top and tight shorts the first time he saw her. Nevertheless he threw an arm around her bare midriff in a welcoming embrace, until Elaine forced him to remove it with her unrelenting gaze. Teddy seemed friendly enough, like his mother. He was a darkly handsome eleven-year-old who smiled easily and appeared eager

to please. Sanders, of course, was just out of babyhood, and he was the easiest going of all. Hammond found him warm and affectionate, but he made mental note to ask Elaine if her youngest had any Asian blood.

Over the months he dated Elaine, he took all of them to operas, to plays, to the Cirque de Soleil, the French mime circus, which even Tina had to admit enjoying. Inspired Hammond painted the paneling covering the townhouse walls white, making the interior larger and airier. He offered to refinish the furniture, but Elaine had only shrugged, and he never brought it up again.

(Hammond confided to Erica that the kids were desperate for some kind of positive male role model in their lives--their father being such an ass--and Elaine, poor Elaine, she was so lonely and sad, always second guessing herself. She needed so much looking after.)

For Valentine's Day, he bought Elaine an industrial thermos and an elegant set of plain white china.

"For my practical girl," he said when she unwrapped it and stared wonderingly.

"I'm practical?"

"Of course, you are, darling," he assured her. "Now open these." He gestured at the gift-wrapped boxes of dishes and cups.

"Dishes?"

"Yes, now you can get rid of those ugly plastic things," Hammond told her. "We can eat off real china now. You'd be surprised how much better food tastes."

"So," asked Elaine, unwrapping a plate and examining her reflection in the porcelain. "So you're thinking of moving in, then?"

“Let’s face it, it’d save both of us a lot--the driving, the rent money, everything would be more manageable. I know how you struggle with things. I can help you out, Elaine. I want to help you and the kids.”

“I have a good job, Hammond.” Elaine worked as a teacher in a middle school not far from Sylmar. “I struggle like everyone struggles.”

“But I can help. I’ve seen when you don’t have money for the kids to go on trips or join clubs.”

“Those things are extra; they don’t need those things.” Elaine shook her head. “I provide for them.”

“But the point is, I can help. My family is very comfortable, I have a nice allowance, and I can help. I want to help.”

“Well, we’ll see,” said Elaine, replacing the plate in its wrapping, putting it back in the box.

“I’ve already told my family about us, and they’re dying to meet you. Of course, they were a little surprised that I’m dating a woman of color.”

“You are? Who?”

“You, my silly darling. You’re a woman of color.”

“How did I get to be a woman of color?” Elaine frowned and puckered her brow.

* * *

When Hammond was ready to move in with Elaine, he insisted they look at different places to live, and they found a house to rent--also in Sylmar--which was bigger and had a fenced yard. Once Hammond promised to buy them a dog, the children were anxious to have the house, and Elaine agreed. So at the end of their first summer together, Hammond and Elaine moved with the children into the larger house.

The day of the move, Hammond was hung over, headachy. He had stayed too long with Erica the night before at their favorite wine bar in West Hollywood.

“Just think,” he’d told Erica, “this time tomorrow, I’m going to have a house in the suburbs, kids and two cars.”

“The mind boggles,” said Erica.

“This is the kind of thing I need,” Hammond insisted. “This is where I feel I really belong.”

“Well, I hope it works out.”

“The truth is, they need me,” Hammond continued. “You should have seen the dump they were living in, no better than ghetto housing, really. They need stability. Those boys need a father.”

“And Tina?”

“She’ll get used to me.”

But during the move, Tina kept her distance or else rolled her eyes whenever Hammond spoke to her. Toward late afternoon, Hammond overheard her and Teddy playing in the garage with boxes that had just been unloaded from the friend’s truck he had borrowed.

“What’s this?” he heard Teddy ask. “Stockings? A leotard?”

“Lemme see that?” Then Hammond heard Tina hoot. “Captain Super Value!”

“Lemme try the cape,” Teddy begged. “C’mon I found it.”

Hammond stepped into the garage, glaring. His head felt like it was on fire. “What are you doing? Those are my things. Who told you to open those boxes?”

The children, sitting cross-legged on the cement floor, froze, staring in amazement at Hammond as though he had just grown horns out of the side of his head.

“You have no business! You have no right!” Hammond’s voice could crack like thunder, especially in the nearly empty garage.

Teddy collected himself enough to say, “We didn’t know this stuff was yours.”

“Don’t open things that don’t belong to you! Never!”

“We’re sorry,” said Teddy. “Honest, we are, but what is this stuff?”

“It’s mine.”

“Yeah, but what is it? A uniform?”

Hammond relented, his head still pounding. “I used to be an actor. That’s one of my costumes.”

“Yeah?” asked Teddy.

“You were Captain Super Value?” asked Tina with laughter in her voice. “Did you run around shooting things with a price gun?”

“I opened supermarkets a few years back. I wore a mask and twisted animal shapes out of balloons, that kind of thing. Now, c’mon, you guys, put that stuff back. Leave my things alone. I’m sure you have plenty of your own stuff to unpack.”

Teddy began refolding the tights, which were electric blue and glittery. Hammond turned and walked out of the garage, confident the children would leave his possessions in peace. Perhaps he had been a little hard, he wondered, hesitating at the doorstep.

“Captain Super Value,” he heard Tina cry in the stagy voice of a radio announcer. “Captain Super Value, but he ain’t no bargain!” And Hammond heard both children erupt with laughter.

* * *

Hammond ended up buying the children, not one, but two oversized pups that promised to grow into great, burly dogs, and he asked Elaine to marry him. She took a long time to think about it, though Hammond knew it was what she wanted, and she was only being coy. Weren't all women coy? The first woman he'd asked to marry him took a whole month before saying, "We might as well." After a few weeks, they'd had a terrible, alcohol-fueled fight, and the engagement was broken.

Finally, in the fall Elaine accepted, and for Christmas that same year, they traveled with the children to North Carolina, where they were married in his parents' home, where Hammond not only made vows to Elaine, but to the children as well, weeping as he read what he had written.

Hammond lived with Elaine and her children nearly a year, when he decided to apply to graduate schools. His mother sent him a large check, so he could send applications all over the United States. He applied to over twenty schools, but only one accepted him. A university in the South that had a reputation for welcoming non-traditional students. Hammond, at forty-five, was far from the usual graduate student. Relieved, Hammond had his mother send another check and he bought himself an airline ticket to visit the school. He thought the school and the college town ideal, not only for himself, but for Elaine and the children. He could see Teddy riding his bike on the wide, shady streets, Tina enrolled at the old-fashioned brick high school, and Sanders playing with his trucks under a magnolia tree on one of the large grassy lawns.

After Hammond flew back to the west coast, he found Elaine almost exactly as he had left her a week earlier, lying on their bed, bobbing an ankle crossed over her knee. Elaine, he learned, had not packed a single box despite

the fact that he had called her often, enthusiastically announcing his decision. She had not even bothered to give notice at the school where she taught.

When Hammond came upon her that afternoon, she was running her fingers through her short wet hair, reading a paperback book, which she dropped on the blue quilt when she rose to embrace him.

“Darling, why haven’t you started packing? I got all those boxes for you in the garage. I thought you were going to start packing.”

“How can I pack?” she shrugged. “How can I pack when we don’t know the outcomes?”

“But I’ve already found us a house. Darling, we have to pack.”

“I don’t think it makes sense when we don’t know the outcomes.” She pulled away from him and stretched out on the bed, yawning and flexing her fingers like a cat splaying claws.

“I’ll pack then,” said Hammond without moving his lips.

“You can’t.” Elaine yawned again. “We don’t know the outcomes.”

“I know my outcomes. I’m going to move. And even if we don’t win in court next week, you can’t stay here, so you might as well pack in any event.”

“Maybe I can stay here.”

Hammond shook his head. “But you can’t.”

Elaine picked up her book, turned a page.

Hammond sighed. They would pay fifty dollars to talk the whole thing over for an hour with their permed and perfumed counselor Fran, in her living room-style office filled with severe abstracts and books on wine. Since the wedding, they had been visiting Fran once a week to talk things over, iron out misunderstandings and so forth.

They started the sessions after one terrible misunderstanding over the laundry when Hammond had been trying to show Elaine how to sort the clothes.

“Hammond, I know how to sort clothes. I’ve been in the world, working and taking care of myself, my children and a husband for almost fifteen years,” she had said wearily.

“What are you implying,” Hammond had asked.

“I’m not implying anything. I’m telling you straight out: I know how to sort laundry. I know the right settings to use on my washer. I know how much soap to put in.”

“So that’s it. You’re still angry that I told you that you were using too much toothpaste.”

“Hammond, here,” Elaine had said, handing him the clothes basket. “Since you are so interested, you do the laundry. I won’t even tell you how.” And she had walked off, leaving Hammond alone in the garage, where he sorted the clothes admirably, but he forgot to check pockets. A crayon of Sanders melted in the dryer and ruined an entire load of wash, prompting another misunderstanding.

So they would seek Fran’s help again, but in the meantime, nothing would be pulled off their shelves or out of their closets. He had heard Elaine’s theories on the efficiency of procrastination many times. She had a number of sayings which glorified passivity and inaction until the very last moment. “Procrastination is efficiency’s first cousin,” she liked to say. And: “Why do today what may not be necessary to do tomorrow?” And: “Deliberation can defeat urgency.” She seemed to come up with a new saying almost daily, but not one thing would be packed unless Hammond did it himself.

* * *

Hammond chewed on his pen a lot during this time. He chewed on his pen, and he wrote long letters full of misspellings to Elaine's attorney, detailing what he termed the "malpheasants" of Elaine's ex-husband. In his letters, Hammond told over and over why the man, a convicted felon for spousal abuse, should not be allowed to prevent Elaine from taking the children out of state to live.

"Stop," Elaine startled him once, appearing in the doorway to his office. She held her book down against her thigh. Its pages open like wings of a dead game bird. "Every time you write to her, it costs me money."

"I don't understand how you can just stand there, darling, and do nothing about this!" Hammond had railed. "He writes those horrible, vituperative depositions, and you won't even bother to read them through. Peggy's begging you to write a response. I'm begging you to do something."

"Every time we answer him, every time we write to Peggy, every time you call her on the phone to complain about him, it costs me hundreds of dollars."

"You won't even worry. This is about your future, this is about your children, for God sake, and you won't even worry. You could lose your children because of this."

She shook her head. "I won't lose my children. There's nothing about that in this." She was right. If they lost the judgment, Elaine simply would not be allowed to move out of state with the children. She was really only risking Hammond.

The children were no better, Hammond felt. They had no sense of moving. Tina refused to believe in the possibility of ever living apart from her junior high school friends and her violent, but pitiable father. "I'm not moving!" she'd chant, cupping her ears whenever Hammond broached the subject of

weeding through her collection of rodents and lizards. "I'm not moving! I'm not moving!"

Teddy believed his mother like religion. "When my mom starts to pack, I'll pack."

Sanders, the baby, was the only one who could be persuaded to put "the petrochemical collection of garishly colored shapes," as Hammond called his toys, into a cardboard box for an hour or so, before pulling them out -- one by one -- to strew across the living room carpet.

* * *

In court a week before they were scheduled to move, Hammond wore his best suit, his wedding suit, a dark blue serge that narrowed his bulk somewhat and gave his transparent eyes a sea tint. He carried a briefcase filled with pens and yellow legal pads. His hands, mottled like cold cuts, shook a little when he tumbled the combination. Elaine wore one of the whispery long skirts of gauze she favored with sandals. She put her hand -- warm and dry -- over Hammond's before stepping into the docket.

Elaine's ex-husband, a small, thuggish man superannuated by a long and greasy black ponytail, followed her to take his seat in the docket.

Peggy, their attorney, was late, and she trembled with embarrassment. Hammond could see she feared the judge. She was a tense brunette in her forties, who quaked naturally from a systemic palsy, which was exacerbated when she was stressed. The judge, Peggy had confided earlier, had just been demoted to family court and had recently lost a daughter to suicide. He was prone to call contempt for "body language issues," as Peggy put it.

Hammond pinched his eyes shut as though he were a young boy hurtling down track on a roller coaster. Reopening his eyes he caught a glimpse of Elaine smiling, tentatively, sympathetically at the aging man on the bench. And he

noticed the judge nod sadly at Elaine, as though he were grateful to spot an old friend at a funeral.

* * *

“Now, I bet you’re sorry you didn’t pack,” hollered Hammond, hurling boxes upstairs into the hallway that afternoon. “We move in exactly one week, darling.”

“Why would I be sorry I hadn’t spent two weeks packing, when I really only need one?” Elaine called from the second floor. “C’mon, kids, two piles--garage sale and take-with-us.”

They took two cars, two dogs, Tina’s hamsters and her lop-eared rabbit. Elaine’s daughter had finally been persuaded to set the lizards free and give her aquarium to a neighbor. Tina had gone quickly from adamantly refusing to move to adamantly refusing to move without her hamsters and Mr. Hopper.

Teddy, true to his word, packed as rapidly and efficiently as his mother did, while Sanders sprawled in the middle of the floor, playing with his little brown toes, singing a little to himself:

We’re caught in a trap.

We can’t walk out.

Because I love you too much, bay-bee

* * *

Tina and Teddy refused to ride with Hammond. Tina pulled her stack of teen magazines into her mother’s car, slamming the door. Teddy simply took his mother’s hand; he would not let go until they were both in her car. Sanders, on the other hand, would go wherever his car seat went without complaint. So Hammond pulled away from the hollowed house following Elaine with the baby at his side and the two dogs pacing the hot back seat.

* * *

It was in Arkansas that Tina believed the locals had metal plates sewn into their skulls that prevented them from behaving normally. This seemed true from the open-mouthed silences Hammond, Elaine and the children elicited walking into restaurants and grocery stores.

In Little Rock, they had reservations at the motel that accepted the dogs without a deposit. They settled the pets in the room--rodent cages always shut away in the bathroom--before changing into swimsuits to play a bit in the pool.

Hammond always enjoyed this time. Elaine held the baby in the shallow end. She blew into Sander's bronze face, which clenched like an anemone, before gently dunking him. He would gasp and hold his breath while she taught him to move underwater to the edge of the pool and pull himself out.

Hammond liked wrestling with the other two children in deeper water, especially with Tina, whose nipples had just begun to dimple her bikini top.

But when Elaine took the baby inside to call a Chinese restaurant for their dinner late that afternoon, Tina abruptly shook off Hammond's hands. "Stop, or I'm telling."

"What? Stop what?" Hammond was flabbergasted.

"You know what," said Tina, her loud voice bouncing off the pool tiles, carried by the water. "And I will tell, too."

"What are you talking about?"

"You better stop," put in Teddy, "or I'm telling too."

"I never--" began Hammond.

"Never what?" asked Tina slyly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Hammond finally, hefting himself out of the pool. He sluiced the water from his hair and grabbed a towel.

"I don't need this."

“Neither do we,” said Teddy.

Hammond stalked off, mute fury causing his gorge to rise. *I never . . .*

* * *

When Hammond was thirteen years old, he lived with his family in Scottsdale, Arizona. His father had worked “very hard,” as Hammond liked to say when he felt embarrassed by his father’s money, and the old man “had been successful,” inheriting an auto parts business from his father-in-law which allowed them to afford a lavish home in with a dazzling emerald pool in the desert. The seven of them--mother, father, Hammond, the oldest, his sister, two brothers and the baby--lived pleasurably in that big house for about six months before the baby toddled out a picture window left ajar. He fell into the backyard pool and drowned.

Recalling that afternoon once over cocktails with his sister, Hammond mentioned regretting that he had not been home that day to watch the baby.

“You were there,” his sister had said, stirring her whiskey with her finger.

“I was not. I was at the, uh, place, the school. I was at practice.”

“You were there the whole time, Ham. It was a Saturday.”

“No, I was the only one not home when he drowned. I was the only one.”

“You were there. I remember you being there. You wore that yellow shirt you had, the one with hibiscus. You were drinking water from the hose when I called you to the back.”

Then Hammond remembered. He chafed from the stiff cotton collar of that yellow shirt. He tasted the water warm from the sun dropping into his mouth. And he saw the baby floating on his stomach, his diaper undulating with gentle pulses of emerald water.

“You’re wrong, Mimi.” Hammond shook his head, pouring himself another drink. “I was the only one who wasn’t home when brother died. If I had been there, I would have seen him. I would have jumped in and pulled him out.”

* * *

In Little Rock, they noticed a strange fellow on their walk earlier that day. He was chugging his cigar and tracing after their steps through the shadowy and decrepit residential streets. This man listed as he walked, his belly rolling loosely against his worn t-shirt like a partially deflated beach ball. Tina hissed that he was not right in the head. He had yellow eyes like a goat and a grin that bared his long amber teeth as though they were ready to bite. They quickened their pace, but the man shuffled faster to keep pace. Though Hammond was sure he could protect them from the stranger, they hurried back to the motel.

Elaine reported the strange man to the woman at the desk.

“Oh, him? He’s always around here somewheres. Just ignore him an’ he’ll leave you alone.”

Late that night, Hammond, Elaine and the children huddled on the double beds eating Chinese food from cartons in the flickering glow of the motel television set. They were watching a horror movie called *The People in the Wall*. It was about a house that held demonic, half-humans between the drywall and framing. These monsters thrust bloodied hands from the plaster periodically to shock and torment the human inhabitants of the house.

Sanders, the baby, had fallen asleep before the movie grew too frightening. Wearing a blasé expression on her smooth face, Tina watched, steadily chewing her noodles while her glasses reflected the blue light from the set. But, Teddy gnawed at the sheets when he wasn’t pulling them over his head to shield himself from the gorier parts.

“Why do they live there?” he asked his mother.

“Will you hush,” mumbled Hammond through a mouthful of rice.

“Because they’re being punished,” Elaine whispered.

“Nah,” scorned Tina. “That’s not why. They were murdered, and now their souls can’t get free. They’re not being punished. They do all the punishing.”

“Why were they murdered?”

“Ssh!”

“The people that they thought loved them didn’t love them, so they killed them and stuffed the bodies in the wall to get the house.”

“Hmmn, I wasn’t aware of that.” Elaine reached for her glasses on the bed table.

“All they cared about was the house.”

“How can they get free?” asked Teddy.

“Tear up the house, I guess,” shrugged Tina.

“Shush up, please!” Hammond yelled. He hated talking during movies, even bad ones.

Everyone grew quiet, except Sanders, who snored irregularly over the rasp of the air conditioning unit.

* * *

The next day, they made it almost to Memphis before Ian, the mohair hamster grew limp. Tina shrieked from the backseat. Elaine jerked the wheel, lurching her small car off the interstate. In his car, Hammond followed her to the shoulder.

“For God sake, what is it?” cried Elaine.

“It’s Ian! He’s not moving, Mama!”

Teddy scrambled over his seat to the back. “Look at him, Mom. He’s all flat.”

“Do something, do something! He’s dying!”

Elaine reached to pull the small flap of silken fur from its cage. She took an ice chip from the cooler to rub on the hamster’s chest. Hammond hung his long face, like meat on a hook, in the car window.

“What’s wrong? Is it the car? Is it overheating?”

“Ian,” whimpered Tina. “Ian’s dying.”

“What?”

“The hamster,” Elaine explained, massaging the small creature with ice. “Something’s wrong with Tina’s hamster.”

“THE HAMSTER! Of all the--”

“Hammond,” said Elaine, in a rush, “get Sanders, get the dogs out of your car to stretch a bit, will you? Show him the pine trees. I’ll take care of Ian.”

Tina shot Hammond a murderous look, a look of secrets revealed and certain revenge, and meekly, he watched Elaine attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation with her fingers on the rodent’s narrow chest, but Ian remained still. Finally the hamster’s wet black eyes dried and locked like periods on a printed page.

In a pine grove off the interstate, with cars blurring past, they buried Ian under the biggest shade tree they could find. Hammond said some words about Ian’s character and constancy. He liked hearing his big voice rumble in this cathedral of pines. Tina made a twig cross to plant on the small mound and, below it, spelled out his name with pebbles.

Since they were stopped, Elaine fixed peanut butter sandwiches and sliced some carrots, and poured plastic cups full of Kool-Aid for lunch.

* * *

After another day, they made it to Georgia, and a week later they found the house Elaine would buy. Hammond's parents co-signed the note since neither Hammond nor Elaine had jobs, but they bought the house with Elaine's teacher's retirement money as a down payment.

It was a plain house, blue and brick, a tract home on a corner lot. Sometimes Hammond would find Elaine wandering the empty rooms, gingerly, dreamily touching the walls, whispering: "My house. You are my house."

Almost immediately Elaine found a job that took her away for hours, days, at times, as a consultant for a human service agency. Teddy quickly fell in league with a pack of neighborhood boys his own age. Tina joined clubs, ran track and volunteered at the hospital her first year in high school. They both vanished like their mother. Hammond went to his classes, conducted his research and took care of Sanders after preschool while everyone was gone.

One afternoon, Hammond drove to pick up Sanders and found him lying on a small cot in the room recessed from the director's office. "I gotta head hurt," the baby murmured, clinging to Hammond's sweater. "I gotta bad head hurt."

Hammond unfastened the child's fingers from the expensive wool.

"I don't know what's wrong with him," the director whispered from her desk, cupping the mouthpiece of the phone she clenched under her jaw. "He's usually such a chirpy little thing."

Hammond simply put the boy to bed without lunch and forgot about him, while he worked until Elaine got home that evening.

"Where's Sanders?" Her words fell as sharply as her heels on the hardwood floor.

"Napping, I suppose," Hammond shrugged without looking up from his notes.

“Hammond, call the hospital!”

Her cry was one of the last things Hammond remembers from that blur of a night, that and the tubed fluorescent lighting snaking overhead, suspended from the perforated ceiling tiles in the hospital.

“Hammond, Hammond, wake up! Hammond, can you hear me?” Her arms crossed over her chest, Elaine stood at his foot. “You fainted, Hammond. Are you okay? We have to go home, now. They say we have to go home.”

Hammond found himself on a green plastic couch in a small darkened room. “Where am I?”

“The staff lounge.”

“The baby?”

“He has an embolism, a blockage to his brain,” whispered Elaine as though sharing a bad secret. “It’s very rare. He’s in a coma, now. He might,” she breathed through her teeth, “be in a coma a day or a week or a year or the rest of his life.” Elaine curled her finger to beckon Hammond’s ear to her lips, and she lowered her voice still more. “It’s inoperable.”

* * *

One of Hammond’s testicles never descended, but atrophied instead like a walnut left to rot in the cornucopia heel of his mother’s Thanksgiving table setting. Hammond believes this is why he never impregnated a woman, why he never had any children of his own. And he felt deeply grateful.

“Let us give thanks,” his dying father held his martini aloft that last Thursday of his last November.

“Why?” Elaine shot the word out like a pistol blast. “Why should we?”

* * *

The next year Elaine alternated working with visiting Sanders at the hospital with an armload of picture books from the library to read to him. Tina

found a boyfriend who got her a job at the fast food restaurant where he worked. Teddy ran with his friends, but he waited, too. He waited patiently for his mother to get back to him. In June, Tina and Teddy flew to California to visit their father without Sanders.

One late night that summer while she slept, Hammond rummaged through Elaine's briefcase and found a note to a co-worker: "*Aaron, this session is neither edifying nor enlightening. Shall we repair to Mazda World and see if your car is ready? E.*"

Hammond stomped his thick feet to the bedroom and ripped the sheets from Elaine's slow-breathing, curving form.

"What is the meaning of this?" In his anger, he spat, throwing the balled up note in her face.

"Why are you waking me up?" Elaine jerked upright, waking immediately, angrily. "Why are you waking me when I'm finally able to sleep?"

"You tell me what this means!" shouted Hammond.

Elaine began to unfurl the note. "I don't know what it means. What is it? It's just a note, isn't it?" She read it aloud. "Mazda World's the place Aaron bought his car. They're fixing it. I was just giving him a lift."

"Oh, right."

"Yes, that is right. What did you think? That it was some kind of den of iniquity? Some dark place of assignation?" Elaine's ability to waken fully lucid and articulate never annoyed Hammond more.

"Give it back!" Hammond tried to snatch the note from her hand.

Elaine juggled the wadded paper like a tumbling club over her shoulder into her other hand. Hammond grabbed her empty hand and used it to twist her arm against her back. Elaine let her muscles go pliant and melted away from

his grasp. It was an old trick, she'd once told Hammond, from her days with her ex-husband.

Hammond recovered himself. He let her free to sit on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. He began to weep. "You said you loved me."

"I said that?" marveled Elaine, smoothing the rumpled piece of paper.

"I thought you loved me."

Elaine pulled off her nightgown and threw on a pair of jeans, at-shirt.

"I married you. I've given my life to you and those children."

"Have you been drinking, Hammond?" asked Elaine, with sympathy, as she pulled on a sweater and searched for her car keys. "Get some sleep," she said before leaving. "Get some sleep and you'll feel better."

