Softly spoken

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SOFTLY SPOKEN

by

SARAH K. INMAN

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Senior Scholar's Program

COLBY COLLEGE
1993
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Peter Lecroy
I am always surprised that people cannot understand range and change and variety and contradiction and tragic feeling and a saving dash of frivolity and the deep sense of comedy, the salt of life that makes our daily bread bearable.

-Katherine Anne Porter

And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh so that all that hear will laugh with me.

-Genesis Chapter 21. 6
Table of Contents

Salt Water Never Freezes  page 1
Accidents Will Happen 9
Stegosaurus 19
Spectacle 28
Seafood Circus 44
Sí Chucha 56
Occupied with Cranks, Deadbeats and Oddballs 67
Cadaver 93
Epilogue
SALT WATER NEVER FREEZES

The winter is going. You can tell by the snow that hangs in massive clumps from the roofs above. It hovers at the edge of the gutter, threateningly, like a seagull, getting ready to shit on your shoulder. And you are ready to go to the beach house. It's not ready for you however. You understand that the unusual cold has left ice patches in the bay. Irregular shapes of ice bob like sea creatures from a nature show. But you always thought that salt water never freezes.

It is the fourth time in three months that he calls early in the morning, asking to borrow money. The ex-husband, Stan, who went to New Jersey for a while to get his act together and to get away from it all. This time, Stan needs one hundred, a hundred and fifty dollars, whatever you can give. Stan has something at a canning warehouse lined up for work but, it won't begin for another week. You ask him how he is and he says much better, although the throaty scratch of his voice sounds as rough as ever.

"Send it to the same address. I mean, it hasn't changed since," he says. "I didn't wake you. Did I?" he adds.

"No," you lie.

"I didn't wake Karen. Did I?"

You say, "She's sleeping through almost anything now." And then, you think, thank God that she sleeps now. There was a time when she would sleep all day and stay awake crying all night. The doctors said that it was good for her; that she was just experimenting
with her lungs and her new sleeping pattern outside the womb.
Karen is two-and-a-half years old now. It's been a while since she
has screamed all night.

This time when Stan calls, he manages to wake you up from a
dream that you were having about cooking rice in such a way that it
comes out hard, like pebbles. It's five minutes before six. He
apologizes but he has to go. Too bad, you think. While he was trying
to escape it all, he moved in with Donna. Donna is insanely jealous of
you and you cannot figure out why. Donna always wears jeans with
tight, unflattering, sweaters. She also has a collection of glass
figurines and you never could understand why someone would want
to have a collection of such delicate knick-knacks. Whenever Stan calls or
when you call him (which isn't often) Donna leaves the apartment for
a while. She cannot tolerate it. Stan apologizes and he goes out to
look for her. You might have time for another ten minutes of sleep
but you cannot get comfortable again. Instead, you pick a magazine
off the floor and read an article that supposedly helps to assess your
personality and your tolerance of other people. You remember
taking a similar test for your job. Since no one had been trying to
divorce you that day, you were in a relatively good mood and, you
scored well.

True or False

1. I think that the majority of people are cranks, deadbeats and
oddballs.

Although you circled false for the survey on your job
application, today you choose true. For the rest of the day, you will
categorize people you know by these definitions. The man who sold
you your car was unquestionably a crank. He was bitter and it showed in his sales pitch. You parents are oddballs. It is amazing how marvelously they have managed for so long, being so different. Your mother is active and lively. She goes to the cinema once a week to see one of the new films. She also has a fetish for rhinoceroses. Rhinoceros magnets decorate the refrigerator. Friends send her birthday cards with at least one rhinoceros on the front. Sometimes when they can't find ones with rhinoceroses, they send ones with dinosaurs. On a good day, your father will drive downtown and buy some groceries or weed the small vegetable garden on the side of the house. Does that make him a deadbeat? You're not sure. A real deadbeat in your opinion in Frank Dizogni, the pizza-faced guy from your high school chemistry class. He never did his homework and always copied off your quizzes in class. Frank had a job at a film developing shop during high school. You think that he still works there. Tomorrow you will forget these categories and continue with your life as it is.

The familiar sounds of Karen's babbling and the noises that she makes while playing with her flexible, plastic, animals tells you that your daughter is awake. Presently, Karen has a preference for the green monkey. Last month she played with a pastel blue rabbit until she pulled its legs apart until it tore the rabbit in half from the crotch up. You go into the next room to make sure that she does not ingest any plastic bits that may be on the floor, and help her to dress. She has wet her plastic underwear, that she wears only at night and you have to explain to her once more how she should ask Mommy if she needs to go to the bathroom, even if she has to wake her up.
Karen will appreciate a trip to the beach house this summer. She'll appreciate it more and more every summer, especially when she is fourteen and ripe in her bathing suit. You are sure that your parents will not mind. They don't mind you living in the annex of their home. They seem to understand that you just got off to a bad start with your life. Your family talks about it. About you conceiving a baby out of wedlock, about your rushed marriage, about your drunk, divorced husband. Your family talks about your art work and that one painting you sold for two hundred bucks. They talk about the art history class you recently took and how they stayed home with Karen two nights a week so that you could listen to some grey-haired man ramble on about what the shadow in plate eleven means to you. But, there is at least one member of your extensive family whom you can look to when you need to feel better about yourself.

Your cousin Randell, who you would classify as a deadbeat, is thirty-five, and like you, lives at home. Unlike you, he does not have children. He does not have a steady, boring job, unlike you. He sells shoes one week, and the next, he sells knives door to door. Once he was a late night security guard who watched television and read People Magazine. Another time, someone paid him to drive his car cross country. He began with the best of intentions but when he reached Minnesota, he got bored and flew home. He still watches late night television and reads People. Also, unlike you, Randell has an annoying lisp. Randell also has a tattoo of a boa constrictor that no one likes. You have a tattoo that no one in your family would like if they saw it.
You work at a car rental agency. Sometimes you even get to tell people about different places they can drive to with the rented cars or the various places where your company has other branches. You always recommend that they make a reservation with you ahead of time so that when they arrive in Key West, Squaw Valley, Toronto, Albany, Houston, New Orleans, they will have a car waiting for them and be ready to take off. Mister Allan is in again today to rent a car for another business trip. It seems like every other week, he flies to Chicago for conferences. Mr. Allan is definitely a crank. His daughter’s name is Christine. She is probably also a crank. Last you heard, she has gone back to school for fashion design in New York City. The two of you are the same age and used to take ballet classes together. After class everyday she would ask you for thirty-five cents to buy a Kit Kat. If you had it, you always gave it to her.

Christine was one of your summer friends; your beach house friends. You rode bikes, sucked on the flower of a yellow plant that your mother warned would give you a sore throat. You dug for clams, and went fishing, and skipped flat rocks across the bay. One time you and three friends decided to play in Christie’s boat house. It was dark and musty inside. Christie came in while you were playing. She started kicking you in the shins when she came inside. Christie was much bigger than you and she liked to push you down. Once she got you down on the cold floor, she liked to take swings at you with her fists and feet. You didn’t know what she was so angry about. Your other friends opened the door and waited for you to get up off your knees before leaving.
The beach house is meant to be a family escape and you think back to driving down the highway on a warm afternoon in late June. One of your brothers put a towel over your head and you were forced to inhale the scent of laundry detergent. The other brother tickled your sides until you felt like something is going to burst. Your heart, your lungs, your brain, your guts. Someone forgot the tanning lotion and you had to buy a tiny bottle of the stuff in the overpriced grocery shack across from the beach. You brought it back to the city house with you and forgot it there again the next time you returned to the beach house. Someone will always leave the tanning lotion at the city house.

Even today, you like to sweat. You hop around the room in front of the television until your limbs shake. Perhaps you are an oddball and all the sweaty people in the workout video are oddballs too. The reception on your television is terrible. You get two and half channels but at least your parents own a VCR that they let you use for your exercise videos. You get a glass of water from the bathroom. Stinky clothes and shoes left behind the bathroom door. You and Karen should move out soon. Karen is getting more and more impatient these days. While you're working out, she crawls in your way. She crawls onto your stomach during the crunches part of the video. There was a time when you insisted on jogging even when you were four-months pregnant.

Stan came into your room one night without your parents knowing it. He was drunk and charming and he wore sandals. You
remembered hearing once that Charles Manson wore sandals but you cannot remember where, and if your source was a reliable one. Stan carried a backpack of books and said that he would read to you. He had been studying and drinking. In the top bunk, the heat rises. Fortunately, no one was on the bottom bunk. He read to you from The Raven. All you can think about is dead women. Stan didn't get far into the poem, a stanza or two, before he began to kiss you with his lips and not much of his tongue. This a refreshing change from the slobbering drunks who like to root around in your mouth like plumbers. Stan is a gentle drunk, or at least he used to be.

At work, some college punk calls with a list of questions. He is asking too many and you know that he is only looking for all the asymmetrical information that you can give him. In other words, he wants you to double talk so that he can use it in a report.

"We offer unlimited mileage up to 150 miles a day, Sir."

"And if you exceed the limit?"

"And if you exceed the limit, the cost is fifty cents each mile, each day."

"To what extent is the car insured?"

"All damages to the exterior of the vehicle will be covered."

"Okay. Thank you."

