

## ABSTRACT

TRESCHL, SARAH HEPBURN. *Flush*. (Under the direction of Dr. John Kessel)

“Flush” is a collection of five original, previously unpublished short stories. The stories chronicle intimate relationships between men and women and the inherent loneliness of modern love.

“Flush,” considers a man and woman who are housesitting for a history professor and his wife. Their relationship goes awry when the man starts dressing in the professor’s clothes and attempts to fix up his house.

“In Summer, In Fall” tells the story of Emmet, a man who pines for his ex-wife but settles for an affair with a woman who otherwise would not interest him. Their affair is complicated by the woman’s jealousy of Emmet’s previous relationship with a woman other than his wife.

“Gloss” is a first-person narrated story about a woman cheating on her dying husband. The woman’s desire for approval from her boyfriend compels her to ask her husband to photograph her nude.

“Margo’s Dish” deals with a cohabitating couple on the brink of dissolution. The woman’s jealousy of her boyfriend’s ex-wife drives her to begin an affair with his best friend.

“Empty Glass” dramatizes a compulsive overeater and her ex-husband. The woman discovers her obsession with her body has prevented her from sustaining a worthwhile love relationship.

**FLUSH**

by  
**SARAH TRESCHL**

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

**ENGLISH**

Raleigh

2003

**APPROVED BY**

---

---

Chair of Advisory Committee

## PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Treschl lives in Colorado Springs with her four-year-old son.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Flush.....	1
In Summer, In Fall.....	19
Gloss.....	36
Margo's Dish.....	52
Empty Glass.....	66

## FLUSH

When Seth returned to the house after a round of golf with his buddies (he'd made only one good shot and had rolled his ankle on the third hole), he found his navy sweats, cigarettes, and a roll of toilet paper stacked in a neat pile on the front porch. Under the pile he found a pink note written in purple crayon: *Fuck You*. Seth picked up the sweats, the toilet paper, and the note and threw them off the porch into the pansy garden. He put the cigarettes in his back pocket.

“Beatrice!” Seth pounded on the door. “Beatrice! I have some good news!”

Seth banged on the door for a couple of minutes, knowing, even as he banged, that Beatrice wouldn't open the door. He imagined she was inside cutting her cuticles or downing another pint of ice cream. He spat in the bushes and headed for the street. He had just reached the car when Beatrice appeared in the doorway, her dark hair tangled around her face, her pudgy knees poking from beneath one of his old shirts.

“What's going on?” Seth said, walking back toward the house.

He wondered if Beatrice had a chemical imbalance in her brain. He'd seen a show on late night television that listed ten warning signs for mental illness. He couldn't remember what they were, but Beatrice reminded him of the actress on the show: messed up hair, smeared make-up, sallow skin—only the actress, with a tattoo of a dragon on her shoulder, was prettier and had bigger breasts. Seth remembered finding the woman, despite her odd habits, or maybe because of them—her refusal to eat anything that wasn't “alive” (she

believed her body's enzymes couldn't handle the chemicals) and her occasional desire to slice her arms with a ballpoint pen—oddly appealing. After the show, he'd masturbated to the image of the woman handling her live food, the raw fish and straggly greens.

“What's the news?” Beatrice said. She bit the nail of her pinkie finger, half chipped and streaked with red nail polish. She spit the nail in Seth's direction and leaned against the doorframe, her arms crossed.

Seth focused on the dark fuzz on her forearms. He admired the contrast of black hair on blanched skin. He thought her contrariness, her utter lack of concern for what other people thought of her (surely, another woman would have waxed or, at the very least, swiped a razor across her arms), was what made her alluring. He pulled the pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

“Do you have a light?”

Beatrice examined her nails. “Tell me the good news,” she said.

The neighbor across the street started his lawnmower. Seth turned to look at him, running through a list of things Beatrice might consider good news. Money, certainly, would be at the top of the list, but Seth recently had given Beatrice a hundred dollars for a new dress after her brother caught him masturbating in the bathroom of a local strip club. Seth didn't feel particularly flush. He thought perhaps he could relinquish the carton of cigarettes he had hidden in his trunk (Beatrice rationed the stash under the bed, they each got ten cigarettes a day) but he didn't want to incense her further or, more importantly, surrender his hiding spot.

Seth wanted to tell Beatrice he'd found a job, but he didn't think he could muster the indignity of dressing in pressed pants and a tailored shirt only to wander through the mall or

read the newspaper in the parking lot of some museum or restaurant as he had done for weeks a few months earlier.

“I found an old blender in the trash at the golf course,” he said. He watched the neighbor struggle with the lawnmower. The neighbor’s wife had come outside, presumably to watch. In her hand she held a blue and yellow sports bottle. Seth headed for the car. “The cord is frayed, but otherwise she’s perfect.”

He yanked the blender from the backseat. He coiled the cord around the base. He considered putting the blender behind his back like a bunch of flowers. He imagined presenting the blender to Beatrice, her eyes soft with appreciation. When he turned from the car, Seth saw Beatrice had gone inside. She had taken the sweats and the toilet paper with her. The note lay in a ball on the sidewalk.

On the way into the house, Seth tripped on the stairs and dropped the blender. The plastic pitcher separated from the base and rolled down the stairs. “Mother of Christ,” Seth said. He wiped his hands on his jeans. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he discovered the pitcher had acquired a narrow crack and several scuff marks.

Seth picked up the blender and tucked it in the crook of his arm like an infant. He climbed the stairs slowly. Inside, the house smelled of grilled beef and cigarette smoke. Seth and Beatrice weren’t supposed to smoke in the house—they were house sitting for a history professor and his wife while they were in Germany for the year—but Beatrice had set up an air filter in the living room which she claimed would remove the smoke before the McDowells’ return. She seemed not to notice the heavy smell of smoke in the couch cushions and the bed, where they smoked like crazy at night while watching the television. Beatrice was like that sometimes: inattentive to the obvious. Sometimes she’d say things like “Where

are my keys?" and they'd be sitting on the table right in front of her. Seth respected Beatrice's disregard for reality. He liked to tell his friends she had an imagination.

Aside from the smoking, Seth and Beatrice carefully followed the McDowells' instructions. Beatrice walked the dog, Ginger, every morning before she went to her aerobics class. Seth watered the plants and checked the mail. On the weekends, Seth cared for the lawn and anemic garden and examined Mr. McDowell's handiwork in the house. He sniffed at the lack of circuit breakers on the receptacles in the bathroom, pipes from the hot water heater that were too small, clear caulk rather than white around the tub in the bathroom.

He scrutinized the flaws with delight. Before giving Seth the key and the garage door opener, Mr. McDowell had patted him on the back like a child. "Keep your chin up, kid," he said. Seth watched him saunter to the car where his wife was waiting, probably with a French pedicure and a shaved cunt. Seth didn't aspire to have degrees or a pretty wife or even a job: he knew the lucky few got every goddamn thing in the world. There was nothing he could do to alter his fate as babysitter of dogs, plants, and wall décor. But he sure as hell didn't like being called kid.

Seth walked into the kitchen whistling lightly. He was pretty sure the squabble he was having with Beatrice meant they'd have sex later on, probably after Beatrice finished the crossword puzzle in the newspaper. She did the crossword every night after dinner before coming into the bedroom to watch television. Lately, Beatrice refused sex because she had gained weight, all of which seemed to have landed smack on her rear, only Seth wasn't saying anything about it. He encouraged her by suggesting she keep her nightgown on.

Seth slid the blender into a cabinet. Beatrice was bent over the stove inspecting a pan of chili. The dog, Ginger, sat patiently at her feet. “Smells good,” Seth said, pouring himself a glass of water. He picked a lighter off the counter and lit a cigarette.

“The almighty golfer,” Beatrice said, waving her spatula in the air. “Hail to the chief.”

“Jesus Christ, Beatrice,” Seth said. He sat down at the table. He tapped his ashes into the half-empty glass of milk from breakfast. “Henry paid. I know we don’t have the money.”

Beatrice snorted. “Henry—now there’s a golfer,” she said. She spooned some of the chili into her mouth with the corner of the spatula. The red oily juice ran down her chin. She used her fingers to push the juice into her mouth. Then she said, “Did you go by the coffee shop and ask about the job?”

“I forgot,” Seth said. He dropped the cigarette in the milk. “Besides, I don’t know anything about coffee. I don’t even like the stuff.”

“Okay,” Beatrice said. “Let’s make a list. Things Seth likes. Then we can narrow down your job search to strip clubs and the golf course.”

“Here’s an idea,” Seth said. “How about you skip your morning at the gym and go find a job yourself? Be in charge of your destiny for once.”

“And who will take care of things around here?” Beatrice said. “Who will walk Ginger and wash the dishes and clean the toilets?” She pointed her finger at Seth. “Who will wash your dirty underwear?”

“This is not your house,” Seth said. “And if it was, I’d suggest you get the breakfast dishes off the table.” Seth fished the cigarette from the milk and threw it in the trash. He lifted the cup to his mouth and drank the warm liquid, happy his discomfort temporarily

blocked Beatrice's voice, her endless nagging (and FAT!!! ASS!!! YOU HAVE A GODDAMN FAT ASS!!!!).

"I know this is not my house," Beatrice said. She spooned the chili into two yellow plastic bowls. "That's the point. We don't have a house because you don't have a job."

"We don't have a house because *we* don't have a job," Seth said. He pushed his chair from the table and headed upstairs to the bedroom. He had reached a point. He thought about his mother, how sometimes she would sit in her chair at dinner with her arms crossed over her flowered apron, staring at his father. On those nights, she ate nothing, didn't even taste the mashed potatoes or green beans she'd prepared. Other nights, she ate like an animal, first her meal and then anything left on the table, including chunks of fat from the chicken and crusts of half-eaten bread. His mother didn't believe in waste. She either ate big or not at all.

Seth flipped on the bedroom light and pushed a pile of laundry from the bed. He lay on the purple and gold duvet with his shoes on. He listened to Beatrice stack the breakfast dishes in the sink and set the table for dinner. Three months ago, before they'd moved into the McDowell's house, Seth had asked Beatrice to marry him. He'd presented her with a cubic zirconium ring and a card he'd discovered in the checkout aisle of the drugstore. *You always know the right thing to say*, the card read in gold embossed print.

Beatrice took one look at the card and tossed it back to Seth. You forgot to sign the goddamn thing, she said. You probably didn't even read it. Later, Seth found the card in the bathroom wastebasket. Beatrice had written a note on the inside: *Is this the best you can do?*

"Seth!" Beatrice called from downstairs. "Let's eat!"

Seth contemplated the ceiling. In one corner, he noticed a spot where some of the paint had drifted onto the wall, as if the painter had sneezed. The ceiling fan looked cheap

and worn. Seth imagined Mrs. McDowell standing on the bed in her nightgown, carefully brushing the blades of the fan with a pink feather duster. He imagined coming in the bedroom behind her, running his palm along her freckled thigh.

Seth rolled onto his side. He counted three nail holes in the wall. He thought he might fill the holes with putty before the McDowells' return. In the trunk, Seth had an old toolbox filled with odds and ends: drill bits, screws, nails, electrical tape, lock washers, wood glue, pliers, screwdrivers, pencils, measuring tape, clamps, wire strippers. Seth sat up and scrutinized the wall. It would be easy for him to putty the nicks and holes and touch up the paint.

He went downstairs, put on his jacket and went outside. The neighbor was sitting on the porch sipping from the sports bottle. His wife was sitting next to him with her hand in his lap. The lawn was only half mowed. Seth got his toolbox and one of the hidden packs of cigarettes. He carried the toolbox up to the bedroom and then went back down to the kitchen for a light. Beatrice was sitting at the table, eating her chili and doing the crossword.

"I called for you," she said. She didn't look up.

Seth pointed to the empty bowl on the table. "That mine?" he said. The bowl in front of Beatrice was almost empty.

"Ginger jumped up and ate yours while I was getting the paper," Beatrice said.

"There's peanut butter in the cupboard if you're hungry."

Seth picked the lighter off the counter. He believed Beatrice had eaten the chili, not Ginger. He had half a mind to tell her so. "I'm going to the hardware store," he said. "I'll pick up a burger on the way home."

Seth expected Beatrice to protest, to ask him why he needed to go to the hardware store, to fight with him about the cost of the hamburger, but she was silent. Seth watched her move her lips as she read the crossword. He thought Mrs. McDowell's hairless cunt must look something like Beatrice's mouth. "I'll be home in an hour," he said.

When he returned from the store, Seth noted the neighbor and his wife had gone inside. The lawnmower was parked by the garage. Bits of grass and leaves covered the driveway and sidewalk. Seth pulled the gallon of paint and a plastic bag from the trunk. He had purchased a new pipe for the hot water heater, white caulk for the tub, putty for the walls, and sealant for the windows.

Beatrice was propped in bed with her knees up, watching television. She was wearing the kind of fleecy zip robe Seth associated with elderly grandmothers. Beside her on the bed lay an empty plate. Seth dumped the paint and the bag on the bed.

"What's in the bag, chief?" Beatrice said. She pulled the bag toward her and extracted the pipe. "You got some plans, cowboy?"

"I'm going to fix this place up," Seth said. He walked into the bathroom and unbuttoned his jeans. He pissed in the toilet and decided not to flush. He wanted Beatrice to smell his urine, heavy with garlic from the Cajun hamburger he'd eaten on the way to the hardware store.

"Why?" Beatrice said. Seth heard her push the bag from the bed. She walked into the bathroom carrying the paint. She put the paint on the counter. "You going to paint the walls?"

"Just the bedroom," Seth said. He washed his hands. "You can help if you want."

Beatrice shook her head. "Let me get this straight," she said. "You used our money to buy stuff to fix *their* house?" She put her hands on her hips. "You used *our money* to buy paint and a pipe?"

"That's right, cowgirl," Seth said. He liked watching her face, her wild eyes and flushed cheeks. He reached over and unzipped the robe. Beatrice's breasts hung limply beneath the fabric, the nipples wide and brown. "Beatrice," Seth said. "Is this the best you can do?"

Beatrice clutched the robe closed. Her eyes were wet. "Go ahead and paint the house," she said. "I'm going to bed."

In the morning, Seth investigated Mr. McDowell's closet and dresser. In the bottom drawer, he found a worn copy of *The Joy of Sex* and a bottle of vaginal lubricant. Seth peered at the drawings of the woman, her wide hips and the thatches of hair covering her groin and armpits. Seth tried to arrange the book and lubricant as he had found them. He didn't want the McDowells to think he had rummaged through their things.