In the morning, sheriff's deputies served Hammond with orders of restraint. He was not to come near her, he could not occupy a hundred yard radius of her home or person. He was to appear in court on a specified date for charges of assault, but they released him on his own recognizance.

Hammond packed a few things, planning to talk to Elaine later, straighten things out. He didn't remember that he had promised never to hurt her. Only afterwards did he recall that she said she would leave him if he ever harmed her. He didn't think he had twisted her arm that roughly, but it was her only condition, and he had broken it. They had an appointment for marriage counseling in a week, and Hammond was sure he could make everything right at that time.

He was early. He sat in the waiting room, browsing the family-oriented magazines with interest. Reading an article on homemade Christmas ornaments using flour and table salt, he vowed he would be a better step-parent. He remembered how angry he had been when he overheard Tina and Teddy laughing over a celebrity magazine in the front room.

“Rags to riches,” Tina had said. “How come they never have stories about people who start out with money and all kinds of privileges and end up being nobodies?”

“Hmm,” Teddy commented, “that’d be Hammond’s story, wouldn’t it?”

And they had both laughed merrily until he stepped into the room and demanded they stop, calling them “ungrateful shits.”

He could be a better step-parent, more understanding, more tolerant. They were only children. . .

Elaine pulled open the heavy door to the clinic and sat on a couch opposite Hammond in the waiting area. She wore a blue floral dress that Hammond always thought a bit large for her bony frame. She stained the bodice with soy sauce, but wore it anyway because she believed the stain bled into the flowers well.

“How’s Sanders?” Hammond asked, staring at this spot of soy.

“The same. He’s always the same.”

“I *really* want to work this out, Elaine. I *really* want to come back home.”

“That’s not possible,” she answered, pulling a paperback from her purse and flipping through the pages to find her place. “It would be too . . . problematic.”

“Then why did you come here? I thought you came to talk things over.”

“I came to tell you--in this neutral place--I came to tell you I want a divorce. I never want to live with you again, and there is no chance I’ll change my mind.”

“Then you give me no choice.”

Hammond asked to see the counselor first and privately. He spent about ten minutes with her while Elaine read in the waiting room. The counselor called Elaine while Hammond was still in her office.

“I have something to tell you that will upset you,” the counselor, Lisa whispered after closing the door.

“What is it?”

“I have to file a police report, Elaine; it’s my job. I have to report suspected abuse or accusations of abuse.”

“What are you saying?”

“Hammond has accused you of sexually and physically abusing your sons.”

“*What?*” Elaine shot a disbelieving look at Hammond.

“He says you have molested your sons. Would you like to speak to him, Elaine? Would you like to address these accusations?” urged the counselor.

“No, I won’t speak to him. What can you say to a person like that?” Elaine grabbed her purse and stood to leave, staring at Hammond. She pulled open the door. “He’s insane.”

* * *

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation sent an officer out to Hammond’s new apartment to make a report based on his accusations against Elaine. A short dark woman in a tailored suit asked him a series of questions about Elaine and the children.

“And you observed the accused molesting her sons.”

“Observed?”

“You saw her touch the boys inappropriately?”

“Yes, yes, that’s what I said.”

“Where?”

“Ah, in the crotch, rubbing the crotch. Kissing, kissing, too.”

“Where? I mean in what location.”

“In the living room. They were watching a movie, a movie about people living in the walls. Science fiction, horror film.”

“Here? In Georgia?”

“Um, Sylmar. In California.”

The agent closed her notebook. “Out of state. I can’t put this forward for prosecution.”

“No, I mean here, in Georgia. It happened here,” Hammond insisted. “I remember now. It was in Georgia.”

“Sir,” began the agent, “I won’t put this forward for prosecution. We get a lot of stories, sir. Some of them from estranged spouses falsely alleging child abuse to hinder visitation or just out of vindictiveness. Now these folks who make these claims, sometimes they get caught, and they get into more trouble than they ever bargained for. Sometimes we find out the person who makes the accusation is the one doing the abuse, because we do investigate pretty closely and interview all the parties. Now I’m not saying your claim is false, but I am saying maybe you don’t remember things too well. Sounds like you may be a little confused in your remembering, sir.”

“But I know what I remember,” blustered Hammond.

“What do you remember, sir?”

Hammond sank back in his seat, shaking his head. He drew a deep breath. “Nothing. I suppose I could be a little confused in what I thought.”

“Well,” said the agent with a smile, “no harm in that at this stage.” She packed her notebook back into her briefcase and gave Hammond her card. “Now if you start to remember things clearly--who, what exactly, when and where--why, you call us, and we’ll look into it.”

* * *

Sometimes Hammond sees the children. He's heard that Tina has moved into an apartment with her hamburger chef boyfriend. Hammond occasionally spies on them as they leave the restaurant together in the early evenings in their orange uniforms. They walk with their arms entwined, haloed by dusk motes tumbling about their shadowy forms.

And one night while waiting in line to buy tickets for the movie theater, Hammond saw Teddy laughing and talking with a group of friends.

"Teddy!" he called. "Teddy, how's tricks?"

Teddy cupped his ear. "Hunh?"

"How's tricks?"

"Tricks? What tricks?"

"HOW'S TRICKS?"

"I didn't do any tricks." The boy hung his head. "If there were tricks, they weren't mine, I swear it."

"Forget it," said Hammond and he turned away.

For a time, Hammond started visiting Sanders again in the hospital. He would sit in the vinyl chair at the child's bedside, eating cellophane-wrapped vending machine crackers, reading the newspaper, and waiting for Elaine to walk into the room. Once he heard the door squeak open, but by the time he looked up, the door had been shut.

The next time he visited Sanders, a nurse told him the hospital administrator wanted to speak to him in his office.

"I'm afraid we have a problem here, sir," the man began, showing Hammond the court order that forbade him from visiting Sanders at the hospital.

* * *

Hammond never had the chance to get close enough to Elaine to talk to her. He really wasn't sure what he would do if he had run into her. He feared he might scream or push her into a wall.

He thought he saw her one time, but he couldn't be sure. He thought he recognized her as she walked past the door of a classroom where he was teaching freshman. He heard the footfalls, and he glanced up to see her familiar gait--vague, slow, undetermined steps, arms swinging dreamily. Then he had the idea this person, if she was Elaine, had stopped just outside the door, having seen him too or having heard him speak. She seemed to have stopped, to be listening for a moment.

"The passive voice," Hammond rumbled, pausing for drama, "must always be avoided!"

Then Hammond imagined he heard her laughter from the corridor.

"Open it up," cried Renda, enthusiastically. "I want to see what they've done. I ordered a thousand of them. I hope that's enough."

Jimmy ripped open the carton flaps with Renda's keys. He pulled a slick folded brochure from the stacks inside the box. "It takes a whole . . ." he began reading and paused.

Elaine rolled her eyes in disgust.

"It says here, 'It takes a whole fish to raze -- r-a-z-e -- a village.'"

"What?" thundered Renda.

* * *

Long after dark, Elaine nosed her small car into the garage, listening to the plaques clattering against each other on the back seat as she turned into the drive. She could see Hammond through the kitchen window, as he walked to the door to greet her. He was still in his black kimono, but doubled a little,

clutching his side as though he were in pain. Oh, dear, thought Elaine. Hammond had such an anxious bowel.

“You wouldn’t believe the kind of day I’ve had,” he called from the doorway.

Elaine closed her eyes and saw Betty Buckleby alone in her apartment across town, sliding a reduced calorie frozen dinner into her microwave and opening a can of fish for her cat.

CHAPTER 5

IT TAKES A WHOLE FISH

Her first day of work with the Prevention Resource Agency, Elaine determined not to be late. By this time, her new boss Renda Glensi had relocated to a new office and hired a secretary, who wrote out and mailed straightforward directions to the office for Elaine.

Elaine woke early--careful not to disturb her husband Hammond, who slept poorly and needed the mornings in bed to recuperate. In the milky dawn, she packed the children their lunches for school and ironed a black cotton dress (long-sleeved, soft, and belted--identical to her wine red--two for fourteen ninety-eight at the House of Imperfections). She shivered out of her bathrobe into the warm garment in the laundry room after the children had gone to school. She applied her makeup quietly in the front bathroom, taking care not to rattle the jars or squeak the mirrored door to the medicine cabinet.

The last thing Elaine wanted was Hammond lumbering out of bed, flapping around like an overgrown bat in his black silk kimono and offering her fist-sized muffins the texture of upholstery ticking. But Hammond was already in the kitchen, when Elaine emerged from the bathroom, stirring a great bowl of lumpy orange-colored batter and humming to the opera music wafting from the little yellow radio on the counter.

“Good morning, darling!” he sang.

“Hi,” Elaine smiled.

When he bent to kiss her, a flap of his robe fell open revealing his fleshy chest fringed with white hairs that always made Elaine think of albino

coconut matting. "I'm making yam muffins for your first day of work." He smiled, expectantly.

"But, Hammond, I don't--"

"Oh, and there's the paper at your place at the table. I think I folded it to the part you like." He smiled, again.

"But, I don't have time, Hammond. I have to be there at nine and it's already going to be eight."

"Oh, pshaw! Renda won't mind if you're a little late the first day." He reached into the cabinet. "Where's that nutmeg? You can tell her you got lost. Everyone comes in a little late their first day. It's practically *de rigueur*."

"I don't want to be late. I want to get there a little early. I don't really understand what the job is, Hammond, and I'd like a little time to figure it out." For all her effusiveness during the interview, Renda had been oddly evasive about the position she was trying to fill.

"You're going to get a headache if you don't eat a good breakfast." He stopped mixing the batter long enough to wag the sticky spoon at her.

"No, Hammond, *you* get headaches if you don't eat breakfast. Breakfast makes me sick. You know I never eat it except to be polite."

"All right, alright." He stared with purpose into the bowl as if to discern some hidden secret in the mixture. "No matter that I went to all this trouble. . ."

"Look, Hammond, I'm sorry but---"

"I just wanted to give you some substantive nourishment so you wouldn't feel weak and sick."

"Hammond . . ." She was beginning to feel weak and sick already. "Please, Hammond, I'm sorry you went to the trouble, but I didn't ask you for breakfast."

"Forgive me if I care about you," he murmured.

“I don’t want breakfast. I don’t want to be late for work the first day. I’ll talk to you later.” She took up her sunglasses, purse and keys and left Hammond sadly spooning batter into the muffin tin.

Driving the highway to Gainesville, Elaine thought about how Hammond once told her he’d been engaged to a woman named Sheila a few years ago, but they had broken the engagement off just weeks before the wedding. When Elaine asked him why, he explained he and Sheila kept having “the same argument over and over” and they just couldn’t seem to stop. “She would say almost exactly the same words in the same way each time,” Hammond had sighed, shaking his head. Replaying the scene that morning, Elaine felt a flash of sympathy for the redundant Sheila.

The names of the small towns dotting the highway into Gainesville made Elaine want to laugh. Arcade, Buzzard, Morose and Dampbottom. She imagined conference tables years past lined with civic leaders--all white men in their middle years--nodding their balding heads agreeably, perhaps mumbling, aye. “We’ll call the town, Morose, then.” She could almost hear a gavel pounding.

Elaine thought about Hammond again and sighed. The back of her neck hurt as though some great fist clutched her nape, paralyzing her like a kitten. She tried to force her mind over the useful things he had done, like repairing the screen door where the dogs had torn it pawing to get in the house. If only Hammond didn’t sweat and curse so when he worked . . .

Elaine noticed yet another cemetery off the highway, at least the third she’d passed. The profusion of these odd crops sprouting whitewashed crosses and thick stone markers amazed her. Southerners, she marveled, were certainly unabashed about death. Californians, like herself, considered death quite vulgar, as though it pointed to some personal or professional failing, and cemeteries

were tastefully obscured from public sight. She couldn't count the times she had gotten irremediably lost looking to pay last respects at Californian grave sides. Really, it was ridiculous how well burial grounds were hidden far in the foothills or off serpentine, nameless streets that twisted endlessly through dusty eucalyptus groves.

Staring after a particularly ostentatious crypt bedazzled with gilt cherubs, Elaine nearly missed her turn. Luck brought her hand to her lap, where she clutched the handwritten directions between her knees. She made the turn and found the next highway, which took her directly to the strip of office buildings in downtown Gainesville and Renda Glensi's new offices.

The office itself was buried in the basement of an employment agency, Elaine later learned, owned by the part-time mayor of Deadlark, the last little town she'd nosed through on her way into Gainesville. Mistakenly, Elaine entered the employment agency section of the building on the main floor. The receptionist greeted her warmly and handed her a sheaf of papers attached to a clipboard and a ball-point pen. Elaine enjoyed filling in forms, printing carefully and clearly the way she wrote on the chalkboard when she taught. She handed back the completed pages after a few minutes and smiled, ingratiatingly at the young woman across the reception desk.

"I need to copy your driver's license and social security card," the receptionist murmured, looking over the forms. "Oh, and then I'll need to take your fingerprints."

"Fingerprints? Why do you need my fingerprints?"

"Well, you got to be bonded. You know that."

"Bonded?"

"In case, you get sent on a domestic job, you know."

"Domestic? Like housecleaning?"

“Light housekeeping, child care or even pet care. You got to be bonded to work in somebody’s house.” The receptionist stared at Elaine in a peculiar way, as though suspecting Elaine of some dark motive for questioning the fingerprinting.

“I’m not a housekeeper. I can’t even keep my own house clean.”

Another woman, under a burnished helmet of piled hair and behind a mask of heavy cosmetics, stepped out of an adjacent office. “Is there a problem, Rosaleen?”

“She,” Rosaleen pointed the ball point pen in the way she would finger the accused in a courtroom. “She don’t want her fingers printed.”

“It’s the law,” the other woman insisted, pursing her waxy fuschia-colored lips.

“There must be a mistake. May I speak to Ms. Glensi?”

“Who?”

“Ms. Glensi, the director.”

“Director of what?”

“Prevention Resources, the sign outside,” Elaine sputtered.

“That’s downstairs. Take those stairs” The woman seemed relieved, but the receptionist lifted a skeptical eyebrow.

“Ms. Glensi hired me as a consultant.”

“Renda?”

Inexplicably, both woman traded a glance and burst into raucous laughter. Elaine smiled, uncomfortably, and inched her way to the stairwell.

“Honey,” the receptionist, wiping her streaming eyes, called after Elaine, “you’re gonna wish you let me print your fingertips.”

As Elaine descended the stairs, she noticed a damp chill creep up her legs through the soft black fabric of her dress. By the time she reached the base of

the stairs, her teeth were chattering a little. She checked her watch. Her mistake in the employment agency had cost her exactly twenty minutes.

She took a deep breath and pulled open the door to the reception area. A young looking blonde woman wrapped in a heavy overcoat hunched over the solitary desk in the waiting area pouring over a slick-wrapped novel from the library. Elaine cleared her throat, and a head of yellow hair, a cantaloupe-sized head popped up from behind the desk at the blonde woman's elbow.

"Boo!" the little head cried.

"Boo," Elaine replied, amiably.

"You're s'posed to be scared! Mommy, she's not even scared." The little girl was ungraciously plump and wore eye glasses with plastic blue frames that glittered.

"If you don't shut up, Brittany, I'm gonna whale you good!" shouted the blonde woman in a voice that scraped at the nerve endings of Elaine's back teeth like a dentist's drill. "Shut up and stop scaring people. It's very hostile, goddamn it, and I told you to quit a hundred times by now."

"I don't mind," put in Elaine.

"Of course, you mind," growled the blonde, turning a page in her book, but staring at Elaine. In the solitary fluorescent glow of the desk lamp, the blonde woman seemed ethereally lovely. Her soft yellow hair waved gently, softly framing her shell pink face and her eyes, burning with ferocity, glowed violet. Elaine had never seen violet eyes before. "Nobody likes hostility. It's damned rude and inconsiderate."

Elaine decided to ignore this. She cleared her throat again for courage. "Is Ms. Glensi in? She hired me as a consultant."

“So you’re the new one,” the woman sized up Elaine, ominously. Brittany stared, too, through her clouded glasses. Her lower lip still quivered from her mother’s rebuke.

“May I speak to Ms. Glensi?” Elaine tried again.

“Hah, you think I’d be sitting on my ass reading a book if Glensi was here? You think I’d bring my kid in to work, for god sake, with Glensi here.”

“How would I know?” asked Elaine, reasonably. “This is only my first day.” She caught a glimpse of the name bar on the desk. “I don’t know how things go around here, Delia. I just got here. Are your eyes violet?”

“Contacts. Kind of nice, aren’t they? Call me Dee.” The receptionist’s extraordinary eyes softened a little. “And this here is Brittany. Stop blubbering and say hello. She’s here on accounta she’s sick from school and her granny’s at the beauty parlor.”

Brittany, no longer able to control her contorting lips, dissolved in a chubby, weeping heap on the floor.

“There, there.” Elaine bent to pat the small girl.

“Don’t touch her,” warned Dee, “she bites!”

Elaine pulled her hand back just as the child snapped her teeth.

“Go on in that office to your right. Another one will be here around ten.

“Another one?”

“Yeah, she hired three of you, but one can’t come for a couple weeks. Glensi’s in Puerto Rico, and she said for you all to read all the agency information, the grant stuff and everything until she gets back in a week.”

“Is there much to read?”

“Hardly nothing. There’s the grant, but no one can make sense of it. If I was you, I’d bring a library book and a big old overcoat. It’s cold as blazes in here, but your office is worse.”

“Where is my office?”

“That door there,” Dee pointed to the right. “Behind me’s the kitchen. We got a refrigerator and a microwave, if you wanna bring your lunch.”

“Got a bathroom, too,” piped the little girl, pridefully. “But, my momma won’t mop it.”

“Hell,” snorted Dee, “that wasn’t in my job description.” Dee swiveled her chair around and bent to pull a file sleeve from the bottom drawer of the cabinet behind her desk. She slapped a heavy manila folder on her desk. “This here is the grant Renda wants you to look at. Might as well be in Egyptian with all the pie graphs and bar charts and those are the most understandable parts of the thing! Glensi can sure write some gobbledy goop when she puts her mind to it.”

“Gobbledy goop,” repeated Brittany, trying to imitate a turkey and giggling. “Gobbledy goop! Gobbledy gop! Gobbledy goop!”

“Shut up! Goddamn it!” Dee thundered. Brittany began sniveling. “You got kids?”

“Three.” Elaine nodded, fighting the impulse to comfort the little girl. She hated to think what her children would feel if she hollered shut up at them.

“Three! You must be crazier than I am, then, and you’re the schoolteacher. Well, maybe you can make sense of this thing,” Dee said, pushing the file at Elaine. “Jimmy said to get it away from him ‘cause it gave him sharp headaches behind his eyes.”

“Jimmy?”

“Yeah, he’s the other one. The one that’s been here a week. He’s always on the phone, trying to get a good deal on a new Toyota. So far, he’s found a good trade-in value on his car, but no real factory prices on a new one.”

“Is he here, then?”

“Who Jimmy? Nah, he won’t be in ‘til around ten when the dealerships open.”

Elaine lifted the grant. “I guess I’ll take a look at this.”

“You got aspirin? It is a headachy thing. Oh, and you can make some coffee, if you want in the break room. Renda bought this coffee maker with a brain, the box said. No one’s used it, yet. But, I can tell you, a brain is sorely needed around here.”

“Would you like some coffee?” Elaine offered the secretary.

“Hell, no. Caffeine makes me edgy.”

Elaine took the grant into the break room, carefully stepping over Brittany’s crumpled little form on the carpet. She would brew a pot, in case Jimmy wanted some when he came in at ten.

While the coffee dripped, intelligently, into the heat resistant carafe, Elaine began reading Renda’s grant. It was a mess. Rife with redundancies, abundant with ambiguities, infested with agreement problems. The first page read like an exercise she might have mimeographed for her honors students as a proofreading challenge. On the yellow legal pad she brought in her briefcase, Elaine copied out her favorite sentence: *The uses and functions of the funding monies aforementioned earlier in the previous paragraph of this document herein entitled the request for funding or grant, so to speak, is useful as a tool of measurement given success levels established earlier in the next section of this request for funding and/or grant.*

“Miraculous,” whispered Elaine. “And they got the money for this?” She wished for her red felt tipped pen to score out whole paragraphs. She would delete pages, she decided, sipping her first cup. The graphs were good, though, Elaine had to admit, grudgingly. Renda must not have had a crack at those.

It occurred to her that Renda might not want her grant proofread after the fact, so Elaine decided to rewrite it, sensibly. It might be worthwhile to have a readable copy on hand in the event of an audit; and, besides, she might be able to figure out what she was supposed to do. Elaine rubbed her shoulders for warmth; tomorrow, she resolved, she would bring her parka.

She was well into revision of the second page, when a lanky young man wearing a gray suit under an unbuttoned overcoat popped into the little break room.

“E-la-ine?” His loud drawl made an extra syllable of her name.

“Yes?” She winced, shyly, looking up at him. But, he looked to be a kid, really, dressed up in fancy clothes on a lark. His dishwater brown hair cowlicked heavenward, his fine eyebrows lifted like question marks and his brown eyes cast up like shiny pebbles; he seemed the human embodiment of a half-grown hound.

“Hey, Elaine, I’m Jimmy,” he said in a quieter tone, adjusting for her reserve. He sidled his long body around the break table to shake her hand, gently. “I’m the other consultant.”

“You’re the one who wants to buy a new car.”

“That’s right.” He smiled, lazily. “And I’m about to jump on the phone for a while to do so. I suppose Dee told you all there was to know about me.”

Elaine shrugged. She hoped there were more to know about Jimmy than that he wanted to buy a new car.

“You’re not reading that ton of crap, are you?” Jimmy indicated the grant with a lilt of his chin. “Can you believe they gave her the money? My God, they shoulda locked her up in a remedial writing class over at the alternative school!”

The door to the break room thudded startling Elaine.

“That’s Dee’s kid kicking the door. She wants me to play Minefield on the computer with her. I can’t believe you’re seriously reading that thing!”

“I’m rewriting it,” explained Elaine.

“Then, you’re a better man than I am. I won’t touch it. It makes my brain feel all loose in my head, like it’s gonna run out my ears.”

The door thudded again.

“I thought if I wrote it over, I could understand it.”

The doorknob rattled.

“I better get out there before old Dee pulls off a chair leg and starts whupping that kid. Let me know when you get that thing deciphered unless I drop dead from old age first.” The last part of this sentence, Jimmy croaked his voice in a surprisingly good imitation of an elderly fellow. Elaine laughed as he spun out of the room.

By lunch time, the headache Hammond, Delia and Jimmy had predicted for Elaine came true with a terrible, throbbing vengeance. Elaine pushed her tablet and the grant file as far across the break room table as she could and propped her elbows to hold her head in her hands and close her eyes. She flashed on an image of glowing red leeches, swelling and shrinking, as they affixed like cruel straps to her cerebral coil.

Jimmy yanked open the door again and rushed in, saying, “I gotta pee like a big dog!” He slammed into the men’s room without seeming to notice Elaine cradling her head over the table. When he emerged, she had straightened up and pulled the grant file open again.

“Hey, Elaine,” he said, “I don’t know if you got plans for lunch, but I know a good place, Southern food, buffet-style, not too far from here. Whyn’t you come on and have lunch with me?”

“Maybe, I will,” said Elaine, shoving the grant away once more and rising from the dinette chair. “Is Dee coming, too?”

“Hell, no!” Jimmy crinkled his brow and squeezed his eyes in incredulity, as though Elaine had suggested the unthinkable.

At the Southern-style buffet restaurant which doubled as a family steak house, Elaine found an inexpensive, albeit somewhat wilted, side salad and a small bowl of peas swimming in a viscous amber fluid that she could afford. Then she loaded her tray with all the wrapped crackers, sesame sticks and lemon wedges she could discreetly manage. She didn’t expect to be paid for at least a couple of weeks and hadn’t budgeted to eat out.

“Don’t you like fried chicken,” asked Jimmy, as he espied her austere tray contents.

“Sure, I guess.”

“They got the second best fried chicken in all Georgia right here. Why’n’t you grab a piece?” He asked, brandishing a crisp and succulent breast portion from his plate.

“Maybe I will later,” Elaine lied. She busied herself draining off the peas on her fork.

“Here, try this piece,” Jimmy dropped the breast on her salad dish. “Seriously, I got plenty.” Jimmy indicated his plate which was piled skyward in defiance of gravity with several fried chicken parts, mountainous scoopings of mashed potato, and various other indefinable fried morsels.

“Will you have some salad, then?” offered Elaine, taking up the chicken piece, hungrily.

Jimmy snorted. “Vegetables? Don’t be disgusting!”

The two consultants ate in companionable silence until the edge came off their appetites.

“What were you telling Dee when we left?” Elaine asked Jimmy after she had polished the bones of her chicken piece.