He hangs up. You hang up. He's most definitely an asshole, but you'll put him down for a crank. Asymmetrical information is just another way of explaining how to dick over the customer. It's television without reception, beer without alcohol, and shit without potpourri to hide the smell. Sex without orgasm, and death without a
funeral. You're not dead yet and you just hope that no one mistakes you for pulseless, and drops your body into a pit.

The ride to the coast is a little under an hour, which is still a long time to drive and keep Karen occupied. You leave around her nap time and she sleeps most of the way. The neighborhood should be quiet around this time of the year and you are looking forward to seeing your old home undisturbed by the overabundance of summer activity. But, as you turn down the driveway, a light goes off in the house. It is now that you recognize the beat-up two door Datsun parked across the street. You know that all your neighbors are summer residents. Now occupying your home is a family of Gypsies. Oddballs, you assume. Freaks, Randell would have called them. But, what does he know? This family consists of two men who appear to be in their sixties, a woman who is slightly younger, and a young girl and boy.

But who are they and what are they doing in your home? You call the police. They arrive and embarrassingly enough, you discover that this family of supposed Gypsies are actually people renting your beach house out for the winter. You feel stupid for the rest of the drive home.

The following morning at eight a.m., the phone rings once again. You let it ring. It wakes Karen. You let her babble and softly cry to herself. You could get out of bed. Instead, you stare out the window at the stalactites of frozen water that decorate and threaten the outside of your home. They could fall or melt.
ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN

As I sit on a bench at the edge of the cliff I wonder what it would be like to just leap off. It would probably be very painful since a spring low tide has exposed the rocky shoreline. Anyway, I was just wondering. Of course, according to my mother, it's a miracle that I'm alive, with all the weirdos out there and all the freak accidents. You never know, you could just slip on a pretty autumn leaf, fall back, and crush your skull. That's why I wear only shoes with good traction.

The longer I sit, the damper my hair gets from the humid air that hangs over the grey ocean. My sweat is starting to dry and I feel sticky inside my polyester softball uniform. It's gross weather, the kind that strangles out the sunshine and smears it into a sickly haze. It's the kind of shitty weather that makes old people pass out in churches.

It's the kind of day that if I were still five years old, I would spend the afternoon hiding out in the cool dirt underneath the willow tree in our backyard. I would sit there playing with insects and giggling to myself until my mother would call me inside for dinner. I'd never go inside right away though. I'd just sit there until my brother Andrew came to get me.

Presently, I sit with a melting ice pack over my left eye. With my right eye, I watch a man and a woman who are talking on the shore below. They look like actors in a Shakespearean play, speaking only in iambic pentameter. It's probably a tragedy, like Romeo and
Juliet, King Lear or even Hamlet. As they move up from the shore and towards my bench, I realize that I can't stay here all day. I have to go home and deal with the mess I've made.

"Nice game," I hear someone say. It's the Shakespearean couple, actually Christine Beaurubi's parents. Mr. Beaurubi says, "Way to get down on the ball! Too bad about your eye."

"Thanks."

"Have you had your eye looked at?" Mrs. Beaurubi asks.

"Uh, no. I've got this ice, though."

"Well, you should really go and have it checked out," she says. Then she realizes what I'm so worried about. "My gosh! Isn't tomorrow Andrew's wedding?!" Yup, you got it Sherlock, I thought. And I have to go home with this egg that covers half of my face.

"Well, you must be excited! Are you in the wedding party?"

"Yeah, I--"

"Well, of course you are!" Then Mrs. Beaurubi goes on for a while, drilling me with questions about the wedding, how my family is doing and all those other questions that just seem irrelevant to me right now. Sure, I'm capable of bullshitting with her, but I'm just not in the mood for "and what color are the bridesmaids' gowns?" conversation. Read the damn paper, I think. Find out who the ushers are, where the bride comes from, and whether or not she chooses to wear her mother's wedding gown, and also read about how lovely all the bridesmaids look except Andrew's little sister, who messed up her pretty little face in a softball game. If only she weren't so selfish, and so clumsy, she wouldn't have ruined the
wedding. Finally, Mrs. Beaurubi remembers she left Christine at Pizza Hut and that she must get going.

I continue to sit, fumbling through my duffle bag, looking for a mirror to see how awful it really is. As I shuffle through my things, I come across an index card that my mom gave me before I went to New York City last Christmastime. It is written in outline form and reads:

RULES TO FOLLOW WHILE IN NEW YORK CITY:

1. a) Hold tightly to handbag, but surrender if life is threatened.
   b) Stick together.
2. Do not go to Central Park or Harlem.
3. a) Get return schedule for train.
   b) Do not stay outside too long. It's very cold (30 degrees below zero w/windchill).
4. a) Do not take anything from strangers.
   b) Do not talk to strangers.
5. Do not sit in running car-exhaust asphyxiation could occur.

Rule number 5 always gives me problems because I never mess around in cars. It's just too uncomfortable with the gear shift in the way and all. Sometimes I just want to scream at my mom and say, "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that when I go out on a date, I screw around in the back seat of some car! And you're afraid that one of these days, I'm going to forget, and leave the car running with the windows rolled up and then someone will find me the next morning dead and half-naked with some guy, also dead and half-naked. Then we'd become the hit story of the local police beat. And, oh, wouldn't the Beaurubis just love to talk about the little Kibble girl who disobeyed her mother by violating rule number 5!" I just want to say, "Mom, what's all this shit about
strangers and going to Harlem? Yes, mother, if you don’t mind, my friends and I are going to camp out in Central Park for the night.” I want to say all this, but I have to learn the value of holding back on sarcasm.

I just don’t understand why she treats me this way. It’s not as if she forbids me from going places and doing things, it’s just that I can’t understand why she thinks that I must be told everything. She let me go to skiing with Eddie one weekend last winter and she even allowed me to go to Mexico with my friends over spring break. Of course, the night before we left for Mexico, she sat me down, looked me in the eye and said, "You’ve just got to be careful. You know why guys go on spring break. Don’t you? Because, they want booze and sex."

"Thanks, mom, I was kind of hoping that there’s more to life than just that."

Ignoring my sarcastic tone, she went on. "Hey, listen, Anita Beaurubi’s niece was raped in Daytona last spring. She was with all her friends, and then this man that she met at a bar followed her back to her room. No one could hear her screaming until it was too late. That’s why you’ve got to stick together! I worry about you so much!"

"Oh, yes, rule number 1 b, I remember." I grinned as I said this.

"That’s right, and another thing, I hope that you’re not drinking when you go out with your friends." Mom has already covered this area with me. Sometime this summer before I went out with my friends, I found one of her notes on the counter. DEAR
KERRY, IF YOU DRINK ALCOHOL TONIGHT, YOUR NAME WILL BE IN THE POLICE BEAT SECTION OF THE PAPER. HAVE A NICE TIME!
LOVE, MOM

I find a compact among my things. The swelling has gone down a bit, but it'll still be black and blue for tomorrow. She's going to blame me for not turning my head quickly enough. Then, she'll blame herself for not stopping me from playing in the game. Just as I begin to fix my face with Clinique's Miracle Cover-up, I hear our station wagon's muffler rumble to a stop behind the park bench. I hear my mother slam the door angrily and march behind me, so that I can see part of her twisted expression in the mirror.

"Let me see your face!" Frightened, I turn my head slowly towards her, averting my eyes and looking down. "Look at me!" she shouts as she grabs my chin with her strong fingers and sharp nails that drive into my soft face. "Disgusting!"

"I didn't mean to-"

"Oh! Just shut up!" And now, I just don't know what to say, so, I start to cry. It really was my fault. Yesterday she suggested that I not play in the game just to be on the safe side. I wanted to say, like I've said in the past, "Maybe I shouldn't get out of bed in the morning just to be on the safe side." I went ahead, I did it anyway. I need sympathy now and I know that I won't get it for a while.

"Stop crying! Do you want your one good eye to be red and puffy for tomorrow too?!"

"I-I-I can't!" I blurt out between sobs. "B-b-but, mom, it was an important g-g-game!" My shoulders are hunched over, I'm
sobbing heavily now and finding it difficult to breathe. It's an awful feeling, like I'm being suffocated not from crying, but by the this overwhelming force. This beast is worse than any of the Grendels, the Lex Luthers and the wicked witches of our minds. This beast is my own flesh and blood. No, this she-wolf sometimes tells me that I'm so beautiful and to be careful when I shave my legs for fear that I might cut a vein and bleed to death, then at other times tells me that I'm the dumbest, ugliest creature on earth.

"Sit up straight! You look like a hunch back!" She's right. With my swollen eye and my slouched body, I probably do look like a monster. "Do you sit like this with Eddie? It's not very attractive, you know?" As much as she hates him, mom occasionally finds it useful to toss his name at me like a hand grenade. "Now, get in the car!"

I peel myself from the bench and manage to put my duffle bag in the back seat, but I hesitate at the door. I get in and slam it. My mom tries to start the car, but it won't go; it keeps stalling.

"Damn it! See what you made me do!" With that remark, I leave the car and begin to walk very fast. I take long, powerful strides and I imagine that I'm a soldier, marching off to battle. I can breathe again. I follow the path down to the shore. A feeling of incredible self-righteousness overcomes me. She's the enemy; I'm the good guy. What makes her say that it's my fault that the car won't start?