In the closet Seth found a row of collared shirts and v-neck sweaters. On the floor was a stack of jeans and khaki pants. Seth picked up the pants one by one. He sniffed the fabric and rolled the material between his fingers. He imagined waking in the morning next to Mrs. McDowell, smelling the lemon of her hair, the musk of her skin. He imagined taking a shower with her then dressing as she sat on the bed and watched him. Seth unbuttoned his jeans and pulled off his shirt. He threw his clothes on the bed. He selected a red and navy sweater and a pair of khaki pants from the closet. When he got them on, he discovered the

pants were too long. He had to roll the cuff twice before he could walk into the bathroom to see how he looked.

When he got downstairs, Beatrice was washing the dishes and talking on the phone. He's a goddamn pig, she said. I wish we never met. Seth plucked a box of cereal from the cupboard and poured the cereal into a bowl. When he opened the refrigerator, he saw the milk was gone. Beatrice had left the empty pitcher sitting on the top rack.

Seth ate the dry cereal with a spoon. Beatrice hung up the phone and resumed doing the dishes. Seth watched her run the soapy plates and bowls under the stream of water. She was wearing yellow rubber gloves.

"I'm going to the hardware store," Seth said. "I need more paint."

Beatrice turned off the water and pulled off the rubber gloves. She wiped her hands on the dishtowel hanging on the handle of the refrigerator. Finally, she looked at Seth. "What in Christ's name is going on here?" she said. She threw the dishtowel at Seth. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"Like what?" Seth said. He brushed the front of the sweater. "I look good."

"You look like a jackass!" Beatrice said. She lit a cigarette. "What will Mr. McDowell say when he comes home and finds his clothes smelly and wrinkled and his house painted another goddamn color?"

"I'll wash the clothes," Seth said. He poured the leftover cereal into a sandwich baggie. He reached for one of Beatrice's cigarettes. She yanked the pack away from him and put it in her pocket.

"I'm not going to hang around and watch you destroy this place," she said. "I'm going to stay at Pam's until you can get normal."

“This,” Seth said, sweeping his hand through the air, “is the best I can do.”

After Seth returned from the store, he watched Beatrice pack an overnight bag with clothes, soap, her make-up, and a toothbrush. Seth walked her to her car and waved to her as she drove away. He ran his fingers through his hair then walked across the street to the neighbor’s house. He noticed the leaves and grass had been swept from the sidewalk and the driveway. Seth rang the doorbell and smoothed his pants. He ran his tongue across his teeth.

The wife answered the door. “Oh,” she said. She was wearing a green turtleneck and a pair of jeans. Her reddish hair was in a ponytail with a few wisps around her face. “Can I help you?”

“I live across the street,” Seth said, pointing to the McDowell’s house. “I’m Seth.”

The woman put her hands on her hips. “I thought a middle-aged man and his wife lived in that house,” she said. “I used to see them outside with their dog.”

“The man got a job with another university,” Seth said. “He’s some kind of professor. We moved in a couple of weeks ago.”

“You mean you and your wife?”

“Girlfriend,” Seth said. “I don’t have a wife.” He thought he could see the outline of the woman’s nipple through her shirt. “I’m wondering if you and your husband would like to come to dinner.”

The woman squinted at him. “What do you mean? Tonight?”

“Actually,” Seth said, “I was thinking we could have one of them progressive dinners. You know, where the whole neighborhood makes a dish and everyone walks from house to

house.” He looked at his shoes. “I’m doing some work on the house. I’d like people to see what I’ve done.”

The woman pressed her lips together. “You mean we go inside each other’s houses?” She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. You don’t know our neighborhood. Our neighborhood isn’t like that. We don’t *interact* with each other.”

“I could make signs,” Seth said. “I could hang one on every door. Like a formal invitation.”

“I’m really busy,” the woman said. “I need to get back to my work.”

“Please,” Seth said. “How about you and your husband come over tonight? Don’t bring anything. I’ll make peanut chicken.”

The woman fiddled with the sleeve of her turtleneck. “I don’t know,” she said. She was quiet. She kept looking back into the house. Then she said, “How about dessert?”

“Wonderful,” Seth said. He clasped his hands together. “I’ll make an apple pie. How about eight o’clock?”

“Eight o’clock,” the woman said. She looked uncertain. “Okay. Eight o’clock.”

“Thank you,” Seth said. “You won’t be disappointed.”

The woman smiled faintly and ducked into the house.

Seth crossed the street and went inside, thinking about the things he would need to complete before the neighbors’ arrival. He felt alive and purposeful, energized by the knowledge that his work, his enterprise, would be on display in a matter of hours. He felt nervous and giddy, like he was preparing for a first date with a woman.

Seth went upstairs and finished painting the bedroom. He had some leftover paint so he painted the floorboards in the bathroom and the map room, which was the name Mr.

McDowell had given to his office, only there weren't any maps on the walls. Seth picked up the old-looking trinkets on Mr. McDowell's desk, a rusted swan paperweight that was chipped on one side, a cracked compass, a porcelain facemask painted in yellows and reds. Seth read the notes scattered on the desk but didn't find anything worthwhile. Mostly, the scribbles were related to missed phone calls and half-assed ideas about the Battle of Stalingrad. Before leaving the office, Seth arranged the notes into two piles, personal and professional. He thought the old man might appreciate the organization.

When the paint was gone, Seth went outside and threw the empty container in the plastic recycling bin in the backyard. He went back in the house and lit a cigarette. He picked up the phone and called Beatrice at Pam's house. Nobody answered, but Seth left a message telling Beatrice to get her ass back to the house by eight o'clock. He didn't want to be alone with the neighbors. If the conversation lulled, he could count on Beatrice to think of something to say.

After Seth caulked the tub, sealed the window frames, and replaced the pipe in the hot water heater, he went to the grocery store to buy ingredients for the apple pie. He didn't have a recipe but he was pretty sure he could find some gray-haired lady in the baking aisle who would be delighted to give him some pointers. He wondered if he would have to chop up a bunch of apples or if the apples came in a can.

The grocery store was plastered in signs advertising cling peaches, deli ham, and honey mustard pretzels. Seth picked up a basket inside the entrance and scanned the signs above the aisles. Usually, Beatrice did the shopping. She didn't trust Seth with the money.

Seth located the baking aisle, lined with red and white packages of flour, sugar, and boxes of cake mix. The aisle was empty except for a teenage boy with a rod in his nose who

was examining a tub of frosting. Seth peered at a package of brownie mix, thinking he'd hang around for a minute in case any grandmotherly types walked by. The directions on the back of the box called for two eggs and a cup of water. Seth considered that whipping some eggs, water, and powder in a bowl would be a hell of a lot faster than chopping apples and drenching them in syrupy sauce. Beatrice, he knew, would go hog wild over brownies. She had what she called a "thing" for chocolate. Seth thought perhaps if he appealed to Beatrice's appetite he might get laid.

When he got home, Seth poured the brownie mix in a plastic bowl and tossed in the two eggs. He ran the bowl under the faucet, approximating the cup of water. He stirred the mixture with determination, imagining the glow of the neighbor lady's face as she ate the brownie, the crumb in the corner of her mouth hanging half-heartedly before falling to her breast, the thank-you kiss she would deliver to Seth before going home. Thank you for the delicious dessert, she would say. Come by tomorrow and I'll return the favor.

Seth couldn't find a baking pan so he poured the batter onto a couple of cookie sheets. He thought he might go back to the store and pick up some frosting so he could make a layered brownie, the fancy kind he sometimes saw in bakery shops.

About ten minutes after he'd put the brownies in the oven, Beatrice came stomping through the back door. Her hair was wet and shiny. In her hand she held a plastic shopping bag.

"How do I look?" she said. She set the bag on the table and fluffed her hair with her fingers. "Do you like it?"

"Yes," Seth said. He thought she looked like a drowned rat. Her face looked fatter than usual. "You look beautiful."

“Thank you, honey,” Beatrice said. “I knew you’d like it.” She fumbled with the bag. “I’m going upstairs to change into something special,” she said. She wriggled her hips at Seth. “Don’t go away, bad boy.”

Seth watched Beatrice’s breasts bounce as she climbed the stairs. “We’re having guests in an hour,” he called after her. “Maybe save the lacy stuff until our company is gone.”

Beatrice thumped back down the stairs. “What guests?” she demanded. She inhaled deeply, sucking in her abdomen, thrusting out her chest. “Are you baking something? Are your asshole friends coming over to watch football and get drunk?”

“No,” Seth said. He felt impatient. He didn’t want to waste his remaining hour explaining things to Beatrice. “I called Pam’s and left a message. Our neighbors are dropping by for some dessert.”

“What neighbors?”

“Our neighbors,” Seth said. “The man and woman across the street. They agree our neighborhood should be a place of community, not distance.”

Beatrice grabbed Mr. McDowell’s sweater. Seth pulled her grip from the fabric and moved behind the counter. “Don’t ruin my clothes,” he said. “This sweater was expensive.”

“The only community around here is the one in your head,” Beatrice said. “I’ve seen you staring at that lady across the street. You think she’s a stripper, too?”

“Please,” Seth said. “She’s probably thirty years old. Plus she has a husband. I doubt he’d let her shake her boobies at the strip joint.”

Beatrice laughed. “I’m going to do a show tonight,” she said, “for our community of neighbors. I’m going to put on my garter belt and panties and give you boys the night you

always wanted, right here in our living room. Call Henry and tell him the show starts at eight.”

Seth crossed his arms. “Please don’t embarrass me in front of my new friends,” he said. “Nobody’s interested in seeing your tits flap or the new ass you’ve grown.”

Beatrice glared at him. Her face was red. She turned and ran up the stairs. Seth heard the ladder he had left leaning against the wall in the bedroom crash to the floor.

“Christ,” he muttered. He opened the oven door and pulled out the brownies. They looked like giant burned rectangular blocks. Seth poked the brownies with a fork but they had hardened onto the cookie sheets. He wrapped a dishtowel around each hand and carried the cookie sheets outside. He threw them in the dumpster.

Seth went into the kitchen and pulled a beer out of the refrigerator. He took the beer outside and sat on the front porch. He decided he’d wait for the neighbors and explain to them when they arrived that Beatrice was too sick to socialize.

He sat outside for what seemed like hours. He watched the people pull into their driveways. Some of them carried briefcases and gym bags, others carried rusty lunch boxes or sacks from the grocery store. Seth imagined they were returning from work, where they each had made some insignificant contribution to the world. He watched the sun turn from orange to deep red and disappear behind the houses. Later, when it was completely dark, Seth listened to the crickets chirp and moan in the bushes.

He knew the neighbors weren’t stopping by for dessert. He could sit on the porch all goddamn night and they still wouldn’t show up. Still, Seth didn’t want to go inside and face Beatrice. He knew he had hurt her feelings. He should have kept quiet about her big ass.

Seth lifted himself from the step and stretched. He left the empty beer bottle on the porch.

Inside, Seth pulled the cracked blender from the cabinet. He found some superglue in his toolbox. He ran the glue along the crack and held it together. When the glue was dry, Seth loaded the blender up with strawberry ice cream and milk. He plugged the blender in the wall and smiled with relief when the milk and ice cream began to churn inside the pitcher. She looks broken but she works, he thought. She really works. He poured the milkshake into one of Mrs. McDowell's fanciest glasses and carried it up to Beatrice.

The bedroom door was locked. Seth examined the scuffmarks on the door, the fingerprints near the doorknob. "Beatrice?" he said. "I have something for you."

Seth heard the toilet flush. On the wall next to the bedroom door was a picture of Mr. and Mrs. McDowell. Mrs. McDowell looked older than Seth remembered, with a deep furrow between her brows and lines around her mouth. Seth thought she was wearing too much make-up.

Suddenly, his fantasies of Mrs. McDowell seemed foolish and elementary. How could he stand to be with a woman who painted her face before having her photograph taken when he could be with Beatrice, whose argumentative demeanor made him horny, day in and day out? So what if she was getting a little thick in the rear? She complimented him in a way no other woman could.

"Beatrice?" Seth said. He knew in the morning he'd go back to hating Beatrice, her straggly hair and chipped nails, but tonight he wanted to relish her vulnerability, her shame for her body.

His hand felt cold from the glass. He took a sip of the milkshake. It tasted faintly of glue. His eyes began to water. “Beatrice, I made you a milkshake.”

After a few minutes, Beatrice opened the door. She had taken off her make-up and put on the fleece zip robe. The smell of cigarettes drifted from the room.

Beatrice took the glass. “Thank you,” she said. She went back in the bedroom and sat down on the bed. She gulped the milkshake. “Ugh,” she said. “This tastes funny.”

“I know,” Seth said. “It was the best I could do.”

Seth watched her drink the milkshake, admiring the veins in her hands and the way she pressed her lips together after each sip, wasting nothing. Seth believed he could love Beatrice anywhere, including their trailer ten miles out of town, but later, after they’d married and produced a couple of kids, he liked to remember her in the McDowell’s house, drinking the milkshake, kissing him with cold lips. Watching her, Seth believed he was capable of anything. The whole world unfolded for him like a floor plan, with windows and doors and a two-car garage. His memory of Beatrice drinking the milkshake never faded, not even after she couldn’t shake her pneumonia and died, almost twenty years before Seth, so that in moments of pain or self-hatred Seth would conjure her face in that moment, and feel, temporarily, like he had done something worthwhile, something to be proud of.

## IN SUMMER, IN FALL

Looking back on his marriage, Emmet remembered his wife Minnie as transparent doll made of pantyhose and air, a woman he could admire but not touch, like a conch shell on display in a museum. Sometimes, walking through the house they'd shared, Emmet was struck by memories of her—the strands of hair she left on the bathroom floor, her collection of bread crusts for the geese in the park, the smoothness of her naked back pressed against his chest while they slept. In the bathroom, he touched the fabric of her favorite towels and the spare bottles of bath cream she kept beneath the sink, imagining Minnie on their honeymoon, half submerged in the tub, her limbs covered with bubbles. Standing at the kitchen sink, surveying Minnie's garden and bird feeders, Emmet believed Minnie was still with him in the house, hidden from view, hanging her delicates on the shower rod, napping in the spare bedroom.

When Minnie left for Brooklyn to be with her parents, Emmet put a *For Sale* sign in the front yard. He wrote the sign by hand, red marker on yellow legal paper. He taped the sign to the mailbox and watched it snap in the wind, thinking of the day he and Minnie moved into the house, bringing with them their college textbooks and some furniture they'd borrowed from their parents, a couple of dented metal bookshelves and a queen sized mattress without a box spring. Emmet liked to imagine Minnie as she was that day, young and happy, her face unlined, her shoulders tanned, not the Minnie who surfaced after the first years of their marriage, depressed and unwilling to talk to him, desperate for work she

enjoyed and a membership at the gym, where she wanted to lose the weight she'd gained since college.