“Oh, she wanted to come, I think. She asked where we were going. I told her we had coupons for sandwiches in the topless joint in Morose. And she still wanted to come. ‘I ain’t never seen a real topless place,’” Jimmy pitched his voice several octaves higher in imitation of the secretary’s nasal drawl. “I had to remind her about Brittany. Jeez!”

“What’s wrong with Dee?” asked Elaine. “She seems a little tense, but basically okay to me.”

“Well, nothing, if you don’t mind bitchy, selfish, Medea-monster mother-types with chronic and constant PMS to the tenth power. Why not a thing on earth is wrong with old Dee. I tell you I feel sorry for her husband, that poor drunken bastard. I’d drink myself blind, too, I tell you, if I were married to old Dee.” Jimmy squinted at Elaine, suspiciously. “Didn’t you notice she’s a lunatic.”

“I guess I’m not really a good judge of people,” admitted Elaine, for some reason, picturing Hammond probing a plump muffin with a toothpick for doneness.

“I’m gettin’ good at judging folks myself,” Jimmy said. “My fiancée, Linda, she’s really good. She’s a psychiatrist over at the state mental hospital and you know what that’s like. I swear they line them up about a mile down the road and she has to be able to walk along saying, crazy or not that crazy all day long. Matter of fact, that’s where I met her.”

“At the mental hospital?”

“Substance abuse,” mumbled Jimmy, stuffing his mouth with mashed potatoes.

“Oh,” Elaine nodded, sympathetically.

“No, no, I was a substance abuse counselor. You’re the teacher, Aaron’s the lawyer and I’m the counselor Glenda hired for this little team.”

“Who’s Aaron?” Elaine didn’t have much use for lawyers.

“He’s the third one. He’s not coming for another week or two.”

“I don’t think I like lawyers,” Elaine muttered, ripping open her last packet of saltines.

“Oh, he’s all right. I spoke to him on the phone. He’s a hell of a lot better than that minister nut she interviewed last week. Heck, I wanted to put him in the car and haul him over to the mental hospital for Linda to look at.” Jimmy balled up his napkin and threw it into the pile of bones on his plate. “You ready to go?” He stood and tossed a dollar on the table for a tip.

“I’m ready,” Elaine rose, pocketing a handful of sesame sticks for the drive home.

“Don’t even get me started on religion,” he said in a loud voice, putting his hands up as if to ward off any potential questions. Elaine could feel the other diners in the popular Southern-style buffet steak house swivel their heads towards the young man speaking ostentatiously across the table. “I will say this,” Jimmy began, pausing until the clatter of utensils and tinkle of glasses ceased. “I will say this, Christianity is the root of all mental illness. And that’s a fact that can be proven!”

Later in the car, Jimmy gnawed on a toothpick and said with a sigh, “Well, they almost threw us out of there.”

Elaine nodded. “I thought the old man was going to hit you.”

“Nah, he was a cowardly codger, I could tell when he started in with that ‘youngster’ business. That big ole’ waitress, she was the scary one.”

“I think she was angry about the tip, though,” said Elaine, remembering that she had not added to Jimmy’s crumpled dollar on the table top.

“Uh-oh,” mumbled Jimmy, pulling into the parking lot behind the office. “Glensi’s back. That’s her car over on the side.”

In the main office, Jimmy and Elaine found Renda Glensi leaning over the crouching Dee. The older woman was attached to the secretary’s desk by the short coiled cord to the phone she tucked between her chin and voluminous chest.

“You left the ‘l’ out of public,” Renda bellowed into the mouthpiece. “Do you hear me? You left the ‘l’ out of public!” Renda painted an elaborate ‘l’ with a sloppily bandaged finger of her free hand. She rolled her eyes and motioned Jimmy and Elaine to come closer. Elaine, again, was struck by Renda’s very odd resemblance to both great American presidents--Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. It was especially strange to watch her breathing with difficulty, shouting into the phone and painting invisible ‘l’s’ in the air.

Dee slid out from under the phone cord and slipped into the break room. Elaine, driven by curiosity, followed her. “What’s going on?” she whispered to the secretary. “Is something wrong?”

“Old Rensi woke up the middle of the night in Puerto Rico and realized she left the ‘l’ out of public on all those plaques she sent honoring folks all over town for non-smoking policies,” she smirked.

“The ‘l’ out of public?” Elaine was mystified.

“Yeah, she sent out a truckload of these awards honoring all these businesses and agencies for their ‘courageous pubic spirit.’ Jumped on a plane that morning and here she is on the phone, trying to recall the batch. I told her about the typo when I read the thing. Now, she’s trying to blame the printer.”

“Oh . . .”

“Then, she wouldn’t listen about Brittany, tried to give her a pat and my kid nearly chomped her finger off. Lucky, Britt’s granny showed up to take her

home. I'd walk softly, if I were you. I don't think Glensi's in such a good mood right now." Dee shook her head, frowning in a manner suggesting she felt Elaine were somehow responsible.

"E-laine! E-laine!" The blast of Renda's voice rattled the coffee cups in their decorative tree stand on the counter.

Elaine hurried to the outer office, expecting to find the older woman in an extremely distressed condition, which she could not specifically imagine, given the urgency of the older woman's cries. But Renda was flailing a what appeared to be a cocktail napkin scrawled over in ink and beckoning to Elaine with the wild gestures an impatient rancher might use to summon a recalcitrant cow.

"Get on the phone!" she sputtered, breathlessly. "Call up these people and tell them we have to get their awards back! Tell them anything you want, but, for heaven's sake, don't tell them the printer left out the 'l' in public!"

"There's about twenty names here," observed Elaine as she reached for the napkin.

Renda pulled the napkin from her grasp and ripped it horizontally across, severing the list. "Here, Jimmy, you call these."

Jimmy caught the floating tag of napkin Renda flung in his direction. He stood, staring at his half of the list and scratching his head. "Let me get this straight, Renda. You want me to call these people and tell them to give back their awards."

"That's right," nodded Renda, turning on her heel to retreat to the sanctum of her own office. "Let me know when you finish and I'll send you around to pick up the plaques." She closed the door behind her.

"Jeez!" hissed Jimmy. "I'm gonna feel like a big ole' idiot."

"Don't tell them your name," advised Elaine, picking up one of the phones in their office. No furniture had been ordered for the consultants' office,

so Elaine sat on a solid-looking carton and began to dial the first number. “Make up a name.” She had already picked a new name for herself. “Hello,” she spoke into the mouthpiece. “This is Betsy Buckleby with the Prevention Resource Agency. Is Mr Miles in?” And so it went the remainder of the afternoon. Elaine, as Betsy Buckleby, sailed through her list, recalling the defective plaques, one after another, with grace and equanimity.

She rather enjoyed being Betsy Buckleby, whom she pictured as an unmarried woman of advancing years, a little stout, with a dependable female roommate and a neutered tom for a pet. Betsy, Elaine imagined, was the kind of person who wore her hair curlers to the supermarket late on Friday nights to buy ice milk instead of ice cream, as she was trying to reduce. Calling up strangers to recall their awards thrilled the staid Betsy in a peculiar way.

Occasionally, she overheard Jimmy saying, “Yeah, this is Icabod, Icabod Crane over to the Prevention Agency,” or “Call me, Ishmael,” and she felt a pang of envy. There were so many more good names for men, she lamented.

Finally, Elaine as Betsy got to her last name. “May I speak to Mr Hermann?” she chirped, breezily. She thought she could hear music in the background, glasses tinkling and, maybe even, cue sticks hitting pool balls. It sounded like a place where people undoubtedly smoked.

“Ye-ah, mmn, hmmn, that’s me,” a slow rasp poured in her ear, like smoke.

Betsy felt affronted. “Mr Hermann, I’m with the Prevention Resource Agency. We recently awarded you a non-smoking policy recognition award.”

“Ah-h-h-h-h-h, yes,” the voice purred. “Honoring my *pubic* spirit. Very nice.” The slow voice chuckled. Betsy felt certain she heard a suspiciously noisy exhalation.

“Mr Hermann, there’s been a mistake and we need to come and collect your plaque.”

“Did my ex-wife call you? Wait a minute, who is this?”

“Betsy Buckleby with the Prevention Resource Agency. We gave you the award, and we need to have it back.”

“Well, you can’t. It’s mine. You gave it to me. I already put her up over my little league sponsorship pictures.” The noisy exhalation persisted.

“Mr Hermann, are you smoking?” asked Betsy.

Hermann coughed. “No, no, no. Is that what my ex-wife told you?”

“Mr Hermann, I don’t know your ex-wife and I don’t know what she has to do with any of this. But, I think you’re a smoker and you took that award under false pretenses, so you better get prepared to give it back.” Betsy slammed down the receiver in anger. “Some people,” she complained to Jimmy.

“I think you’re getting into the role a little bit much there,” Jimmy told her. Surprisingly the phone rang at his elbow, and Jimmy picked it up before Dee could. “Prevention Resource Agency. . . One moment, please.” He cupped his hand over the speaker. “Betsy, it’s for you.”

She knew who it was. “Mr Hermann?”

“Ye-ah, it’s me. Look, let me keep the award. I’ll stop smoking again. I swear it.” The raspy voice begged.

“You really mean it?”

“I swear I do.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Mr Hermann. Maybe you better give it back until you’ve been a few months without smoking.”

“Please, it will be a reminder for me. Please!”

“I really shouldn’t, but okay, Mr Hermann, you can keep it.”

“You mean it?”

“Yes,” murmured Betsy, turning back into Elaine. “Keep the award.”

“I really do have courageous public spirit,” the smoky voice laughed.

“I’m sure you do, Mr. Hermann. I’m sure you do.”

After that call, Renda summoned the consultants to her office by hollering through the walls. “Jim-my! E-laine! Jim-my!”

“H’aint she heard about a little thing on the phone called the intercom button?” asked Jimmy, as they ambled to Renda’s office.

“Jimmy, you need to get the boxes of brochures I picked up from the printer. I want to show y’all how I had them done up.” She chucked her car keys at Jimmy, and he headed for the stairwell. “I think you’ll like them. I used an African proverb on the front. There were two, really, I wanted to use. But, Dee told me one was plenty.”

“Really,” said Elaine, affecting an interested look. She felt tired and the doe-eyed pastel prints of large headed children, rabbits and deer that covered the walls of Renda’s office made her want to shut her eyes.

“I can’t remember which one I ended up picking. But one of them was the teach a man to fish thing. Do you know the one? I can’t remember how it goes.”

Elaine shrugged. “Something about give a man a fish and you feed him for one day, and teach a man to fish and you feed him for a whole life time?”

“Whatever,” Renda flung up her hands. “Something like that. The other proverb was that wonderful village one. I can’t remember exactly.”

Elaine remembered. She had heard it a million times and was thoroughly tired of the thing: It takes a whole village to raise a child. She thought it pretentious and over-simplified. She hoped with all her heart she wouldn’t have to hand out literature with that meaningless drivel on it.

Jimmy hoisted a large box onto Renda's desk. "I'm 'bout to get a hernia here," he grunted.

CHAPTER 6

THIS GIFTING

Though Daisuke's parents remained in Japan, many thousands of miles away from the university town in the Southern United States where he worked on his transfer degree, this did not hinder their spirits from appearing regularly in his dormitory apartment to nag at him and to give him valuable pieces of advice. In fact, they appeared so often that once he had been driven to ask his biology lab partner, Naoko, also from Japan, if she were likewise visited by the unbidden spirits of her mother and father. "My parents?" she had asked. "My parents appear only on Internet. E-mail, you know, like that."

The morning Daisuke planned to visit his teacher, he could hear his parents' spirits rustling in the bedroom as soon as he stepped out of the shower. And while Daisuke toweled his long face dry in the mirror, he could see his father standing at his elbow in the cramped and steamy bathroom cubicle.

You must take teacher some small gift, the old man was saying, as he stroked his chin pensively. Daisuke's father also had a long horse-like face and thick black eyebrows -- bushy as caterpillars -- nesting in his brow. Now those caterpillars hunched, tensing to spring. *You will be obligated*.

Hai, called his mother from the adjacent bedroom. Glancing out, Daisuke could see her spirit had gained a little weight, but she was still a rather diminutive middle-aged woman, sitting now on his bed, frowning while she sniffed at and sorted through the wilted clothing he had piled on it.

Your father is right. I have not packed so many gifts merely to stuff your baggage. With an upturned palm, she indicated the bedroom closet which held his luggage.

Daisuke finished drying his face, hung the towel and stepped around the bed to the closet. From a suitcase, he pulled a yellow bag with a red character boldly splashed upon it -- the insignia of a popular gift store in Kyoto. Daisuke opened the bag, peering in at a square of silk -- patterned with bronze coins on a burgundy field bordered with navy. He curled the mouth of the bag closed.

That is not the custom here, he reasoned with both spirits. *Americans do not take gifts to teachers in the college.*

Take the gift, insisted his mother. *She is helping you with this paper. You will be obligated. You must take the gift.*

Daisuke's father nodded again, the caterpillars arching toward his gray hairline. It was no use. His parents' spirits were no more reasonable than their real selves. Daisuke sighed, stuffing the small bag into his backpack. Then he dressed quickly and hurried out. He did not want to be late for being early.

Downstairs in the garage, Daisuke tossed his bag of books into the backseat of the used compact car he had just purchased with money sent from his parents as an early graduation gift. Before starting the ignition, he stroked the dashboard lingeringly, pretending to swipe at dust in case anyone should see him. In truth, he loved the car, loved the rush of its engine, loved its pine scent emanating from a yellow ornament in the shape of a Christmas tree, which he had purchased at a carwash and which hung on the rearview mirror. Daisuke especially loved the freedom the car gave him on afternoons like this to zip over to the teacher's house to work on his essay, to zip to the library until mealtime and maybe to zip out again later to the noodle shop in the mall. Before buying the car, Daisuke had had to wait humbly at the bus stops for the unpredictable

university bus to deliver him to a few campus and downtown locations on its abbreviated route.

As he drove to his teacher's house, he noticed many people waiting humbly for the bus as he had done for so many months. He saw that many of these people were black, and he sighed again. Daisuke had very powerful feelings for black people. This teacher he was visiting would understand that. She would not laugh as his parents would have done, if he mentioned that he wanted to dedicate his life to helping the black people. She would listen with great seriousness, and she might ask him how he would do that.

Driving through downtown, Daisuke considered the ways in which he could help the black people. First of all, he would have to remain in the United States as there were simply insufficient black people to help achieve equality in Japan. Then he thought he might become a teacher and encourage others like himself to dedicate their lives to ease the suffering of the black people. Yes, he could do that. He could be a teacher like the teacher he was visiting, and he also would never laugh when students told him of their dreams. He would encourage them to give their lives over to making things better for the black people.

He felt much better about bringing the teacher a gift. At first, he had worried she might think it comical. This teacher had a strange sense of humor. He remembered how amused she had been when he apologized once after class for correcting her on a point in her lecture. He had the idea she might laugh if he presented her with a gift for helping him with a paper. She, no doubt, considered this help a part of her job, though the paper was for another class, and she was no longer his teacher of record. Teachers were quite different in this country.

He could not even imagine going to a teacher's house in Japan. But this teacher had invited his small English-as-a-Second Language class over twice--once to see a video of the play they had read and again for an international potluck dinner party. He had liked the teacher's house, a comfortable single-storey brick home in a quiet residential neighborhood. It was much like his host family's house, where he stayed the summer he arrived in the States. Plus the teacher's house was close to the campus and very easy to find.

In a few minutes, he pulled past the familiar drive way to park a slight distance from the house. Though there was plenty of room--the teacher only had one car and a two car garage port--Daisuke considered it impolite to park in her drive or directly in front of her house. He grabbed his backpack and checked his wristwatch. Good, a little early. He would walk slowly to the house and think about his essay.

The house had two entrance --a front door and a side door to the garage carport. Daisuke hesitated on the driveway, trying to remember which entrance he and his classmates used on the previous occasions. The carport door, he thought. Yes, that's right. Besides the grass looked too tall and rangy in the front yard for Daisuke--wearing khaki shorts--to hike through to the front. The weeds would certainly scratch his bare calves, and surely little insects would hop up and bite him. The last time he had been to the house, the lawn had been shaved as close as velveteen, and pink and purple flowers had been blooming around the mailbox. Now the lawn was overgrown with heavy stalks bending under seed heads and dandelion puffs. The mailbox flowers had shriveled into bronze twists.

If he hadn't brought the gift at his parents' insistence and felt obligated after the work session, he might have offered to help in the yard. But this idea held little appeal. This teacher had a husband; he recalled the large man who had

talked in a loud voice like a politician denouncing a rival. This teacher had some children, too, she said, though Daisuke had never seen them. Why didn't they tend the yard? Again he felt grateful to the spirits of his parents.

Daisuke knocked on the carport door. He had seen a shadowy figure in the kitchen from the garage window. Someone pouring something from a pitcher. Then he heard footsteps, and the door opened. "I hope I am not late," he said, smiling at his teacher. He was almost always early, but he enjoyed saying, I hope I am not late.

The teacher tried to smile back, but Daisuke could see that her eyes and nose were swollen and pink-tinged as though she had been sneezing. Allergies? he wondered, from the overgrown lawn?

"Are you ill?" asked Daisuke, alarmed. He had only the weekend to work on this paper. He had to start studying for mid-terms next week.

"Oh, no," she said. "I was just pouring some ice tea. Would you like some?" She was short for an American and seemed even shorter in bare feet. She was not what anyone in Japan or in the U.S, for that matter, would call a pretty woman, but Daisuke liked the way she looked--the way her brown hair was always neatly tied back, the way she smiled, revealing even teeth, and how her eyes behind her eyeglasses always showed that she was thinking hard about what people said to her.

"Yes, thank you," he said. Normally, he disdained the tea they drank in this country. It was as bitter as something that might drip out from under a car, but Daisuke knew it would be terribly rude to refuse and ruder still not to drink every drop and accept more if offered.

"I thought we could work in the office," she said, pointing to a room off the kitchen. In his host family's house, where he lived his first summer in America, they had a similar room they used for dining. But the teacher's family

apparently ate in the kitchen, where Daisuke saw the teacher's tall husband bent over the telephone. What was his name? Daisuke raked his memory. They had been introduced twice. He seemed a friendly man, but Daisuke had not liked his voice, and he had an unpleasant memory of the man's painful grip when they shook hands. What was his name? Grady? Gravy? Meat? Something like that.

"You remember Hammond?" asked the teacher, indicating her husband with a tilt of her chin.

Daisuke nodded and waved at the man on the phone. Hammond covered the mouthpiece and said, "hiya," to Daisuke. Hammond. Of course, like ham--a thick slab of ham. That was why Daisuke thought of gravy and meat.

The teacher liked everyone to call her by her first name. She had a theory about how that somehow made it easier for the international students to learn English. She explained it once to the class, but Daisuke couldn't quite comprehend the reasoning, something to do with anxiety and filters. In any case, Daisuke liked feeling a little anxious in his classes; he liked his heart pounding in his throat, and he liked being on edge and competing to be the best. It made him feel awkward to call his English teacher by her first name, Elaine, so he compromised by calling her Miss Elaine. He didn't feel compelled to call the big man--without even a shirt to hide the white fur on his fleshy chest--mister, though. Hammond, he thought, was good enough. He hoped he would not err and call him meat or even gravy sometime, though.

He followed his teacher into the office/dining room and seated himself in front of a dismayingly large glass of ice tea.

"Do you like sugar?" Miss Elaine asked.

Sugar wouldn't help. Daisuke shook his head. "Thank you, no." He reached into his back pack to extract his notebook, thesaurus, and the paper he had written.

"Well, let's have a look at it," the teacher said, putting on her glasses. She reminded Daisuke of the doctor at the student health center the time he went to have a boil on his right buttock lanced.

They worked on the paper for an hour. Daisuke had been horrified when Miss Elaine found an agreement error and another error in pluralization. But he was prepared for the article errors. They were so hard to get right. It seemed like the rules just kept changing for those. It was like trying to understand American football. Daisuke was prepared also for her comments about developing his paragraphs. The topic sentences were good and the examples clear, but Daisuke always had been a little weak on summary and synthesis. He worked with Miss Elaine to fortify his paragraphs while he diligently sipped at the brown stuff she called tea. She really did help him. He was wise to come, and by the time they finished working, he truly wanted to present her with the gift.

"You know, Miss Elaine," he began, "in Japan, when you do a favor for a person that person must then return the favor. It is an obligation. You are so nice to help me with my paper--"

"But I feel that's my job, Daisuke," interrupted Miss Elaine.

"I thought you would say that, but--" He rummaged through his backpack. Where was that yellow bag?

"Come on, hon, it's time to get going." Hammond poked his head in the doorway.

"In a minute, Hammond. Just give me a minute."

"Shake a leg," the tall man boomed as he crowded into the office, buttoning a riotous Hawaiian shirt he had draped over his pale shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Daisuke." Miss Elaine smiled, sadly. "I've got to be somewhere right now. I hope you don't mind if I say goodbye now."

"Oh, sure," said Daisuke. "No problem." He pawed through his papers and books. How could such a brightly colored bag disappear? Why so many zippers and compartments in this back pack? "Before I go--"

"I'm gonna start the car." Hammond jangled his keys ostentatiously, then walked heavily toward the back door. Daisuke heard a car door slam through the open window, and he listened expectantly for the click of ignition and the engine's roar. Soon he heard the click, but no roar. Then he heard another click. Click, click, click.

"Good luck on revising your paper." Miss Elaine slipped on her sandals, which were under the work table, and she grabbed her handbag from a desk nearby.

The car door, then the back door slammed again. "Battery's dead!" called the big man from the kitchen. "Goddamn it, Elaine, you left the headlights on all night."

The corners of Miss Elaine's mouth quirked downward, but briefly. "Would you mind doing me a favor, Daisuke?" she asked. "I hate to have to ask."

Daisuke had a sinking feeling, but he said, "Of course, I don't mind."

"Well, the thing is I need a ride," explained Miss Elaine. "I have to visit my daughter, and I need a ride."

"Do you have battery cables?" asked Daisuke. He had only had his car a short while, but already he had bought and read the manual. He knew all about jumping dead batteries, and he was planning to buy cables as soon as he

determined from consumer books in the library which brand was the best. “I can start your battery with my car.”

Miss Elaine shook her head. “I don’t have cables, Daisuke.”

“I can take you in my car to buy some. I will buy them as a gift.” He gave up on finding the yellow bag.

“No, no, you see, there isn’t time. There's only one more hour of visiting. I have to go during visiting hours.”

“Your daughter is ill? In the hospital?”

“No, not exactly the hospital. Would you take me to see her, though? It might take a while. I understand if you have something else to do.” But she cast her eyes down when she said this.

“I can take you,” said Daisuke. “You will have to tell me where to drive. I don’t know where to go.”

“I’ll navigate,” offered Hammond, as they all filed through the kitchen and walked out the carport door. Daisuke, who was very sensitive to smell, caught a whiff from Hammond which made him think of cheese and soap, a cheesy soap. He felt appreciative of his pine-scented tree ornament. Nevertheless, he hoped the large man would take the back seat and roll the window all the way down.

But Miss Elaine took the back seat, and because of the length of his bony legs, Hammond sat in the front. Daisuke noticed the entire car dipped with the tall man’s weight before he climbed in beside him. He is large, concluded Daisuke, and dense.

“Just take a left at the street up ahead,” said Hammond, “and head toward the campus. I can tell you how to get there pretty easily from the university.”

“Okay,” Daisuke nodded, steering the car away from the curb.

“So, Daisuke,” asked Miss Elaine after they had ridden several minutes in silence, “what classes are you taking in the fall? Are you taking more literature courses?”

“No,” Daisuke replied softly. “No more literature.”

“What?”

“No, not literature.”

“But you said you loved American literature. Wasn’t that the reason you came here to study?”

“Well,” said Daisuke, “it’s a long story. But, basically, I have lost my love of literature.”

Hammond snorted.

“But how?” Miss Elaine leaned forward. Her voice was urgent, and Daisuke felt her warm breath in his right ear.

“Is your seat belt not working?” he asked politely. Daisuke felt nervous about driving people without seat belts on. “I can stop and fix it for you.”

Miss Elaine sat back, then he heard the satisfying metallic click. “It works.”

“Ah, I’m so glad.”

“Tell me, how did you lose your love of literature?”

“It was during your class,” admitted Daisuke.

Hammond let out a hoot.

“During *my* class? Was it something I did? Something I said?” Miss Elaine’s voice rose higher and higher with each question.

“It was the black people,” he tried to explain. “You remember?”

“The *black* people?”

“The poems, the play. Remember Gwendolyn Brooks? Langston Hughes?”

“Langston Hughes?”

“Sure, honey,” Hammond spoke in a voice that scratched against Daisuke's nerves. “You remember old Langston.”

“Shut up, Hammond, please.”

Daisuke felt his eyebrows jump like his father's. “I discovered there are things more important than literature,” he tried to explain.

“See,” said Hammond, “see there. That's what I've been telling her all along.” Daisuke felt a pointy elbow in his ribcage.