When I was younger, my mother used to threaten to get a leash for me. "You see that," she would say, pointing out some helpless child bound in what looked like a medieval torture device
looking over the cereals in aisle four, "that's what I'm going to get for you if you take off on me again!"

"No, you won't!!" I would respond. "I'd be like a dog. I'd break loose and get away!"

"Yes, and you, like all bad, wild dogs, would get rabies and die." She always had to extend the metaphor in favor of her point.

The mud on the shore is now splattered all over my white stir-up pants and cleats. It's time to stop walking. She's not far away and I know that she's looking for me. Perhaps I would be better off if I were a character in a Shakespearean play. When they have problems, they kill themselves or other people, and the audience is always satisfied. She appears shortly after I take a seat on a nearby rock. "I called your father. He'll be here as soon as he calls triple A." I can tell by the tone of her voice that she wants to reconcile; however, I'm still too angry to forgive her. Guilt is a good thing. "When Daddy gets here we can go get some make up for that eye." Although her expression has softened, her eyes have yet to entreat me to accept an apology.

"I don't want any damn make up." My tone falls cleanly and sharply like a blade, annihilating any compassion or guilt I've worked so hard to create. "Don't you talk to me that way!" Then, she feigns a slap. "I'm going to throw up!"

"Yeah, I'll make you sick!" There's nothing left for me to say. I reach down, grab a handful of mud, and fire it. As one salty ball of sea slime strikes her chest, I aim and fire another one. There's
nothing she can do, she just stands there, covered with mud. After eight handfuls, I'm tired and I feel sick.

The rock I was sitting on looks like a good place to puke. Now, I'm retching up everything that my mom made me for breakfast and lunch. Then, I feel her soft hand caressing my back. "It's O.K. baby," she keeps saying. I don't want to hurt her anymore, but something is still troubling me.

"Why, Mom. Why do you want to hurt me? Why do you think I'm so stupid? Can't you see that it was just an accident?" I say in between regurgitations.

"I know, honey. It's just with your brother's wedding and all, we're all very busy you know. Here's a tissue. Wipe your face."

I've stopped vomiting by now. We're sitting in the mud and she's holding me like she did when I was a baby. We must look like two giant sea slugs, if there are such things. I'm exhausted, my stomach's empty, but the damp air is refreshing. "And another thing," I begin to question, "why do you treat me like a baby? Don't you trust me? I'm not stupid, you know? I mean, aside from today, that was just an accident. We can get make-up to fix it."

"I just worry so much. I don't want anything to happen to you. I had a sister once, you know. Where is she now?"

"Mom, that's different."

"How is that?" Now, she takes on the self-righteous, distaster expert, know-it-all tone, the you could drown in the bathtub if you're not careful tone. "You're wild, Kerry. You're wild just like my sister was. She liked to go out all the time. I trust you, and my parents trusted her, but you just don't know who or what's out there. And
you trust everyone, you think there's no danger in anything, just like she did. Just think for a minute, Kerry! The good swimmer that she was, she couldn't handle those rip tides. She drowned."

"I know, Mom. But I can't spend my life worrying about what might carry me away."

I never really knew my aunt. She was just twenty-eight when she left for her last vacation on the California coast. I was barely two then. As a result of Auntie Helen's accident, as the Kibble family calls it, Mom's always a little tense, especially before family vacations. I recall our first trip to Disney Land. When I heard the sobs coming from the back of the boat on It's a Small World, I thought it was some little kid, younger than I was. So, being an eight-year old, I said, "Shut up! It's only a stupid ride!" When I turned around, I discovered that it was my mother who was sobbing uncontrollably and saying, "This was Helen's favorite part of the ride," as we passed through the Orient.

"My goodness!!" is my father's response to the two of us sitting on the stinky low tide shoreline.

"Oh, Honey, you cut your leg shaving!" Mom notices the band-aide through my nylons. "You have to be careful, you know, you could cut a vein and bleed to death!"

"Christ, Mom! You worry about the silliest things!"

"Jesus, Kerry! Would you please not use the Lord's name in vain!"

17
It's impossible for me not to laugh. "Mom!! We've already been through this! Please, just calm down and enjoy the wedding!" I notice that she's kind of smiling too, at her own ridiculousness. Bruised and cut, I walk down the aisle and hope that there are no terrorists where Andrew's going on his honeymoon.
STEGOSAURUS

The dinosaur arrived early Tuesday morning in Burt's penthouse. He did not hear the creature come in so it must have found its way inside while Burt was sleeping. He figured that it was probably around four or five in the morning since he had gotten up once at three forty-two to urinate and get a drink of water. It puzzled him how the thing made it to the fifty-fifth floor of the building. The creature was amazingly quiet for a two ton Stegosaurus. It was just standing there in the middle of the living room, blocking the entertainment center. It covered almost the entire length of the room. The armored plates that protected its back rose up along its rear end and nearly touched the track lighting. There was a note that hung from one of these plates that read, "Call Julie". At least it wasn't a note like Paddington Bear arrived with, Burt thought. It did not read, "Please look after this dinosaur." Burt became bitter about this enormous burden since he felt that he didn't have the time to spend with a dinosaur. If he wanted a pet, he would have kept a few tropical fish in an expensive tank.

His work as a nuclear engineer had always been a priority for Burt, and researching the best possible areas for a nuclear waste dump consumed all his energy. Ten years ago he began working for Nu-Tech, and in that time he received several pay raises and saved enough money to buy himself a nice place to live. Each new project that Burt took on was more difficult than the last. The president of
Nu-Tech loved Burt because he was reliable and never let anything interfere with his job. Burt thought that if maybe the dinosaur had arrived in the spring, or a few months later, he could have handled it. It would even be a fun companion to tote around town or bring on talk shows. Burt would have informed all the interested scientists about his new housemate. He might have even wanted to keep it as a pet.

The dinosaur was munching on an English Laurel that was kept in a ceramic pot on the floor when Burt first appeared. It paused, turned its tiny head toward Burt and looked at him with wide, sad eyes that reminded Burt of Gruffy, a pet hamster he kept as a child. It was that familiar look Gruffy gave to him when she wanted to be fed. That scared, sort of sad expression also appeared on Gruffy's face the day she gave birth to a litter of six hamsters. At the pet store, his father had bought only one hamster but what he did not know was that she was pregnant. His father was so bothered by the extra animals and so angry at the pet store for selling him a pregnant hamster that he returned Gruffy and her babies. Burt hoped that the dinosaur was not pregnant.

Burt ate breakfast in the kitchen while watching a morning talk show program about people who loved their pets more than their spouses. Most of the guests were divorced or separated. Some were married but had to live in different houses.

When Burt returned to the living room, the Stegosaurus was still standing there in front of the couch, blocking the entertainment center. As Burt squeezed by it, the creature gave him that look again. This time its expression was accompanied with a low guttural
noise. *Uuhhn.* Burt was quite surprised to discover the dinosaur made a sound. Was it still hungry? Or was it going to have a baby? When Burt headed for his bedroom, the dinosaur made the sound again. *Uuhhn.* Burt turned back and examined the note that was dangling from one of its armored plates more closely. The words *Call Julie* were hand written in fluorescent pink marker on white construction paper.

Burt had to think for a moment of the last time he spoke to Julie, his girlfriend. It had been awhile. He just assumed that after their last meeting, she would call him. She never did. A few days had gone by. Then two weeks passed and now it had been almost three weeks since he had last seen her. They had met six months ago in the public library, where Julie worked as a librarian and Burt did some of his preliminary research work. The library was a convenient place for Julie to be, since it was only a block away from the Nu-Tech office building. Sometimes Julie would meet Burt for lunch. Then, one night she had called and had asked Burt out for dinner. He had already ordered a pizza and was planning on watching Benny Hill and going to bed early. Burt had suggested that they go out some weekend night instead. This was the beginning of their romantic relationship.

Now, six months after their first meeting, Burt stood next to the Stegosaurus and wondered why Julie hadn't called. She seemed to have a nice time with him the last time they went out, three and a half weeks ago. They did what they usually did and went out for Chinese food, then returned to Burt's where they had sex several times until they couldn't move any more and went to bed. Although
the next day was Sunday, Burt got up early to work on some research. Come to think of it, Burt was a little lonely and he felt that he missed the presence of Julie’s body wrapped beneath the covers of his king-sized bed. He would not call her because he had no reason to, other than the note on the dinosaur. If there was something bothering her, or she wanted to talk to him, she would simply call. Burt had learned not to let little things bother him. Over a period of time Julie had become one of those little things. She appeared to Burt as a constant variable. Any extra value he gave to her would take away her consistency, and therefore, imbalance the equation of his life.

When Burt returned from work, the dinosaur was still there. It looked at him with those sad eyes and made that sound again. *Uuuuhnn*. The English Laurel was completely eaten. Burt left his apartment and went to the florist, where he bought seven English Laurels, five Spider plants and two geraniums. Although the Spider plants and the geraniums were on sale, the bill was quite high. The creature gobbled up the English Laurels, nibbled at the Spider plants but left the geraniums untouched. The next time he went out food shopping for the Stegosaurus, Burt went to the grocery store where he bought out all the marked-down plants, some bird seed and even a pumpkin, just to see if the Stegosaurus would eat it. The dinosaur seemed to like the bird seed but ignored the pumpkin.