Emmet didn't expect anyone to buy the house, so he felt safe advertising what he believed was his last connection to Minnie, her presence pent up within the rooms of their home. He put the sign out for her, in case she happened to drive by or phoned to ask him how he was doing. Emmet believed the pretense of selling the house would drive her back to him. He thought his initiative would surprise and intrigue her (she once accused him of hanging on to things), forcing her to reconsider her request for a divorce.

Emmet tried to adjust to his new life, hoping his days without Minnie would be temporary, days they would later laugh about while lounging together in bed, the sun warming their skin through the window. He imagined telling Minnie about his meaningless tasks (how he sorted their books alphabetically, then later by publication date) and the unnecessary trips to the mall and corner grocery store. She would giggle at his routines: how he scrambled eggs in the morning with green peppers and sliced tomatoes, how he watched television while exercising with hand weights and a rubber tube, how he spent time in the shower thinking of ways to win her back, bemoaning his thinning hair and the reddening stretch marks on his thighs and beneath his arms. Emmet lived his life as though he were writing a script he would later read to Minnie, a script in which he starred as the main character, a man who walked with his eyes directed at the floor, his back slumped.

What Emmet wanted was his old life, his nightly walks in the park with Minnie, their weekend camping trips and summer vacations to Florida to visit his parents, the occasional night at the movies or dinner out with their friends. But every day Minnie failed to call, Emmet grew more impatient, more lonely. His old life seemed less important than filling his

new life with something other than television reruns and window shopping at discount stores. He signed up for a supper club and a book group, convinced the presence of other bodies would distract him. He attended the gatherings wearing the appropriate attire (beige pants and a sweater vest), determined to contribute to the conversation by nodding his head and occasionally expressing concern for American culture, the lack of family dinners, the lukewarm interest in reading literature to children.

By the third meeting with the book group, though, Emmet felt sorry he had ever made the effort. He abhorred the groups' arrogance, their scripted witticisms and self-inflated references. Emmet left halfway through the meeting, whistling as he walked out the door. He imagined telling Minnie how he left without so much as saying goodbye. He thought she would admire his gall.

Emmet began spending his days at the coffee shop and the library, where he read self-help books and old issues of *Time*. In the evenings after watching the news and lifting his dumbbells, Emmet walked in the park, remembering his walks with Minnie, her cold hands and long silences. Sometimes he believed she walked with him, so real were his memories.

And then, unexpectedly, in the middle of the dry and muted summer, Emmet met a woman—not a woman he ordinarily would have found attractive (her lips were thin and her nose was a bit off-center) but a woman who provided him with an escape, a reprieve from his loneliness for Minnie.

Emmet found her in the library. On Saturdays, he liked to read the entire week's newspapers instead of self-help books or magazines. Mostly he liked the editorial sections

and birth announcements. He reveled in the names parents picked for their children: Andrew Mark, Jessica Anne, Michael Spencer, Regina Joy, Hannah Marie. He and Minnie never wanted kids—Emmet still didn't want kids—but he liked the rhythm of the names, the jumble of vowels in his throat. He went through the papers in an orderly fashion, beginning with Sunday and moving through the week, reading first the editorials and then the announcements. The routine was comforting, as was the grainy newspaper, which smelled of ink and dust. Emmet sat in a cubicle at the far end of the library, hidden by a shelf of books, whispering the names to himself, rubbing ink between his fingers.

One Saturday, Emmet woke later than usual. He had spent most of the night looking out the window, listening to the cars and trucks sloshing through the puddles on the street. When he got to the library, it was nearly noon. He circled the lot three times before he found an empty spot to park. In the library, Emmet watched a woman wearing a green turtleneck pull the entire week of papers from the pile and hold them in front of her as if she were delivering a pizza.

“I was going to read those,” he said.

The woman looked at him. “All of them?”

“Yes. I read them every week.”

“Oh.” The woman walked toward one of the tables, her red purse slapping her hip. She put the stack on the table and sat down. She plucked a newspaper from the stack, opened it, and began reading.

Emmet jingled the keys in his pocket. He couldn't decide if he should leave and come back later or wait until the woman was finished. He liked watching her, though. He admired her slight shoulders and fair skin.

“You can sit with me,” the woman said, not lifting her head. She tapped her palm on the empty chair next to her. “I don’t mind.”

Emmet released the keys in his pocket. He sat down and picked a newspaper from the stack. He spread the paper carefully, so as not to touch the woman’s. He was aware of her body next to his, the proximity of her crossed ankles to his calf. If he extended his arm, he would touch her shoulder, covered in a gauzy blue fabric. He suddenly felt warm and nervous, like he was on a first date. The woman smelled of lemons and wet soil. He looked at her hand resting on the paper, her fingernails lined with dirt. He thought perhaps she had spent the morning in her garden, planting peonies or sage. Emmet looked at his own hands, struck by loneliness. It had been months since he had been this close to a woman. After Minnie learned of his affair, she wouldn’t let him near her. She made him sleep on the couch. Once, she asked him to spend the night in a hotel. Emmet had been sorry for the affair—he still was, but he couldn’t help thinking Minnie was foolish for giving up their marriage because of a two-month fling with a woman he barely remembered.

Emmet glanced at the woman. She moved her lips as she read. Emmet watched the way she moved her mouth, regarded the flash of freckles spread on her upturned nose and the tiny white scar on her cheek near her ear. He thought of Minnie in her parent’s house, Minnie shopping in the city, Minnie rubbing lotion on her palms before sliding into bed. He remembered the way Minnie’s wet hair clung to her back after she showered. He imagined the woman’s lips were Minnie’s lips. He pulled his chair closer to hers.

“Why do you whisper the words?” he asked.

The woman looked at Emmet. He guessed she was about ten years younger than he, maybe in her early thirties. Her eyes were shining, her cheeks flushed. “People who move

their lips when they read experience more pleasure in their reading.” She fingered her turtleneck. “You not only see the words, you say them, too.”

“Your theory, anyway.”

“No. I read about it in *Reader’s Digest*.”

Emmet laughed. He felt swollen, euphoric. “Because if you want up-to-date, cutting-edge information, *Reader’s Digest* is the magazine that delivers.”

The woman crinkled her nose. Emmet admired the lines around her eyes. “I flip through it at my mother’s house,” she said. “I don’t have a subscription.”

“What do you subscribe to?”

“Magazines, you mean?”

“No, I mean in general.”

The woman was quiet. Then she said, “I don’t subscribe to anything.”

Emmet looked at his hands. “I don’t either,” he said. The woman turned the page of her newspaper. She pushed a strand of dark hair behind her shoulder.

Emmet considered his empty house, his unmade bed and bare walls. Minnie had taken all their pictures, even the framed photographs of their wedding day, which had been above the fireplace. Emmet didn’t want to go back to the house, the closets filled with Minnie’s old clothes, the kitchen cupboards stacked with her pots and casserole dishes. He was tired of being alone, tired of the hollowed pit he felt in his chest. “I’d like to take you to dinner,” he told the woman, not looking at her. He knew it was too soon.

The woman arched her brows. “You don’t know my name,” she said.

“Tell me.” Emmet leaned toward her, inhaling lemons and wet dirt. He believed she was Minnie. “Whisper it.”

The woman glanced around. Her eyes were bright. She put her mouth near Emmet's ear. "Isabelle," she whispered.

Isabelle's favorite color was blue, her hair had been blond when she was a child, she never ate breakfast, she read chapters of mystery novels every night before going to bed, she hated her job as an elementary school teacher, she loved getting mail, she someday wanted to write a screenplay. She had written one in college but it was terrible. Emmet watched her smooth butter on her bread and stir the ziti on her plate. Isabelle wore a lace skirt and a white blouse. Emmet wore khakis and a shirt Minnie had given him for his birthday. Before he left the house, he had scrubbed his hands with the bristled sponge he used for scouring pots.

Emmet told Isabelle he subscribed to routine. He had thought of it on his way home from the library. "I'm comforted by doing things in sequence," he told her.

Isabelle held her fork delicately. "You want to control things," she said. Beneath her blouse, Emmet could see the faint outline of her bra.

"No. I want to know what's going to happen next."

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you know what's going to happen? In your life, I mean."

Emmet lifted a forkful of ziti to his mouth. He chewed five times then swallowed forcefully. "It doesn't matter if I know or not," he said.

A child at the next table knocked over his mother's drink. The woman leaned over, collecting chunks of ice in her hand. Emmet could see down her blouse, the concave hollow between her breasts.

Isabelle put her fork on her plate. "Tell me about your last relationship," she said. She tucked a wisp of dark hair behind her ear.

"You don't want to hear about it." Emmet pushed his plate to the edge of the table. He put his napkin on the plate.

"Yes, I do. Tell me."

"I was married for fifteen years. My wife left me three months ago."

"Wow," Isabelle said. "I'm sorry."

"I am, too."

"Why did she leave?"

Emmet put his elbows on the table. He was too tired to lie. "I had an affair."

"Oh." Isabelle pressed her lips together and opened her purse. She rummaged around for a moment then closed it again.

"There are a lot of good things about me," Emmet said. He wanted to convince her. "I'm a generous person. I used to work overtime so Minnie could get her hair done and buy new clothes. I'm a good listener. I'm very clean." Emmet rubbed his hands on his pants. "After the affair, Minnie couldn't see the good things about me. All she saw was the affair."

"I can understand why," Isabelle said, rubbing her nose. "She must have felt lonely and unattractive."

"Minnie is a beautiful woman," Emmet said. He tried to picture Minnie's face but couldn't.

“Why did you have the affair?”

“I was lonely. I missed the affection Minnie gave me when we were first married.”

Emmet scratched his face. He had shaved before he left the house.

“You mean sex.”

“Yes.”

The server came to the table and refilled their water. Isabelle put two fingers in her glass and scooped out some ice. She put the pieces in her mouth then wiped her wet fingers on her napkin. “Let’s talk about something else,” she said.

“Tell me about your last relationship,” Emmet said. He felt relieved Isabelle hadn’t left. He imagined another kind of woman would have ended the date.

“I lived with a man for six years,” Isabelle said. “Then one day he told me he was in love with another woman, a girl he met at an office party. So I left.”

“I’m sorry,” Emmet said.

“Well.” Isabelle said. “Things happen.” She swirled the ice in her glass and looked at her fingers.

When Emmet got home, he flipped on the television and climbed into bed, still wearing his clothes. He tucked his knees to his belly and balled his fists under his chin. He was almost asleep when the phone rang. Emmet stumbled out of bed, knowing it was Minnie. He wanted it to be her.

“Hello,” he said. He rubbed his eyes. He could hear the faint murmur of the television. He had forgotten to turn it off before he fell asleep. “Hello.”

“Emmet. It’s me. My dad is sick.”

“Minnie.” He tried to imagine what she looked like, propped on the couch with the telephone in her lap, but in his mind she was merely an outline, a ghost.

“I could come help you,” he said. He sat down on the floor.

“No.” Minnie cleared her throat. “No. We’re okay.”

“Then why did you call? I don’t mind. I want to help you.”

“I’m calling because we’re taking Dad to the beach where he can get some fresh air. I wanted to tell you I’ll be out of town for the week. I don’t want you to come. It would be too much for you. You don’t deal with hardship very well.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Emmet pulled off his socks and threw them under the table.

“You like things a certain way. Think about it. You use the same brand of soap every morning in the shower. You drink your coffee from the same mug. You make a list before you go to the store. You’re predictable.”

“I am not. Anyway, being predictable has nothing to do with my ability to deal with hardship,” Emmet said.

“Yes, it *does*.” Minnie sighed. “They are intricately connected.”

Emmet said nothing. He hated the way Minnie talked, in a surreal, pseudo-intellectual sort of way, as if she knew something Emmet didn’t. He got up, opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. He cracked it open and watched it foam. Then he poured it in the sink, watched it circle and disappear.

“I’m selling the house,” he said finally.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Minnie said. “I’m looking for an apartment in the city.”

“Minnie.” Emmet pictured her clearly now, the tuft of bangs on her forehead, the lines around her mouth. “I miss you.”

“Don’t.”

“Minnie.”

“I have to go. Bye.”

Emmet held the phone in his hands and examined the veins in his forearms. He remembered the first time he saw Minnie, in a class in college. She was sitting to his left, reading a book of American sonnets. Her hair was pulled in a ponytail, her long neck exposed. During class, Emmet peeked at her while he took notes, admiring her posture and the way she tilted her chin when she squinted at the board. He imagined she was a dancer, with firm calves and calloused feet. After class, he followed her to her car and watched her drive away. Then he walked to his own car, thinking about a friend from high school who had been in a car accident. Emmet had asked him how the accident happened. “I saw a deer on the side of the road,” the friend said. “I thought I was the deer.” Emmet felt like he understood: he wanted to be caught up in Minnie the way his friend had been caught up in the deer.

The summer turned into fall. A thunderstorm destroyed Emmet’s *For Sale* sign, so he called a realtor who brought a metal sign and told Emmet to be out of the house in the afternoons when she brought her clients. He grew a beard. He began eating tortilla chips and glazed doughnuts in front of the television. He stopped doing his exercises. When he stood in front of the mirror after his shower, Emmet clutched the rolls of fat on his belly.

On Saturdays, he went to dinner with Isabelle, who had begun wearing jeans and a sweatshirt for their dates. She suggested he see a therapist. Sometimes in the car, Isabelle put her hand on Emmet's knee. Once, she touched his face, let her fingers move across the bristles on his cheek. Emmet wondered what she was thinking, touching his face, moving her hand down to his shoulder. He wondered why she let herself be with him. He imagined he must be pathetic to her, sad and deflated, a soufflé that had fallen.

One night after dinner, Isabelle invited Emmet to her apartment. "It's small," she said, unlocking the door. Her living room walls were bare. Emmet put his keys and wallet on a bookshelf filled with tiny glass figurines. The shelf was covered in a film of dust. Emmet ran his finger through the dust and wiped the residue on his pants.

"I like it," he said. He followed Isabelle into the kitchen.

"Are you thirsty?" She opened the dishwasher and pulled out a plastic cup.

"No," Emmet said. He watched her fill a glass. Her hair was tucked in a bun, with a few loose strands around her face.

"We could play cards."

"Yes."

"I don't have a television." Isabelle lifted the glass to her mouth. When she drank, she made tiny gulping sounds.

"Oh." Emmet looked at his boots. He wondered if he should have taken them off at the door.

"Well." Isabelle put the glass in the sink. "This is awkward."

Emmet stepped closer to her and put his hand on her arm. "You feel cold," he said. He moved his hand to her shoulder. He remembered the first time he kissed Minnie. They

had gone for a walk in the snow. Minnie wore only a sweatshirt and jeans. Her lips felt like ice. Emmet put his mouth on Isabelle's. She felt warm.