“What's more important than literature?” asked Miss Elaine.

“You know, the black people, their suffering.”

Hammond's laughter reminded Daisuke of the greedy geese in the park who had snapped up all the crumbs he offered as a young boy and then pinched mercilessly at his fingers with their beaks after he had fed them.

“Please pull over, Daisuke,” Miss Elaine requested, primly.

“You want the restroom?” asked Daisuke. “You want me to find gas station?”

“No, just pull over to the curb.”

“C'mon, Elaine,” Hammond whined. “Not again.”

“You want me to pull over here?” Daisuke indicated a parking space alongside a vacant lot.

“Yes, pull over here, please.”

“Oh, for the love of god!” cried Hammond.

“Get out!” she said when Daisuke had stopped the car. “Go on, get out!”

Daisuke started, reaching for the door handle. He had not expected that his losing his love of literature would so anger her.

“No, not you, Daisuke. I was talking to my husband.”

“She’s putting me out,” Hammond said. “She does this all the time. She puts me out of the car. She thinks that's the way people do things.”

“Miss Elaine, I think maybe--” began Daisuke.

“I have to do this, Daisuke. I’m sorry if it embarrasses you.”

“There’s nothing here,” complained Hammond. “Not even a pay phone. It’s goddamn hot as blazes. What am I supposed to do? Walk all the way back?”

“You should've thought of this before. You acted up, and you have to get out.”

Hammond climbed out of the car, causing Daisuke to cringe when he slammed the door hard behind him. The tall man started walking back toward the house. “Some day you’ll take this too far, Elaine! And then where will we be?” he called over his shoulder.

“I really am sorry, Daisuke,” said Miss Elaine, climbing into the front seat beside him. “He behaves so badly that sometimes I just can’t stand it. Have you ever felt like that about a person?”

Though he had never desired to put anyone out of a car, Daisuke nodded compassionately. He was glad the big man was gone. He rolled down the window to clear out the thick Hammond smell.

“Where do I turn?” Daisuke asked at an intersection just past the campus.

“Go right, see that police car. Just follow it. You can probably follow it the whole way. I may as well tell you, Daisuke. My daughter’s been arrested. She’s in the county jail.”

“That is terrible. Some mistake?” he asked.

“No,” she said, “no mistake. She broke the law all right.”

Daisuke shot a glance at Miss Elaine. She seemed composed, even purposefully engaged in pulling something from her wallet. It would be so impolite to ask what crime her daughter had committed.

“You’re going to turn left. See the police car? Keep following.”

The squad car turned into a driveway near the building where Daisuke had registered his car and had gotten the stickers for his license plate.

“Now stay on this little road. See the signs to the jail? Follow those. It’s back there, not too far. Try to park under a tree for the shade. I’m going to leave my purse under the car seat. I’ve got my license out. You have identification?”

Daisuke nodded. His ears burned. He felt such terrible shame for the woman, for his teacher that he could barely speak. Nevertheless he managed to say, “I have a shield to put in the window. Keep the car cool.” He unfolded the accordion flaps of cardboard and secured the shade behind the dashboard. “I can wait by that tree.”

“Oh, no, you’ll melt in this heat,” cried Miss Elaine. “It’s air-conditioned inside.”

“I prefer to wait,” said Daisuke, reading the sign forbidding visitors under twelve years of age.

“Daisuke, I really wish you would come inside with me,” Miss Elaine pleaded, tugging his elbow. “I don’t want to go alone. Please, will you come with me?”

Daisuke could not refuse. He followed Miss Elaine into the squat concrete building, which was shimmering in the afternoon heat. The first cool blast of air-conditioning raised the fine black hairs on Daisuke’s arms and legs.

“You have to go through the metal detector,” Miss Elaine whispered.

“What?”

“This thing.” Miss Elaine put her glasses in a plastic tray and stepped under a door frame like those at the airport. Daisuke dropped his keys in the tray and crossed the threshold after her. He looked around the small waiting room at the rows of white plastic chairs in the center and a bank of gray lockers across from a horseshoe-shaped desk. Several people stood at the desk in a line, and more sat in the plastic scoop chairs. Black, Daisuke noticed, all of them black people. This confirmed something very sad for Daisuke, and he felt renewed in his conviction to fight to end their suffering.

Miss Elaine and he took their places at the end of a line curving around the desk. The lady in uniform at the other side of the desk was also black. Daisuke gave her a warm, sympathetic smile when she glanced up at him.

“What d'you want?” she barked, causing Daisuke to jump back a step.

“He’s with me,” explained Miss Elaine. “We’re just visiting.”

“Then fill out those slips on the counter, and get your i.d. ready. Nobody holds up this line.”

“Yes,” said Daisuke, taking a slip and a pencil. “Sorry.”

He filled the form carefully, giving his name, birth date, address and telephone number. Then he pulled his license from his wallet. Miss Elaine took his form from him and wrote in her daughter’s name. “Go sit down,” she whispered. “Save me a seat.”

Daisuke found two vacant seats near an elderly woman who wore a green cotton house dress printed with little white checks and a pair of thick glasses low on her nose. She was sitting straight up but sleeping soundly in her chair. He could hear soft snores from her opened lips. A boy in a dress shirt and navy suit pants turned around, rotating his head in what Daisuke considered an impossible fashion, to stare at Daisuke as though he were a lizard in the zoo. This is too bad, thought Daisuke. This poor boy dragged to this terrible, terrible

place to visit a father or brother, who was probably unfairly imprisoned. He had read about the unfair imprisonment of black people many times in the editorial pages of the American newspapers.

The boy had unblinking intelligent eyes, coffee-colored pupils in wide milky blue saucers. Daisuke waved his fingers at the child in greeting. The boy rubbed his nose, then extended his middle finger alongside one brown nostril, cupping the other fingers under his palm. Daisuke looked away, and the boy's laughter spilled out like a handful of coins.

"Here, Daisuke, put your license in your wallet. You can keep that in your pocket. Everything else has to go in a locker," instructed Miss Elaine, scooting into the seat next to him.

"I don't have anything else. Just the wallet."

"Your keys. You have to put your keys in a locker. Give them to me. I'll put them with my sunglasses."

Daisuke felt reluctant to trust his keys to one of the lock-less lockers. What if someone should steal his car? He glanced around at the dark faces. Then he felt ashamed. He handed Miss Elaine his keys and silently rebuked himself for his suspicion. Miss Elaine put his keys and her sunglasses in a locker and shut the door. When she turned to walk back to her seat, the door on the locker she had chosen creaked open. Daisuke fought the impulse to leap up and shut it more firmly.

Miss Elaine sat beside him. She was silent for a moment then she sniffled. Daisuke prepared to bless her should she sneeze, but she didn't sneeze. She sniffled again and again, and then she drew in a ragged breath. Daisuke felt the heat from her body alongside his own. Soon she was quaking and weeping noisily.

Daisuke looked around helplessly. People were shifting in their seats, turning to see Miss Elaine. At first, he tried to shield her by leaning across her chair. But he could feel more and more eyes upon them. “Shh, please, shh,” he said softly in Miss Elaine’s ear. Perhaps the others thought he had made Miss Elaine cry. “The people are staring,” he whispered. Then he gently patted the air above her shoulder. He didn’t like to touch his teacher, but he wanted to give her comfort. So he patted the air very tenderly, saying, “Shh, please, shh,” the whole while. The sleeping woman on the other side of Miss Elaine jerked and woke with a snort.

“Who? What? You crying, honey?” she asked in a high incredulous tone. Daisuke could see the old woman’s bare pink-splotched gums when she spoke.

Miss Elaine nodded, taking off her glasses to wipe them on her blouse. “My baby,” she sobbed. “My little girl.”

“Come here, honey, come here.” The old woman pulled Miss Elaine to her loose cotton bosom. She folded Miss Elaine in her arms, stroking her hair, rocking and saying, “Now, you got one baby in here. That’s sad. I know that’s sad ‘cause I got two babies in here and a grand baby, too. Cried myself dry. Can’t cry no more. But you go ahead, and you cry. Feels better, don’t it?”

Gradually, Miss Elaine’s sobs subsided, and she straightened in her chair, pulling away from the old woman. “Thank you,” she said. “I’m okay now. You’re very kind.”

“Shoot,” said the old woman, smiling with glistening gums. Daisuke could see two dark patches on her dress where Miss Elaine’s tears had fallen.

The woman officer behind the desk shouted something, and Miss Elaine rose hastily, replacing her glasses and pulling on Daisuke’s elbow. The boy who had given Daisuke the obscene gesture also jumped up and hurried to one of the glass doors. Two more officers--a man and a woman--emerged from the doors

and started lining people against the wall to pat their clothing, probably searching for weapons or drugs. It tore at Daisuke's heart to see the boy prodded in this search, though the youngster giggled through the process, as though it tickled to have the officer run his hands over his thin limbs. Next the officer pawed Daisuke's pockets, sleeves, sides and even his crotch. Daisuke felt his cheeks flame, and he latched his gaze to his shoes while the female officer told Miss Elaine to stand against the wall with her legs apart.

When all the visitors were searched, the officers led them through a series of buzzing doors and down a long corridor which was marked with large orange arrows pointing straight ahead. "It sure is warm in here," said Miss Elaine, recovered from her weeping.

"Sure is," agreed a large black woman wearing a tight t-shirt, shorts and plastic sandals.

"They should put air conditioning," suggested Daisuke, thinking of the cool jets from the vents on his dashboard. "It is so unfair," he blurted. "All of it. So many of your people in this place. They cannot all be criminals."

"You Chinese or something?" asked the black woman, slapping along beside him in her zoris.

"I am from Japan."

"See I knew that," she said, smiling. "I knew you wasn't from 'round here."

"This way," the officer, a white man with a deep voice, grumbled. "C'mon, we don't got all day."

The visitors filed into a hall which led to several small rooms with long windows radiating from a central watch area, where Daisuke noticed several white officers sitting around a long panel of switches, buttons and video

cameras, talking and eating fried chicken out of striped boxes from a popular take-out restaurant.

“We’re going this way, Daisuke,” said Miss Elaine. Daisuke felt the awkward pressure of her fingers once more on his elbow. She led him into one of the rooms with windows to a stall with a circular metal stool which faced a shelf and another thick-paned window. Below the window was a perforated metal screen for the visitors to talk through. “You sit down. I’m too nervous,” hissed Miss Elaine.

Daisuke sat on the stool obediently, and in a few moments, a girl with wild black hair and dark eyes shuffled from an adjacent room and took the seat across the glass from Daisuke. Her thick, unruly hair and large, staring eyes reminded Daisuke of a story he had once read about a girl who had been raised in a closet. The girl in the story had grown up without hearing human language and could only bark and howl when people found her. But this girl said, “Who the hell are you?” in a clear loud voice through the metal plate, as soon as she sat down.

“Daisuke,” he said into the screen.

“This is my daughter, Daisuke, this is Tina. Tina, this is Daisuke. He was one of my students last semester.” Miss Elaine introduced them as though they were meeting for the first time at a party.

“What’s she saying?” asked the girl. “I can’t hear anything unless you talk right into the vent-thing.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” said Daisuke with a smile.

“What’s he doing here?” the girl demanded in a louder voice.

“What did she say?” asked Miss Elaine.

“Here, you must sit down.” Daisuke half-rose from the seat, but Miss Elaine firmly pushed his shoulders down.

“No, it’s better if you sit down. I’m too nervous, too upset. I don’t know what to say. It’s better if you talk.”

“She wants to know why I am here,” said Daisuke.

“I asked Daisuke to bring me because the battery died, and I needed a ride.”

“It’s not bad enough I’m in here,” Tina muttered, clearly not hearing her mother, “that she’s gotta bring strangers with her to see me. Whyn’t she just call the local paper and have them put my picture on the front page?”

“What’s she saying?” asked Miss Elaine. “I can’t hear a word.”

“She is surprised that I am here,” Daisuke translated diplomatically.

“I want to know when I’m getting out of here. When are you gonna get me out of here, huh?”

“What?” Miss Elaine gave Daisuke a helpless look.

“Tell her to goddamn pay the bail and get my ass out of here,” the girl said in a low, deliberate voice. The girl’s tone reminded Daisuke of Hammond, and he felt an inexplicable anger rising in him.

“She is unhappy in the jail,” said Daisuke after a pause. “She is sorry for her crime, and she wishes she could be released to start making up for the mistake.”

“Oh, honey,” cried Miss Elaine, tears streaming once more from behind her clouded eyeglasses. “I wish I could get you out, but there’s no bail because you violated your probation for that other thing with the bad checks. They have to have a hearing first. I’m so sorry, baby. I wish I could get you out.”

“What? What’s my mom saying? I can’t hear unless she talks into the screen,” the petulant voice persisted.

“She says,” said Daisuke directly into the screen so that his words would not carry back to his teacher, “she says you have done a terrible thing and

brought shame on your family. You must think about this while you are in the jail. Your mother is not getting you out.”

“I knew it!” said the girl, frowning. “Well, then she needs to get my stuff out of my apartment. I mean it. She’s gotta go today, or else they’ll throw my stuff away. They’re kickin’ me out.”

Daisuke turned to Miss Elaine. “She asks if you will please go to her apartment and help remove her things. They have asked her to move. She is afraid to lose her belongings.”

“Of course, tell her, of course, I will. I’ll do anything I can. Ask her if there’s anything else she needs?”

Daisuke spoke sternly into the screen again. “This is a hardship for your mother. She will do it, but do not ask anymore. You must show gratitude, and you must not bring any more shame on her.”

The girl stared at Daisuke with wide eyes. She smoothed her hair down, and for a moment, she did not look so wild. “Tell her I said thanks,” she said, softly, her eyes filling. “Will you tell her that?”

Miss Elaine placed her palm flat on the glass divider patterned with chicken wire. She moved her lips, but she did not speak, *I love you*.

Another guard poked his head in the room and called, “Time’s up!”

Daisuke and Miss Elaine trod once more with the others through the steamy corridor, walking against the orange arrows this time. Again Daisuke wanted to broach the subject of the unfair imprisonment of black people with the friendly woman flapping her zoris beside him, but she seemed silenced by sadness. Daisuke glanced around at the small group and noticed the downcast eyes and stooped shoulders as he moved wordlessly through the buzzing doors with Miss Elaine.

While Daisuke refolded the accordion screen from the windshield, Miss Elaine said, "I thought she looked pretty good, didn't you? I mean, for being in jail."

"Yes," said Daisuke, "she seemed to be fine."

"Gosh, I hate to ask you, but do you think *you* could take me to her apartment to get some of her things."

"Where does she live?" Daisuke asked, warily. He did not want to spend the remainder of the day driving a long distance when he had his paper to revise. He would give her the square of silk and be done with this gifting.

"Not far from here. In fact, it was probably very convenient for the officers who arrested her to find her."

"Tell me how to go."

Miss Elaine directed him to an apartment complex a few blocks from the jail. The apartment building was just across the street from a squat clapboard building without windows. A large sign proclaiming PACKAGE LIQUOR was painted on an arrow pointing to the roof of the windowless building. Beyond that, there were only vacant lots filled with weeds and stray rubbish.

"Not a very good neighborhood, is it?" asked Miss Elaine.

"Probably the rent is reasonable."

"If she paid it," Miss Elaine said ruefully, "I'm sure it would have been."

Miss Elaine directed Daisuke to a parking slot near the rear of the building. "It's just up those stairs. We may as well park close. There might be a few boxes."

Miss Elaine led the way up a dark and dingy stairwell to a breeze-way which was slick with rust-colored water streaming out of air conditioning units protruding from the low windows. She deftly side-stepped the streams, advising Daisuke, "Watch your step." At a door in the middle of the walkway, Miss

Elaine knocked loudly. A thin man, wearing sunglasses and a bathrobe and smoking a cigarette in a long onyx holder, pulled the door open. “You? What d'you want?”

“Tina told me to come for her things.”

“That’s one crazy girl you got,” said the man, laughing. “One wild bitch.”

“Will you let me in to get her things?” Miss Elaine’s voice quavered.

“Ready to dump her junk in the garbage. Should, too, way she left me with the rent to pay.”

“We do not wish to disturb you,” said Daisuke, stepping in front of Miss Elaine. “We will just get the belongings and leave.”

“What are you? Chinese?”

“I am from Japan.”

“Kent,” cried a sleepy female voice from inside the apartment. “Just let them take her crap. Be done with it.”

“Would save me a trip to the garbage bin,” said Kent, thoughtfully.

“Already got most of it packed up for you in trash bags. Come on, then, hurry up and get it out of here.”

The man stepped aside, allowing Daisuke and Miss Elaine into the apartment. A young red-haired woman stretched out on the sofa and yawned, “S’over there by the bookshelf.” Then she turned her back to them.

“There's more stuff in the bathroom,” said the man, settling on the arm of the couch to watch a silent television set flickering in another corner of the room.

"Hush," said the woman. "Tryin' a sleep."

Daisuke followed Miss Elaine from the living room to a bedroom recessed from the hall way.

"This was her room." Miss Elaine gestured at the stripped mattress, a battered dressing table and a chest with gaping drawers. "I guess we ought to

clear out the bathroom. It looks like everything's gone from here," she said, opening an empty closet.

Daisuke spotted a box of garbage bags near the foot of the bed. "We can use these, and there is a box."

Miss Elaine pulled open the cabinets in the bathroom. "Look at all this, will you? I don't believe this."

Daisuke peered in the bathroom to see row upon row of bottles of shampoo and conditioning lotion, hair sprays, tubes of toothpaste, jars of cold cream, stacks of soap bars--dozens and dozens of bathroom products--crammed under the sink, behind the mirror and in a wicker closet near the bath. Daisuke winced inwardly.

He remembered visiting a great-uncle once in the hospital, walking the long corridor with his eyes fixed forward so as not to look into the rooms of the invalids. But at the sound of a pan clattering, he had glanced involuntarily into a mad woman's room. She was nearly bald, thin strands of white hair streamed across her pink scalp as she smiled, rocking herself and picking at the bedcovers with slow, trembling fingers. He had the same feeling of revulsion and pity that he had felt for the old woman looking into these cabinets crammed with beauty products.

"What did she need all this for? What would a person want with all this?" Miss Elaine asked, then she began to cry again. She stepped to the bed, sank on the bare mattress and wept, while Daisuke stuffed the plastic bags and packed the box tightly with the products--nearly all of them new and unopened.

When he had cleared out the bathroom, Miss Elaine finally had stopped crying and helped him load the products into his car. Then they returned for the four large plastic garbage bags humped in a corner of the small, cluttered living room. Daisuke grabbed two bags, and Miss Elaine hoisted the remaining two.

Daisuke heard the tinkle of broken glass in one of his bags. They were slippery, but not too heavy. They carried the bags out the door before Miss Elaine set hers on the railing.

“Give me one of yours,” said Miss Elaine. “I think mine just have clothes in them, and we can throw them down over this railing. It’ll be a little easier.”

When they returned to toss the remaining sacks over the railing, the black man stood once more in the breeze-way. “You see all that shit she had in there? Something not right with that girl. And that last thing she did. That was crazy. I swear I don’t know what you can do with a person like that. I swear I don’t.”

“We do not wish to disturb you,” repeated Daisuke.

“Now you tell her I got me a new old lady. I don’t wanna see her no more. You better tell her that,” he told Miss Elaine.

“I’ll be sure to tell her,” agreed Miss Elaine, but he had already gone back into the apartment and shut the door.

Miss Elaine pushed the bags off the railing to the parking lot below.

They stuffed the bags into Daisuke’s trunk, and Miss Elaine rode with the box of bathroom supplies on her lap back to her comfortable and easy-to-find house in its residential neighborhood. Daisuke tried to think of something encouraging to say. He could tell his teacher felt terrible by the way she kept biting her lips and staring into the box on her lap.

“Do things like this happen in Japan?” she asked finally.

“I think everywhere,” said Daisuke. “Everywhere bad things happen. People get in trouble.” He tried to think of a similar instance he had experienced in Japan that he could relate to comfort her. He almost wished he had had a relative arrested or had gotten involved in some youthful folly that had cost his parents pain and embarrassment. But nothing came to mind, and he did not like to lie to his teacher.

As they neared Miss Elaine's home, Daisuke noticed Hammond loping down the street, heading in the direction of the house. Miss Elaine was still looking down into the box on her lap; she did not see her husband. So Daisuke decided to say nothing.

When they got to her house, Miss Elaine said, "I want to thank you for everything, Daisuke. You were really wonderful to drive me all over. I will never forget this." She opened the car door and started to climb out. Then she stopped. "Here," she said, reaching for a bottle from the box on her lap. "It's avocado conditioner," she read from the label. "It will give your hair lustrous body. Take this from Tina and from me. A little gift."

"No, no, please," Daisuke shook his head.

"Really, Daisuke, I insist. Besides it would be good for Tina to pay something for your help."

Daisuke hesitated. "Thank you." He took the bottle and placed it on the floor board. Then he helped Miss Elaine remove the bundles from his trunk to her carport.

"Thanks, again, Daisuke. You've been great."

"Wait, Miss Elaine, I almost forgot," said Daisuke. "I have something for you, too." He reached into the car and hauled out his backpack. "It's from my mother and father." He handed her the yellow bag.

"What is it?"

"Silk," he said. "Silk from Japan."

Miss Elaine unfurled the burgundy square, and the printed bronze coins glittered in the sun. "But it's lovely. Thank you very much. And thank your parents for me. It is so nice of them."

Driving home that afternoon, Daisuke could not understand something. Though he had received the gift of his teacher's help, had offered the gift of

battery cables, had given the gift of his time and car, had received another gift of conditioning lotion, and finally had given the gift of silk, Daisuke felt heavier somehow, more encumbered than ever, as if all the bottles, tubes and jars in the girl's bathroom were piled on his chest. His lungs constricted from the pressure of all this gifting, and it was hard for him to draw a deep breath.

Daisuke knew he must call his teacher in the morning. He would see the girl with wild hair in the jail again. He would still fight to relieve the suffering of the black people. But that was for later, in the future.

Daisuke flipped on the car radio and tuned to a jazz station while he steered his little car once more through the streets toward the university and his dormitory apartment. The station played a familiar blues-y piece that Daisuke always enjoyed. In his bucket seat and against the pressure of his shoulder strap, Daisuke bowed slightly toward the steering wheel. "*Arrigato*," he said aloud to the unseen disc jockey who had selected a favorite to play.

"She said to thank you," Daisuke told the spirits of his parents who, conjured by the Japanese word of thanks, appeared in the back seat of the car.

In the rearview, he saw his father nod.

"Slow down," cried his mother. "You are driving too fast."

"And you ought look where you are going," warned his father.

CHAPTER 7

IVOR'S PEOPLE

Ivor blew his nose between his thumb and index finger onto the unswept floor of the airport. Volcanic ash billowing in from Montserrat cast a haze like a dingy mantilla over all of Antigua. The fine gray dust collected in the cab driver's nostrils to be sneezed and snorted out with growing frequency in the late afternoon breeze. He believed they were coming from a lay-over in Puerto Rico, his people. The plane was delayed, but they would soon be arriving from San Juan. Ivor prepared the words he would use.

Walter told him they were Americans from the South, and that was all he needed to hear. Hastily, he cleared his small bundle from the cabin, swept the ants from the kitchen linoleum and sloshed a jigger of disinfectant into the rust colored toilet basin. The ball of his shirts and shorts nested in the hull of the spare tire, he would stay with his blind aunt or--with luck--with a sympathetic woman in St. John's. He didn't know which; he didn't care. He hoped the Americans would stay a week or a month, two months, a year. For sixty dollars US a night, he would sleep forever on the narrow, pokey sofa in his aunt's parlor. He would sleep standing on his head for that money.

That was the only hard part--the money. Foolish Walter had reserved the cabin for the Americans at only thirty dollars a night. Can you believe that? Thirty dollars a night to stay in Antigua. This stung Ivor's pride. He cleared his throat righteously and hocked into an ash can. He would fix that first thing.

“Ivor,” called Jeannie, the information girl. “Ivor, your plane is come.” Ivor had shown Jeannie the envelope flap on which Walter had written the Americans’ names. Ivor made a great show of being unable to decipher Walter’s block printing as though it were an illegible scrawl. Jeannie had merely rolled her eyes and told Ivor the Americans were called Singer, Aaron and Elaine Singer.

The first burst of tourists through the glass panel door was led by a tired looking bearded man. He was followed by a woman wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses. At first glance, Ivor had the idea the woman had just had a surgery; she moved so slowly and so gingerly, as though she might break. He fervently hoped these were not his Americans. He judged them to be too weary, too thin and, surely, too poor to be much worth his while. He looked beyond these two to the usual cluster of returning islanders, business people returning from New York through San Juan to Antigua. Ivor recognized many of them from his sporadic school days. Ordinarily they would not even nod to him on their way to the parking lot. And today Ivor did not stop to chat them up as he liked to do in idle moments. He reminded himself that he, too, was a businessman with clients to attend.