Burt now ate all his meals in the kitchen watching television on his six-inch black and white. The dinosaur spent all its time in the living room. Burt would feed it and give it water from a large mixing bowl that he never used. And occasionally, Burt would turn on the
color television to the Discovery channel for the dinosaur to watch. What at first appeared to Burt as an overwhelming responsibility was now one of those little things that he wouldn't and couldn't allow to interfere in his life. As long as the dinosaur stayed in the living room, Burt discovered that he could live with it easily enough.

Over the weekend, Burt went to the library and did some research on dinosaurs. Surprisingly, he did not see Julie there. The Stegosaurus in his living room was from the Jurassic period that ended about 150 million years ago. It could grow up to twenty feet in length and its hind end could reach up to eight feet in height. Burt was thankful for his spacious penthouse. The Stegosaurus was a plant-eating dinosaur with armored plates extending from tail to head that served as protection from other dinosaurs. Ideally, these plates would scare off any enemies before they even thought to attack. The plates also made it easier for the Stegosaurus to camouflage itself. If it absolutely had to, the Stegosaurus could lash out with its spiked tail at any approaching trouble. Fortunately, this dinosaur had no need for his defense mechanisms in the comfort of Burt's apartment.

One evening, after the Stegosaurus had been in his apartment for a week, Burt returned from work and was content with himself since he had found a piece of land in Montana that would be perfect for the nuclear waste sight. He got off the elevator at the top floor and saw Mrs. Winston, a member of the cleaning staff, vacuuming near his door. When she turned off the vacuum, they heard a noise coming from his apartment. It was the dinosaur, Uuhhnn. She asked him what the hell that noise was, if someone was going to have a
baby or if someone was really sick or if someone's dog was running mad. Burt shrugged, keyed his way into the apartment, and slammed the door before Mrs. Winston could peek her head inside. The dinosaur was standing in its usual spot, moaning. Burt couldn't understand why it was crying, since there was a fresh bowl of water and several plants left on the floor. Then he noticed the "Call Julie" note. It was floating in the bowl of water. Burt removed the note and the Stegosaurus began to excitedly lap up the water like a kitten would milk. Burt crinkled up the note, threw it in the trash and thought that it had been a while since he had talked to Julie. He had a few minutes. He called.

Burt was surprised to find out that Julie was pregnant. He asked her how far along she was.

About a month. It must have happened the last night they were together.

He asked Julie what she planned to do about it.

She didn't know yet. They would have to talk.

He said that would be fine since he had more time now after having just finished an important project at work.

She said she couldn't believe that it took him so long to call her and that he actually thought so little of her.

He didn't understand what she meant by him thinking so little of her.

Julie said that talking would be useless if that's how he felt.

Felt like what?

Never mind.

The dinosaur moaned as Burt hung up the receiver. Uuhhnn.
The following day after work, Burt went to buy more bird seed and plants for the dinosaur. As he walked home, Burt became tired while carrying the 3 pound bag of seed and two English Laurels. He passed Julie’s apartment building and decided to go up for a visit to rest his tired arms and legs.

She asked him what the plants and bird seed were for.

Nothing important.

She asked him what he thought.

About what?

About the baby.

Oh. He didn’t know. It was her decision.

She knew that, but she’d like his thoughts on the matter anyhow.

It was entirely her decision. He offered to help financially, but didn’t think that he’d have the time if she decided to keep it.

She told him that she didn’t want to see him anymore and to get his lazy ass out of her apartment.

Burt gathered his plants and bird seed and left.

When he got home, Mrs. Winston was standing outside his door. She said that something smelled awful, and it seemed to be coming from his penthouse. She again asked what the hell was in there. Burt tried to ignore her. She poked her head inside anyway. The glimpse of the Stegosaurus and the sickening stench of its excrement caused her to gasp. A mound of dinosaur turd covered the rug and part of the sofa. Burt called the janitor of the building, who upon the sight of the excrement, gave Burt the number of a cleaning service that he could call. They were people who were hard pressed for cash
and more likely to do it than any of the custodians in this building. A team of six people shoveled and scrubbed for several hours.

It's kind of cute, one of them remarked. Does it have a name? No.

_Obliviously_ it's not house trained.

Burt told them not to tell him how to care for his dinosaur.

He couldn't be bothered with dinosaur shit again. In the morning, Burt called the Fire Department, who said that they would be right over. The Fire Department called the Army Corps of Engineers, who said they would send someone over to assess the situation. The representative from the Army Corps of Engineers said that they would be able to assist with the dinosaur's removal by offering a few helicopters and a few good men. He gave Burt the number of a construction company, which would have to take off part of the roof to hoist the dinosaur out. The process would be difficult and expensive but not impossible. Burt called the city zoo, who also sent a representative over to assess the situation. The zoo people were very excited and spent a lot time in his apartment, studying the dinosaur. Burt was tired of all the phone calls.

Nu-Tech heard about Burt's problem and encouraged him to take a few personal days from work so that he could straighten things out. Burt was grateful for this time off since he had many people at his penthouse, drawing diagrams, making calculations and preparing for the dinosaur's removal. During this time, he wondered how Julie was and what she decided to do with the baby. When he called her apartment, the operator said that the number had been disconnected. Although Julie told him that she never wanted to see
him again, Burt stopped by. No one was home. He went to the library and looked for her there. He asked the other librarians where Julie was. They told Burt something about her quitting work, being sick of this goddamn city, with its goddamn insensitive people and her returning to Montana where she was living with her mother. They were almost positive that she wasn't coming back.

Four days after the Stegosaurus shitted in his apartment, the dinosaur removal squad finished their project. Burt watched the tranquilized dinosaur being raised onto the roof and into the sky. He had to spend a few days in a hotel while they put the roof back together. For some odd reason, when Burt returned to his apartment, it felt smaller, less spacious. Burt sat on his couch and watched color television from the entertainment center for the first time in a while. And when he got tired, he went to sleep in his king-sized bed.
SPECTACLE

The sound of a freight train passing through the county late at night reminds Rose of a hedonistic chant that she heard once somewhere in a horror film. When she was younger, if her parents were home or if there was a baby sitter in the house, Rose felt secure that she would be protected from whatever might be out there. Either the adults could protect her or the mere presence of others would be enough to ward off any evil. Rose used to sleep in this comfort but now she is not so sure. Growing up the oldest of three sisters has taught her not to seek out dependence or comfort in others. Nowadays, Rose is constantly working and studying. She does not have the time to get scarred. It seems to Rose that she spends her day wishing for a moment away from people and wishing for more time to sleep, and when these wishes are finally granted, she is unable to fall asleep.

The steady drone of the train that rumbles about a half a mile away from her window is too similar to what ghosts are supposed to sound like. It is nothing, she tells herself, there cannot be anyone out there. And before she goes back to sleep she pulls a popular women's magazine from underneath her bed and flips through it before letting it slide to the floor. There is something comforting about reading advice on hair removal and fashion. They seem to confirm her existence and remind her that there is room for her in the world. She, like so many other people, has hair on her legs, underarms and bikini line that needs to be ripped, plucked, burned or shaved off.
If the woman's magazine fails to provide a sense of security, Rose will lie awake on her side, staring out the window across the street into the neighbor's apartment. The blinds are always open and the computer screen is on. Rose knows that the man who occupies the apartment's name is Milton and she is pretty sure that he writes news for the local paper. This seems to explain why he stays up late at his computer. Milton is a sinewy, rather slim man with wavy red hair.

Rose has seen him up close a few times outside in the driveway while he was getting into his car. Once, when Rose was hurrying from her apartment and was not expecting it, Milton surprised her by saying hello, which caused Rose to slip and fall down the bottom three steps from the apartment. Rose's clumsiness now gave them something to talk about. Milton would ask how her back was doing and Rose would answer by saying, "My ass is fine. How's yours?" To which he'd smile, touch his rear and say "still there."

Now when Rose walks by, she grips the railing tightly and carefully walks down the stairs. She hates to make a spectacle of herself. There were a few other times that she caught him off guard, looking at her as she went in and out of her apartment. Sometimes, almost every time that she's spoken with him, she could feel his eyes on her, sizing her up.

"What size are you anyway?" Milton asked Rose once.

"Sometimes a ten, sometimes a twelve." She answered.

"I thought you might be," he said.

The next day there was a box left in between the screen door and the wooden door of her apartment. In it was a red cotton knit
sweater and a note that read, ROSE, HERE IS SOMETHING THAT I
THOUGHT YOU MIGHT LIKE. I CAN NO LONGER WEAR IT. MILTON.

"There's got to be something wrong with that boy," Uncle Harry
said when Rose told him about the gift.

"Why?"

"I dunno. It's just a funny feeling I got." Rose didn't like it
when Uncle Harry got "funny feelings". Usually he got funny feelings
after he ate and that funny feeling would soon become a funny smell
and Rose would have to leave the room. The last time Uncle Harry
got a funny feeling there was a train accident that involved a car
transporting a supply of feather beds derailing into the local swamp.

Milton looks taller from the apartment window and up front
his age is more dubious. He skin is freckled and slightly pock­
marked and may be older than twenty-five. She somehow prefers to
look at him from the window from where he looks more boyish and
less threatening.

Rose especially likes to watch on the nights when Milton has
just showered and is wearing only a towel around his waist. His
small body is fairly well defined with muscle and when he sits at his
chair, a small roll of fat curls from his belly.