In the bedroom, Emmet unbuttoned his shirt slowly, his fingers fumbling with the fabric. Isabelle let Emmet unzip her jeans then she pulled them off herself, throwing them near the window. She tugged her sweatshirt over her head and unhooked her bra. She covered her breasts with her hands and slinked, eel-like, under the blanket. Emmet took off his pants and shorts and climbed into bed next to her. He tried to make his abdomen look firm by tightening his muscles and breathing shallowly.

They made love quietly, without talking, and afterward Isabelle curled her body next to Emmet's. Her skin felt sticky. Outside, Emmet could hear a dog barking on the street. He watched the shadows roll across the ceiling and listened to the cars passing each other on the street below. He thought Isabelle might be asleep. Against his chest, he could feel her lifting and falling softly, like snow.

He was almost asleep when she rolled over, facing him. "I can't sleep," she said. She kissed his forehead. "I'm going to make a sandwich. Do you want one?"

"I'm not hungry," Emmet said.

When Isabelle left, Emmet sat up and hugged his knees. In the light of the streetlamp, he could see it was beginning to rain. He wondered if Minnie liked her new apartment. He hugged his knees and listened to the rain.

"Maybe I'll have a bite of your sandwich," Emmet said, when Isabelle came back.

"Here." Isabelle handed it to him. She put the plate on the floor near the bed. Emmet let his legs slide back under the blanket, his toes curled. The sandwich was lettuce and cheese, no meat.

“Yuck.” He handed it back to her.

“Fine by me,” she said. “I’m starving.”

Emmet put his head back on the pillow. He closed his eyes. Isabelle ate the sandwich and went into the bathroom. Emmet listened to her turn on the faucet and fill a glass with water. When she came back in the bedroom, she was wearing a robe. Emmet was still naked. She lay on the bed, on top of the covers.

“Do you want me to go?” Emmet said.

“No.” She rolled over on her side. “What’s the worst thing you’ve done?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s the worst thing you’ve done?” Isabelle touched his face. “Something you can’t forget. Something that haunts you.”

“I don’t know,” Emmet said. He wanted to go to sleep. He suddenly felt tired.

“If you tell me, I’ll tell you,” Isabelle said. She rubbed his shoulder.

“I don’t know,” Emmet said. “Let me think.” He remembered stealing some money from his mother when he was ten to buy some baseball cards. “Once, I accidentally ran over a cat,” he said.

Isabelle was quiet. Then she said, “I thought the worst thing would be your affair.”

Emmet had forgotten the affair. It meant nothing to him. He merely wanted contact, a brief connection. “I didn’t love the other woman,” he said. “I didn’t do it to hurt Minnie.”

Isabelle turned her back to him. Emmet listened to the rain. “Does my affair bother you?” he asked, touching her arm.

She pulled away. “Yes,” she said. “It bothers me.”

Emmet tried to think of something to say. “Tell me your worst thing,” he said.

“Okay,” Isabelle said. “I’ll tell you the truth.” She was still facing the wall. “About eight years ago, when I was living with my ex-boyfriend, Rick, I posed for a nude picture because we were strapped for money. I met a guy outside the grocery store one day who gave me his business card. He said I had a look to me. That’s what he said. He said I had a look. He offered me a hundred dollars to sit for him. At first I said no, I was too embarrassed, but later, at home, I started thinking about all the things I could buy with that money. The car needed brakes and Rick needed new shoes. When he came home at night he said his feet hurt, and I thought it might be his shoes. I thought the arches might be bad. So I did it. I posed for one picture. The man didn’t try anything funny.” She rolled onto her back. Outside, it had stopped raining.

“That’s not terrible,” Emmet said. He thought Isabelle was lying. Her body didn’t strike him as being worthy of documentation.

They were quiet for a while. Emmet remembered a picture he had taken of Minnie when they were first married. She had been in the bathroom in her bra and panties, blowing her hair dry with her head upside down. Her hair hung in front of her face, tousled and feral, the muscles in her legs stiff and tight. She hadn’t noticed him standing there until he snapped the picture. Emmet wondered where the picture was. He imagined Minnie had taken it, in the box with their other photos.

“I just thought of something,” Isabelle said. “What’s the best thing you’ve done?”

Emmet sat up and rubbed his eyes. “It’s almost midnight,” he said. “Maybe I should go.”

“Please.” Isabelle touched his leg. “Tell me.”

Emmet flexed his fingers. “I don’t know,” he said. “That’s harder.” He lay back on the bed. “Let me think a minute.” He tried to think of something heroic, something that would impress Isabelle. He considered lying to her. He could tell her a story about rescuing someone who was about to drown. He could tell her about doing CPR on an old man, late at night, during a blizzard. “I don’t have a best thing,” he said.

“Everyone has something,” Isabelle said. “I’ll tell you mine first, if you want.”

“Go ahead,” Emmet said.

She rolled over to face him. “Okay. In college, I worked at a pizza shop. There was a homeless guy who used to come in and sit at one of the tables. He never bought anything. He smelled bad because he didn’t have a place to take a shower. Nobody wanted to go near him. But one afternoon, when my shift was over, I decided sit with him. I asked him about his family, his friends, whether or not he had a job. The usual kind of stuff. He talked for nearly an hour. He talked and talked, like he hadn’t opened his mouth in months.”

“That’s the best thing?”

“Yes.” Isabelle flopped over on her stomach.

Emmet rubbed his eyes. He had thought of something while Isabelle was talking. “Three years after we got married, Minnie gained nearly fifty pounds. She said she was stressed out, that eating helped calm her nerves. She asked me if I thought she was unattractive, being fat like that. I lied and told her I thought she was beautiful.”

“That’s the best thing?”

“Yes.”

Isabelle snorted. “Sounds like the worst thing, if you ask me.”

“Why? I protected her. I made her feel like something she wasn’t. Just like you made the homeless man feel like something he wasn’t.”

“No,” Isabelle said. “You didn’t listen to what I said.”

“Yes, I did,” Emmet said. He got out of bed and picked his boxers off the floor. He put them on then stumbled in the dark, looking for his jeans. He bent over, running his hand along the carpet, feeling for the stiff fabric. When he stood up, he knocked a picture off the end table.

“Sorry,” he said, reaching for it. He held the frame in his hand. He wanted to see who was in the photo. He walked into the bathroom and flipped on the light.

“What are you doing?” Isabelle said. The picture was of Isabelle and a man with dark hair and blue eyes. He was wearing a cowboy hat. “Give me that,” Isabelle said. She stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips.

Emmet sat on the edge of the bathtub and looked at the picture. He knew then: he couldn’t have her, the same way he couldn’t have Minnie. Even in love he was alone. He stood up and set the picture on the counter. He reached for Isabelle, pushed his hand beneath her robe, felt the bristle of hair on her thigh. She didn’t fight him. He let his mouth graze the nape of her neck. In the morning, he thought, he would call the realtor. He wanted to keep the house.

## GLOSS

Outside the restaurant, Archie messes my hair and unbuttons the top button of my blouse, arranging the collar to reveal my freckled cleavage and the small, star-shaped scar beneath my clavicle. He likes pin-up girls who wear black leather corsets and high heels, who have red painted lips and windblown hair. In his desk drawer, he keeps pictures of nude women, most of them prone with their legs in the air, their firm breasts slicked with oil. Once, I tore a fistful of the photos into bits, scattering the flecks of paper into his wastebasket as if tossing the remains of an old friend out to sea, the glossy paper dancing from my palm to the black basin below.

“Turn around,” Archie says. I do a half-circle, careful not to let my new red pumps get wet in the puddle, rimmed with radiator fluid. I consider what I must look like: a thirty-something woman with teased hair and too much make-up, performing on command for her pot-bellied beau. I watch a woman entering the restaurant, her skin radiant as the airbrushed faces in magazine advertisements, but when the woman looks at me, she immediately looks away, as though by holding my gaze she would subsume a part of me and be changed, tarnished.

“I can stay for an hour,” I tell him. My skirt feels tight around my waist. Normally I wear a ten, but tonight I squeezed into an eight, hoping the snug waistband would diminish the appearance of my no longer (not since the baby) sleek abdomen.

“You look great,” Archie says. He jingles the keys in his pocket. “Next time wear jeans instead of a skirt.”

I ignore him. I know other people think Archie's a jerk, but I happen to be fond of his cynicism and need to control everything, especially me. I know when I'm with Archie, I'm at the mercy of his appeals. I'm happy with the arrangement.

Inside, Archie salutes the bartender and tells the waitress to seat us near a window. He watches her shimmy toward the table, her hips moving like the revolving glass doors of a fancy hotel. Archie sits with his eyes directed toward the entrance (an old habit, he refuses to allow newcomers to see the back of his head) and palms his gut. The lights of the restaurant cast a shadow over his head, making his brown hair appear coppery. I hope the lights don't make my skin look yellow or draw attention to my penciled brows, the light hair on my upper lip.

"I'm hungry," Archie says. He leans back in the booth and watches the waitress sashay toward the kitchen, her pink and yellow running shoes reflecting and refracting the light.

"I'll be right back," I tell him. I drop my purse in the seat, releasing the strap like a weight, pleased with the simple act of letting go, of leaving something behind for someone else.

Archie slings his arms on the table in mock exhaustion. "You have the bladder of a child," he says. I wonder if he's teasing or if he's trying to humiliate me. At the shoe store, he told the salesgirl my feet looked large for my frame. He wanted to know if the flash of red, the intertwining of leather straps around my ankles, would make my feet look clownish. I could tell from the look the salesgirl gave me she disapproved of Archie's reproach.

Walking toward the bathroom, I touch the band of my wedding ring and consider the reduction of my body to mere parts: big feet, small bladder.

The bathroom is small and flushed with dirty yellow light. A woman stands at the basin combing her hair, a lush color, deep brown mixed with auburn. She gathers her hair at the nape of her neck and flicks a few strands onto the floor, the pieces falling gracefully, catching the light.

“Hello,” I say. I peer into a stall. The woman ignores me. When I get the door locked, I quickly unbutton my skirt and breathe for a minute, the air stale, bleach mixed with urine and the faint odor of grilled meat. I consider taking off my shoes. Above my navel, a thin red line runs around my waist like an equator.

When I return, Archie smiles and pushes the rims of his wire glasses. “You’ll never guess who’s here,” he says. I scan the tables but don’t recognize anyone. Archie gestures to a couple sitting a few tables to our left. “Terry,” he says. He thumps the table with his hand. “She came over to say hello while you were in the bathroom.”

Terry is Archie’s first wife. Once, I had found some old photos of her stacked in an envelope in Archie’s medicine cabinet. One photo was of Terry on top of Archie, naked, her blond hair matted to her forehead and face, her breasts packed tight as pregnant bellies. I never told Archie I found the pictures. I imagined he still looked at them, comparing Terry’s body with mine.

I glance at the couple and see Terry is watching me, her doll eyes opened wide. I lift my arm and wave. I hope I don’t have lipstick on my teeth or toilet paper trailing from my skirt.

“She looks different,” Archie says.

“Yes,” I say, imagining the body beneath her cream blouse and black pants. I sit down and reach for a menu. The cover shows a pot roast drenched in a silvery sauce. “What has it been? Four, five years?”

“I haven’t seen her since the divorce,” Archie says. The waitress ushers a family to the table behind us. The children argue about who will sit on the inside, near the window. Archie touches my arm. “Is this okay?” he asks. “Do you want to go somewhere else?”

“Of course not.” I realize if I sit with my legs crossed my skirt doesn’t press on my bladder.

The waitress comes with a bottle of wine. Archie leans back in his chair and watches her pour the wine into the glasses, the glazed liquid nearly transparent. When she walks away, his eyes follow her.

“I need a favor,” Archie says. He scratches his nose.

“I need to be home in forty-five minutes.”

“I know,” Archie says. He looks at his hands. “I want to ask Terry to sit with us.”

“Mmmm,” I say. I sip my wine. For three years it has been like this: Archie looking at his hands, asking for favors. I imagine Ned asleep on the sofa, his bald head balanced on a flowered couch cushion, his purplish toes sticking from beneath my mother’s red and yellow patchwork quilt. “I can’t leave Ned for too long. I have to give him his medication at ten o’clock.”

“You’ve told me,” Archie says. He gulps his wine, his bristled cheeks moving in and out like a fish. “I need to talk to Terry. I think I can catch her in a lie.”

Archie pushes back his chair and brushes the front of his pants. From this angle, he looks like a bent nail: his legs slink from his narrow hips, his shoulders slumped in permanent disappointment.

“What lie?” I say. I feel slighted Archie wants Terry at our table. I want him to spend the evening with me, complimenting my new shoes and curled hair. I don’t want to share him with Terry.

“Please,” Archie says. He puts his hands on the table and leans close to my face. “I don’t ask you for much. Please understand I may never have this opportunity again.”

“Okay,” I say. I imagine Ned’s pills, the varied array of plastic bottles on the nightstand. I consider his willingness to ingest, his resignation to swallow.

I watch Archie approach Terry’s table. Terry’s date shakes his head and presses his lips together. Then Terry stands and follows Archie to our table. I offer her my hand, admiring her arched brows and the tiny yellow-brown freckles scattered across her nose. A ruby pin in the shape of a cowboy boot rides her blouse.

“Hello,” she says, not looking at me. She sits in one of the empty chairs.

Archie sits and offers Terry a glass of wine. He doesn’t bother introducing us, his eyes focused on the entrance, his arms crossed.

“Is your date going to sit with us?” I ask her. Her date looks the way Ned used to; he has the same silver strands running through his dark hair and the same lean, small frame. I wonder if they are married, if Terry washes his back in the shower, carefully observing for changes in moles, if she suggests he get a haircut before her mother comes to visit, if she searches his pockets when she does the laundry, if she sleeps with other men in their bed.

“Ben’s shy,” Terry says. She looks at Archie as if they shared a private joke. He smiles, radiant.

“I’ll encourage him,” I say. I stand and smooth my blouse. Archie shakes his head. I reach over and touch the end of his nose with my finger. His skin feels rough, as if he had recently acquired a sunburn and had spent time in front of a mirror, peeling away the dead layers. “Be right back,” I say.

When I get to Ben’s table I put my hand on his shoulder. He jerks back, bewildered. “Jeesh,” I say. I put my hands on my hips and examine the tiny red bumps on his face. I wonder if he has some sort of dermatological problem, a condition his doctor couldn’t explain or alleviate. “Come sit with us,” I say. I motion my hand toward the table.

Ben brings his glass of water with him. The ice clinks the glass as he walks. Terry has scooted next to Archie so that they sit on one side of the table and Ben and I sit on the other.

“I like your red shoes,” Terry says, as I slide into my chair.

“A gift from Archie,” I say, pointing my toes. Terry picks up one of Ben’s hands and holds it on the table. Ben’s hands are short and fat as a child’s.