He pushed his glance past these islanders to the gaggle of wealthy *Puerto Riqueños*--honeymooners, vacationers--jabbering away in their sing-song voices. Come on, come on then, thought Ivor, let the others in.

After the Puerto Ricans, a small group of American businessmen wearing great cowboy hats filed through the entrance. They were so stout and tall that they could only squeeze one at a time through the doorway. Ivor could see from their chalk stripe suits and calves’ leather cases, they were certainly as wealthy as he hoped his people would be, but somehow he did not feel equal to handling these comers.

“Ivor,” repeated Jeannie, “your people are come.” She tipped her head to indicate the bearded man and the weak-looking woman, the first couple to disembark from the plane and wander into the airport.

Ivor smoothed his hair and hurried to shake the man’s hand before he could get away. Already, Ivor could see Mellie, the driver of the Fantasy Wagon, eying the American couple covetously.

“How you do?” asked Ivor, hurriedly thrusting the envelope scrap at the young man as though it were a certificate of legitimacy, a ticket of entry. “You are Singer?”

“Yes?” said the man.

“I am Ivor, Ivor Gore. I drive the taxi to the place. It’s my place, actually,” he blurted nervously.

“*Your place?*” asked Singer, raising his eyebrows.

“Actually, I manage Sunshine Cabins,” amended Ivor. “Actually, I manage the business.”

“Do you work for Walter then?” asked Singer softly. Singer was the kind of man who projected a nonspecific gentleness, a vague kindness radiated from his softly contoured features and warm green eyes. He was the sort of person most people like immediately, but forget soon after meeting. At a closer look, Ivor was well pleased by Singer’s sensitive and thoughtful look. Not a businessman, he concluded with relief. And the woman, Ivor scarcely glanced her way again. She was very quiet under her cap and sunglasses. She edged out of the conversation, stepping away from Ivor and Singer to watch the luggage ride around and around on the conveyor belt.

“Not exactly work for Walter,” explained Ivor. “I manage the property. I show you around, collect the money, make sure everything is A-okay.”

“I see.”

“And, you see, the thing is, well, when Walter made the reservation, well, how much he tell you?”

“Thirty dollars a night.”

“See, that’s the thing. That’s the mistake, see. It’s thirty dollars a night you rent for a week, two weeks. But how long you here?”

“Three and a half days. Four nights,” calculated Singer.

“See, there it is. That’s the thing.” Glimpsing the Singer woman haul a scarred valise from the rubber belt, Ivor hastily and realistically reduced his rate. “If it’s less than a week, it’s fifty a night. Walter, he give you the weekly rate.”

“Where is Walter?”

“Walter, he is out of town. I run things now.”

“Well,” breathed Singer, giving himself over to what Ivor perceived to be consideration of this new rate. “I think I’ll pay the rate I agreed to pay over the phone. That’s what we’ve budgeted for, and that’s what we’ll pay.”

* * *

Singer’s gentle and pensive demeanor masked a profound obstinacy. Elaine returned, dragging the bag, to observe Singer in action. His intractability, his absolute stubbornness fascinated her. In most things, Singer could be flexible, open and generous. But, when he decided to stand ground, it was impossible to move him. *El Jibarito*, she called him, affectionately, the little hillbilly. She learned the word in Puerto Rico, when they took a day trip into the country and encountered a few rustics hiking to the market. But Singer was really more the hill billy goat--impossible to pull on a lead. She smiled, imagining herself tugging uselessly at Singer’s neat little beard. Elaine was curious what effect Singer’s imperturbability would have on the island taxi driver.

“It’s a mistake,” Ivor repeated. “You see, that’s the weekly rate Walter give you on the phone, and you’re not staying a week.” It was clear the cab driver believed that if he explained his point enough times, Singer would yield.

“I think we’ll pay the thirty dollars we agreed to pay.” Singer smiled in a friendly way, but he firmly latched his merry gaze on the taxi driver’s obsidian eyes.

“Walter, he made a big, big mistake,” persisted Ivor, breaking the stare.

“There’s our other bag,” Elaine interrupted to put a skip in the taxi man’s record. “Oh, no, that’s not it.”

“This is Elaine,” Singer introduced her, still smiling as though he were introducing two people he hoped would become friends.

“Hello,” she said, but she would not extend her hand to shake Ivor’s. She had watched him blowing his nose on his fingers through the glass door.

Finally, their bags pushed through the the plastic curtain flaps on the conveyor gate. Singer pulled both off the conveyor, and Ivor grabbed one, while Elaine dragged the valise. Ivor gave a two-finger to Jeannie, who rolled her eyes again, and he led his people out to the taxi van.

The drive out of the airport was fairly smooth, although it felt strange for Elaine to be riding on what felt like the wrong side of the road. And she jumped every time Ivor tapped the horn to greet other vehicles or pedestrians coming from the opposite direction. The car horn, she noted, seemed more an instrument of sociability--rather than of warning--on this island. Ivor seemed to know an alarming number of people.

He tooted every time an islander appeared by car or on foot on the hard scabble horizon. Soon after the airport, the road became jarringly rugged with worn swatches, creases, cracks, crater-sized potholes and bumps. Elaine and Singer were bounced against one another and the car doors, while Ivor

anticipated and rode the lurches like a surfer negotiating a choppy, but familiar, sea.

The landscape lay flat, inert on either side of the road, biscuit-colored stretches interrupted sporadically by tufts of harsh-looking brush that bristled with spiny gray quills.

“Scrub,” said Singer pointing instructively.

“Shrub, don’t you mean?” Elaine asked.

“No, scrub. They call it scrub.”

“Looks like shrub.” And so it did--low-lying and menacing, untended shrubbery. Now and again, a tree flashed past. These were extraordinary trees--ordinary in appearance up to the leaf level where the branches twisted back on themselves and grew like contorted appendages downward, dripping fringed leaves and scarlet blossoms--bead-shaped and clustered like berries. These trees looked like strangely mutated cousins of the crimson blooming *flamboyant* they had seen in in the pigeon park next to the Governor’s mansion in Puerto Rico.

The sun sank purpling the blossoms and blackening the leaves. Fields appeared and cows and goats wandered the unfenced meadows. The goats formed groups that seemed organized and purposeful, while the cows meandered indecisively and separately. The cattle seemed confused, as though they were a little surprised to find themselves on this Caribbean island.

“Ever hit a cow?” Singer asked Ivor.

“What?”

“Ever hit a cow with the van?”

Ivor hesitated. “Yes.”

“What came out worse? The car or the cow?”

“Both come out bad. Bad for the cow. Bad for the car.” He hit a pothole hard.

“Ever hit a goat?” asked Singer.

“No, goat, he too smart.”

“Does the road get better?”

“No, man, never.”

After several more miles, Ivor pointed out some interesting spots. “That’s the way to St. John’s, where they keep the market,” he said, spitting out the open window to indicate the direction. “Up there on that hill, see there? They’re trying to put up a hotel.” He pointed to a shadowy, roofless structure near a hilltop. “And that’s the road to Half Moon Bay, over there.” He tooted at a bus full of islanders passing on the other side and lifted two fingers in salute.

“Do you know everybody on the island?” asked Singer.

“Most everybody.”

* * *

The cabin--Sunshine Cabins, as advertised in the economy travel guide, though there was only one--was a crumbling yellow structure in a small, dust-blown fenced yard. Thirty dollars a night, Elaine could see at a glance, was exorbitant for this hovel.

Ivor led them through the tiny rooms, pointing out the ancient and rusted rotating fans, the dented and filth-clouded ice box, and the gas stove that hissed ominously. Water rushed incessantly in the toilet, and flying beetles pipped against the lamps. The lights were just bright enough to attract insects, but too dim to read by, though Ivor quickly replaced the two bulbs that flickered most.

“Normally,” Ivor began again, “this place goes for sixty dollars U.S. a night if you only stay a few nights. Fifty if you stay four. But I will call it even if you pay forty a night for three nights in advance.”

“No,” said Singer shaking his head. He pulled a twenty and a ten dollar bill out of his pocket. “We are paying the thirty we agreed, one night at a time, and that’s all.”

“On this island, nowhere can you stay for thirty a night.”

Elaine had taken off her sunglasses so as not to bump herself walking through the shadowy little rooms. She put a hand to her face and gingerly touched her cheek to see if it felt real. Often her skin didn’t feel like flesh these days. It felt numb, rubbery, orchidaceous, she thought, thinking of the waxy blooms she and Singer had spotted peeking from hairy clumps of moss in El Yunque, the rain forest.

Singer had finished arguing with the taxi driver. He pulled a bag on the bed and unzipped a compartment to remove the shaving kit and a newspaper.

“Look, look,” Ivor persisted, “I got mosquito spray here for you, sun block and books.” He held up a couple of worn crossword puzzle magazines. “You got books here to read.” The taxi driver fanned the pages enticingly. Elaine could see all of the puzzles had been scribbled in. She wanted to laugh.

“I got tissue,” cried Ivor in triumph. “I even got some tissue for your lady.” He proffered a travel-size box of tissue to Elaine. “Here, miss. Don’t cry.”

“Elaine?” called Singer. “Are you okay?”

Elaine shook her head and took a tissue, the last one, which fell apart as she plucked it from the box.

* * *

“Well, my people are come,” Ivor bragged to his brother at the chip stand just outside St. John. “My pigeons are come.” He laughed.

“Skinny pigeons, them pigeons,” scoffed his brother. “Jeannie say.”

“Nah, they rich,” protested Ivor.

“How you know they rich, Mr. Businessman?”

Ivor searched his mind for some evidence that his people had money. Their luggage was shabby, their clothing worn, and neither of them wore as much jewelry as a watch. And, come to think of it, they hadn't even paid for the taxi ride from the airport. “From the states,” he said finally. “They come from the U.S.”

“Yeah, they rich, rich like me.” Ivor's brother plucked at his raggy shirt. “Skinny like me, too.” He rapped on the wooden stick that replaced his missing leg.

“Fool,” spat Ivor disgustedly. He turned to leave the stand.

“Hey, buy me chips, Mr. Businessman!” his brother called after him. “Buy me paw paw!”

* * *

In the bathroom, Elaine put a towel over the shaving kit to unzip the bag silently. She pulled a plastic orange vial from a compartment carefully so the contents wouldn't rattle.

“You shouldn't take so many of those,” called Singer from the bedroom.

“They help,” she said, liberally shaking out capsules. She twisted the faucet, but eschewed the orange stream from the tap and swallowed the sticky pills dry.

“I wouldn't drink that water,” said Singer.

“I didn't.”

“Are you upset? Come on, honey. Come read the paper with me.”

“We shouldn't have come,” Elaine said. “It's a mistake.”

“Come on, sit with me.” Singer patted the bed beside him. “It isn't even like he's gone, Elaine. He would be visiting his father this time of year anyway.”

“You can say that. You can say that. He isn’t your son. But I know he’s not coming back this time.”

“Of course, he’ll come back. He’ll be back for Christmas, and next summer we’ll take a trip with him, maybe camping or something.”

“He doesn’t like camping. When he was in Boy Scouts, he hated sleeping out--the bugs, the dirt.” Elaine remembered how her middle son always detested dirt and disarray. When he played out doors, he would frequently run inside, crying and holding his small brown hands aloft for Elaine to wipe as though the few grains of soil were as dangerous as a flesh-eating disease.

“Well, we’ll take him somewhere else then. You haven’t lost him, honey.”

“But I did lose him. He doesn’t live with us anymore. First I lost my baby, I lost Sanders, now I lost--”

“Hush, hush,” said Singer, drawing Elaine into his arms. “I know this is hard because Sanders died, but that was over four years ago, and this isn’t the same, honey. This isn’t the same at all. Teddy *wanted* to move in with his father.”

“But why? Why? That’s what I don’t understand.” Elaine pulled free and rose to walk to the window. The transparent husks of several dessicated moths lined the ledge outside the glass. Elaine traced them with her finger.

“He was unhappy, Elaine. You know that. That stunt with the belt. He could have hurt himself.” Singer stood and leaned over the bed. Elaine could see his reflection; he appeared to be twisting the bedspread.

“What if he hurts himself over there? Who’s going to stop him next time?”

“Maybe he won’t be unhappy there. Maybe he’ll get along with the kids out there, make friends. Maybe he’ll like it there. He seemed to think he would.”

“What are you doing?”

“There’s a spring poking out. I’m coiling it back, so it doesn’t pinch like the devil in the middle of the night.”

* * *

As soon as Ivor parted the bead curtains at the Ha-Ha Club, Sheila, the bartender told him his uncle wanted him. And before Ivor could take a step backwards to slip out into the night again, he heard his uncle wheezing, “Ivor, Ivor, my son.”

“Uncle, you in here?” asked Ivor, disingenuously peering through the cool, cramped, but otherwise deserted bar as though it were too vast and busy to discern his father’s mountainous brother occupying a good third of the bar and two bar stools at first glance. The older man’s grayish skin folded and creased around his bull neck like an elephant’s hide, and his bald head shone under the dim bulb dangling from a cord in the ceiling.

“They tell me you have business at the cottage. People staying. Americans.”

Ivor rolled his eyes. “They some raggedy Americans. Poor and skinny as stick bugs.”

“Still you got people,” winked his uncle, twisting his bulk to signal Sheila. “Buy me a drink, boy, and tell me about our business.”

* * *

In the morning, Elaine shook Singer awake. “We can’t stay here,” she told him. “We have to leave.”

“The island?”

“We can’t stay. I thought it would be okay, but it’s impossible.”

“Our plane isn’t until Friday,” said Singer, yawning. “Did you sleep?”

“No, there are bugs all over this place. Didn’t you feel them. Look at your arms; they’re all bitten up.”

The pale undersides of Singer’s arms were splotted with tiny pink weals. “I didn’t feel anything,” he marveled.

“There’s no hot water, either. I heard you ask Walter on the phone about the hot water. You said there was hot water.” Elaine tried hard to keep her voice from rising.

“We can go somewhere else,” promised Singer. “If you don’t like this, we’ll go somewhere else. Let’s go into St. John’s today and find another place.”

“Look,” said Elaine, racing to the closet, “look. Ivor left a shirt.” She unfurled a freshly-laundered blue shirt on a hanger. A patch with Ivor’s name stitched in red over the breast pocket. “It’s nice. I like this blue. I think I’m going to wear it,” she told Singer. “Do you think he would mind?”

Singer shrugged and scratched at the bites on his arms.

* * *

“I saw your people,” Jeannie told Ivor when she met him in the grocery. “They walking in the road. The woman wearing the shirt of your uniform. Why you don’t drive them in the taxi, Ivor? Why you make them walk?”

“Where you see them? Where?”

“Walking for the bus stop in front of the boat dock.”

Ivor quickly paid for his cigarettes and ran out to the taxi, cursing his people under his breath. Goddamn them, stupid, stupid Americans! Didn’t they know to take the taxi? What had he done to make them insult him this way?

He reached the bus stop just as the Americans climbed on board. He followed the bus for awhile, but he stopped when he couldn’t think what he would do if he caught up. He would look too foolish telling the couple to come

off the bus and get into the taxi. He remembered the man's smiling eyes. What if they refused?

* * *

The bus, nearly empty when Elaine and Singer boarded, quickly filled with islanders. An ancient Chinese man in a black suit slowly climbed on board after a few stops to slide between Singer and the window, where he promptly curled against Singer's shoulder and fell asleep. The fare collector, a teenage boy, sat next to Elaine. He kept hopping up to gather coins in a canvass sack from passengers as they boarded, distressing Elaine. She worried that someone else might try to take his place, and she protected it with her baseball cap while he was gone.

Mothers with flocks of small children, young women dressed in bright dresses and heels for work, men and boys piled into the bus until there was no room for anyone to sit, and Elaine was certain the bus would no longer stop for people waiting at the side of the road. But it kept stopping, and more people packed in. Pull down seats appeared in every possible space, and when they filled, more people boarded the bus to stand, sit on the floorboard or in other people's laps. A man wearing only pajama bottoms climbed on at one point and hung halfway out the door, clutching at a seat strap. But Elaine was especially fascinated by one girl with large fleshy ear lobes which flapped and rippled with the breeze from an opened window. She could not stop staring at these amazingly mobile lobes.

The bus driver had a cassette deck in front and only one song on the tape that he played over and over as the bus lurched and leaped toward St. John. The only words Elaine could make out from the staticky speakers were:

Think about every night and day.

If I had wings I could fly.

I believe I can fly.

Over and over the refrain repeated itself until Elaine thought she might have to scream to release the song from her brain.

Soon she could feel vibration from Singer's ribs. He began singing the song with the tape, softly at first, then without inhibition. Elaine shot a glance at the Chinese man. She hoped Singer wouldn't disturb him. Breathing deeply and slowly, the old man obviously enjoyed the profound oblivion of natural sleep which so often evaded her.

Elaine looked to the boy beside her. As he fingered his cloth sack full of coins, he seemed unaware of the singing. Really, he was too young to have to work, she thought. *He's not much older than . . .* Elaine noticed his fingernails were rather longish, filed to points and painted a shade of electric blue.

The girl with the movable ear lobes seemed to yawn and cry out at the same time, startling Elaine, who then realized the girl, too, was singing along with the tape. Some children and their mothers joined in, and a rich and triumphant chorus blended with the scratchy sounds of the tape. Then the bus hit a hard bump.

Reflexively, Elaine reached back with her forearm to protect the boy.

"Don't you touch me, lady," he said coldly.

* * *

"Ivor! Ivor!" the one-legged man called, hobbling to catch the taxi driver before he pulled out of the parking lot at the dockyard. Ivor had finally gotten a fare to the airport: a Puerto Rican couple, newlyweds crisp and bright in their new holiday clothes. They readily handed Ivor twenty dollars U.S. for the one way trip.

“What you want?” asked Ivor, rolling down the window.

“Your people, Ki-Ki say they in St. John’s, ask about rooms.”

“Them, they stay with me,” said Ivor, confidently. “Ki-ki drunk.” He rolled the window back up and drove out of the parking lot. The entire ride to the airport, he did not honk at acquaintances nor point out interesting sights to the couple. He thought about those people, his people, and he shook his head from time to time.

* * *

In St. John’s, the dense heat seemed to pound between Elaine’s temples. In a storefront window, she could see her face flamed red beneath her baseball cap, and her forearms had the raw looking sheen of severe sunburn. They had been walking for hours. Singer steadily leading her from hotel to hotel, patiently checking rates, examining rooms, running hot water and testing mattresses.

Street hawkers crowded the wooden storefront walkways, frequently forcing Elaine and Singer into the busy streets, where cars screeched and honked at them. Over-ripe fruit and fish odors fouled the nearly unbreathable heat. T-shirt and souvenir vendors piteously begged the couple to examine their wares. Once Elaine wandered to a t-shirt stall, fingering a dark blue shirt her son might like. Then she remembered he was gone, he would not be coming back, and she dropped it as though stung by an electric current. She stumbled away, deaf to the vendor’s pleas, then insults. After that, she had the feeling that everyone there in that village, every islander she passed in St. John’s hated her and hated Singer. She could see the sidelong glances and hear the mocking laughter echo from every direction. They despised her; she knew it. They wished she never existed.

They detested Singer, too, she could tell. But that didn’t matter. He didn’t pay attention, and Elaine knew he didn’t care. He was like that. Things didn’t

affect him. He probably sensed the hostility at some level, but it was of no account to him. Singer just kept walking through the streets purposefully, climbing steps to look at rooms and asking questions pleasantly of various contemptuous clerks. How ridiculous their hatred seemed in the face of his bland courtesy.

“Well,” said Singer, finally. He had taken off his Panama hat to fan his face. Perspiration matted his brown curls to his temples and forehead. “How about this steel drum band? This Pepper Garden?” he asked. He had stopped to read a bill posted in a shop window. “That’s just up the hill near the dockyard. We could take the bus back and hike that hill. I’d kind of like to hear this band. How about you?”

“What about a room, Singer? You said we’d get a room.”

“I think I know a place,” he said. “It’s expensive, but there’s really nothing here near the dock that costs that much less. And this place is so noisy. I don’t think you’d like that.”

“Let’s get the place first. Then we can do whatever you want.”

* * *

At the airport, Jeannie told Ivor his people had been seen hitchhiking up the big hill to hear Pepper Garden play.

“Hitchhiking?”

“Yeah, your famous Americans catch a ride in Damon’s truck.”

“Those people, they not my people,” scoffed Ivor.

“The woman,” said Jeannie, “she wear your shirt.”

Ivor sunk deep into a plastic seat in the waiting area. He drew his legs up and wrapped his arms around them. He buried his head in his chest and closed his eyes.

“Hey, Ivor!” Jeannie called. “Hey, Ivor, they’s no sleeping in the terminal.”

* * *

Elaine wondered if she had been wrong. The man driving the pick up seemed to bear Singer and her no malice. He had not hesitated to stop to load them into the flatbed with several other people and a fly-spotted cur. Again, Elaine found herself seated near a teenage boy, near his dusty legs, really. He sat on the wheel well, and she hunched cross-legged on the floor of the truck bed. Singer was next to her, talking amiably to the islanders sharing the truck bed.

Singer had the habit of gesturing with his hat when he made a point or to indicate a direction. He was telling the others where they had been that day. Elaine noticed the dog’s low growl, like the rumble of a distant earthquake, every time Singer swiped at the air with his hat.

“Singer, don’t do that,” she warned him. “Don’t wave your hat. Upsets the dog.”

“Does it?” asked Singer, giving his hat an experimental flip. The dog snarled and lunged. The boy on Elaine’s left caught the dog’s ruff and forced him down. “You’re right.” Singer put his hat in his lap. He continued talking to the others. In a few moments, he forgot and began waving the hat again. The dog grumbled fiercely.

“Singer, put the hat down.”

“Oh, right.” He replaced the hat. In a little while, he was fanning it, and the dog shot forward, snapping and howling. Another man caught him this time and wrestled him back. “The hat,” grinned Singer. “I keep forgetting.”

“This dog,” said the boy near Elaine, “he don’t like things like that hat. Things, he don’t like things in his face and strangers.”

“Is he your dog?” asked Elaine.

“No,” the boy smiled, shaking his head, as though Elaine were absurd for suggesting he’d own such a dog. “No way.”

“Whose dog is he?”

“That dog, he’s nobody’s dog. Just likes a ride up the hill. So we stay bring him. And later we bring him back.”

In front of the restaurant at the top of the hill, the dog jumped from the bed gate and trotted stiffly to disappear in a nearby ravine. While Singer was thanking the truck driver, the dog reappeared and leapt back into the pickup.

“You going to stay to hear the band?” Singer asked Damon, the driver, companionably.

“No, not this time.”

“They’re a good band?”

“Oh, good, real good.”

“Can you stay long enough to have a beer with me?” Elaine heard Singer ask as she stepped behind him to climb down a few chalky rocks.

“Well, sounds good.” The man rubbed his hands together. “Your wife, she okay out there? Those yellow rocks, they crumble.”

“Elaine!” called Singer without turning around. “You okay out there?”

“Yes!”

“She’s okay,” Singer shrugged, and they went inside for their beer.

* * *

Ivor got to the cabin as Ashley from the Paradise Cove Resort was putting the couple’s worn-looking luggage into the resort’s van. “Hey,” cried Ivor. “Hey! Hey!” He grabbed a strap of the garment bag Ashley was loading and tried to wrench the piece of luggage free.

“What are you doing?” asked Ashley, who had been schooled in the States and spoke with deliberate precision. He yielded the bag, and Ivor fell on his backside lurching it free. “Have you lost your mind?”

“The Singer, they my people,” Ivor protested, clutching the bag to his chest. “They stay here. You steal my people.”

“They don’t want to stay. They don’t like it here,” scoffed Ashley, his eyeglasses glinting. “They asked my father for a room this afternoon.”

“They stay here.”

“They rented a suite.”

“They my clients.”

“Air conditioned, a view of the sea.”

“These people, they make the reservation with Walter. They stay here.”

“One hundred and fifty-five dollars U.S. a night,” said Ashley. “And they’re renting a boat tomorrow.” Ashley took the garment bag from Ivor and tossed it in the van. He tooted his horn, raised two fingers and drove off in a cloud of dust.

Inside the house, Ivor found a scrap of paper and a fifty dollar bill the couple left behind for the lodging and the cab ride. He recognized his name: I - V - O - R printed in one corner and uselessly traced the letters under that with his finger tip.

* * *

After the steel drum band played, Singer and Elaine decided to take a worn path that trailed down the hill. On one side of the path, the sun sinking over the bay made glitter of the particles of volcanic ash and motes that swirled in the late afternoon sky. On the other, the facade of an abandoned armory blazed ochreous, while a small herd of dun colored goats trickled down from the broad, rubied steps to the hillside below.

“Goats,” said Elaine. “Goats, again.”

“Goats,” nodded Singer. They rounded a bend, finding themselves on a narrow street.