Most of the time just watching Milton will put her to sleep. He
is a focus, like the moving images on television to watch, to stare at
until her eyelids cannot hold up any longer and she must give into
sleep. When she wakes again the room across the street is dark and
the computer screen is turned off.

Rose's uncle, Harry, is upstairs rummaging through his drawer
of wool sweaters, sniffing the armpits of each in an attempt to
determine which ones need to be dry cleaned before winter officially arrives. He pulls out his old favorite kelly-green one that he wore often last winter. The wool has balled and the waist band is stretched quite a bit. He sniffs under each arm and decides that it could do without the cleaning although there is a hint of body odor and moth balls. Almost immediately Harry sneezes from the wool. He hangs the sweater over an arm chair before going to bed. He has fallen asleep long before Rose even feels a hint of drowsiness.

Rose moved in with Harry a year ago to save money while she finishes getting her bachelor's degree in accounting. There is no guarantee that she will find better employment afterwards and it is tiresome to always have to be somewhere, but she keeps going. Sometimes Rose feels like she did when she used to run. There is this feeling like her heart is going to explode from her chest. The only difference is that when running she always knew how much farther she had to go and that she could stop anytime to walk the rest of the way. Rose liked to pick up the pace toward to end of her run and give it one last push for the final sprint home. Sometimes the best part about running is stopping.

"You could always move in with your Uncle Harry," her father said to Rose one day. "You'd have your own room and it's better than coming home to an empty apartment. You always did hate to be left alone in the house."

Rose's first thought about moving in with Uncle Harry was his funny odor. She was also reluctant to move in with Harry because of the fate of the last woman to live with him.
A few years ago, Harry’s girlfriend, Norma, moved out. Later, Norma told him that she was a lesbian and that she had moved in with her new lover. Her newly discovered sexuality had nothing to do with her moving out. It was only after she realized that she and Harry could not live together that she started loving women. Harry was a bit surprised and confused, but still more hurt than anything since he still felt like he loved her.

"You’re not a dyke. Are you?" Harry asked Rose one day.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"I dunno. I don’t see you going out at night on any dates."

"That’s because I go to school and when I’m not doing that, I’m working."

"Okay. I was just checking."

"And what if I was?"

"Was what?"

"A dyke."

"Well, for starters, I wouldn’t want any of your girlfriends coming over here."

"Why not?"

"Why? Because, I wouldn’t want them over here."

A real depression settled Harry when Norma drowned this past summer. She and the crew with whom she worked went swimming in a tank that was used to sanitize water. It contained fifty thousand gallons of water and had yet to be used for sanitation purposes. The tragedy occurred after the completion of the project when they decided to go for a ceremonial dip.
Tonight the train passes through town, crying its song. Rose turns to a page in the magazine with a lanky model wearing a bright pink suit, reading a newspaper and standing in front of a kiosk on the corner of some European boulevard. The woman is pursing her lips and her eye glasses have slid to the edge of her nose as she looks inquisitively at the paper. Rose turns the page to a photo of another big city street that is littered with small cars and lots of busy-looking people.

She turns to the window and lets the magazine slide onto the floor. Now, the weather has cooled and Milton is too cold to be wearing just a towel. Tonight he sits in front of the computer wearing a pair of dark blue sweat pants and a gray sweat shirt. Milton sits typing, only to pause and consult his notes. Rose is impressed by his concentration and diligence. He sits straight in his chair, rocking back or leaning forward to highlight something. Occasionally he gets up and returns with a cup. Rose guesses that it is a cup of water.

When Rose falls asleep, she is climbing, not falling, down a jagged cliff. When she reaches the shore, and looks back to the path she's come from, it seems like she'll never get back up it again. It's too steep. There is someone with her and the two of them continue to walk along the shore, which is lined with giant clam shells. They are abnormally enormous. Rose remembers reading something about hydrothermal vents in parts of the oceans where the water is extra warm and as a result there is an abundance of nutrients so that certain fish and other sea life grow to extreme proportions. Giant sea
worms would probably freak her out the most. They were certainly far from any hydrothermal vents. Where did these clams come from? They are fascinating to look at, especially when they open up and expose their soft pink bellies. Rose reaches her hand inside one, just for the fun of it, and quickly pulls it away, fearing that it may snap off her arm. They continue to walk along the beach, sticking their arms into the open mouths of giant clam shells. Then, Rose looks up to the shoreline ahead of her where there are hundreds of native islanders dragging their canoes in from the ocean. They’re not naked or clothed only in loin clothes as Rose expects. Instead each is wearing a brightly colored one piece bathing suit. The really bizarre thing that shocks Rose more than their bathing suits, more than the giant clams, is the fact that these people are just passing by her, not looking at her, ignoring her.

Harry wakes to the sound of the train that is sneaking through town just before five in the morning, well before his alarm goes off. The light begins earlier these days with winter approaching and for this, Harry is thankful. He is thankful that he does not have to wake in absolute darkness. Only thing is the hiss of that train dragging him out of bed and depriving him of a good twenty more minutes or more of sleep. Sooner or later it will subside. They will cut down on their runs because the weather will get bad.

Harry drags himself out of bed and into the coldness of the room. He is careful not to wake Rose up, although he knows that once she’s asleep, she will sleep soundly. Harry works at the post office, sorting mail and working the counter. Harry is thankful too
for having the job that he could have lost this summer due to a certain incident at Norma's wake. When Harry thinks about Norma he is happy for the most part, but memories of the embarrassment that he felt at her wake make him blush and bow his head dejectedly.

Norma's wake was a private one, meaning that Harry was not invited. Her girlfriend, Claireece, decided that only family and close friends should be invited. Absolutely no ex's. Harry was pissed off when he found out and showed up anyway. He got the feeling that people were staring at him throughout the entire ceremony and felt especially unwelcome when one of Claireece's friends made a snide comment about never getting his mail on time. Harry retaliated with by saying that Victoria's Secret catalogs were not priority mail. Claireece had her reasons for not inviting him. Harry was the cause of much heartache and mix-up for Norma in the days that followed their break-up. He called three, four, five, six, times a day and questioned Norma about the state of their relationship, the nature of it, and if they would ever get back together again. Often he had his friend, Mick, whose mail route included Norma's house, deliver flowers to her.

The day of the wake was particularly difficult for Harry. He knelt before the coffin and stared in. Norma's face appeared absurdly made up. Theatrical almost. He's never seen her wearing so much make up. She was also wearing a flowered dress that he'd never seen and clasped between her two hands was a pair of pink rimmed glasses that she wore for reading. Harry remembered Norma staying up late at night, reading by the bedside lamp while he
eased himself into bed and fell asleep. Norma would often complain about those damn things. They slid off her nose, they irritated her ears and she was always cleaning them. Sometimes when Harry could not sleep, he would lie awake and watch her read. Then, if that did not work, he would ask her what she was reading about, in which case she begin to offer a detailed explanation about the plot. This always put him to sleep. Harry could not imagine why she would want to take those things to the grave with her. On the other hand, Harry would like very much to have them. He had little to remind him of Norma except a few photos of their wedding and trips to the beach. The glasses would be, in Harry's mind, a perfect symbol of their relationship. They were something that she hated, that grieved her, yet that she could not do without.

An impulse to take them overcame him but unfortunately, Harry lacked slyness or any skill that would be useful in snatching a pair of reading glasses from a corpse. He did it without much thought, while he was kneeling before her casket. He wanted those rosy-rimmed glasses; he needed them. If he did not take them off, no one would, and Norma would be buried with what bugged her the most.

Meanwhile, Claireece was watching Harry the entire time as he knelt before the casket and blessed himself. She witnessed the entire rip off. She almost got tired of watching him, until she saw his hand go into the casket. She thought that he might be reaching out to touch Norma's breast one last time, getting a final thrill before they put her under but, then she saw Harry's fat little hand slip something into his pocket. Naturally, Claireece screamed.
"That sneaky bastard! Don't let him leave here without searching his pockets!"

Harry turned to face a funeral home full of disapproving glances. He was red in the face and when Claireece approached him, he took the pair of glasses from his pocket and handed them to her. The man who made the late mail comment frisked Harry before announcing that there was nothing else in his pockets to the curious onlookers.

"You can leave now, Sicko," said Claireece and Harry went home.

Around ten in the morning after Rose has showered and made herself up, she goes to work at Sardino's, a pub-style restaurant with decent food and a dark bar that gets crowded on weekend nights. The pay is not great but Rose has not been there for long and they let her work around her night school schedule. More importantly, it's an income for a time being until Rose gets her degree in accounting and a better job, a career. Rose cuts her legs shaving in the shower. There are no band-aides in the medicine cabinet, so she puts on a pair of black socks instead of stockings. She will have to change later at work when the bleeding has stopped. She spends the morning first helping the manager with paper work and sorting last night's receipts. Then, she wipes down tables and chairs before the lunch customers arrive.

On her break, Rose talks with Liz, one of the managers, about her trip to Paris.

"Everything in France is a fucking spectacle," Liz says.
"Really." Rose says.

"Yeah, I probably am tired of having been force fed culture. But, really, I mean, all we really did at night was go to shows at these cabaret places. The Moulin Rouge, Le Lido." Liz gesticulates with swirling arm motions, almost knocking over the coffee. Rose could only imagine what the hell Liz was talking about. Rose rather liked going out to bars that featured bands and wondered why Sardinos never had bands.