I peer at my watch. If I left the restaurant at nine forty-five, I’d still make it home in time to wake Ned and remind him to take his pills. I think about the stack of dishes in the sink and the laundry hanging on the line, the empty shirts and pants fluttering in the evening breeze. I had promised Emily I would sew the loose strap on her blue dress so she could wear it to school. What would her daughter think if she knew her mother spent the evening dressed in red heels and lace panties instead of sewing her dress, instead of massaging her sick father’s shoulders and reading him old *New Yorker* cartoons, instead of packing tuna on rye in a school lunch and rolling freshly washed socks into compact balls?

Archie puts his elbows on the table and begins a joke about a man and a woman who are killed on their wedding night. I listen to the mother at the table behind us tell her kids a story about life when she was their age. Where we lived we had snow all the time, the mother says, and we had to wear our jackets even when we were indoors, the weather was that cold.

I cross my legs and rub a brown smudge from my shoe. I think about the basket of wool sweaters and down coats in my trunk, ready to be taken to the dry cleaners. Last year, I hadn't bothered to have them cleaned. I had simply shaken them out and pulled the loose threads with my teeth.

"They get to heaven and tell St. Peter they want a divorce," Archie says. Ben spoons the ice from his glass and lays the chunks, shimmering and wet, on his napkin. Terry digs in her purse and comes up with a black and gold tube of lipstick. She smudges the gloss on her bottom lip and rubs her lips together. She puts the lipstick away and pulls out a bottle of hand lotion. She pours the lotion into her palm. She offers the bottle to me. "No, thank you," I say. I'm listening to the mother tell her story.

The mother reminds her kids to sit up straight and then goes on with the snow, how she went sledding every Saturday with her father on a wooden sled, how afterward her mother made her chocolate brownies with walnuts on top and hot chocolate with real whipped cream and read her books while she warmed up in her pajamas and a wool blanket. Sometimes, after the stories, my mother helped me cut paper dolls and glue buttons on their faces for eyes, she says.

"Terry, I have a question for you," Archie says. Last month, he grew a beard and has developed the habit of tugging on it, presumably for emphasis. The waitress appears and asks if we're eating together.

“We’ve already eaten,” Terry says, pointing at Ben. Ben waves her away with his hand.

“I’ll have some hot chocolate,” I say. “With whipped cream, please.”

Archie squints at me, stroking his beard. “Is that going to be your dinner?”

“I have to leave soon,” I say. “I don’t have time for a meal.”

“Okay,” he says. He shrugs. “I guess I’ll have a scotch and water. No food tonight.”

The waitress nods and walks away. Ben begins spooning the ice back into his glass.

“I love whipped cream,” he says. Terry nods at him and winks.

“Terry, here’s the question,” Archie says. He smiles. “Did you fuck Walter while we were married?”

Terry looks at Ben, her face flushed with anger. Ben prods the bumps on his face with his fingers.

“Excuse me?” she says.

“Just answer the question,” Archie says. He reaches for his wine. “I don’t care one way or the other. I’m just curious.”

“No, I did not fuck Walter while we were married,” Terry says. With her eyes open wide and her red mouth contorted in a sneer, she looks like she’s on stage performing for a sold-out audience. She pulls a pack of cigarettes from her purse.

“You can’t smoke here,” I say. I don’t want Ned to smell smoke on my clothes.

The waitress brings the hot chocolate and the scotch. When she leans over to hand me the mug, I catch Archie looking down her blouse. “That all?” she asks. She walks away before anyone answers.

I sip the hot chocolate and look out the window. I watch a woman walk to her car. I envy her simple beige coat and black sneakers, the striped scarf around her neck, the leather briefcase in her hand. I suspect if I had a life of my own, I wouldn't be here with Archie, waiting for him to pay attention to me, or lie awake next to Ned at night and worry about being left alone with Emily. Husbands weren't supposed to die, at least not in the books I'd read. Nobody signed me up to empty buckets of vomit or pick used tissues from the floor. Nobody bothered to ask for my opinion—and if someone had, I would have said I was too tired to mess with other people's fluids.

“Did you *kiss* Walter while we were married?” Archie guzzles his scotch. His eyes look red and watery.

“Who's Walter?” I ask, annoyed. As far as I was concerned, Walter could shove a pitchfork up his ass and walk on his hands. He could come down with cancer and die under my mother's handmade red and yellow quilt. He could buy himself a plot of land in the nearby cemetery and have himself a ceremony in the rain, with his daughter crying and his wife making plans to sleep with her lover that night in their bed.

“Walter was my business partner,” Archie says. “We owned an ice cream shop.”

Behind us, the kids are standing on their chairs tossing packets of sugar into the air.

“Eat your soup,” the mother says. “We're leaving in ten minutes.”

Ben laughs. “Scooping sweets,” he says. He puts his head in his hands and laughs until tears stream from his eyes.

“Why are you laughing?” Terry asks. “I don't understand what's so damned funny.” Her lipstick has smeared onto her chin.

“You’re a whore, Terry,” Archie says. “You’re like ice cream—sweet, yet without substance.”

“Like you’re any better, Archie,” Terry says. “Like masturbating in the garage every night for half an hour is an act of substance.”

“You bring yourself off every morning when you engage the mirror in your primping rituals,” Archie says. “And that takes a lot longer than half an hour.”

The family stands to leave. The mother looks at us with disgust. She looks, I think, like a pumpkin or a basketball: her belly appears to begin at her neck and swoop down to her ankles. I wonder how she washes her feet in the shower.

“Let’s all tell the funniest thing we can think of,” I say. I slip off my shoes and push them under my chair.

Archie sits back in his chair and looks at his watch. He breathes hard, like we’d just had sex in the guest room of his mother’s house, a place we often went while Emily was in school and Ned was at the doctor’s. We never went to Archie’s apartment. I had never seen the place, not in the two years we’d been sleeping together. He said he was afraid his roommate might try to pick me up.

“You have twenty minutes, kid,” he says. He tugs the hair on his chin.

“You start,” I say to Terry. “Tell us the funniest thing you can think of.”

Terry reaches over and peers into my empty mug. “Are you done with this?” she asks. She runs her finger along the inside of the mug and comes up with a runny dollop of whipped cream, which she promptly sticks in her mouth. Archie and Ben watch her as if she were extracting an intestine from a corpse.

“Hello,” I say. “Go ahead, Terry.”

Terry pats the corners of her mouth with a napkin. "I don't tell jokes," she says.

"It doesn't have to be a joke. Tell us a scenario. Or an anecdote. Something funny, that's all." I pick up the mug and slide it to the end of the table. Ben excuses himself to go to the bathroom.

"You're going to miss Terry's joke," I tell him. I watch him walk to the men's room. He appears slightly bowlegged.

"Terry has a joke," Archie says. "But she doesn't want to share it."

"What joke?" Terry asks. She dabs her lips with more gloss. "I don't tell jokes."

"It's not really a joke," Archie says. He slugs the last of his scotch. "Remember when you dressed up in a costume to spy on me at the bar?" He laughs. "And your wig fell in the toilet?"

Terry slumps in her chair. "Not funny," she says.

I glance at my watch. I imagine Emily fell asleep in her bed while reading *Harriet the Spy*, her favorite book. Sometimes, on the nights I was with Archie, I came home to find her asleep in the hammock swing on the porch, her blond hair threaded through the netting, her school books scattered on the floor beneath her. I had put a television in her room so she wouldn't hear Ned's vomiting on the nights after a round of chemotherapy, but she said the colors were too bright, they hurt her eyes.

"Let's hear the story," I tell Terry.

"You tell the story," Terry says to Archie. She unfastens her ruby pin and puts it in her purse, leaving two tiny prick marks on her blouse.

Archie takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "I don't remember the story," he says. "I just remember the part about your wig falling in the toilet."

“I had dressed in a costume to spy on you because I believed you were having an affair,” Terry says. “But I quickly discovered I had ascribed far too much desire onto the other women. You sat alone at the bar for almost the entire night.”

“You must have missed the blonde at the end,” Archie says, “when you were reeling your wig from the toilet.”

Ben returns from the bathroom with a giant wet mark on his shirt. “What happened to you?” I ask.

Ben crosses his arms. “I leaned over the sink to look at my face in the mirror,” he says. I wonder if he was attempting to pop one of his bumps. “And when I stood up, I realized I had accidentally gotten my shirt wet on the counter.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his keys.

“In fact, Terry,” Archie says, “I remember many women approaching me during our marriage.”

“I doubt that very much,” Terry says, “considering you were at least fifty pounds overweight from the booze.” She pushes her hair behind her shoulders.

“I’m ready to go, Terry,” Ben says. “I have to be at work early tomorrow.”

“Wait, we didn’t hear your funniest thing,” I say. I don’t want to go home and adjust Ned’s head on the cushion. I don’t want to stand outside in the cold and pull shirts and pants from the clothesline or turn out Emily’s light or sew the blue dress. I’d rather stay in the restaurant and watch people eat chicken pilaf and bloody steak and listen to my lover’s former wife tell me her funniest thing.

“I’m not feeling very funny right now,” Ben says. He brushes the front of his shirt.

“You look funny,” Archie says. “You look like you wet yourself.”

“Shut up, Archie,” Terry says. She slides her purse strap onto her shoulder and pushes out of her chair.

“I know about Walter,” Archie says. “He paid me a thousand dollars to be quiet about your affair. But he wasn’t thinking of you. He was thinking of himself. He was married, too, you know.”

“Go fuck yourself, Archie,” Terry says. She looks at me. “Here’s a funny thing. Archie was impotent for most of our marriage. He takes a pill to get an erection.”

“Terry has breast implants,” Archie says. “And she shaves her pubic hair with an electric razor.”

I slip my feet into my shoes. “I know about the pills already,” I tell Terry. I don’t want her to think she knows more about Archie than I do. I pull my purse from under the table and stand up. “I have to go, Archie,” I say. “You can call me at work next week if you want.”

“Elizabeth,” Archie says. He pulls his wallet from his pocket. “I need to talk to you.”

I ignore him. I follow Terry and Ben outside, past the tables of men and women drinking wine and laughing, past the circle of waitresses poised near the kitchen, their lips too red, their faces shining, past an elderly man scratching his back with his cane. Outside, I button my blouse to my clavicle and smooth my hair. I watch Ben and Terry walk to their car and drive away. The car’s exhaust rises and disappears.

As I back my car from the restaurant, I see Archie running toward me, his arms flailing, his credit card in his hand. I pretend not to notice.

At home, I unlock the door quietly. My head feels heavy and full. I hear laughter from the television and Ned’s raspy snores. I drop my keys on the floor near the door and

creep into the living room. Ned's mouth is partway open. I watch him for a moment, inspecting his freckled arms and peeling fingernails. One of the nails looks purple underneath. I wonder if the chemotherapy bruised his fingernails or if Ned hurt himself coming out of the shower.

Suddenly, Ned's eyes flicker and open. "Elizabeth?" he says.

I reach over and snap off the television. "It's me," I say. I note the blue dress still draped over the armchair. I think about my sewing basket, wondering if I have any leftover white thread. "Go back to sleep."

Ned rubs his eyes. "It's late," he says. "Where were you?"

"I went shoe shopping," I say. I point at the red shoes. "I saw them in a store window, just sitting there. So I thought to myself, why not try them on? And I did. I went in and tried them on. When I walked around in them, they were comfortable, like a pair of sneakers. I thought, how many pairs of three-inch heels feel like a pair of sneakers? So I bought them. And I've worn them on my feet ever since."

I was talking fast. I felt out of breath, like I'd run down the block to catch the postman.

"They're pretty," Ned says. He adjusts the tubes beneath his nightshirt. I think behind his eyes I see resignation and acceptance. Surely, he wouldn't demand his wife remain faithful to a dying man.

"Ned," I say, sitting on the edge of the couch, sliding my hand into the cuff of his sleeve, "can I ask for a favor?"

Ned, I knew, would help. Even after rounds of chemo, I liked to ask him for advice with decisions or problems I was having at work because I knew he wanted to feel necessary.

I even asked Emily's teacher at school to occasionally call and ask him about school-related issues.

"Of course," he says. He shifts under the blanket, trying to sit up. I put one arm under his legs and the other at his back, lifting him. "Better," he says.

"I'm wondering if you would be willing to take my picture," I say, watching him. I reconsider. How selfish can one woman be? "Never mind," I say. I stand up. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have disturbed you."

"Please," Ned says. He clears his throat. "I want to help."

I think about the pictures in Archie's medicine chest, the happy expression on Terry's face, her wet hair. "Ned," I say, saying the words quickly while I have the courage, "I want the picture to be of my body. Naked."

Ned nods like he'd been expecting this request all along. "I can do that," he says. "You bring the camera and arrange yourself here by the couch." He gestures limply with his hand. "I can take the picture."

I concentrate on the floor, the coils of carpet looking not unlike pubic hair. "Okay," I say. "I'll get the camera."

Upstairs, I find the camera hidden beneath a stack of sheets in the linen closet, where I hid it when Ned got sick. I place the camera on the dresser and examine my skin in the bureau mirror, the rounded pores (bigger on my cheeks and chin) and the mole near my hairline. I am not a pretty woman, I decide. I have a face and a body and features on a face and a body, nothing more, nothing less. I am unremarkable.

I undress quickly without looking in the mirror. I slide my arms into my favorite purple robe, grab the camera from the dresser, and head downstairs. In the living room, I find Ned asleep on the couch, still sitting, his head flopped to one side.

I slip a pillow beneath his head and rearrange his legs beneath the blanket.

On the way back upstairs to check Emily, to smooth her hair from her face, I remember the blue dress. I look at it from the stairwell, the blue straps hanging from the bodice, the skirt bunched and tucked in an effort to conform to the chair. I consider going back to retrieve it but continue on my way upstairs, my hands supporting my lower back. I believe, for a moment, I can leave my body like I've left the dress, uninhabited and limp. But tomorrow, I know, I will thread the needle, mend the strap.

## MARGO'S DISH

In the morning, Raymond's ex-wife, Harriet, a dark haired, thin-lipped woman who routinely wore trousers with plaid socks, called Raymond to ask him to pick the kids up from school. When Raymond realized the caller was Harriet, he quickly moved away from Margo, his girlfriend, who was arranging their breakfasts on the table, her mouth set in an expression of feigned happiness. Margo had a way of posturing bliss when she was angry, something Raymond hadn't learned to recognize until after Margo moved in with him. Even now, months later, Raymond sometimes had to watch Margo carefully before determining her mood, the erratic fluctuations in her disposition.