“Ever notice how appropriate goats seem?” she asked. “Wherever you see them, they’re never out of place.” The street led to a row of shack-like houses similar to Ivor’s Sunshine Cabin. Glaringly bright garments--shirts, shorts, shifts--fluttered from clotheslines in the small backyards.

“Well, goats certainly work well here,” said Singer.

A man rushed out of his house to shoo the goats that had followed Singer and Elaine down the hill from a garden patch in his front yard. He cursed them and picked up a handful of stones to toss at them. The goats wagged their tails and brayed blithely. Elaine was about to remark on how foolish goats made people seem, when the one-legged man quickly limped over to them.

“Hey, man,” he gasped. He was out of breath from rushing up the hill.

“Hey, how you do?”

“Hello,” said Elaine warily.

“Nice day,” the one-legged man smiled.

Singer nodded.

“You like this island? This island, it’s a friendly place. I see you people, and I have to come over. I want to be friends.”

Singer and Elaine stopped walking to stare at the man expectantly.

“And friends, they help one to the other, right? They give help, right?”

“I don’t have any money to give you,” Singer said.

“Bus fare,” the one-legged man blurted. “You must have one dollar U.S., man. That’s nothing to you.”

Singer shook his head and raised his eyebrows. Elaine felt her pulse quicken.

“You don’t have to be like this, man. You don’t have to be so bloody hostile, man. I just want to be friends. I try to be friendly with people.”

“I don’t have any money to give you,” Singer repeated.

The one-legged man thrust his arms out and shoved Singer in the chest. “You people make me sick.”

Elaine shuddered. Singer was small and thin, but he was strong. She had no doubt he could beat a one-legged man fairly easily in a fight. She was worried for the islander, who seemed so upset he looked as if he might weep.

“It’s okay,” she told the one-legged man. She dug into her bag and pulled out a bill. “Here, here’s five dollars U.S. Take it.” She held it out to him, but Singer’s glare held him fast for a moment. “Come on. Take it.”

The one-legged man snatched the bill and hobbled off down the street, yelling: “Bloody hostile!”

“I wish you hadn’t done that,” said Singer quietly. “I already told him no.”

* * *

Ivor found his brother drinking a bottle of juice at the main fruit stand in St. John. He slapped the bottle out of his brother’s hand and sent it crashing against the plywood counter. “You! You!” He lunged and grabbed for his brother’s neck. Ivor’s brother slid off his stool. Ivor dove after him, slapping and kicking wherever he could reach.

The stand keeper and others in the street rushed to separate the brothers. Ivor’s uncle was called from his house a few doors down where he was having a bath. He came running in his bathrobe. Two tufts of shaving cream or soap suds sprouted from his large ears.

“What’s this?” the old man demanded, clutching his dripping robe close around his belly. “What’s this about?”

“Him,” spat Ivor bitterly. “He come after my people, begging and pushing, they say. Now, they go Paradise Cove. He ruin my business.”

The one-legged man, sitting in the dirt between two bar stools, narrowed his eyes at his brother. He shook his head, but he said nothing.

* * *

“Well?” asked Singer, parting long floral drapes to reveal the sea, glittering under the moon. “Do you like this room?”

Elaine wound her hair in a towel and nodded. “This is a beautiful place, Singer. Thank you.” Steam from the shower gave the well-apportioned room a fragrant and gauzy warmth. Thick cherrywood furniture bore soft cushions printed with the same splashes of pink, gray and white flowers decorating the drapes.

“It costs a lot, but I was thinking there’s no point in coming all the way here and suffering. So we’ll pay the extra, and we’ll stop suffering.”

“I don’t know if--”

“Elaine, come here.” Singer pulled her towards him. He reached for the towel on her head and gently rubbed her hair dry. “I want us to try. In this room, we can try at least. Tomorrow, we get a boat, and we can rent some snorkels and flippers. We can watch the fish under the water. You like that. Remember Belize?”

Elaine nodded. Her son had found a starfish adhering to a boulder at the mouth of an underwater cave. He had pulled her arm. *Look, look*, his mask had bubbled. He kept the shells he had found in Belize on a shelf in his bookcase, where they still sat, furred with dust, untouched.

* * *

In the morning, Elaine woke to Singer pulling on her arm. “Wake up, honey. Wake up. The boat will be here in a few minutes.”

“Can’t it wait? I was really sleeping,” she told Singer. “I think I was even having a dream.”

Singer consulted his watch. “No, we’ve got to hurry. It’s almost ten.”

“Did I really sleep that long?” Elaine yawned.

Singer threw her bathing suit, some shorts and a shirt on the bed. She dressed quickly and stuffed her hair under her baseball cap. They clattered down the polished steps to the garden, where other guests were having breakfast. In a few minutes, a morbid looking man steered a motor boat into the landing beyond the courtyard. Frowning, he put out his hand to help Elaine into the rocky little craft. Why, he’d rather handle a snake, thought Elaine, than touch me. She could see his plum-colored lips pursed in distaste as he guided her into the boat.

“This your boat?” asked Singer, climbing into the boat unassisted.

“No.”

“But it must be pretty nice to steer it around the island.” Singer smiled.

“Put your life jacket, sir. You, too, ma’am.”

Elaine pulled on the padded orange jacket, carefully fastening the canvass straps. Singer hastily threw his life jacket over his shoulders.

The boat pattered away from the landing, pitching with each transparent turquoise push of the waves.

“You do much fishing?” Singer asked. The guttural motor roared when the craft reached the open sea, drowning his words.

The boat man cut the engine again when they approached a small bay, cut like a sickle at the base of tall jagged cliffs. He leapt out of the boat and tugged it close to the sand so that Singer and Elaine could step out and wade.

“I will be back at half past one,” he told them, again taking Elaine’s hand to help her out of the boat.

“Okay, we’ll be here,” Singer replied, tossing the borrowed masks and flippers onto the sand.

On an impulse, Elaine clung to the boat man’s hard calloused hand. “I’m sorry,” she blurted.

“For what?” asked the boat man, wrenching his hand free.

“I mean, thank you,” she said, lifting her sunglasses to peer into the man’s yellow-rimmed eyes. “Thank you for bringing us here.”

“You be careful,” he told Singer as he climbed back into the boat. “You be careful, they’s pirates, real pirates, cut your throat for a cigarette lighter.” He sputtered off before Singer could reply.

“Nice fellow,” Singer told Elaine, who had waded out and was spreading the towels on a smooth patch of sand.

The water felt warm, so Singer and Elaine pulled on their masks and flippers and waded back out into the sea. Underwater, she could see the bay was filled with fish. Hundreds and hundreds of transparent gray-tinged fish shimmered and darted collectively, massing together like clouds. She reached to tug Singer’s arm. *Look, look*, her face mask burbled.

When they were tired from swimming, Singer and Elaine waded out of the water. Singer unwrapped a package of sandwiches he had purchased from the hotel restaurant that morning. Then he produced a new deck of cards. “Gin?” he asked, stripping the plastic wrap from the box. “Penny a point.” He shuffled and dealt the cards, and they ate the sandwiches while they played.

Then Singer took out the camera and snapped some pictures of the cliffs, of the sea, of Elaine in her swimsuit. She took the camera from him and shot him posing as a muscle man on top of a flat black rock. Laughing, Singer replaced the lens cap and returned the camera to its case. He slipped the camera

and his wallet in a plastic bag left over from the sandwiches. He began digging a hole in the sand under his towel.

“What are you doing, Singer?” asked Elaine, watching him dig.

“Digging a hole.”

“How come?”

“Hear that?” Singer placed the plastic bag containing the camera and his wallet deep in the hole he had dug and covered them up with sand. He smoothed the mound and replaced his towel over it.

“I don’t hear anything.” But as soon as the words were out, Elaine heard the purring of a motorboat in the distance.

“Water carries sound,” said Singer. “We hear the boat before we can see it.”

“Is that man coming back for us so soon?” she asked.

Singer shook his head.

A small boat appeared like a blotch on the horizon, growing larger and louder as it approached. Two islanders--young men--steered the boat into the bay, cutting the engine to float toward the sand.

“Hey,” called one man.

“Hey,” said Singer.

“Nice day!” the other shouted.

“Yeah,” Singer agreed.

“Gotta light?” asked the man, who climbed out of the boat first and waded toward the beach, pulling the boat on a stout rope.

“Sorry,” Singer apologized. “Don’t smoke.”

“Nice, but very, very hot today,” said the man in the boat. He also stepped out and waded through the shallow water. “Do you have any drink.”

“Water,” offered Elaine, holding out the canteen. The two men ignored her.

They appeared to be surveying the picnic site with intense interest. Elaine felt embarrassed, proffering the canteen. She set it on her towel. She felt a chill on her shoulders and reached to put on the shirt she had brought--Ivor's shirt, the blue short-sleeved uniform shirt.

One of the men saw the shirt and motioned to his partner. “Ahh,” he said, “you know Ivor.”

“Sunshine Cabins.” Singer nodded.

“He's good man, Ivor is,” the islander told them. “A business man.”

Giggling erupted from a pile of rocks at the base of the cliffs. Two small, very brown boys, tagging each other, raced from the foot path leading down from the cliffs. Soon after, a woman followed them wearing her hair wound up in a paisley turban. She wore a cotton house dress and cracked black flats. Laughing and shrieking, the boys clamored into the water. The woman kicked off her shoes and followed the boys out into the sea, hiking her dress to her hips as she waded in deeper and deeper.

“Kids,” said Singer. “You got kids?”

“I got four girls.” The islander held out four fingers. “They's no peace in my house. And this man here, he got twins, babies.”

The other man nodded sheepishly.

“Let's go,” he said suddenly. “Come on. Time to go.”

The two men pushed off their boat, climbed in and gave Elaine and Singer the two fingered salute. “Regards to Ivor,” one man called, before yanking the rip cord to start the engine. Elaine and Singer waved at them until the boat vanished in the horizon.

* * *

On the last day, Elaine and Singer stood in the dockyard parking lot looking for a ride to the airport. The one-legged man shook his brother awake from his nap behind the post office. “Your people waiting for you.”

Ivor hurried to the parking lot, climbed in the van and tooted his horn at the couple. “Hey, I can give you a ride.”

Singer hesitated.

“Hey, look, no bad feeling. Come on, I need the work.”

Singer and Elaine piled their luggage in the van and climbed in.

Ivor turned to face them before driving off. “It cost twenty dollar U.S., up front,” he said, holding out his hand. Singer paid him, and the van pulled out of the parking lot.

“You like the island?” asked Ivor.

“Yes,” said Singer. “It’s a nice island.”

“You come back some time?”

“Sure,” promised Elaine.

“Ahh!” Ivor flashed a smile in the rear view. “Now, everybody, they say that. But they never come back. Look, I’ll show you the place they’re trying to put a hotel,” said Ivor, tooting his horn at a young girl raising two fingers in salute from her bicycle. “And then I’ll show where is the road to Half Moon Bay.”

CHAPTER 8

MOTHER-IN-LAW'S TONGUE

Aaron told Elaine that the man who had come to cut their grass had asked for some toilet paper to take out in the woods. Aaron wrinkled his nose, curling his upper lip. Elaine wondered why he was telling her about this, why he simply didn't let the man indoors to use their bathroom. After all they had two, and since Elaine had just finished her shower, neither one was being used.

"Why not let him in to use the bathroom?" she asked. Aaron hesitated, frowning. Elaine could see he wanted her to make the decision. In his fastidiousness, he abhorred the idea of letting a man who *would* go in the woods in to use *their* bathroom. "Why shouldn't he use our bathroom?" demanded Elaine.

"He said something about eating bad chicken last night."

"I'll tell him to come in if you don't," threatened Elaine, but it was an empty threat. She was wearing only a smallish bath towel knotted at her breasts and another one turbanned over her wet hair.

"No, no, I'll go tell him." Aaron sighed, before slipping out of the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind him.

Elaine pulled two dresses from the closet and spread them on the bed. She was determined not to be the kind of funeral goer who belabors dressing and grooming. Besides it would be inconsiderate to let her daughter Tina catch her trying out different outfits or overhear her grumble about having to wear hose on a Saturday. She would just wear the dress or skirt that needed

no ironing and that was long enough to evade the issue of nylons altogether. Early August in North Georgia was certainly warm enough for sandals and bare legs. Elaine finally selected the soot-colored cotton dress instead of the navy linen, which needed ironing. The cotton, though it looked slightly rumpled, would surely smooth out with body heat.

After a moment, she felt more than heard the yardman's heavy footfalls as he made his way to the front bathroom, a thin wall away from her closet. When she rehung the other dress, Elaine could hear his muffled grunting. She quickly shut the closet door. They had never hired a man to cut the grass before, and for some undefinable reason, the idea of paying a grown man to mow embarrassed Elaine. When he had come to the door to ask for the job, she hid in the hall closet, listening to his slow baritone blending with Aaron's nasal drawl. After the mowing began, curiosity drove her to peek at him from a window which was so low that it neatly framed his chest, large belly and knees. He appeared to be pushing the mower with his great hanging stomach, his hands idly resting on the top handle. His flannel long-sleeved shirt and work gloves covered his skin from her view. Not that it mattered. She had stared for a moment, oddly relieved that she could see neither his face nor his shoes.

As she pulled on the cotton dress, she heard the toilet flush -- a feeble half flush. The front toilet could be temperamental. It required patience. The handle had to be held down for a few extra seconds for full flush. Now it would be necessary to wait for the tank to refill before a thorough flushing could be achieved. From the sound of the door yawning open, Elaine could tell the yard man wasn't one to wait.

When his heavy footsteps receded and the mower resumed puttering, Elaine took a tissue from the box on her dresser, covered her nose with it and hurried to the bathroom. She pulled a book of matches from under the sink, lit

several and dropped them--hissing--into the bowl, her eyes averted. Then she wrapped her fingers in toilet paper, flushed properly and shut the lid.

“Generations,” she told Aaron, whom she met in the hallway as she was lighting and waving around several more matches. “Not just years, but solid generations of poor dietary habits.”

“You were the one who wanted to let him in.” Aaron shrugged. “He’d have been just as happy to go in the woods. That would have been my preference too.”

Elaine knew well that Aaron disliked any kind of disturbance or intrusion in the house, so she changed the subject before he could elaborate on his “preference.” “When are you going to dress?”

“Now, I suppose. Should I wear a suit?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” said Elaine, remembering the junked cars and broken down appliances scattered in the yard of Terrell’s mother’s house and the slack-faced, toothless woman herself, rocking in a chair that was not a rocker, muttering about the fee the sheriff’s deputies had charged for impounding her car, which Terrell had been driving the day he died. “Probably just some dress slacks and a nice shirt.” She chose the soot dress for its plain, inexpensive appearance as much as for the fact that it needed no ironing and required no stockings. Elaine had a closetful of tasteful, costly dresses--most of them black for some reason, but she hadn’t wanted to outdress the other mourners, to draw attention to herself in that way.

Elaine’s daughter Tina emerged from her room in a diaphanous black sheath trailing over patent leather heels that were so high they caused her to lurch forward a bit like a blackbird on a precarious perch. She had swept her dark hair upwards in an intricacy of teasing, twisting and spraying that combined with her heavily made-up, but red-rimmed swollen eyes to make her

look much older than her twenty years, something of a superannuated prom date. And she had doused herself liberally with a scent that Elaine found particularly noxious. The sour-saccharine watermelon fragrance wafted after Tina like an invisible airborne veil that stung Elaine's eyes and made her nose run.

"Do you think I look okay?" Tina asked, quietly.

"You look nice, honey," said Elaine right before she sneezed.

"I don't want to look nice. I don't even want to go."

"I know." Elaine sneezed again. "I know you don't."

"I think I'll take my car. You'll probably want to come home before I do. I'll want to stay around afterwards, be with people."

"Will someone go with you? Those boys he lived with, maybe?" suggested Elaine. She was secretly relieved that she would not have to endure the forty-minute trip inhaling artificially sweetened watermelon fumes, but she didn't like to think of her daughter driving out into the country alone.

Tina shook her head. "I want to go alone. You remember how to get there?"

"It's that church just before you turn for his mother's house, isn't it?"

* * *

A week ago, Tina had gotten up from bed, asking if her boyfriend Terrell had called. When Elaine told her he hadn't, she leapt for the door and drove off, unwashed, before even brushing her hair. Half an hour later, the phone rang, and Tina was on the line, alternately sobbing and shouting incoherently.

"I can't understand you," Elaine had said. "Slow down. What's going on?"

"Terrell's ex-girlfriend was at his apartment," she finally managed to get out.

Oh, no, thought Elaine, here it comes. Terrell was six years older than Tina, and from what Elaine could glean, he had something of a complicated life--unresolved relationships with former girlfriends, illegal aliens for roommates, a bit of a gambling problem, even a heart condition and a five-year-old son that his grandmother looked after. Elaine was convinced it was only a matter of time before the tragedy named Terrell inexorably unfolded in her daughter's life. "Come home, honey," she had said to Tina on the phone that morning. "Just come on home."

"No, wait!" Tina had shouted. "Listen. She told me that Terrell's dead. That he died last night. Then she slammed the door in my face."

Tina had called from a pay phone, so Elaine told her to stay put. She would drive out, meet Tina. Together they would drive to the little town called Stephens Community, where Terrell's family lived, and find out what had happened.

All the way to Stephens, Elaine talked and talked, explaining to Tina that it might all be a mistake, a cruel joke on the part of the vengeful former girlfriend, or that Terrell might only be ill, not really dead, while Tina sat, staring out the windshield, dully repeating from time to time. "I knew this would happen. It was just too good to be true. I knew I would end up losing him. It was too good to be true."

As they turned off the highway onto the country road leading to Terrell's mother's house, Elaine noticed a graveyard and a small gray church between two cow pastures. Then a monster car with huge airplane tires-- something between a jeep and a tank--overtook them, nearly forcing their little car off the road.

"Honk, Mama, honk!" Tina became agitated, noticing the passing vehicle. "That's Terrell's cousin. Honk!" Tina reached over her mother and punched at

the horn, producing a few feeble bleats. The larger car swung a broad U-turn. The way the gravel sputtered out from under the oversized tires made Elaine fear the driver had turned to exact vengeance. But the car's occupants soon recognized Tina, who had rolled down her window and was leaning half out of the car, when Elaine pulled to a stop alongside the other car--faced in the opposite direction.

Four men stepped out. Elaine could see that each of them was carrying a brown bottle of beer and was crying. Their unshaven cheeks were wet with tears. Elaine thought she could recognize from her daughter's description the three brothers who were Terrell's roommates -- their flat Mayan faces pitted with blemish scars and their long straight black ponytails snaking all the way down their backs. The fourth man she took to be Terrell's cousin. He was the biggest of the four, and he had the same thick calves she had noticed on Terrell the time he pounded on the door in the middle of the night drunk and demanding to see Tina. Elaine had flicked on the carport light and noticed at once the extraordinary bulk in his lower legs--a family trait, she guessed, seeing the man she took to be his cousin.

"Terrell's dead," this man told Tina. "Some guy shot him, killed him dead."

Tina's wild hair flew from side to side as she shook her head, screaming, "No, No, *No-o-o-o!*" Her face reddened and her mouth burst open with a terrible shriek, as she crumpled back into the car. Then she bellowed long, hiccupping howls that threatened to rend the small white car in two, shattering through to the cloudless deep blue Georgia sky. Elaine feared the earth, even the universe was not big enough to hold her daughter's grief.

She pulled Tina close, patting down her rough unbrushed hair, smelling her sour milky breath as it gasped out spasmodically. She cradled her daughter's

head, shoulders and rocked her the way she had done when Tina was a baby, saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, honey, I'm so sorry." Elaine could think of nothing--not one thing--that she could do or say to make this any better for Tina.

After a while, Elaine asked the men, standing helplessly around the car while her daughter wailed, "Who did this?" No one seemed to hear; no one answered.

Instead, they told her to follow them to the house.

And so she had, thinking along the way how she would throw her arms around Terrell's mother when they met. She would hold her tight and try to pull some of the grief from this woman, whose son's death made her own inability to comfort her daughter seem insignificant. But when they got to the house--an oversized shanty, really, with the junk-strewn yard, cardboard wedged in paneless window frames, the ripped screen door--and Elaine stepped into the house to meet the woman, she did not even shake her hand.

For one thing, the woman sat on her own hands, rocking and rocking in a dinette chair, muttering, "Goddamn sheriff's deputies, goddamn them, charge me fifty dollars to get that car out. Fifty dollars! Who's got fifty dollars?"

The airless front room was filled with women, young and old. No one wept, but Tina. And no one introduced anyone. Through the screen door, Elaine could hear the man she took to be Terrell's cousin cursing and threatening revenge. "Somebody's gonna *die* tonight. Some motherfucker's gonna *die* for this."

The room itself was hideous. Mismatched, threadbare couches slumped along the fingerprint smattered walls. A vinyl wet bar, which was charred mysteriously on one side, held an array of dingy porcelain figurines--poodles, angels and ballerinas, leaned in a corner. Discolored sheets were strung as curtains in the doorway to the rest of the house and over the windows. Not

wanting to stare about, Elaine fixed her eyes on the pocked and dust-furred linoleum at her feet, listening in disbelief while Tina announced that she was pregnant. It was still early enough for Tina to change her mind about this, and Elaine had been hoping, hoping hard that she would.

“And I’m going to have his baby,” she said, sobbing. “I’m pregnant.”

The younger women’s eyes widened, but they made no comment.

“Fifty dollars a lot a money.” grumbled Terrell’s mother. “They call me up and say, fifty dollars. Who told them to take that car? That’s what I want to know.”

A diminutive elderly woman fought her way through the doorway sheet. Tina rose to embrace her, but the old lady shook her off. “Terrell ain’t here,” she croaked, shaking a warning finger. “You ain’t gonna see that boy anymore. He’s gone. Terrell’s gone. Ain’t never coming back here.”

“Fifty dollars is just too damn much money.”

A teenage girl turned to Elaine and explained, “She’s upset about her car.”

“Does she know about her son?” whispered Elaine.

“You mean my cousin Terrell. Oh, yeah. She knows all about that.”

Then everyone was talking at once. The teenage girl told Elaine that she would graduate from high school next year and had plans to go to the technical training school in town to become an EMT. When Elaine asked what that was, the girl said, “emergency medical technician,” and Elaine told her it sounded like interesting work. The girl nodded, smiling and went on to tell about the classes she would take.

After an hour, Elaine and Tina rose to leave. No one said goodbye, but Terrell’s grandmother again promised they wouldn’t be seeing Terrell anymore.

On the way home, Elaine asked Tina if Terrell’s mother had lost any other children.

“No, how come?”

“Just wondering. Does she have other sons then?”

“No, he was her only son. He was the oldest. Why do you ask?”

“It’s just that she didn’t seem that upset. The car thing seemed to bother her more. Did you find out what happened?”

“It’s so stupid,” Tina’s voice broke, and she began crying anew. “It’s the stupidest thing. This guy he went to school with, this Brian was going around for like weeks, saying how he was gonna kill somebody, how he had a gun and he was gonna blow somebody’s--” her voice caught. “He just kept bragging about it and bragging about it. Then on Friday night, a bunch of these guys went out into the woods. They go out there all the time to drink and throw dice and stuff like that. Well, they ran out of beer, so Brian said he would take Terrell in his truck to get more. And everyone says they were getting along. They were laughing and kidding around when they left, but then they didn’t come back. They didn’t come back at all.

“This Brian took Terrell deeper in the woods and shot him, I guess. They said he shot him three times, then he dragged him--” Tina broke down again, weeping. “I keep seeing him dragging Terrell, dragging him to hide his body.”

Elaine’s tears splashed onto her sunglasses hearing this. She, too, could see the young men in the darkness, in the deep woods, laughing and talking. Then the flash of gunfire. She wondered if Terrell had known he would die? Had he been afraid? “How do they know all this?” she asked Tina instead.

“Brian confessed. He went home to his mother’s house and told her he killed Terrell. He told her how it happened, and she was the one to call the police.”

“So this Brian’s in jail now?”

“Since last night.”

“But that’s so crazy. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s *stupid*. A *stupid* way to die,” said Tina, as though she blamed Terrell as much as anyone.

* * *

Stephens Community was a good thirty miles from town, maybe more. Tina wanted to be early for the funeral to talk with Terrell’s sisters who had called during the week and had been kind to her on the phone. She left soon after she applied a final slash of ruby lipstick to her lips. Tina’s fancy dress, exaggerated make-up and piled-up hair both saddened Elaine and made her feel tired.

“I’m ready,” said Aaron, stepping into the front room. “Where’s Tina.”

“She’s gone to the funeral alone. She might want to stay longer.”

“You know, this morning they called her from that chicken restaurant where she works. She ought to call them and start thinking about going back.”

“But it’s only been a week,” protested Elaine.

“She can’t sit around forever watching television. She needs to earn some money, so she can move out on her own. She can’t have a baby here. That would be too much. Just too much.”