Liz smiles and takes a big, loud sip, staining the cup with her red lipstick, before continuing. "Watching a movie is crazy. It starts twenty minutes beforehand with just advertisements. People go to watch them, the advertisements, to see some titless French woman giving head to an ice cream bar. It's far from subliminal and it works too. Some guy in front of us bought one of the bars."

Rose lights a cigarette, pops a gum drop into her mouth and looks back at her. "Want one?" she asks.

"A cigarette or a gum drop?"

Rose hands over the package of candy.

"Everywhere you go, people blowing smoke in your face." Rose is careful to exhale out of the corner of her mouth, sending the smoke sideways. She is slightly offended by her treatment as a second class citizen because of her habit. In her opinion, it should be a personal choice to take up deadly habits.

"That's good," Liz says. "You smoke just like 'em? They all know how to do that, blow it sideways. In a crowded place you still get it in your eyes and clothes." She stops talking for a minute and
puts a green colored gum drop into her mouth. "Jesus. How long has this been in your purse?"

"I dunno. Just found them in there." Liz spits the half-sucked candy into a napkin.

"Didn't you used to go out with a French guy?"

"Canadian."

"Same difference."

Rose spends the rest of the afternoon thinking about her Canadian affair, Eddie, while she works. One weekend she and some people from work drove up to Canada where she met a guy at a club and spent the night with him in a hotel. It was the end of August, the weekend before her classes would start and the weekend of Norma's death. Rose began drinking with everyone during the car ride. When she got to the night club she could hardly see straight and began dancing with anyone and everyone who asked her to. Under the dark lights, surrounded by people and mirrors in a room filled with loud music, Rose felt safe. She watched herself in the mirrors of the dance hall. As she sweated, her drunkenness began to wear off.

She thinks about the way she and Eddie kissed on the dance floor and how she went back to the hotel with him. What Rose remembers most clearly was the way he looked at her, stared, wide-eyed, like a cow or some other animal with big pupils. He looked right at her and into her eyes before they kissed. It was weird and at first it scared Rose. She felt like she had stage fright or something, but soon Rose began to enjoy the camera, to love the camera as many

39
actors do. She fell in love with the camera and the camera man fell in love with her. The Canadian guy manipulated her into different positions on the bed and constantly asked for feedback, progress reports. "Ça va?" he'd say. "C'est bon?"

"Oui, c'est bon." Rose even had the opportunity to practice a bit of her high school French.

The next day, the management kicked them out of the Hôtel Margarin. Rose still believes that they were making too much noise, but Eddie insisted that the patron was just a bitch, that loud sex never got anyone thrown out of a hotel before. Around ten the next morning, the patron called their room and awakened them from a deep sleep. She was speaking furiously in French with much expression so Rose handed the phone over to Eddie. He talked loudly and Rose could tell that he was mad. She could even hear the patron on the other end, hollering back. Then, he hung up and lay back in bed.

"Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?" Rose asked.

He mumbled something in some language, then he focused his eyes on her again, and began kissing the side of her face. A few moments later, there was a knock at the door. Eddie opened it. A tall black man said something about them checking out. Rose understood this. She and Eddie got their stuff together, took a quick tour of the old city of Quebec and hopped on a bus back to New York. It was safer being with a stranger. Rose had little or no time in her life for a relationship, especially with her class beginning the first of September.

40
Harry often thinks about the exact circumstances of Norma's death. He keeps the article with the headlines NEWLY INSTALLED SANITIZER EMPTIED TO RECOVER DROWNING VICTIM in the top drawer of his desk. Included in the article are also details of how Canton and the surrounding town's sewage system was affected because of the emergency drainage. It took Harry some time before he could flush a toilet without thinking about Norma. Apparently, the crew just finished construction of fifty thousand gallon water tank that would sanitize more sewers than ever before. Norma had never swum in such a huge tank. She had been swimming in a ten thousand gallon tanks but never one this big. The crew thought that they were going to have to pass this one up, miss swimming in the water tank on the account of rain. The final day of roofing came and the sun was a force of heat that occasionally emerged from behind the haze at its full, powerful strength.

It was the end of August. Norma had been working all week on a ladder. When she wasn't painting the exterior, she was helping to lay out the roof. Rather than cooling things off, the previous week rain had come and gone, leaving sticky, humid weather behind. At lunchtime the heat exhausted crew of a dozen men and three women stripped down to their underwear. They tossed their heavy boots and sticky clothes into into a pile on the grass and climbed the ladder. From atop the ladder of the immense tank, one could see the border of Canada and the Saint Lawrence river. Norma felt scared and invincibile at the same time. She felt powerful, like she did when she was driving fast, yet helpless, like she did when her car suddenly swerved out of control. Jumping inside was refreshing, and
exhilarating. Some swam to the other end of the tank, under the roof-covered part, and called out names and told jokes just to hear their voices echo. Looking down into the dark shadow-filled water, Norma felt panicked and reached for the side. There was nothing to cling to. The other crew members were swimming on the other end of the tank. The sun was out now and Norma could see them climbing out over the side of the tank. She had a sudden vision of the roof closing in on her and being shut into the water tank forever and having to tread water for the rest of her life. Her calf cramped up, her breath quickened as she tried to swim toward the sunlight. Instead of following the circumference of the tank, she headed straight across, taking quick, heavy breaths. Her lungs filled with untainted water. Everyone had emptied out of the tank and it wasn't until they were getting dressed that they realized that Norma was missing.

Milton is sitting in his running car when Rose gets in late from her accounting class. He gets out of the car as she pulls in and says hello. Rose returns his greeting with a smile and a response. He lingers for a moment before inviting her inside his apartment for a drink. She says that it'll have to be a quick one since she has to work again in the morning. Milton explains that he has to do some late night typing anyway and that he wouldn't want to keep her up.

Milton's apartment is simple and neatly arranged. What surprises Rose is his flare for a sense of space. Paintings and photos are neatly arranged on the walls of the living room. The couch and cushy arm chair are nicely laid out.
"I like what you've done with the place," Rose says.

"Actually, I haven't done a thing to it. It was exactly like this when I rented it. Do you like tea?"

"Yeah, sure, thanks." Milton hands her the tea cup and saucer. Rose is too gentle in taking the cup and saucer from his hands and the china slips to the rug. It does not break but the tea spills over the rug and couch.

"I'm so sorry," Rose says and heads for the kitchenette where she finds a roll of paper towels and begins to mop up the mess.

"Don't worry about it," Milton says and gets on his knees with Rose to wipe up the tea.

"Oh, and thanks for the sweater," Rose remembers to say.

"I hope it fits."

"Yeah, it's a little big but I like to wear them that way."

"The reason I asked you here," Milton continues. "Is that we're going away to Canada for few weeks pretty soon. We all have some vacation time from school or work, and I was wondering if you wouldn't mind keeping an eye on the apartment while we're gone."

"No problem," says Rose. Then she glances out the window at the apartment parallel to where she is at.
During the long summer days that followed Sam's absence, Judith read for her summer course in French Literature and worked at the Seafood Shack. On this muggy June afternoon Judith Moffit sat on the jetties across from her place of employment eating a tuna fish sandwich and reading \textit{Le Rouge et Le Noir} by Stendahl. A rat the size of a small couch pillow scurried by. Sam had been gone for over two weeks now and she was still waiting to hear from him. She thought that Sam would agree that Stendahl was a bonehead. Stendhal was a bonehead because as author he was God. And as God he did not give his protagonist, Julien, a decent life. What did Stendhal have on his mind when he sent Julien off to the military, and then had him become a priest? And then had Julien seduce Matilde de Mole, and then seduce Madame Rênal and then had him beheaded? Not only was Julien's head chopped off but Madame de Rênal got to keep it afterwards. It made no sense. Judith sighed and took another bite of her tunafish sandwich. A horn moaned off shore. Judith looked up from her novel to see \textit{Catherine's Dream} racing with the incoming fog. And losing to it. Giant nets intricately hung from the masts of the lobster boat. Judith's dad often talked about buying a boat.

"That's what I want," Barney Moffit used to say as the fishing vessels from the shore would roll in with the evenings. "Someday when I can retire I'll buy a big boat. I'll charter it weekends, but
mostly we'll have it for ourselves, to do whatever with it." Then, he posed the rhetorical question to his family, "What do you think?"

"You're crazy, dear." Mary Moffit would reply. "We can't afford to do anything until Judith is out of college." Then she would turn to her daughter and say, "Don't worry. He's just all talk."

When she was a child Judith wanted to know if they got a boat, could they sail to Albuquerque.

"First of all, sweetheart, you can't sail to Albuquerque," her dad said. "Besides, why would you want to go there?" her dad asked.

Little Judith fondled her model sailboat as she turned her attention to the Buggs Bunny cartoon on television.

Hardly two weeks had passed since that drizzly summer Saturday down by the shores of The Seafood Shack when Sam told Judith of his plans to join the circus.

"Eating fire," he joked "is a hell of a lot tastier than these damn clamcakes."