Raymond carried the phone into the bedroom, keeping his voice low so Margo wouldn't overhear and later accuse him of sounding too interested, too upbeat. Margo's allegations, her insistence that Raymond still loved Harriet, and that she, Margo, was merely a replacement for his estranged wife, always struck Raymond as comical and queer, pronouncements of a madwoman. He sometimes had to block Margo's insinuations to keep from laughing out loud, though he felt flattered she ascribed so much love onto his relationship with Harriet.

Still, he hated listening to Margo's complaints and the obnoxious way she blew her nose while she cried, using two tissues layered on top of one another like whipped cream on a gelatin salad. He wished Harriet had waited until after breakfast to call, when he at least would have had Margo's elevated blood sugar on his side.

Harriet, Raymond learned, had been called in to substitute teach, and her mother, who usually offered to collect Jonah and David from preschool, was scheduled for a Botox appointment. I need you to get the boys, Harriet said, her voice characteristically sharp. Raymond remembered, without warning, the smooth sound of her voice when they were first married, how she would call him on the phone and ask about his dinner preferences, making jokes about the chicken (would you like a little thigh with your breast?) or the roast beef (I'm in the mood for a hunk of meat, she'd say). The memory of her voice seemed so far away, so unreal, Raymond wondered if he hadn't only imagined it. Perhaps Margo's accusations were causing him to hear voices, to envision a life with Harriet that never existed outside of his own mind, his own reworking of his former life.

In the kitchen, Margo straightened her recipe box and the petunias on the windowsill, resolving not to let her jealousy of Harriet get to her. She suspected the caller was Harriet from the panicked look on Raymond's face when he left the kitchen, his quick glance at Margo before charging toward the bedroom. Margo wasn't sure, exactly, what about Harriet made her feel threatened. In truth, Margo had never met Harriet, had never even seen her, except in the occasional photograph she stumbled upon while sorting Raymond's sock drawer or straightening the loose papers on his desk. Margo's jealousy of Harriet felt imprecise and indefinite, something she couldn't explain but nonetheless felt, an understanding that as Raymond's girlfriend, she was inferior to Raymond's ex-wife.

Of course, Raymond insisted he was over Harriet, that he never thought of her, much less missed her. Yet Margo sensed a sadness about him, like when they encountered families

waiting in line at the movie theater, the kids red-faced and jubilant, their parents looking unnerved but not unhappy, as if being with each other was enough. Margo felt that given the chance, Raymond would choose to go back to his family, would give Margo up in a heartbeat if it meant he could spend one more afternoon in the park with Harriet and the kids, picnicking in the sunshine, throwing out bits of sandwich crust to the birds and deciding to stop for ice cream on the way home.

Margo finished setting the table, the jar of grape jam and a shaker of salt for the eggs. She stood back and looked at the dishes, the white plates with blue trim (a gift from her mother), the glass pitcher of water, tiny blue saucers heaped with applesauce, teacups filled with orange juice. Margo marveled at the change in herself: a year ago, she ate granola bars for breakfast and kept her egg fryer in her basement storage closet. She would have scoffed at the idea of waking a half an hour early to mix pancake batter or slice oranges and pineapple.

Now she planned Raymond's breakfasts the night before, setting out the recipe for banana muffins or poppy scones on the counter next to the coffee maker. She made other meals, too, but breakfast was most important. She wanted Raymond to start his day knowing she could take care of him, that she, too, could fulfill his need for family.

Raymond returned from the bedroom, patting Margo's behind before sliding into a chair. "This looks terrific," he said, pouring himself a glass of water. He peeled the wrapper from an oatmeal muffin.

"Who was on the phone?" Margo said. She sat down at the table but didn't intend to eat. She was trying to lose a few pounds before the weekend, when Raymond was taking her to the beach to meet his best friend from college. Margo didn't know anything about Trevor,

except that he had a degree from Harvard (he'd studied bones, of all things) and a predilection for small women.

Margo was dieting because she wanted Trevor to like her. She believed that while she shouldn't let a man dictate her appearance, there was nothing wrong with attempting to approximate a man's ideal notion of beauty. She hoped Raymond would notice Trevor's quick glances at her breasts, the sleek hollow of her back.

"Harriet was on the phone," Raymond said. "She wants me to pick the kids up from school." Bits of muffin were scattered in his beard like snow. "I told her I would."

"What about our appointment with Robin?" Robin was their real estate agent, a short, humpbacked woman who insisted on calling Margo "Marge." She wore flowered, tent-like dresses with leather strap sandals, even when it was raining. Whenever she showed Margo and Raymond a house, she left her sandals by the front door, her bare feet flap-flapping on the linoleum.

"You'll have to go by yourself," Raymond said. He reached for another muffin.

"I don't want to go alone," Margo said. Once, Raymond casually revealed Harriet was a good cook, that she spent hours in the kitchen peeling apples for homemade pies or chopping walnuts and pecans for her famous nutty chicken salad. But, Raymond was quick to point out, Harriet never ate the food she made. She preferred to eat oranges and oatmeal for dinner while her family devoured her homemade French fries and tuna casserole. Margo guessed Raymond wanted to explain to her how Harriet managed to stay thin, as if to offer Margo a suggestion concerning her own weight, her own bouts in the kitchen.

"Look," Raymond said. He crumpled his muffin wrappers in a ball and tucked them under the edge of his plate. "I'm already going to miss seeing the boys this weekend while

we're at the beach. I'd like to have time with them this afternoon. And, I'm sorry, my boys are more important to me than our on and off relationship with Robin, depending on her commitment to locate us a house and your hesitance to put down some money."

There it was—the money. The one concrete thing Margo had that Harriet didn't. Margo had inherited some cash from her grandmother, a woman who had worn threadbare nightgowns and frayed blue jeans, saving all her earnings as a schoolteacher and occasional babysitter. By the time she retired, Margo's grandmother had \$300,000 in the bank, which she planned to use for her living expenses and twice-yearly visits to Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, to obtain holy water blessed by the Pope. When her grandmother died the same year she retired, she left most of her savings to Margo, her only grandchild.

Plus, Margo's job as a stockbroker didn't exactly leave her counting pennies at the end of the month. She suspected her competence intimidated Raymond, or perhaps he was unnerved she made more money (a lot more money) than he did as an adjunct at the community college.

Ultimately, Margo knew Raymond brought up the money to change the subject, to keep her from pressing him about Harriet. "Okay," she said. "I'll meet with Robin myself. But don't be surprised if I pick our new home without you."

"You don't have to threaten me," Raymond said. He pointed at Margo's empty plate. "You aren't eating any breakfast."

"I'm not hungry." Margo crossed her arms over her abdomen as if to indicate an ache. Beneath her shirt, she could feel the ill-defined pressure of her ribs.

\*\*\*

After breakfast, Raymond collected his papers, the nonsensical, trite musings of his students, and headed out the door, whistling lightly. He would teach a couple of classes, giving to the students what he felt was equivalent to his pay (not much) and then pick up the boys and take them to the batting cages, a place he was certain they'd never been, not with pansy-ass Harriet calling the shots. Sometimes, late at night, when Margo was asleep and the nymphos in the apartment upstairs gave it a rest, Raymond bemoaned the probability of his boys growing up effeminate, unable to change flat tires or catch a football without getting decked in the face. He especially worried about Jonah, who was small for his age and ran with an unsteady gait, his belly pushed forward, his back swayed. Once, Jonah had asked Raymond for a doll after watching the five-year-old across the street arrange her Barbie's hair in a French braid. Raymond suspected Jonah would grow up to pursue an "alternative lifestyle," something he, Raymond, could prevent, if only Harriet would relinquish her goddamned clutches and allow him more time with the boys.

Harriet. Even her name made Raymond's stomach turn. Rarely did he have a memory of her like he'd had of her voice, smooth and soft, so overwhelming was his anger toward her. She had left him just when he'd started to matter, when the boys were past their incandescent need for Motherese and breasts, when they'd begun to show an interest in building forts and shooting make-believe guns. Sure, she'd had good reason to leave (though Raymond barely remembered the student's face, much less the brief encounters they shared on his office floor), but she didn't have good reason to keep him from the boys, their growing limbs and awkward faces. All he wanted was the right to see them now and then during the week, to attend their karate practices and school plays, instead of being relegated to every

other weekend like a family friend, someone they knew and enjoyed but could nonetheless live without.

Raymond fired up his decade-old Accord, the only material thing he retained in the divorce, and opened a pack of cigarettes. He tried to concentrate on the joy of the day, the unexpected surprise of an afternoon with Jonah and David. He didn't want his resentment of Harriet to cloud the time he spent with the boys, but swallowing his anger irritated him, especially when they accidentally called him "Mommy" (out of habit, because she was always with them) or when they talked about the fun things they'd done with her, trips to the mall to try a new climbing structure or outings to the science museum where they had learned the names of human bones and touched butterfly wings with their fingers.

And now he had Margo on his case, too—insatiable and inexhaustible Margo. Early in their relationship, Margo had been supportive of Raymond's time with the boys. She would lie awake with him at night and help him think of ways to make himself a presence in their lives. She encouraged Raymond to keep a journal of his time away from the boys so he could read it to them when they reunited on the weekend. She purchased Raymond a camera and suggested he tape photographs in the journal. Margo's generosity, her enthusiasm for his kids, was what attracted Raymond to her in the first place, though he never actually wrote in the journal and used the camera to photograph Margo while they were camping, half-drunk and over sunned.

Now, Margo acted possessive and irritable, complaining of his time away from her, accusing him of loving Harriet in a way he could never love her. Raymond felt stretched between them like a rope holding a boat at dock.

At school, he flung his briefcase on the desk and plopped into his chair. He thought he'd wait like this—with his computer off, his desk empty—until one of his students showed up to annoy him with one of their “ideas,” as they blithely called them. Yesterday, he'd talked to a group of freshman about sexist language and was surprised by his female students' naïveté regarding words. I am not offended by the word mankind, Naomi told him, as if she had reached a level of maturity Raymond hadn't. I know when someone uses the word mankind, they really mean humankind. Stacy informed the class that “Feminism was bullshit” while Raymond folded his arms and nodded politely, hoping his face didn't reveal what he was really thinking: *Stacy would be a good fuck with a gag in her mouth.* How tired he was of women, their smug assessments and chatty philosophies.

Before class, Raymond called Margo to wish her luck with Robin. He listened to the litany of her morning, grocery shopping and phone consultations with clients, while he scrolled through some Internet porn and recorded the grades for a batch of student papers. On a whim, before he hung up, Raymond asked Margo if she'd marry him. He had the feeling marriage was the only way to save their relationship. Maybe, Margo said. Maybe after Christmas we'll talk.

While Margo packed for the beach, she recited poems she had memorized in high school (*It makes me laugh to see a woman in this condition*) and considered the look of her left ring finger encircled in a diamond band. She knew she'd look ludicrous in something expensive, especially a ring, which she'd be forced to wear everyday, even at the gym or during her yearly pap. Margo admired women she saw at the hair salon with shiny rings on

their fingers, their hair too blond and their skin too dark, as if they were bestowing upon the world a preschool art project rather than a face, but she didn't think she herself could ever wear a ring without feeling somewhat hysterical. She was simply Margo, the woman with bobbed brown hair and brown eyes, the woman who had looked her age before her time, who couldn't bear to look at herself when she emerged from the shower, her breasts limp, her thighs dimpled. How could she possibly wear a ring with any sense of dignity? Diamond rings were for women with regular manicure appointments, not for a woman whose worth was pent up in her brain, an invisible thing, for which Margo felt fortunate but would trade for a flat stomach any day.

Margo filled her suitcase with suntan lotion, three bathing suits (all of them one-piece, she hadn't lost any weight), and a yellow jumper she'd found in the mall while looking for new sandals. She planned to wear the jumper on Saturday afternoon when Trevor met them for an early cocktail and a walk on the beach. Under the gauzy fabric, Margo hid a bottle of sesame oil and a feather she'd once been given as a gag gift. She thought she might try something new with Raymond, something Harriet (she hoped) never had done.

Raymond loaded the trunk of the Accord with their bags and a cooler. Margo watched the muscles in his arms as he hoisted the plastic bin over his head, wriggling his hips at her as if he were a dancer with a pineapple or a woven basket balanced on his skull. Then he turned away, his playful mood gone, replaced by the usual Raymond. "Let's go," he said, setting the cooler in the trunk and slamming the hood shut. "I need to get away from this place."

*This place.* The sense of home she tried to create had been reduced to mere walls and ceiling, something to get away from. Margo sickened to think her hard work, her lavish breakfasts and solo dates with Robin the tent woman, had been for nothing. Where did time

go when it went away? Down the disposal with the remains of her muffins, her pancakes, her blueberry scones.

“I’m ready,” Margo said. Already, she knew Raymond could never see her as he had Harriet, whether she married him or not. She would always be the woman who came after Harriet, who tried to emulate her cooking and care taking, who wanted to fill a role Harriet had thrown away like loose scraps.

Margo tossed her purse in the back seat and settled into the car. She rolled down her window so she could feel the cool afternoon air on her face, the light flecks of dust from the street. She felt angry with Raymond for having been married, though she knew she was being silly. Of course he couldn’t have known he would meet Margo when he agreed to marry Harriet. Still, Margo wanted to make Raymond jealous. She wanted him to feel the same rage she felt.

In the distance, Margo imagined she saw a purple and blue striped hot air balloon. She watched the balloon float along the horizon, its bruised flesh tipped with sun, and disappear behind the mountains. She considered leaving Raymond, effortlessly, without looking back, concentrating on her work and her old friends, whom she barely saw anymore. The possibility of being alone opened to her like a flower, like one of the petunia buds on her windowsill at home.

“I’ve asked Margo to marry me,” Raymond said.

The bartender set their drinks on the table while Margo watched Trevor’s face, trying to gauge his reaction. Trevor looked just as Margo suspected he would, with blond hair and

freckled skin, precisely the poster boy of a graduated Harvard scholar. Margo thought he had the kind of soft body that would turn entirely to fat in a few years, probably after he published his first book or when he married some woman from a big family, a woman with fleshy arms and wide hips.

Margo didn't see anything in Trevor's face that indicated surprise at Raymond's announcement—in fact, Trevor seemed to have little reaction at all, as if he were listening to Raymond describe an article he'd read in a journal or his plans for a future student assignment. Margo wondered if Trevor hadn't heard him.

“Of course, Margo hasn't accepted yet,” Raymond said. He patted Margo's thigh, covered by the yellow jumper. Underneath, Margo was wearing one of her bathing suits in case Trevor or Raymond suggested they go for an evening swim after their drinks.

“I'm still thinking about the offer,” Margo said, trying to sound lighthearted. The last thing she wanted to discuss with Trevor was her relationship with Raymond. She'd been trying to attract Trevor's attention by sitting with her back straight, her breasts pushed forward, occasionally fingering the beaded necklace around her neck, but Trevor seemed disinterested in both of them, as though he were present to meet the requirement of showing up and was now eager to return home.