Elaine sighed. “Terrell’s not even buried. Can’t you have a little patience?”

“I do. I do. I’m sorry. I’m just worried we’re the ones who are going to end up raising that baby, and that’s not going to do anyone any good,” he said, softly.

“I know,” said Elaine, thinking of the baby. The past week she found herself thinking more and more of the baby, her grandchild. At first, she’d agreed with Aaron; they couldn’t have the baby, Tina’s baby, in their house. “So disturbing,” Aaron had said many times, shaking his head. Once he even rose

from the dinner table--muttering about the inconvenience, the impossibility-- while he absently closed every window in the front rooms, as though shutting out imaginary fetuses that threatened to flutter indoors like moths drawn to the light.

“I know a baby would be too much,” Elaine prevaricated.

“You know, but does Tina know?”

“I don’t know what Tina knows.”

“You’ve got to tell her.”

“This isn’t the time, Aaron. For god sake, we’re barely going to the funeral.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Aaron admitted. “Well, let’s go then. We ought to pick up some flowers. Do you really think I look okay? Maybe I ought to put on my navy blue suit.”

A smallish, spare man, Aaron managed to look neat no matter what he wore. In a plaid short sleeve shirt and dark brown pants, he looked as cool and orderly as an accountant on a day off.

“You look perfect,” said Elaine. She wished she looked so tidy, so composed. In the front room mirror, she could see the soot-colored dress had not smoothed out. It even looked dusty where the dull nap was beginning to rise from the fabric. She’d had no time to put on make up, and her hair had not even begun to dry, giving her the appearance of someone more prepared to hang out washing than to go to the funeral of her grandchild’s father.

At the flower shop, they initially had chosen a sheaf of red and white carnations to bring to the funeral. The florist had several funeral displays, but Elaine found them ostentatious, even tacky, with their large shiny sashes and sentimental sayings woven into the wiring: *At Rest With The Angels, Eternal Peace, Belovéd Friend*. Aaron simply said they were too expensive. Then Elaine

noticed a lovely sansevieria plant--so understated with its striated spiky leaves, so appropriate for the discreet young man her daughter had described to her. Terrell was so private that he made Tina leave his apartment and sit out in her car when he had to use the bathroom.

“Ah, Mother-in-Law’s Tongue,” said the florist, startling Elaine as he came up behind her, wiping his water-reddened hands on a towel. “That’s the common name for it. Don’t touch the tip,” he warned, “it’ll jab you.”

“Really, honey,” pleaded Aaron. “What do they want with a plant?”

But Elaine had to have the plant. The florist wrapped the pot in green cellophane and tied a dark blue ribbon around that. Elaine felt pleased at the elegant sight it made.

At the church, a thick disorderly line of people wound its way from the cow pasture fencing, where latecomers were forced to park, to the whitewashed vestibule doors. Elaine was glad for her damp hair and stocking-less legs when she stepped out of the air conditioned car into the stultifying heat. The baked red clay burned the soles of her feet through her thin sandals. A loosely strung cloud cover cupped humidity over the churchyard, making it feel as though all of Stephens Community were trapped in a suffocatingly steamy plastic bag.

“Do me a favor, will you?” asked Aaron. “If I die in the summer, don’t bury me at mid-day in Georgia.”

Elaine took his hand and squeezed his long, cool fingers, guiltily. In the car, she had been thinking it would have been easier for her to bear Aaron’s death than for her young daughter to lose her mate. She’d started out reflecting that her years and experience provided her with more resources to deal with loss, but then her thoughts had wandered to the changes she and Tina would make in the house if Aaron were gone.

“Oh, I won’t,” she said, truthfully. She had made up her mind already to cremate him.

Aaron and Elaine met Tina as their end of the line entered the church. Elaine could see at once that her daughter, in her tall hairdo and fancy gown, had dressed more appropriately for the funeral than she had. Men wore double-breasted navy and charcoal suits, while the women were dressed in jet beaded bodices and black chiffon skirts, form-fitting lamé and silver-spangled shifts with fringe. Elaine, flushed with self-consciousness, tried vainly to brush the lint from her skirt. She shot a look at Aaron, who, if he noticed he were underdressed, gave no indication. Instead his little egg-shaped head was tilted back and his glasses glinted with the light, in the attitude of an anthropologist surveying a scene with keen, but detached interest.

“Where should we sit?” asked Elaine. The church was nearly filled but for a few seats on one side in front. Elaine didn’t know whether or not, as mother and step-father of the deceased’s pregnant girlfriend, they merited those seats.

“Up there, I guess,” whispered Tina, resolving the question. An usher appeared at her elbow and led them to the empty seats. Elaine traded shy smiles with the other people already seated in the row, while Tina stared straight at the closed gun-metal gray coffin covered with a spray of blue flowers arranged like a cross at the end of the middle aisle. Thank heavens it’s closed, thought Elaine, casting discreet looks about the small church. She spotted Terrell’s mother in a tight, shimmery black gown that gave her the look of a dissolute mermaid. She tried to catch her eye, give a sympathetic nod, but it didn’t seem the woman recognized Elaine at all.

A pig-tailed girl in black taffeta walked up and down the aisles, handing mourners paper fans affixed to wooden sticks the size of tongue depressors. The fans had the name of the funeral home printed on one side and a picture of an

auburn-haired and green-eyed Jesus kneeling at a rock in a sheep pasture on the other. Jesus wore a confused expression on his gently-featured face, as if he couldn't figure exactly why he had to kneel before a rock among all these sheep.

Another young girl handed out a folded piece of white paper, which when Elaine unfolded it, turned out to be the program, listing the various speakers and hymns scheduled for the service. Elaine, never a churchgoer in her adult life, was astonished that it had come to this--churches preparing agendas for services. Opposite the agenda was a picture of Terrell, leaning and stroking a pale Labrador retriever. Poor Terrell, smiling so kindly at the dog in the photo and now sealed in the coffin up front. Elaine noticed he had died a month before his birthday, which was also her birthday. She was curious why Tina never mentioned this. He would have been 26. She wondered what had become of the dog?

The service began with the raspy-voiced minister delivering a rambling and convoluted eulogy which heaped praise and admiration on the departed, while decrying the violent circumstances of his death. Elaine had learned over the past week--during the course of Tina's obsessive reminiscences--that Terrell had made his living selling crack cocaine, and she couldn't help wondering just how well the preacher had really known the young man. When the minister ended with a prayer, the choir--a gaggle of elderly women in the loft--sang a painfully off-tune hymn. Elaine glanced at Aaron, who loved all types of music. He raised his eyebrows, as though privy to yet another anthropological revelation.

Throughout the service various people succumbed to loud, inconsolable weeping, sometimes shouting in their grief. "He's gone! Terrell! God forgive him!" Terrell's mother screamed the loudest and had to be carried out at one point. His cousin, with the oversized calves, had stood shouting his grief before

collapsing into a faint. He also had to be taken out. Elaine, a lapsed Catholic, was alarmed by this carrying-on. She could not remember more than numbness during the services for her youngest son, but recalled at her own deeply beloved mother's funeral, she had allowed tears only to well in her eyes, not to trickle down her cheeks and streak her mascara.

To Elaine's dismay, two middle-aged women began lifting the floral arrangements from about the coffin, announcing in turn who had provided what piece and reading the florist cards aloud. Elaine was grateful they had neglected to write out a small card. She felt chagrin that the plant, which had looked so handsome and dignified at the shop, was clearly the paltriest floral gift in sight. The two ladies hefted great daisy crosses and rose-covered hearts, enormous plants in pots--she shot another look at Aaron--and sashed wreaths. "With sympathy and love, the Evans Family," one or the other read. "We will miss you always, Myrtle and Lloyd Davis." And on and on. Finally, one woman reached for the little plant. "No card!" she cried. "Who gave this?" Elaine looked about the church with an arched eyebrow, as if searching out the ungenerous soul. She almost carried it off, but when the woman asked again, Aaron slowly raised his hand. "What was your message for the family?"

Aaron shrugged, but Elaine cleared her throat and said, "That we're very sorry. He was . . ." she cast about for the right words. What could she say about the boy her daughter had loved? About the young man she had planned to have over for dinner once Aaron had the air conditioner fixed? That he seemed shy, but polite? That she was sorry she had spoken to him harshly once, telling him never to come to her house drunk again? ("This is not Aaron's house, this is not Tina's house, this is *my* house, and you do not do this here," she had said. And he had called her "ma'am" and he swore he would never do it again.) That he had kept his word? "He was a very nice person." Her voice

inflected involuntarily, making this sound like more of a possibility than a certainty.

The woman holding aloft the pot gave a disgusted look and set it aside, lifting a tremendous display of bronze mums in its place. After all the flowers were admired, another hymn started up, and the ushers rose to lift the coffin's lid. Oh, no, thought Elaine, clutching Tina's elbow. As the lid was raised, Tina buried her face in the hollow of her mother's collar bone and shuddered, weeping. Ushers directed the rows of mourners up to the front to view the body in turn. Starting on one side of the church they proceeded directing people in a horse-shoe configuration, so that Elaine realized their row would be last. Terrell's mother, revived and returned to her seat, was among the first to view her son. She wobbled on tiny heels before wailing once more and falling backwards into the arms of the ushers, who again dragged her outside. Next Terrell's grandmother in black jersey, clutched her handbag to her chest and perched on tiptoes to peer in the coffin. Elaine heard her croaking, "I ain't gonna see you no more, Terrell. You won't be coming around no more." Elaine saw a woman lift a small boy in a suit up to the coffin. "Say good-bye to your daddy," the woman said. "Come on, now, you *gotta* say good-bye." The boy stared silently a moment before screwing up his small face and screaming in terror. More and more people filed past. Elaine recognized no one else, until the weeping Mayans made their way to the front. Tina clung to her mother, darkening the front of her dress with her tears.

"We don't have to go up front," Elaine told her.

But Tina drew herself away and stood. They filed out with the others in their row and followed them to the center front. Aaron and Elaine preceded Tina. Aaron gave a cursory glance in the satin-lined box, but Elaine stood and gaped. This was not Terrell! Not at all. This was a papier-maché replica, a

horrible fake. The skin was lumpy, badly patched. It looked worse than wax. It reminded her of topographical maps she had made in elementary school with flour and salt and covered over with cracking tempera paints. And that expression! She was sure he never looked this smarmy, like the cat who swallowed the canary, like he knew a secret he wouldn't share. Terrell would have been mortified to see himself looking like this. Elaine had heard the Georgia Bureau of Investigation kept the body an entire week. But how could these morticians do such a thing? Of the dozen funerals she had attended, this was the worst job of embalming she had ever seen.

She tried to catch Tina about the waist and steer her away from the sight, but Tina sidestepped her. She put both hands on the coffin's sides and leaned in to whisper at the crudely prepared corpse. Elaine could barely hear her daughter's words. "You ass," Tina hissed. "You stupid, stupid ass." Then she reached in and lightly fingered the white carnation in the lapel of his suit. "What's going to happen to me?" she asked softly, before turning to Elaine. "I shouldn't have loved him, Momma. In the end, he was just another fool, wasn't he?"

Elaine shrugged without saying a word. She was only beginning to understand her gratitude to this young man she barely knew, this young man who had leapt in and out of her daughter's life--seizing the future from them all--this fellow to whom Elaine had no connection, but was now inexorably linked by the warm knot of tissue in her daughter's womb. She would never say that she was glad he had died, glad he was gone, taking his dangerous ways from her girl, that she was thankful he had left her a place in her daughter's life, left her a grandchild in his wake. She would listen to Tina rant, but she would never blend her voice in complaint. Elaine glanced a last time into the satin-lined casket, peering at Terrell's eyelids -- chalky and crumpled like crepe paper.

Turning, Elaine gently led her daughter out of the church. She circled Tina's shoulders with one arm, feeling only slightly absurd, as though she were leading a wounded comrade from battle. Stepping across the threshold into a blaze of sunlight, Elaine reached to hook Aaron's elbow with her free arm. But he had fallen too far back, lingering in the cool shadowy church, pinching the skin between his eyebrows with one hand and slowly shaking his head. No doubt he also had his hard words for Terrell, the disturbances he had caused. Again Elaine would listen, never speaking sharply against the father of her grandchild. She had given Terrell her word.

CHAPTER 9

WALKING CIRCLES

Clearly the woman did not want to walk. She lumbered several paces behind Elaine and her hugely pregnant daughter Tina as they trod the thin carpet winding through the Labor and Delivery wing of the hospital. Mother and daughter marched the corridors with brisk purpose, arm in arm, up and down, back and forth, like comrades, like guards conducting an odd but relentless watch on these peaceful, somnolent premises. But the other woman lagged. The slack flap of her slippers--graying with lint--grew fainter and fainter with each corner they turned. Impelled by a herding instinct she would be hard pressed to explain, Elaine cast frequent glances over her shoulder to mark the distance between them and the woman. When the woman vanished from sight just before the neonatal nursery, Elaine caught her daughter's elbow more firmly.

"We ought to stop," she said, slowing her pace.

"Why?" asked Tina. Elaine's daughter was slightly winded. Her smooth pink cheeks billowed and contracted as she caught her breath, and her dark eyes glimmered from the exertion. She used the break in stride to rewind her mass of dark curls in knot at the base of her skull. "Walking makes me feel better. I don't want to stop."

"But we've lost Laura."

"Linda, her name's Linda."

"Linda? Are you sure? I thought she said 'Laura.'"

"It's her teeth, Momma. Half the time you can't tell what she's saying."

“Linda, then. We’ve lost her.” She craned her neck to search around the corner they had just turned. Elaine felt ashamed that though she had been to the woman’s house after her son, Tina’s boyfriend, had been shot, though she had been to the funeral and even now as they waited together at the hospital for Tina to bear their first grandchild, she hadn’t really known the other grandmother’s name. “She was keeping up, but I don’t see her now.”

“Good,” said Tina. She swiped a damp lock of hair from her brow. “She’s too slow. She’s holding us back. And did you see those slippers. God, it’s embarrassing. I’m glad she’s fallen behind. I don’t care if she is Terrell’s mother. I don’t want people to think she’s with us.”

“What people? There’s no one here but us,” Elaine pointed out. At two a.m., the hospital’s halls were completely empty. The few nurses at the front desk seemed preoccupied with their work and barely glanced at the marching women, let alone their footwear. Even the newborns, bound in pink or blue receiving blankets and nested in their clear plastic bassinets, slept with their puffy little eyes squeezed tight.

“Still,” Tina pouted, “I don’t know why she has to walk with us. I didn’t ask her, did you? I don’t even want her here.”

“Shush, she’ll hear you.”

“I thought you said we lost her.”

“She could be coming, though.”

“She won’t; she’s probably sitting her big butt down in one of those rockers by the front desk. I don’t know why she just doesn’t go home.”

“She wants to be here, honey. This is important to her,” Elaine tried to explain. “And she’s probably tired--”

“From *what?*” demanded Tina. “*Gambling?* That’s all she does all day. She doesn’t have a job. She just goes to that electronic gambling place on

Lexington every day, the whole day long. *We* worked all day. The only thing she did was sit on a stool, smoking and putting quarters in a slot.”

“Well, that could be tiring, too.” Elaine was astonished to learn there was an electronic gambling place in town. Illegal, no doubt. Nevertheless, Elaine wondered if what she did all day long -- reading poetry and fiction manuscripts for a literary journal--could be called work. So often it seemed like eavesdropping on other people’s daydreams. It would be much more stressful to risk coins at computerized black jack or five card draw.

“And did you see what she was wearing?”

“Those slippers?”

“Not just the slippers, but the shirt and that cap. They were Terrell’s. She always wears his clothes.”

“But that’s sad!” She had noticed the bold logo shirt and skater pants stretched taut on the large woman’s frame and wondered why a woman her own age would dress this way. Now she understood. Elaine knew what it was to lose a child, and though it would not occur to her to don her dead son’s clothing--Sanders, her youngest, had been only four when he died--this habit seemed as pathetic as her keeping her son’s pillowcase unwashed all these years to inhale from time to time the salt traces of his scent, to gently finger the few fine black hairs trapped in the weave, to call memories back to her. “She must miss him so much.”

“No, Mom, she doesn’t wear that stuff for his memory or out of grief or anything like that. She wears them because they’re expensive, brand names, you know. She never wears anything of his that doesn’t have a label on it.”

“Oh,” said Elaine, frowning. “Still, I better go back to look for her.”

“I want to keep walking. The contractions don’t hurt as much while I’m walking. I can’t see why I should have to stop and be in pain just because she’s worn out from gambling.”

“I’ll catch up with you the next time you come around,” Elaine promised.

Elaine doubled back, adopting a slower pace as she did not have to keep up with Tina and rummaging her thoughts for some idea of what to say to the woman, to Linda, when she did find her. Elaine read the bright wall posters advocating breast feeding and infant inoculation, the directions for sounding the fire alarm and the nameplates on doors to private rooms. Some families decorated their doors with pink or blue balloons, cardboard storks and large floppy ribbons. Elaine had not thought to bring such adornment, though this was exactly the kind of thing Tina would want, even expect. She hoped there would be time the next day to find ribbon and a colorful stork somewhere. Perhaps the gift shop sold such decoration.

Elaine enjoyed reading the names that couples and single mothers had given their infants. Mr. and Mrs. Kwan Park called their new son Christopher Brendan. Another couple named their baby girl Xylophonia Shadderica Wright. Both blue and pink balloons were affixed to one door. Hermaphrodite? she wondered. But reading the nameplate, she found twins had been born to these parents--Amrita and Vinai Deepali. The last door she read gave her pause. Only the mother’s name was given--no father, no baby. “Gretchen Ellsner” by itself had been penciled into the cream colored card.

When Elaine taught middle school, she had known an eighth grader named Gretchen Ellsner. She had not been one of Elaine’s students. Elaine taught the “regular classes,” which consisted mainly of black and Latino students. No, this Gretchen Ellsner had been a white girl, so she would have been with the “gifted” group, comprised of middle class children of varying

learning abilities, but all with one thing in common: pushy parents. To Elaine's thinking all this was just another way around desegregation in the New South.

Though not legitimately gifted, the Gretchen Ellsner she remembered had been self-motivated. Elaine recalled the poems, stories and drawings the girl had submitted to the literary magazine that Elaine, as faculty sponsor, had moderated. The work was not exceptional, but Elaine recalled the sense she had gotten of knowing the girl, knowing this Gretchen Ellsner and her comfortable world of friends and shopping at the mall and violin lessons and even a pet potbelly pig named Hamlet.

This had been about the time Elaine was having so much trouble with Tina--the running away, the high school truancy, the thirty year old boyfriend with blue-green tattoos crawling obscenely from his elbows to his wrists. Tina had even managed to get herself arrested for biting a red haired policeman, a rookie who'd had the temerity to ask her what she was doing in a phone booth downtown at four in the morning.

During that time, Elaine would look at girls like Gretchen longingly. At graduation, the Ellsner girl had trotted to the front of the stage several times for awards in music, Spanish, citizenship, band and physical fitness. And after the ceremony, Elaine spied Gretchen flinging her thin arms around her mother and father, her wheat colored hair flying like a veil as she drew them into the circle of her thin arms with natural grace.

Elaine picked up her pace. If she did not hurry now, Tina would catch up with her as she rounded this part of the floor in a short while. True to Tina's prediction, Elaine found the other woman, Linda, rocking in one of the rockers and fanning herself with a pamphlet on preventing sudden infant death syndrome. Elaine thought she might finally have the chance to tell the woman how sorry she was that her son had been killed, that she knew what a terrible,

terrible thing it was to lose a son. But any words she could think of to frame her commiseration seemed weak, false, a gross understatement deserving of this strange woman's harshest scorn.

As Elaine drew closer, she caught strong whiffs of cigarette smoke, heavily applied scent, and something else, what was it? Yes, alcohol. She could smell hard liquor every time the woman swished the fan in front of her face. Elaine noticed the nurses at the station, just across the hall from the rockers, moving stiffly now and peering over their files from time to time at the large woman rocking and fanning herself.

"There you are," said Elaine, not sure what else to say.

"Tired," the woman replied.

"Yes, it's tiring," agreed Elaine, though she had no idea what the "it" she mentioned was, but as she uttered them, her words seemed true. Everything was tiring--raising children, cooking dinners, washing load after load of laundry, and now that Sanders had been gone all these years and Teddy, her middle son, had moved to the west coast with his father and Tina was usually at work, the house was often empty but for her and her husband Aaron, and that somehow was tiring too.

Most tiring of all, was this waiting for her grandchild to be born. She and Tina had been walking since after midnight, walking and walking and practicing the breathing while Elaine dutifully jotted down times between contractions. Just thinking about it all made her eyes sting with self pity because who would be the one to help Tina take care of the new baby when it arrived, to get up in the night, to hold it when it cried, to love it with all of her power to love and then, and then perhaps she would lose that baby like she lost Sanders, and Teddy too, like she was always losing Tina.

She wanted to sink into one of the rockers along side Linda and rock some of this overwhelming tiredness away. But a glance at the nurses' station kept Elaine on her feet. What if these rockers were meant only for the new mothers? The nurses were already behaving as though they were affronted, and Elaine didn't like to break the hospital's rules.

"It is tiring," repeated Elaine. Why didn't the woman speak? Why did she let these awkward silences grow between them? It was so quiet Elaine could hear another nurse walk toward the desk, her pantyhose rasping together at the knees, and the dull squeak of her rubber soled shoes.

"*The Ellsner baby turn yet?*" she heard the approaching nurse whisper.

"*Still breech,*" another nurse whispered back.

Elaine tried to smile. Linda gave her a startled look and Elaine wondered if she had grimaced instead of grinning. Elaine could hear her own stomach rumble. "You know, we have a word for what we are."

"Huh?" The woman's shiny dark brow rippled; her eyes crinkled in puzzlement. Nice eyes, Elaine noticed. Very little white rimmed these deep, almost velvety black eyes, and what little showed was bluish white like skimmed milk--in spite of the cigarettes, the liquor. Perhaps the woman's features, her cheekbones and nose were really quite fine under all that heaviness. Try as she might, Elaine could not conjure Terrell, and the snapshots she'd seen only made his image more enigmatic to her. It might not be so bad if the baby looked like this woman.

"My parents spoke Spanish. There's a word in Spanish for what we are. I don't think there's one in English, but in Spanish it's *comadres*. We're *comadres*." In truth, Elaine, a sixth generation Mexican American, never really understood how *comadrazgo* worked, but she wanted to make some connection, establish a bond between herself and strange dark woman in the rocker.

“Huh?”

“There’s two kinds of *comadres*. There’s the godparent kind, but there’s another kind, the kind we are--both mothers of the parents of our grandchild; we are *comadres*. We have a special relationship through responsibilities toward our grandchild. You know what I mean?”

“One thing I can’t understand,” mumbled the woman, rocking and fanning.

“What’s that?”

“What all you just said.”

* * *

“No baby tonight,” said Toni, the Nigerian midwife. The woman’s slightly accented speech was so soothing that Elaine wanted to just close her eyes and let it wash over her like warm bath water. “See here.” Toni pulled a trail of graph paper from the fetal monitor at the side of the bed in Tina’s room. “See how the blue line is flat. The contractions have stopped.”

“Did the walking make them stop?” Tina wanted to know.

“No, not at all. If it was true labor, the real thing, the walking would accelerate the contractions. But this is not true labor. You must go home tonight. Get your rest. It will not be long, but it will not be tonight.”

“But I wanted to have the baby tonight,” protested Tina, her voice rising. Elaine tensed. Her daughter was not one to cry in public, but she was not shy about raging anywhere, anytime.

“We can go get some breakfast,” Elaine offered hastily. “I bet we can find someplace open, even this early. How’d you like an omelet with cheese and some potatoes.”

“But I’ve got my bag here. I’m ready to stay and have the baby. I don’t want to wait anymore!” Tina’s eyes flashed. “I’ve been waiting and waiting. It’s too much!”

Elaine remembered the time Tina had thrown over the dining room table with dinner served on it. She had risen from her seat and heaved the table over on its side, crashing china, glassware and spattering food and iced tea onto the carpet and walls. *How many times*, hollered Tina, *did she have to tell people she didn’t like tuna casserole?*

The midwife grabbed Tina’s forearm, looked into her eyes, and said firmly, “Listen to me. You are not having the baby tonight. You go home, and you rest. You understand me?”

Tina nodded, silently, and Toni gathered up the chart, ripped the graph paper from the machine and took off her gloves. Elaine stepped around the curtain to give Tina time to dress.

Outside of the curtained-off section of the room, Linda had found another chair near the door. She sat in that, swaying from side to side with her arms folded over her massive breasts.

“They’re sending Tina home,” Elaine told her.

“Huh?”

“You may as well go home. They’re sending us home. She’s not going to have the baby tonight.”

“For reals?”

“Of course,” Elaine said more sharply than she liked. What reason would she have to lie to the woman, to send her away if the baby was about to be born?