Judith nodded and grinned. She knew what those clamcakes tasted like. It was the beginning of Sam's second summer as fry cook at The Seafood Shack. He was awful. It was not just that Sam was a bad cook. His bitterness about having to spend one more summer living with his parents and older brother directly affected his culinary skills. Sam had two motivations for spending thirty hours a week trying to improve the quality of the shit-smelling fish by smothering it in a generic brand of grease, then letting it spatter and hiss in the always too high fryer. One was the five dollars and seventy-four cents an hour he received. The other was the sight of
Judith's muscular legs. Thick black fishermans' boots flopped around her lower calves and a fish-stained white smock wavered just above her knees.

One could say, however, that Sam was a little better cook than the seventy-two year old widower they called Sheep. Sheep had a nasty case of eczema that covered his hands and face. It itched him often and when Sheep scratched, he scratched hard, inflicting himself with scars and scabs. Sheep used the salt water as a remedy to sooth his skin. Every morning at seven he swam the three-quarter mile strip of beach that extended from jetty to jetty. He got the nickname Sheep by living up to a dare. Just over fifty years ago, Nathanael Poulin had attended The Methodist Spring Church social with a sheep as his date. For the rest of his life, even after most of his friends had died, the name was sure to follow him wherever he would go.

Sam had no illusions about joining the circus. Signing a contract with the Red Horse Circus was not the insane idea it first appeared to be. Samuel Elmer Packwood Junior agreed to work for the next six months of his young life as assistant manager of promotions and sales for The Red Horse Circus. Put more simply, he was to help sell miniature plastic windmills, nameless stuffed animals, balloons in various shapes, and T-shirts and baseball caps with the Red Horse Circus emblem.

Sam always talked about getting the hell out of this place. The spread of tourism that transformed his hometown into a refuge for weekend fried seafood eaters became tiresome. Sam had also
developed resentment for the salt water and the entire coastal region ten years ago when he and his older brother, Keith, went to dig quahogs. Sam was eight years old and Keith was twelve when they took a row boat out to the sand bar directly in front of their house. Keith was annoyed with Sam's childish anxiety about the water and incoming tide. After they had dug a bucketful of clams, Keith waded his way up to the edge of the channel and began to swim home.

"Don't leave me here!" Sam whined.

"You know how to row! " Keith called over his shoulder. "Don't be such a baby!"

Sam struggled with the oars, but began to drift off with the moving tide. His whines of exasperation and grunts of frustration did not give him the strength that his eight-year-old body needed to manoeuvre the boat. Sam wanted nothing more than to return home. Eventually Boating Safety was called, Sam was dragged in, and the boys were scolded.

So, in these days of Sam's absence, Judith took her lunch breaks at the beach in front of her place of employment. Today she was eating a turkey sandwich and reading La Femme Abandonnée by Balzac. "Madame la vicomtesse de Beauséant était blonde, blanche comme une blonde, et avait les yeux bruns. Elle présentait noblement son front, un front d'ange déchu." Judith wondered if she fit into the diabolical femme fatale category or the innocent femme angélique. Judging from her ambiguous reddish brown hair color and faint tan she was probably neither. Then she looked down at her own reflection in a mucky tide pool and thought that if she and
Sam were to have children they would probably be pretty cute unless they got Sams' big ears. She read on. "je préfère la mort à l'abandon."

Once Judith finished her course in French Literature she would be eligible for a scholarship that enabled her to spend the first semester of her freshman year in Toulouse, France. She had always had doubts about going abroad, especially with Sam and their recent closeness. It almost seemed as if he wanted to be the first one to leave.

"Judy, you're going to be there. Hopefully, I'll be, well, somewhere," Sam once said to her. It was a moist night in April and they were sitting on the bench outside the locked Seafood Shack. His arm hung around her shoulders and she rested her rugged hand on his hairy knee. Judith shrugged and lowered her eyes. Then she stood up, took a set of keys from her pocket and unlocked The Shack. Sam followed her inside the dark sea of a tiled floor, wooden tables, and plastic booths. The pungent fish smell remained behind the counter.

Sam followed Judith to booth four and slid in next to her. He put his arms over her shoulders and breathed," Where'd 'ya get the keys from?"

"Sheep," she whispered. They began to kiss, but being wedged between the plastic seat and the linoleum counter with their feet hanging off the edge of the seat was precarious. For a moment, Judith relaxed. But she almost instantly began to slip from beneath Sam under the table top.
"Poète, prends ton luth et me donne un baiser" Judith was reading "La Nuit de Mai" by Musset and occasionally taking bites of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich. '"Partons, dans un baiser, pour un monde inconnu"' After her lunch hour Judith returned to scaling fish and shucking clams. She worked late that day. It was almost the fourth of July and the tourists caused a higher demand for seafood. A month had passed and there was still no word from Sam.

On her way to work the next day Judith bought the Morning Sun newspaper. The front page feature was about the recent increase in summer fatalities. Statistically, summer is the season when most accidental deaths occur. There was one segment on the danger of fireworks. After skimming an article about two young girls who received third degree burns from sparklers, Judith turned the pages to read about the Red Horse Circus. The Red Horse Circus had just finished its fifth week touring and was now headed South for its next stop. The circus had earned its reputation on the account of the Flaming Diver, Newl Groden. What the crowd really loved about his diving act was its ingenuity. For each performance Newl would secure himself into his asbestos suit. Someone would come out into the ring and pour lighter fluid on him for the audience to witness. Next, he would climb up a rope ladder, ascending eighty feet into the crazy ocean of colored bright lights that cascaded onto him and the circular pool below. To the audience he looked like a caricature with his stocky limbs and hidden face. When he reached the diving board platform he would pull out a long match, strike it across the diving board and touch it to himself. It was not until
flames spread over his body and he began to burn completely that he took his famous step, skip, spring, dive, descend, splash, roll.

"Hey, Judy," Sheep called. You wanna cut up some more of that squid?"

Judith handed him a clump of chopped squid. Sheep took it with his left hand as he scratched behind his ear with the other one.

"Hey!" Sheep began to bark. Then noticing the girl's fallen eyes, he softened his tone. "What's a matter with you? You look sad."

Judith turned her eyes to the cutting board and began to hack a dead squid.

"What was that? That you were reading?" Sheep asked. "Was it about that flaming diver fellow? Or were you reading about the sparkler incident?" Judith tossed the paper over the counter and continued hacking.

"Says here that," Sheep began as he took the paper in his scabbed hand, "that diver guy is five foot five, kinda short, huh? He weights one-hundred and sixty pounds, pretty strong. Look at this picture. Says here, too, that he broke a few swimming records in college. Also did a few triathlons. Pretty impressive. You see, Judy. You work hard and you get somewhere."


"So, Judy," Sheep continued. "What's bugging you?"

"Nothing," she replied.

"Aw, come on, I'll give you a penny for your thoughts."
"It's Sam," she answered holding out her hand. Sheep reached his scarred hand into the pocket of his dirty smock and handed her a quarter.

"What about him? No letter yet?" Sheep asked.

She nodded.

"Well, screw him!" Sheep raised his voice in a moment of anger. "Uh, sorry. I didn't mean to snap," he softened his tone. "What I mean is that he's young and so are you. I did a lot of stupid things when I was young. Besides, he couldn't cook any better than a dead donkey."

Judith giggled and passed Sheep some more squid.

"Hey, Judy," Sheep began, "Would you like to see some fireworks on the fourth?"

Judith looked up from the cutting board.

Sheep continued, "Yeah, my grandson and some of his friends are going to have a barn fire and of course lots of fireworks. Would you like that?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Of course they're still illegal and all, but they're careful boys."

Judith made it home that afternoon in time to witness the Superfriends saving the universe from creatures who came from a culture of innate evil. The Celluloids, they were called. Wonder Woman was even in this episode helping to destroy the only female Celluloid. Buggs was on next. Pure entertainment. Pepé le Peuw was chasing the black cat with the white stripe. "Mon amour! Mon amour! Je t'aime, je t'aime." He chased her all through the streets of
Paris. Exhausted and realizing the futility of his actions, he threw his paws into the air and declared "C'est la vie!"

At nine o'clock at night on the fourth of July, Martin, Sheep's grandson, and three of his friends began setting off cratefuls of fireworks on the beach. To Judith's surprise, Sheep's grandson had nice skin. It appeared smooth and he was deeply tanned. Judith sat on the cool blanket of sand, sipping a beer. The shock of its warmness revived her senses. As she drank, her system adjusted to its bitterness like the body adjusts to cold water. For a while Judith watched the boys, intense with their goal to run to the wet sand, light a bottle rocket and then quickly return to the safety of the soft sand above the tide line. When Judith tired of their antics, she lay on her back and watched colors appear on the black starred screen above. Later that night one of Sheep's friends had to be taken to the emergency room. He cut himself on a broken beer bottle, lost a lot of blood and received thirty stitches on his left hand.

"Il pleut dans mon coeur/Comme il pleut sur la ville" It was the end of July and Judith was now reading some poems by Verlaine. "-Qu'as-tu fait, ô toi que voilà,/Pleurant sans cesse,/Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà,/Dé ta jeunesse?" Judith read while eating a crabmeat sandwich. She anticipated mail. There had to be some today. Almost two months had passed and nothing from Sam. Judith wished that he had left an address or that there was some way to find out where the circus was headed so that she could send him a letter.
Martin was waiting for an order of fried clams when Judith returned to the Seafood Shack. Judith asked him how his friend was doing.

"He's just fine. The stitches will be out in another two weeks, but it's nothing he won't get over."