Margo examined the yellow fabric skirted against her thigh and felt instantly sorry she'd decided to wear the jumper. She must look silly, a borderline menopausal woman dressed in an outfit meant for a teenager. What had she been thinking? The lights in the mall must have made her delirious, must have convinced her the yellow fabric brought out the bronze hues in her skin.

She folded her hands in her lap and tried to look happy. She tilted her head and smiled at Trevor, determined to act girlish like Goldie Hawn, her favorite actress. Sometimes, she pretended to be another person, particularly someone famous, when she could no longer stand being herself.

“Trevor,” she said, leaning toward him, “do you have a girlfriend?”

Trevor swirled the drink in his glass. Near his jaw, Margo could see the outline of a jagged scar shaped like a lightning bolt or a scribble. “Not really,” he said. “I’ve been dating a couple of women. Nothing serious.”

“Oh,” Margo said. She tried to picture what the women looked like but could only conjure look-alike Harriets, replicas of the Harriet she remembered from the photos she’d found. She realized with a start that her knowledge of Harriet derived primarily from her own imagination, her assumptions based on a handful of 3 x 5 photographs. Her patchwork assessment of Harriet and, now, of Trevor’s girlfriends, wasn’t grounded in anything real. Margo thought perhaps she felt inferior to Harriet because, in her mind, Harriet had come to represent the things Margo wished she were—a good cook, a loyal spouse, a generous mother—not because Harriet had been married to Raymond.

“Trevor’s not much of a one woman kind of guy,” Raymond said. He thumped Trevor on the shoulder. “Remember Meghan? She was my girl freshman year, but you nabbed her, too.”

“Nothing happened between Meghan and me,” Trevor said. “You were jealous we carpooled to campus.”

“Right,” Raymond said. “And the suspicious mark on her neck was the inevitable result of ten miles together in the car.”

“I’m not starting this again,” Trevor said. “All I can tell you is Meghan and I were friends, and only friends. Anything you want to construe from our car rides is your business.”

Raymond looked out the window, ignoring Trevor. Margo concentrated on the mole on Raymond’s neck, the bristle beneath his hairline.

She considered the irony of her situation: while she had dressed in what she thought was a seductive outfit to make Raymond jealous of her, he instead was jealous of a woman he had known years ago as a college freshman with acne and crude masturbatory habits.

Trevor finished his drink and sat back in his chair. “When do you think you’ll make a decision?” he asked Margo. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a stick of gum, half wrapped and covered with bits of lint.

“About what?” Margo said. She suddenly felt too warm, too excessive. She wondered if she could sneak away from Trevor and Raymond and go swimming by herself, away from Trevor’s self-righteousness and Raymond’s insecurity.

“About whether or not you’ll marry Raymond.”

“I don’t know.” Margo felt she couldn’t commit to anything, not when she couldn’t be trusted to pick out a jumper in the mall. A decision felt like too much. She’d rather indulge uncertainty than engage reality, a place littered with ex-wives, incompetent boyfriends, and spontaneous engagements.

Raymond turned from the window. “It was a joke.”

“What was a joke?” Margo said. She felt her lower back begin to ache as though she were too cold or in the heavy part of her menstrual cycle. She placed her palms on her back

like she'd seen pregnant women do, pushing her belly toward the table. The pressure in her back seemed to soar upward, toward her head, and escape through her skull into the air.

"Getting married was the joke," Raymond said. He grinned at Margo, revealing his chipped front tooth. "I don't know why I asked you. I think I wanted attention."

Margo stood and smoothed the front of her jumper. She knew how she'd distinguish herself in Raymond's life: she'd be the woman who had refused him.

"The jokes on you, Raymond," she said. "When you get home, you'll find your things boxed up on the lawn. Good luck finding your own place."

She felt satisfied her money allowed her the benefit of the last word. She knew Raymond would have difficulty finding an apartment he liked with his low-paying job and steep alimony and child support payments. If Raymond didn't miss her in his new life, he would at least miss her money.

Margo had almost reached the shoreline, the yellow jumper trailing from her fist, her sandals tossed in the sand, when she heard a voice behind her, a far away sound, an echo.

"Margo! Margo! You left your purse!"

She stopped and waited for Trevor to catch her. With his hair spiked in the breeze, his shirt pressed against his belly as he maneuvered the sand, Margo believed he looked like the kind of man a woman would marry. She imagined inviting him to her hotel room, dropping the keycard in the dish by the television, sliding her shoulders from the straps of her bathing suit. His skin would be familiar, she knew, like her muffin pan or her petunias on the windowsill. Inviting him into her bed would be like going home.

## EMPTY GLASS

In the years during her marriage and following her divorce, Iris diagnosed herself with a variety of psychological disorders (an easy task with the advent of the Internet), but it wasn't until two years after the divorce when she invested her energies in compulsive overeating that Iris felt herself truly come alive. Somehow, in the company of a pint of triple fudge rocky road ice cream and a bag of Doritos, Iris felt control over her body, and the ways people perceived her body, like she'd never known, not even as a twenty-three-year-old bride with a tight ass and hooters to make her new husband's knees buckle. She enjoyed systematically destroying her firm abdomen and sleek hips, and the excuse of a disorder only furthered the erotic appeal of French fries dipped in salsa, pancakes drenched in honey.

"I'm a compulsive overeater," she announced to her ex-husband, Gary, over the phone. "I'm officially sick." She thought of her mother's slack body positioned in the tub, weightless in the water, and imagined Gary's disgust with her overeating must be like her own repulsion toward her mother. What Iris wanted was Gary's attention, even if the attention was negative: she thought her sickness would drive him back to her.

Gary was a lean, strong-muscled man, the kind of guy who gulped kelp caplets and protein shakes in the morning before hitting the gym where he ran five miles on the treadmill and worked with the weights while watching the sports channel. Gary liked to brag about his ripped abdomen and veined arms, mostly to Iris, who had long since tired of listening. Initially, she had been attracted to his discipline, his willingness to leap out of bed while she burrowed into the sheets in an effort to stay warm, but after a while his discipline merely

annoyed her, mostly because the time Gary spent at the gym was time he wasn't focused on her and her problems, all of them self-diagnosed.

Two years before the divorce, Iris had gone through a phase where she believed she suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from her mother's memoir, published when Iris was eleven, chronicling the old woman's stints at various nudist colonies. This diagnosis was one of many, all made by Iris in an effort to understand her unhappy feelings and bizarre behaviors, like her habit of pinching her arms until she bled when she felt angry or her uncontrollable urge to pluck out her eyebrows when she and Gary had a fight. Gary liked to suggest to their friends that Iris's conduct (her violent mood swings, her ritualistic cleaning, her petty self-mutilation) was what led to their demise, not, as Iris swore, Gary's obsession with his body, including his concern over his prolific back hair and his conviction that his penis was too small for, as he described it, his "very large frame."

Now, the dust settled and most of her friends gone, Iris began to suspect Gary was right. She developed an idea of herself minus the hormones and moods, afflictions of an angry brain. She rewrote the script of her marriage, casting herself as a reasonable, controlled woman who didn't throw staplers at her husband's chest or tape lewd signs (*Honk if you want to suck my cock*) to the license plate of his truck. She composed new sections of dialog, replacing "I regret the day I married you" with "Let's snuggle under the sheets and I'll rub your back." Iris believed if only she could replace the real with the fictional, she could save her relationship with Gary. If only she could make the words tangible.

At night, Iris lay in bed, an empty bag of caramels by her hip, and considered her brain as an object separate from her body, an object on a green and beige plate looking not unlike the cliché heap of spaghetti noodles featured in the haunted houses of her youth. She

imagined packaging the noodles in a paper bag, tying off the top with a raffia bow, and tossing the parcel into a lake. The package felt light in her hands.

Her therapist, Dr. Kuka, regularly encouraged her to talk about her marriage (he said she needed to identify the problems in her relationship with Gary before she could successfully entertain another romance), but Iris preferred to use her hour with Dr. Kuka to go over ideas for her poems, none of which had been published, but held, Iris believed, great potential, if only someone would help her sort out the various themes and threads.

Currently, Iris was working on a poem about grocery shopping with a dead cat. The poem was insincere and phony, mostly because Iris couldn't capture the essence of what she wanted to say. (Having something to say, she felt, was what made her poetry genuine.) Dr. Kuka suggested she make the cat metaphorical, perhaps by swaddling him in receiving blankets or a hand-sewn quilt, but Iris rejected his idea as contrived. After the appointment, she went home and wrote a sestina about her sister's wedding that, in the poem, ended with the death of her childhood pet, Puddles the Cat. In the third stanza, the cat received a sunbonnet as a gift from his owner.

At night, Iris intermittently wrote poems and picked at the pound cakes she bought at the neighborhood bakery and sipped thick milkshakes topped with whipped cream and flecks of dark chocolate. She found her writing improved with bites of sugar and carbohydrate. Instead of staring into space when she got stuck, she took a bite of powdered doughnut or gulped her lemonade, and instantly, magically, the simile or image she wanted popped into her brain like a burst of light. *The cat lay limply in the cart, a dead cocoon*, Iris wrote, invigorated she had decoded Dr. Kuka's metaphor. She had the sensation she was on to something.

Iris continued her rituals of poetry and overeating until late one afternoon she bumped into Gary at the Chinese restaurant they frequented when they were married. Iris had spent the day browsing in the small, high-priced specialty shops on Lake Street where the restaurant was located, and when she passed the familiar brick building on the way to her car she decided to stop, thinking she might take some rice and chicken to her mother, who lived nearby.

At first, Iris didn't recognize Gary. He had grown a full head of black and gray hair. Early in their marriage, Gary had lost his hair due to male-pattern baldness, but now he had hair covering his entire head, even near the temples. Iris suspected plugs.

She hadn't considered Gary would change following the divorce: she thought of him as a character in a book, capable of changing not by his own accord but only in the ways she thought of him. She imagined him waking as he always did, in a hurry, full of energy, downing the kelp caplets and protein shake and heading for the gym.

Gary's change didn't stop with the hair plugs. He was wearing a black leather jacket with copper snaps (he found it on sale in the mall, he said), and his face looked fuller, less drawn. Iris thought the lines on his forehead looked less severe and his teeth were whiter. She wondered if he had used an at-home bleaching kit or if his teeth always had been that white and she, busy scrubbing the bathroom tile with a toothbrush or dusting the living room bookshelves for a third time in a day, simply had failed to notice.

Gary suggested they sit in a booth and catch up. It's been more than two years since we've seen each other, he said, which was true, except they'd talked on the phone many times, including last week when Iris informed him she was a compulsive overeater in the hopes of winning him back.

Iris watched Gary when she took off her coat, studying his expression. She tried to determine if he was disgusted by her increased girth or merely curious. “I’m writing a poem about a dead cat,” she told him, deciding her body was no longer a point of interest for him. He hadn’t looked at her belly or breasts (she resembled, she knew, a pregnant woman with wide hips) but rather had focused his eyes above her neck. “The cat’s body is swaddled in blankets like a newborn baby.”

“Really,” Gary said. He raised his brows and nodded his head in a way that reminded Iris of a parent going along with an extravagant story told by a four-year-old. “Sounds pretty intense.”

“Yes,” Iris said. She watched the young Chinese waitresses scuttle from table to table, their lithe bodies quick, efficient. Iris longed for such swing in her step. Even flights of stairs made her tired. She had stopped going to her favorite bookstore because the building lacked an elevator—a sure sign, Iris thought, of a weight problem: she was adjusting her lifestyle to accommodate her body.

“You can imagine how the woman feels, pushing around a body like that,” Iris said. Sometimes, at the post office or in the mall, she saw obese men and women tooling around in electric wheelchairs, their bloated ankles balanced on metal footrests. She visualized her body in a chair, restful, at ease, heavy on the black upholstery.

Gary pulled a tissue from the pocket of his leather coat. “No, I really can’t,” he said. He blew his nose, sending bits of lint onto the collar of his shirt.

Iris felt an old feeling return: the desire to point out the flecks of tissue, to remind him blowing his nose at the table was rude.

“How does the woman feel?” Gary said.

“I don’t know.” Iris no longer cared about the poem. She could remember only vaguely the words and line breaks. The way she felt while watching the waitresses was meaningful to her in some small, private way (she would write a poem, later, posing herself as a waitress with dark hair and thin wrists), yet she knew her resemblance to them was hollow, empty. The words, she knew, were not enough.

Gary scrunched the tissue and put it in the pocket of his coat. “Listen,” he said, tilting his head in what Iris interpreted as a feminine gesture, an expression of empathy, “I’m sorry I didn’t handle our phone conversation well. I know you wanted emotional support. I’m sorry I couldn’t give that to you.”

Iris placed her fingers on the saltshaker. She watched a couple come out of the gift shop across the street, holding hands, looking happy. The man was carrying a bouquet of flowers in his free hand, which he held with the blooms pointing downward, toward his feet. Iris wondered if they were going to a dinner party, perhaps to another couple’s home, a place filled with whicker baskets of potpourri and pictures of smiling children. “I didn’t need emotional support,” Iris said. “I was lonely, that’s all.”

She looked at Gary’s hands clasped on the table. He had worn his wedding ring for months after the divorce, finally moving the band to his right hand for a week or two before removing it permanently. Iris knew this from her friend Elaine, whose husband sometimes played golf with Gary on the weekends. Iris sold her own ring at a pawnshop in Palm Springs for two hundred dollars, which she used to open a savings account. So far, she had added another four thousand. She was saving to self-publish her book of poems—if Dr. Kuka would ever take the time to help her revise or, better, give her the words.

“The nature of the beast,” Gary said. He put his hands under the table. “Everyone’s alone.”

The waitress came and asked what they’d like. Gary ordered Iris the sweet and sour chicken and the egg soup, her old favorites, without bothering to consult her. When the waitress smiled at Gary—a little too eagerly, a little too generously—Iris noticed her plum lipstick had rubbed onto her front teeth. Iris watched her walk away, admiring her thin calves and small ankles. Near the strap of her shoe was a tattoo of a butterfly.

“So,” Iris said. She tried to cross her legs but couldn’t. Her thighs were too big. “Are you seeing anyone?”

Iris hadn’t intended to ask Gary, despite her curiosity, but the words left her mouth before she could stop them. She knew the answer would hurt, would hurt that small part of herself she buried beneath layers of angel food cake and bowls of shredded cheese mixed with olives, that small part of herself she smothered with poetry and excuses and accusations toward her mother. Iris instinctively stuffed her hands under her thighs and pinched the flesh on her legs. The pain made the answer more bearable.