Terrell's mother sighed heavily and hefted herself out of the chair. Her slippers scuffed the linoleum as she slowly lumbered out of the room. No goodbyes, no pleasant wishes for the next day. The woman just walked away.

Elaine stared after her, baffled. It was hard for her to understand when people displayed antipathy or even indifference toward her. She decided this woman, this Linda must have a mental illness, an emotional deficit of some kind that immunized her against friendliness.

* * *

"Why, of course, she's mental," Tina confirmed as they ate breakfast at a pancake house just before dawn. "Don't you the notice the way she talks?"

"But I thought that was her teeth, her lack of teeth, I mean."

"There's that, but if you really listen, you notice that what she says has nothing to do with anything a lot of the time. It's just not connected."

"But that's sad," sighed Elaine.

"Everything is sad to you," said Tina. She speared a sausage with her fork and wagged it at Elaine. "I think you just like feeling sorry for people."

"What do you mean?"

Tina shrugged. "You just seem to like giving sympathy."

"I don't *like* giving sympathy. But I am sorry for her. She just lost her son."

"She acts like it's no big deal. I'm the one who really misses Terrell. I'm the only one who really knew him. She didn't know a thing about him. He didn't even like her. He was always complaining about how she kept bugging him for money."

"Still he was her son," pointed out Elaine. "She must miss him horribly. I remember how it felt when--"

"Don't, Mom, please don't."

“I’m just saying . . . Well, forget it.” Elaine found a water spot on her knife and wiped it away with a napkin. “Did they ever charge that boy who shot him?”

Tina shook her head. “He’s out now.”

“*Out?* For murder?”

“Out on bail. They haven’t had the trial yet.”

“He got *bail?*” Hearing this, Elaine felt depressingly naive.

“Now they’re saying it was self-defense. He didn’t just murder him in the woods like everyone thought. Now they’re saying Terrell and him were fighting.”

“Fighting? Over what?”

“Another girl. Oh, Mom, I don’t want to talk about all this.” Tina pushed her plate away. Her face crumpled, and the color drained from her cheeks.

“Who told you all this?”

“She did. Linda called me a few days ago. She told me the whole thing.”

* * *

In the morning, Tina decided she would go to work. But after a few calls to the clothing shop from the phone in the front room, where Elaine could hear her daughter’s voice alternately pleading and threatening, Tina raced to her room and slammed the door. Aaron raised his fine eyebrows over the morning newspaper, and Elaine trailed Tina to her room. She knocked hesitantly at the door.

“What is it? What’s wrong? Are you going to work? What happened? Did someone say something to upset you?”

“LEAVE ME ALONE!” Tina roared. And Elaine jumped, retreating a few steps, but she could still hear Tina’s muffled, “Why can’t everyone leave me alone?”

“Do you need anything?” Elaine tried again.

But Tina didn't answer. Instead she stormed out, buttoning her uniform blouse--an extra-extra large, specially ordered to cover her growing abdomen. Then she stuffed her mass of black hair under the company baseball cap and stomped out of the house. Revving her car and screeching in reverse out of the drive, Tina didn't seem to notice her mother watching her from the window or return her wave. “Oh, dear,” said Elaine.

Aaron turned a page in the paper, refolded it and grunted.

“You stop it,” snapped Elaine, glaring at her husband's calm face--his well-groomed beard, his neat blond curls and his glasses as they twinkled in the morning sun streaming through the window.

“What? What am I doing?” He lowered the paper.

“You know what you're doing, sitting there ‘hmmphing’ like you knew this would happen, like you knew it all along.”

“I didn't do anything. I didn't even say anything.”

“That's right. You can't be bothered. All you have to do is act like you're never surprised, like you couldn't care less and I'm the stupid one, I'm the fool--” Elaine interrupted herself fearing her voice would break.

Aaron gazed at her with mild concern, the same expression he wore when the sink backed up or wasps nested in the barbecue. These things act up, his face told her. I am sorry that it happens, but it does. “What do you want me to do?” he asked quietly. “What do you want me to do? She's pregnant, she's hormonal--”

“And she's *my* daughter, *my* problem.”

“I didn't say that. Tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it.”

“I just want to know what's going on. Somebody said something to her. I know it. Someone at that shop must have upset her.”

“Ah, the cult,” said Aaron. Many times, they discussed the strange involvement of Tina’s co-workers in her life, in her personal business. Aaron compared their influence and meddling to that of a cult, but Elaine called them “the coven.” A trio of women--witches all--boiling up innuendo, imagined slights, and petty accusations in the great cauldron of gossip they swirled between marking prices and ringing up sales on the computerized cash register.

“Maybe I should call over there? Make sure she got there okay. Did you see how she tore out of here? I’m worried she’ll get in a wreck. Maybe I’ll just call over there.” Elaine headed for the phone.

“I wouldn’t,” Aaron called after her. “She’ll think you’re interfering.”

Despite this, Elaine picked up the phone and dialed the shop. After a few rings, Maya, the most noxious of the trio, answered, audibly snapping a wad of gum. After shouting the store greeting and listening briefly to a request to speak to Tina, Maya brusquely put Elaine on hold. The inane recording advertising the store’s hours and special values blared in Elaine’s ear for several moments until Maya came back on the line. Elaine pictured the trio of women sequestering her daughter in the back storage room--the two older blondes and young Maya, an African American girl--and brainwashing Tina against her mother. She could almost hear the three of them cackling about Elaine waiting on hold.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you?” blurted Maya when she finally returned.

“What? Why not?”

“She says she doesn’t want to talk to you and to tell you she doesn’t want to have you at the birth,” said Maya in her loud flippant voice.

“What? But I’m the coach. We took the classes together. I know the breathing, the exercises--”

“Both Desireé and Sandy had babies,” Maya informed Elaine, popping her gum vigorously. “They’ll help her with that stuff. Tina doesn’t want you there.”

“I see,” said Elaine after a pause. “Well, tell her to give me a call when she’s ready to talk, will you?” Numbly she replaced the phone in its cradle.

“What did she say?” called Aaron from the kitchen. He stood to stack all of the newspaper neatly and clear away his coffee cup.

“I didn’t talk to Tina. Maya told me I can’t come to the birth. She said Tina doesn’t want me there.” Elaine still couldn’t believe it. “Maybe I should drive out there and see what’s going on. Maybe they’ve tricked her in some way. Think I should go out there?”

“I think that would be a waste of time.” Aaron stood in the doorway, rummaging in his pants pocket. “I think it would be just what they want, having another person jump at their will. And I think when the time comes Tina is going to call you regardless of what the cult says.”

“What if she doesn’t? What if--”

“Look at this.” Aaron waved a slip of newsprint he’d pulled out. “Tomato plants. Buy two get one free.”

“What about Tina? What should we do?”

“We should go to this nursery. Let’s pick out some tomato plants, some green peppers and marigold seeds. It’s a beautiful day. Let’s plant the garden. Tina will call when she needs something. She always does.”

At once, Elaine saw the futility of driving to the shop where her daughter worked. She foresaw the coven’s glee at provoking this desperate act and her daughter’s stony refusal in the face of apologies and pleas. Aaron was right; Tina would call when she needed her. Elaine hated to think that this call might not come until after the baby was born, that she might miss her grandchild’s birth, something she had anticipated for so long . . . and something she had dreaded--

ushering *her* child through hours of agony with only feeble exhortations to breathe correctly to offer in solace. It was a beautiful day--sunlight flooded the backyard and from the kitchen window she could see a pair of cardinals teasing, tagging one another--animate red slashes, silk scarves fluttering against the deep green field of lawn that was so perfect it seemed painted.

“Damn it. I better get the hose,” murmured Aaron as he noticed the cavorting birds. “Those two will rip each other to shreds.”

“You’re kidding. They’re just playing together.”

“They’ll kill each other, honey. Those are very territorial birds,” said Aaron, heading for the back door. But before he could reach the garden hose, Elaine watched the faster of the two birds swoop and tear the other’s breast open. The wounded bird dropped, twitching and spurting blood on the grass until Aaron mercifully smashed its head with a brick.

* * *

After the last tomato plant had been tamped into the soft earth, Elaine heard the muffled ringing of the phone inside the house. She threw her spade, tore off her gloves and ran, nearly trampling the cat in her haste to answer it.

“Momma, I’m at the hospital. Hurry up and get here,” Tina cried. “The baby’s coming.”

Elaine brushed the soil from her jeans and lunged for her purse. “The baby!” she shouted at Aaron, as she bustled out the door. “She’s going to have the baby.”

They had decided long ago that Aaron would not attend the birth. Tina had not asked her stepfather to be present, and Aaron, although interested in many things, was not anxious to see “placentas and whatnot” slithering out of anyone’s body. He would wait at the house for Elaine to call before he drove to

the hospital to see the new baby. "Be careful," he warned as Elaine backed out of the drive.

* * *

Of course, the entire coven--Desireé, Sandy and Maya--crowded the small Labor and Delivery Room, along with Terrell's mother and her three teenage daughters--all lean, tall, very dark, and giggling as they shared a pizza from a large white box. Tina, sitting upright in a hospital bed at the center of the room, seemed distant, unfazed by the large number of spectators. The midwife, had to jostle elbows and part shoulders--as Elaine had--to approach the bed.

"There are too many people in this room," said Toni. "Some of you must leave. I have to examine the patient. There are simply too many people here."

At this, Tina seemed to focus, and she grabbed her mother's hand with a fearsome grip. "Make them leave, Momma. I don't want them here. They're making me sick."

"Who?" asked Elaine cautiously.

"Make them all leave for the examination, but you stay, please, Momma. You stay with me."

Elaine wondered how she would get this group's attention. Except for Linda, they were all chatting and laughing among themselves; they had not seemed to notice or care about the midwife's announcement. Elaine considered clapping or standing on a chair to let out a whistle, but she rejected those notions as silly and instead circled the small room, murmuring, "Let's leave for the exam, shall we? Let's step out for a moment. C'mon, let's go." Soon she was leading the group through the door, but she managed to fall behind and herd them out, remaining inside and shutting the door after the last one.

As soon as she sighed and turned to her daughter, Elaine noticed she had missed one of the visitors--Terrell's mother Linda, who stood like a monument, her arms folded over her chest again, at the foot of Tina's bed.

"Momma," hissed Tina, trying to whisper.

Elaine quickly rounded the bed to her daughter's side.

"Momma, get rid of her," she managed to truly whisper. Toni powdered and snapped on surgical gloves. "That smell--the cigarette smoke--it's making me sick. And she just keeps staring, she doesn't talk, she doesn't smile."

Elaine feared Linda might have heard Tina, and she stole a guilty glance at her, but the woman stood as immobile and inscrutable as ever. It was as though she had been installed like a heavy piece of hospital equipment.

"Um," began Elaine, unsure how to throw the other grandmother out of the room politely, "ah, Tina would like you to wait outside while she's examined. I'm sure you can come back in after the examination."

"No, she can't," piped Tina from her bed.

"Or you can wait in the outer waiting room. I noticed they have a TV. We'll call you if anything happens," Elaine promised.

The woman turned her deep black eyes on Elaine, staring long and hard. Elaine gulped, wondering if she should try guiding the woman by the elbow. But after a few seconds, Linda drew her eyes away and slowly strode out of the room, her gray slippers slapping with sullen dignity.

"Now lie back," the midwife told Tina. "Put your feet in the stirrups. This might bring on a contraction. Just be prepared."

"Don't let her back in, Momma. I can't take it, the staring, the not talking. She's creepy. Eeyoww-ww!"

"Remember your breathing. Don't lose control now," warned Toni.

“Let it out,” Elaine instructed, “let your breath out slowly, like you’re cooling tea.”

* * *

After the examination, Tina asked her mother to readmit Desireé, Sandy and Maya to the Labor and Delivery Room, but she again begged Elaine to make Terrell’s mother go away, said she couldn’t have the baby with that woman silently staring, just staring at her. She claimed it made her labor pains worse. As Elaine trudged out to the main waiting room, she wondered how to keep the other grandmother from the delivery room tactfully. Elaine no sooner stepped into the waiting room than Maya jumped up from one of the green vinyl chairs before the television and rushed to her side as though accosting her.

“You got to do something about that mother of Terrell’s--her and her daughters.” Maya had the kind of breathless, excitable voice Elaine imagined would be ideal for reading headlines aloud from the tabloids. “They are really getting on Desireé’s nerves. She told them they had no business being here, Desireé said they didn’t give Tina the time of day, never once so much as brought over a plate of food the whole time she was pregnant, and now they’re crowding up the delivery room. Desireé goes, ‘you all better leave on accounta there’s no room enough for you.’ And the woman goes, ‘I got more right to be here than you,’ she goes, ‘I’m kin.’”

“Well, she is,” put in Elaine.

“She never so much as brought over a plate of food during the whole pregnancy,” insisted Maya, shaking her head. Her brown eyes bulged with indignation in her pretty brown face. “What kind of kin is that? We gave the shower; we had a cake for Tina and gave her all those baby accessories.”

Desireé and Sandy sidled up to join in the whispered conference. Though they were not related and, in fact, acted insulted when asked if they were, they

looked like sisters. Both were blondes with lank hair and fair, almost transparent looking skin that threatened to crack, fissure and fade early, and both had the same glassy blue eyes, a color that Elaine had only seen in the faces of plastic dolls. Desireé, the shop's owner, already revealed a nest of wrinkles around each blue eye when she smiled as she did at that moment, handing Elaine a yellow gift bag decorated with pastel bunnies and chicks.

"Got you a little something," she drawled, coyly. Tina had once told Elaine that Desireé had wanted to be a country western singer at one time, but wound up an alcoholic instead. She only sobered up a few years ago, when she met her current husband, a wealthy man who bought the clothing shop for her.

"What is this?" asked Elaine, suspiciously.

"It's not much. Just a little something for granny. Go on, open it up."

"Thank you. I'll open it later. I'm afraid I didn't bring you anything."

"Aw, you don't have to bring me nothing, honey. That's plain silly!"

Elaine decided to take this moment of truce to ask why her daughter had not wanted her at her grandchild's birth.

"Why, let me tell you something," began Desireé by way of explanation. "They's once this woman we had working with us, always talked trash on her husband--how he treated her, what all he said to her. And then one day her husband got awful sick, and she starts crying and carrying on. We all just had to laugh at her. You see what I mean?"

"Tina kept going on about how you tried to get her to have an abortion." charged Sandy, the younger blonde. She looked to be several months pregnant herself, and she seemed very weary--drawn and gaunt in the face. "You were even gonna pay for it, huh?"

"You was gonna destroy her last link to her love who had died so young and tragically," put in Desireé. "We, on the other hand, we tried to help your

girl. We told her it was okay to go through with this, that she had friends to back her, to help her out. Together we can do this.” Her voice rose, swelling at the end of this speech as though she were reciting an anthem or making a pledge on public television.

“I see,” said Elaine.

“Now you gotta do something about that Linda person, Terrell’s mother. She’s upsetting Tina, and I almost had to haul back and clock her one myself. I will too, if she doesn’t go away.”

“There’s too many people in the room for me to set up the video camera,” Sandy complained, hugging her large belly protectively.

Elaine figured she had been away from Tina longer than she should have been. She abruptly excused herself and rushed back to Tina’s room without throwing anyone out or inviting anyone back. She about jogged around the hospital’s serpentine corridors to get back to her daughter’s side. Rounding a corner near the nurses’ lounge, Elaine nearly collided with a pregnant girl in a surgical gown. She righted herself by catching the wall and clutching the girl’s soft shoulder, snagging a skein of soft pale hair in her fingers.

“Are you all right?” asked the girl, freeing her hair.

“Gretchen?” asked Elaine. “Gretchen Ellsner?”

“I’m Gretchen Ellsner. Do I know you?”

“You probably don’t remember me. I moderated the literary magazine at the middle school. You wrote stories and poems--the potbelly pig, remember?”

“Hamlet?”

“Yes, Hamlet. How is Hamlet?”

“My parents gave him to some people,” said Gretchen, wearing a blank look on her face. “These friends of theirs have this farm. Well, he’s happier there. I can’t keep him where I’m staying now.”

“How are your folks?” Elaine asked.

“I really don’t know,” shrugged Gretchen. “They don’t talk to me any more.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to it by now.”

“Look, I’ve got to go. My daughter’s waiting for me. But I’m glad I saw you.”

“Yeah,” said Gretchen. “Good seeing you.” She waved and went on her way.

* * *

“Momma, what took you so long? Where were you? I must have had like a dozen contractions. I’m ready to have the baby by now.”

“You had only two contractions,” corrected Toni. “The baby won’t be here before dark. She’s only five centimeters dilated.”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?” asked Elaine.

“Well, women can stay at five centimeters for hours, even days.”

Tina twisted the cotton sheet and moaned. “Don’t say that.”

“Listen, honey,” began Elaine. “I was just out in the waiting room. And it seems like even if Terrell’s mom and her daughters leave, there’s still a lot of people left. Are you sure you want them all here? I mean do you really want Maya, Desireé and what’s her name? Sandy?”

“*Really?* If you *really* want to know, the answer is no. But I can’t ask them to leave. Look over on that shelf.”

Elaine cast her eyes on a shelf at the window sill loaded with opened gift boxes and shopping bags. “They gave you all that? You can still ask them to leave or at least wait in the waiting room. I’m sure they’d understand.” But Elaine was not that sure at all that they would understand.

“No, Momma, I can’t. Desireé’s promised to make my car payment next month. Sandy’s making the videotape, and Maya, she thinks she’s my best friend. She’s getting me a certificate to join the gym. They bought all these decorations to put on the door. It’s like they paid for tickets to be here. I can’t throw them out. ”

“I can.”

“I don’t want you to, Momma, that would be bad for business. But make Terrell’s mother leave. If I’ve never asked you anything, I’m really asking you this. Don’t let them back in. Do whatever you have to.”

Tina was very far from never asking her mother for anything over the years, and as usual Elaine could not deny her. She would ask the woman to leave.

She returned reluctantly to the waiting room, and Maya once again sprang at her. “Can we go back in now?”

Elaine nodded, and the three women gathered their handbags and rose to head for Labor and Delivery. Terrell’s mother also pulled herself up with a groan and followed Tina’s co-workers, her daughters in tow.

“Wait a minute,” Elaine stopped her. “Mrs.--uh--Linda, listen for a moment, please. Tina feels uncomfortable with you in the room. She doesn’t know you as well as she’d like to, and she’s embarrassed about giving birth in front of you and your girls here. I know you’ll understand how she feels, and you can wait out here. I promise I’ll tell you as soon as the baby is born.”

“What are you saying?” asked the large woman, her face twisting into a scowl.

“Tina would be more comfortable if--”

“You kicking me out? Me and my girls?” She plunged a thick finger into Elaine’s chest, causing her to stumble back a step. “I got all the right you got to

be here. You hear me. That is my grandchild. I got a right." Anger had sharpened her pronunciation notably. Elaine understood every word.

"You have to respect--"

"That's bullshit. You are bullshit with your Spanish words and making nice like you're all glad to be a grandmother with me. You are just bullshit." The woman swept around Elaine and strode majestically toward Tina's room as her long, slender daughters trailed, casting resentful glances back at Elaine.

The other woman was certainly stronger, but she wasn't faster. Elaine raced back to Tina's room, using another corridor. The coast was clear at the desk in front of Tina's room; she'd beaten Linda back. Elaine leaned over the counter and called one of the nurses, a pudgy girl with a snub nose peppered with freckles. "I need some help. There's a woman, she's coming this way, and she's trying to get into my daughter's room. My daughter's having a baby, and she doesn't want her there. Do you understand? Is there any way to keep her from going in my daughter's room?"

"Is she a relation?" asked the pudgy nurse in a little girl's voice.

"She's the other grandmother. She's the mother of the baby's father, but he's passed away. She's not close to my daughter. I asked her to leave, but she won't."

"Well, I can call security. What does she look like?"

"She's very big. You might have to call two security people. She's wearing old gray slippers, and she's got three daughters with her. There she is now!" Elaine felt her heart pump with fear, seeing Linda round the corner and stride up the hall.

"That black lady?"

"That's her. Can you do something?"

“There’s already a whole bunch of people in that room,” said the nurse.

“Does your daughter want them in there?”

“I suppose. They work with her.”

“So you want me to have security keep all the black people out?”

“It isn’t that simple, for God sake! My daughter’s friend Maya is black. The midwife is black; she has to be in there. I’m not trying to keep the black people out. Some black people can come in, just not that woman, just not now.”

“I can keep her out,” promised the nurse, lifting a phone from its cradle.

“And I’ll give security a call in case I need help.”

Linda was only a few steps away when Elaine slipped back into Tina’s room, shutting the other woman out. She felt sick at heart--like a thief, like a coward.

* * *

Toni’s prediction had been accurate; Tina stayed at five centimeters for the next four hours, after which the contractions became more frequent and more intense as she moved through true labor. All four women remained the entire time, offering Tina ice chips and lollipops, taking turns operating the video camera, shooting photos with Molly’s camera, rubbing Tina’s back and wiping her face with a damp washcloth. When Tina was at her worst, cursing, screaming to be released from the pain, Elaine wept, and someone snapped her picture.

When it grew dark outside, as Toni had predicted, the baby--a girl--was born. The infant emerged hot and tight like a loaf of bread and smelling of warm blood and salt. Her eyes sealed shut with the waxy stuff of birth, the baby croaked a single irritable cry as Toni placed her on Tina’s stomach. The midwife then handed Elaine a pair of blunt-nosed scissors and told her to cut the blue-

veined and snaky umbilicus, which she did quickly and neatly. The pudgy nurse with freckles took the baby into a corner of the room for cleaning and weighing.

Elaine followed her to the baby examination area. “What happened to that woman I told you about?” Elaine asked quietly. “Is she still in the waiting room because I ought to tell her the baby’s born.”

“Oh, her. She’s gone.”

“Where’d she go?”

“Don’t know. Security took her.”

“Took her where?”

“Removed her from the premises. Warned her not to come back. That’s what you wanted, right?”

“I just wanted her to wait in the outer waiting room.”

“Well, she made such a fuss, they had to cuff her and lead her out, right in front of those girls too. Some people . . .” the baby doll voice lamented.

Wordlessly Elaine watched the nurse swab the baby. As the young woman towed the rust-colored blood and wax from the baby’s face, Elaine recognized the fathomless dark eyes and the hint of fine features under the swelling of birth. This was so clearly Linda’s grandchild that Elaine could keep the promise she had just made to herself. Relieved and dismayed there was no hint of her son who had died as a child, nothing of Sanders in this budding face, Elaine vowed she would not give herself away this time. She would not lose herself in this child as she had lost herself in her own children. She would not love this one too hard; she would take Aaron’s advice and be careful, very, very careful, keep herself safe this once.

The nurse slipped a duck patterned gown over the baby, pulled the drawstring and wound her in a receiving blanket. “Here,” she said, thrusting the little packet she had trussed at Elaine. “Here, you want to hold her?”

Elaine cradled the baby to her breast. The baby stared up at her with Linda's eyes, but the expression was not Linda's. It was oddly familiar; it was a look of benediction, forgiveness, a look of pity, even. Elaine touched the infant's head with her lips--already it was too late for promises to keep safe. That time had passed in an instant, without her knowing it, and she had lost her chance. She felt like a someone who only noticed she had stumbled off a cliff after she has been tumbling for some time in the abyss.

Elaine glanced up to see the coven had made a semi-circle around one side of Tina's bed. Someone, Maya, maybe, called out a question to her. They seemed to be beckoning her to join them, but Elaine wouldn't listen, didn't want to move. She considered how they kept drawing and redrawing circles, putting people in and out, and how she had been a part of that, turning Terrell's mother away as she had. Elaine couldn't understand the impulse to draw people in only to shut them out, and she hoped she never would. She would go to look for that gambling place on Lexington the same night, she'd find the other grandmother, buy her a strong drink and have one too.

Elaine held the baby close and swayed slightly on the balls of her feet, rocking her. She might even stop in to see the Ellsner girl. Glancing at Tina in the bed, Elaine was beginning to see how it was more important for a daughter to get the right mother than for a mother to have the kind of daughter she wanted. She remembered how she had pained her own direct and forthright mother with her vagueness, her chronic uncertainty. Yet Elaine's mother had loved her despite these weaknesses; she had drawn her in and never put her out. Elaine wondered what the right grandmother would count for in this baby's life and if she would have the chance to be that.

Staring deep into the infant's calm eyes, she pretended she could not see the women gesturing from the side of Tina's bed, could not hear them calling.

Soon they would place Tina on the outside; Elaine was certain of that. And Tina would make her own circle with the baby. This thing that Elaine feared could overwhelm and ruin her daughter might be the one thing that might save her. Elaine could see that now, as she saw how tenuous her place in Tina's circle would continue to be, how she would keep being drawn in and out. She would lose this baby again and again. But for now, all she wanted was to hold on--just for a moment--before bringing the baby to the others by the bed. They were saying her name now. She could hear them clearly, even though they still seemed so very far away.

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