“I’ve been seeing a woman for about six months,” Gary said.

Iris watched him examine the grooves on the table. She tried to think what had initially attracted her to him: his discipline, certainly, and the prominent veins in his forearms, but beyond this she didn’t know. How odd that she had spent years of her life with this man.

“I’m happy for you,” Iris said. The waitress came and put two sodas on the table, the dark liquid sparkling and popping under the light. Iris moved her glass away from herself,

toward the end of the table, aware Gary was watching. She wanted him to know she could change for him.

“How about you?” he said. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“No,” she said. She thought wrapping the cat wasn’t such a good idea after all. Surely someone, a fellow shopper, the cashier, the bag boy, would ask about the contents of the bundle. Is it a boy or a girl? they would ask, and what was Iris’s narrator supposed to say?

Gary sipped his soda through a straw. “Sometimes, being alone is the best way,” he said, bobbing the straw up and down in his drink.

“What do you mean?” Iris said. She was prepared for one of Gary’s speeches, his endless diatribes on any subject, big or small. When they were married, he’d once spent twenty minutes explaining the advantages of chromium picolinate, which Iris had casually suggested as a possible culprit for Gary’s restless sleep. She’d read in *Time* that chromium picolinate was associated with nightmares. Gary, however, would have none of it. He insisted chromium was essential to the diet, and if Iris had any sense she’d start a regime of chromium picolinate pronto, on the double. Halfway through his argument, Iris felt she was being personally attacked, not for her reading but for her lack of attention to her dietary needs.

“What I mean,” said Gary, moving his hands from the table to his lap, “is when you’re alone you don’t have someone depending on you for attention and affection. You can do whatever you want, whenever you want. Look at you, for example. You get to write poetry, eat out at restaurants, call friends on the phone—even your ex-husband for Christ’s sake—all without clearing it with another person first.”

Iris clenched her fists. She felt like a half-drowned woman in a cold and empty ocean. “My life is full,” she said. She uncoiled her fingers and imagined the ocean overtaking her, the cold water filling her mouth, forcing her to swallow and gulp until she became too heavy, too tired.

Iris felt her eyes fill with tears. She opened her purse and tried to locate a tissue. When she couldn’t find one, she emptied the contents of her purse onto the table: her wallet, a lipstick, two tampons, keys, sunglasses, a ballpoint pen, a granola bar, and a vial of sleeping pills. “Jesus Christ,” she said. She used the collar of her blouse to wipe her nose.

Gary pushed his drink to the end of the table. This was the part where he bowed out, unable or unwilling to offer Iris comfort. Iris recognized the firm mouth and set jaw. He probably thought Iris was complaining again, or behaving like a needy child. He often said when they were married he didn’t like to reward her self-indulgent gripes with solace. Usually, when Iris was upset or solicited Gary for reassurance, Gary either had gone to the gym or locked himself in the garage, where Iris could hear the drones of his electric trains and the shrieks of his power saw.

“Listen,” he said, sliding his arms into the sleeves of his coat, “I know you need somebody right now.” He pushed a handful of bills toward Iris. “But I can’t be that person.” He touched Iris’s arm in a half-hearted gesture of consolation as he walked past her toward the entrance.

Iris turned around in her chair to see if he would actually leave or merely give her a warning. In the process of twisting her body, though, she knocked her soda onto her lap and the floor. The plastic cup landed and bounced four or five times before rolling under another couple’s table. Iris thought she should attempt to retrieve the cup, but the thought of getting

on all fours with her bottom sticking out and her face near the couple's shoes stopped her cold. The woman reached down and picked up the cup by the rim with her thumb and forefinger. She leaned over and handed the cup to Iris, who set it back on the table next to Gary's.

The waitress appeared, armed with napkins and an expression of half-sympathy, half-disgust.

"I'm sorry," Iris mumbled, standing up. She smoothed a wad of napkins over her blouse and pants. She tried not to look at the people sitting at the tables around her, their petty interest and smug assessments of her belly and hips.

"I can wipe this up," Iris told the waitress, who acted like she hadn't heard her. She waited while Iris swatted a napkin at the contents of her purse and reloaded the items, one by one. The waitress wiped the table, then walked to the back of the restaurant and returned with a broom and mop, which she deftly swiped at the chunks of ice and syrupy liquid.

"Okay," she said. She waved her hand at the table, indicating Iris to sit down.

Iris shook her head. She pulled her coat from the back of the chair. "No," she said. She adjusted the coat over her arm so the fabric covered her abdomen. "We've decided to go. We'll take the food home instead."

The waitress looked confused. "No?" she said. Her lipstick was gone, even the smudge on her teeth.

"I'm sorry," Iris said. "We're not feeling hungry after all." Iris considered the idea of hunger. She couldn't remember the last time she felt hungry. She simply ate all the time, in an endless effort to stay full. Iris felt as if she were expanding like a balloon: a magnificent circumference with nothing inside.

Later, at home, Iris contemplated calling Gary to demand an apology. She threw an old towel on the bed and lined the boxes of Chinese food on the towel as if arranging a buffet. She planned to sit in bed and eat the rice and beef, the saucy chicken, while watching television. She unwrapped the plastic forks and knives carefully, stuffing the wrappers into the empty paper bag the restaurant had provided.

While setting out the meal, Iris thought about her mother, the way she would leave the bathroom door open when she went to pee, how she would sit on the bed in nothing but her underwear and maneuver her feet and legs into a pair of pantyhose. Iris wondered about the sense of entitlement her mother demonstrated, coolly gliding her limbs into flesh colored nylons, incognizant or insensitive to her daughter's shame.

When Iris had the food ready, she closed the bedroom door and lowered the blinds. She didn't want to feel someone watching.

When they were first married, Gary liked to watch Iris undress, mostly after they woke and the frost on the windows melted in the morning sun, leaving drops of water glinting on the sill. Gary would lie in bed on his back, his arms flung on the pillows, and watch Iris lift her white nightgown over her head, exposing her camisole and the brown, crescent-shaped birthmark on her thigh. Because Iris was careful about her diet, and because she enjoyed the sense of power she felt she had in these moments, she would undress slowly, bending over unnecessarily or letting her fingers linger on her breasts when she unhooked her bra.

Later, when Iris became inflicted with her “problems,” as Gary liked to describe them, he stopped regarding her when she unbuttoned the white pearl buttons on her nightgown or when she pushed her ankles from the wool socks she slept in at night. Her body hadn’t changed—not then—but her mind had, and she supposed Gary’s inattention to her body was another of his punishments for her.

They had been married for nearly two years when Iris began to feel less tolerant with herself, with Gary, with their life. She spent more time in front of the mirror, convinced her belly looked loose and flabby, persuaded her eyes were too close together, too rounded and wide, like a puppet’s or a monster’s on an afternoon special. Iris couldn’t drive the car to the corner grocery store without checking and rechecking the size of her pores in the rearview mirror. In her purse, she carried a pocket mirror so she could examine the fine lines around her mouth, the narrow sweeps of her eyebrows.

Iris critiqued Gary, too—she complained of the dark hairs emerging from his nose and sprouting from the moles on his back, the sour taste of his mouth when he kissed her, his refusal to wash his hands after urinating. These things bothered Iris, really bothered her, to the point that she couldn’t bear to eat a meal with Gary without reflecting on his failure to use a napkin or bemoaning his use of a dollar bill to floss his teeth.

At first, Iris kept her criticisms to herself, occasionally letting loose in her journal or to one of her friends, but after a time she began to tell Gary how she loathed the moles and freckles on his arms, how she hated his sloppy penmanship and unintelligible signature, how she longed for a husband who regularly clipped his toenails and managed to throw away dirty cotton swabs instead of leaving them on the bathroom counter.

Of course, Gary's body and personal habits hadn't bothered Iris in the first two years of their marriage. She hadn't minded tossing the swabs in the wastebasket. She hadn't resented Gary's rationalization that because he didn't touch his penis he didn't need to wash his hands. In fact, Iris found Gary's habits endearing. She appreciated his incongruous and downright contrary attitude toward his body, the way he spent an hour at the gym but couldn't spare five minutes to floss his teeth before climbing into bed. Iris believed she loved Gary for his contradiction. In the contradiction she saw possibility.

When Iris first complained to Gary about his inadequacies, as she saw them, Gary quietly listened and said he would try to do better. Yes, he agreed, it was rude of him to leave his dinner plates stacked in a heap in the sink, and he was wrong not to wash his hands after he used the bathroom. He could indeed have spread germs to Iris and made her sick. But while Gary conceded to these minor issues, he ignored the commentary pertaining to his body and penmanship, citing Iris's low self-esteem as provocation for her judgments. You don't feel good about yourself, he said, so instead you are hurting me.

Once, when Iris refused to sit next to Gary on the couch because she declared he smelled like old laundry, Gary ducked behind her and rubbed her shoulders in a gentle, loving way, his fingers moving in circles over her skin. I know you love me, he told her, using his palm to smooth her hair. I think when you feel better about yourself, you'll feel better about me.

Iris felt grateful to Gary for not abandoning her, but she also lost respect for him. She couldn't understand why he tolerated her cruelty, her non-stop criticisms and admonishments. Iris began to press him further, pointing out his erections weren't as hard as they used to be, his abdomen wasn't as taut, criticisms she knew would hurt him. One night

after they made love, Iris informed Gary of her habit of faking orgasm, the way she clenched her thighs and covered her face in an effort to convince him.

After a time, Gary stopped touching her when they lay together in bed. He avoided contact with her body when they moved about in the kitchen, pouring coffee or loading the dishwasher. If Gary accidentally brushed Iris's arm, he would say, "*Excuse me,*" and pull his hand back as if he were bitten. His visits to the gym became more frequent, more necessary, and he spent more time in the garage, claiming he needed to align his train tracks with pliers or build a bookshelf to house the locomotives and gondolas, the small red caboose with the light on the back, the black and white tank cars with the words *Pacific Northern* etched on their sides. Night after night, Iris watched him carry the cassette player and a soda into the garage where she could hear him working with his tools and occasionally singing along with the music, his voice low and breathless.

Gary's voice, the desperate way he sang the words, made Iris regret her criticisms, her endless nagging. She pictured how terrible her life would be without him, how she would miss the miniature Buddha trinkets he kept lined on the windowsill, the hand weights propped near the television, the model race cars stashed in the closet. Her life would be empty, she knew.

But when Gary reappeared from the garage, his face red, his sweatshirt filthy, Iris felt her anger return, as if the anger were a being, a force, inside her, out of control, hot and furious. She admonished Gary for trailing sawdust on the carpet, for leaving his empty soda can crumpled in the garage to attract ants.

"Christ, Iris, a measly can won't result in an ant catastrophe," Gary said.

Later, when Gary turned away from her in bed, Iris wondered what was wrong with her. Why did she have to destroy the one good thing in her life? She would slide out of bed slowly, quietly, and lock herself in the bathroom, where she would sit on the side of the tub and peel the calluses from her feet with toenail clippers until she bled. When she was finished, sometimes an hour later, she covered the wounds with ace bandages and socks so Gary wouldn't find out.

Iris began seeing Dr. Kuka but couldn't bring herself to talk about Gary, about her failure as a wife. Dr. Kuka suggested she write about her thoughts and feelings prior to their appointment, but rather than write in a journal about her marriage, Iris wrote a series of poems, most of them describing the landscape of her garden or the park where she sometimes walked. Landscapes, she knew, were a far cry from anything meaningful, anything real, but she wanted to keep her distance from Dr. Kuka. She didn't want him to see her as Gary had.

Later, when her desire to have a reason for her angry tirades grew to be too much, Iris checked out a stack of self-help books from the library. She matched her feelings and behaviors to the examples described in the books. She especially felt persuaded by the characterization of a woman named Gilda, who spent her days cleaning doorknobs with a bleach-soaked sock, occasionally stopping to cut her hair with pinking shears or pick the scabs from her self-inflicted wounds, most of them administered with a nail file or a ballpoint pen.

Iris recognized herself in Gilda. She identified with the urge to exert herself over something as inconsequential as a doorknob, as a flank of dead skin. Knowing there was someone like herself in the world, Iris felt a small degree of comfort, until she remembered Gilda was no more real than words on a page, the illegitimate child of a psychiatrist-writer.

\*\*\*

In the morning, Iris collected the empty boxes of chicken and rice, the half-eaten fortune cookies, and stuffed them in the paper bag. She threw the towel in the bag, too, because she didn't want to be reminded of her date with Gary. She carried the bag, which felt somewhat damp, to the dumpster, thinking about her mother and the possibility of change. When Iris returned from her first year of college, a small engagement ring on her left hand (Gary later replaced the ring when he got his first full-time job), she discovered her mother had changed in her absence. She no longer spent her Sunday mornings picnicking at the nude campground twenty miles out of town, and she stopped promenading about the house without her towel after her morning shower. She continued to leave the bathroom door open, and she still enjoyed relaxing in their basement Jacuzzi without a bathing suit, but Iris remembered appreciating her mother's efforts, however small.

Near the dumpster, Iris found what appeared to be the remnants of a handmade hope chest, a container the size of a shoe box covered in red velvet, topped with glued-on bits of macaroni. A child, probably a girl, had made the box in a Sunday school art class or with the help of her mother.

When Iris lifted the lid of the box, a few pieces of the macaroni slid onto the pavement. Inside, she found a paper clip, a rubber band, and a few scraps of paper, without words. She closed the box and left it sitting by the dumpster.

Perhaps, Iris thought, she had spent too much time focused on her body and too little time focused on her soul, if she wanted to call it that. No wonder Gary had grown tired of her. She was like the box: ornate on the outside, empty on the inside.

At home, Iris discovered a message on her answering machine. She listened to Gary's voice, high-pitched and quick, while she sipped her coffee and straightened the books on her desk.

"Hello, Iris. It's me. Gary. I wanted to apologize for last night. I know I shouldn't have left you sitting by yourself, especially since I invited you to sit with me, but I panicked, you see, and I'm sorry. The woman I mentioned? Well, I guess I started thinking about her. She's been pressing me about things lately, like getting married, and when you started crying I felt I couldn't stand to have another woman upset with me. Anyway, I hope you're okay. Call me sometime if you want."

Iris erased the message, thinking she would have to let go of her need for validation from Gary. She poured the last of her coffee down the sink. Then she fished her notebook from the top cupboard, where she hid it, and went out to the front porch to write a poem.

She thought she might try a poem about a person for once. Not herself, not Gary, just some person who had no context in the real world. A person for whom words meant everything, for whom words could substitute as a kiss, a mirror, a meal.

Iris sat on the porch, admiring the buds beginning to open on the rose bush. She reached her hand to touch the red and pink petals, the green leaves and firm stems. Even the buds, she suspected, possessed both an absence and a truth.