Judith went to work early on August fifteenth so that she could leave at noon and go water skiing with Martin. Still there was no letter. She sliced oysters for part of the morning, then started to get the grill ready. At noontime she wondered where Sheep was. He was supposed to be in an hour ago. Judith was reading "Enivrez-vous" by Baudelaire while she waited for Martin. "Il faut être toujours ivre. Tout est là: c'est l'unique question. Pour ne pas sentir l'horrible fardeau du Temps qui brise vos épaules et vous penche vers la terre, il faut vous enivrer sans trêve." Martin leaned over the counter and called to Judith, who was absorbed in the poem. She thought about drinking tonight, after water skiing. No, drinking was too simple. "Du vin, de poésie, ou de vertu, à votre guise. Mais enivrez-vous."

"Judith," he began after they had both sat down. "I have something to tell you." Judith got that dense feeling in her stomach, the kind that comes from the anticipation of bad news or eating greasy food. At first she wasn't sure if it was the fish she had last night or the tone of Martin's voice, but Judith knew that something awful had happened.

"What?" she asked.

"Sheep's dead."
"How?"

"He was swimming this morning, as he usually does, and his heart just stopped."

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"They said that it was probably the cold water that shocked his system. Either that or he got tired and panicked. No one's really certain yet."

There was mail for Judith. A letter from Sam had arrived two days ago, but it had been stuffed under junk mail.

Dear Judy,

Sorry I haven't written. I started a few other letters, but by the time I got around to mailing them, we were off to some other place and there was more stuff going on. So many things have happened around here. Have you heard of our diver, Newl Groden? Anyway, the other night he got to the top of the platform and was ready to jump. But, one of his flaming arms caught fire to the rope ladder, which spread to the canopy then the next thing you know, there was this big fucking fire! People running everywhere, screaming. It was kind of neat. At first I was pretty scared, but then I remembered the goods and grabbed what I could of the T-shirts and baseball hats. Most people got out okay. Some had to be taken to the hospital for smoke inhalation, but that's about it. And one of our horses died. So, how are you? How's the Shack doing? Is Sheep's cooking really any better than mine? Talk to you later.

Love,

Sam
The night of the funeral Judith and Martin went to the beach. They latched arms and paced up the shoreline barefoot. Why was the water so warm tonight?

"Judy?" Martin started to question. "Will you write to me from France?"

"Of course."

Martin unhooked his arm from hers, shoved his hands in his pockets and wiggled his feet into the sand. The rushing tide secured his ankles to the mud. Judith headed for the soft sand where she took off........ her blouse, skirt, shoes, bra, underwear, good watch and earrings. She passed Martin on her way into the ocean. Martin pried his feet from the sucking mud and quickly followed Judith into the water. The two swam from jetty to jetty while talking about what they aspired to become. Martin was thinking about a trade school and Judith was not so certain that she wanted to continue with French after college. There was a man named Sheep and a circus horse dead. There were also a few accidents, a few hurt feelings, and a few buried desires. It made no sense.
I'm doing the breast stroke in the YMCA's outdoor heated pool. My head is propped above the water because I have a cold and don't want to get any in my ears. I go from the shallow end of the Olympic-sized pool to the deep end. Then I turn back. Each time I complete a lap, I use my left thumb to rotate my sapphire birthstone ring once around my left index finger. I don't know why I do this. A habit, perhaps. The lifeguard on duty looks bored and is methodically twirling his whistle. He's wearing bright orange shorts and a grey Champion sweatshirt. At times I swear he's staring right at me and not the ten other swimmers. A guy wearing a Red Sox baseball cap stops to talk with the lifeguard. He looks at me too.

I keep swimming. I look to the empty tennis courts, to the vacant baseball diamond, to darkened basketball courts, then to the sky. It's cloudy with smog or fog. I can't tell if it's the sun or the moon that's stuffed behind the pinkish haze. I wonder.

My mind floats back a few years to the tennis courts and the time I spent on them in college.

"Out!"

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

"Out it is then," I sighed. "Let's see, that's game."

"That's set," she replied.
I used to play a lot of tennis and I used to be in really great shape. I mean, now I could probably play pretty decently, but those little skirts don't look so good on me as they did in my college days. I wasn't the type of tall, long-limbed player like Martina was. I use more power in my upper body for a stronger serve and a harder forehand. I guess you could say that I'm more of a Dolly Parton with a tennis racket type.

There's a girl swimming in the pool who sort of reminds of my doubles partner, Heidi. She has Heidi's thick, black hair, her same pale skin and tiny frame. She, however, does not have Heidi's solemn expression nor does she have Heidi's fragile nose and deep-set eyes. Oh well, maybe she doesn't really look like her.

As I get out of the heated pool I use the strength in my arms to hoist my top half over the side of the pool. Then, I roll my hips so that I'm sitting on the edge of the pool with my feet dangling in the warm water. I fiddle with my ring as I turn my head to face the lifeguard. He's surprised, perhaps even a little embarrassed that I catch him looking at me. He smiles. Then, I notice what he's looking at. I'm almost popping out of my Speedo.

I hear my voice eight years ago on the tennis courts, firmly calling the shot.

"Out," I called it.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"I thought that it was on the line," Heidi said.

"Well, I think it's out."

"Thinking's not good enough. Let's do it over."

57
Last Friday at approximately three-thirty in the afternoon, I agreed to have dinner with Roger Carthage sometime this weekend. Although I try to make it a policy of mine not to date people I work with, we decided that Saturday would be the better day for the both of us since I had papers to correct and he also had some work to do. He teaches Cabinet Making at the vocational school, and I teach Spanish for college-bound high school students, so I figure that I can’t really count him as co-worker.

I have to return to my messy apartment. I hope Roger doesn’t notice all the dust bunnies I’ve neglected to vacuum. I was never neat and organized like Heidi. Her neatness extended to her tennis game. In fact, she used to piss me off when we played. Her by-the-book manner of playing gnawed away at my cable of patience. It wasn’t only the way she played tennis. The way she did everything made me wish at times that a yellow school bus would plow her over.

"Nice match," I said, extending my hand.
"Are you sure that's match?" Heidi asked, taking my hand.
"Yeah. That set was 6-4, mine." I answered.
Heidi sighed.
"Let's go tell Coach."

Then Heidi added, "So, what are you doing this weekend?"

There are no better relationships than the ones with a bit of tension.
Heidi and I switched between number 3 and 4 on the tennis ladder. Whenever either one of us had a match with the number two player, we'd wish the other luck, but never really meant it. Two spots difference was just too much. Playing doubles with Heidi was probably the most fun I had in college. We would psyche ourselves up for playing by ridiculing the other team. If we lost, they were bitches who made some unfair calls. If we won, they were bimbos who never learned how to play tennis.

It's good to be alone once in a while. I'm the last one out of the pool and there are no twenty fifteen-year-olds asking me *porque this* and *como se dice that*. I think that I made a mistake by teaching them some idiomatic expressions like "Sí, Chucha, ¿y tus calzones?" Loosely translated, it means "Sure, Baby and your underwear?" My students use it a lot to protest when I give them a homework assignment that they don't want to do.

Back in my messy apartment, I shampoo, condition and style my hair as usual, hoping that Henna's Swiss Formula will improve the overall health of my hair as it says on the bottle. I wonder what the real color of my hair might be if I didn't mess around with it so much. Dirty blond? Light-brown? I'm not sure since I've been highlighting it for so long. It snarls a lot and is difficult to comb.

Heidi's hair was long, straight, black, beautifully natural. Mine was straw-like and only half-curly from all the perms I've had. Her skin was perfect, flawless. Mine was subject to unexpected breakouts. She could keep her check book balanced. I had nicer nails. And of course, like all close friends, Heidi and I had the same awful
I tasted in men. Although she was the more beautiful of the two of us, I had more boyfriends than she did. It must have been my slut-blond hair and all that black shit I wore under my blue eyes. Besides, it's hard for most to recognize real beauty.

Roger Carthage. I've heard the faculty call him Rog. He's kind of short for my taste, but he has a young, boyish face and I can tell that he works out. I first met him at the faculty volleyball game when his serve caught me off guard and whacked me in the chest. Everyone thought it was funny. I forced a laugh. Ever since I was twelve, people have been accidently catching me in the chest with everything from kickballs to potato puffs.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! Are you okay?" The person would ask after a bout of uncontrollable laughter.

"Yeah, I'm just fine." I'd reply. "I'll never breast feed, but I'm just fine."

Ever since I was twelve I've been sucking it up, so to speak. Stuffing away my real emotions, allowing them to cloud my mind and exit in the form of sarcasm.

Heidi always looked nice, like she had her shit together. She came to my dorm one night wearing a pair of fuchsia suede boots, the flat kind that scrunch around the ankles. Her matching fuchsia sweater clung to her as did her well-fitted ironed white pants. Heidi wore silver rings, a thick silver chain around her neck and the silver hoops I bought for her while I was in Mexico.

"Me gustan mucho tus pendientes," I said.
"Muchas gracias. Nice top," she added as I fiddled with my ring. I was wearing the same loose fitting black blouse that I always wore when I was feeling slightly insecure about my sized 38-D chest.

I take a few Sudafeds, hoping that my nose will stop running and my head will stop pounding. Then, I look into the full length mirror. My favorite black sweater seems too clingy. I go to my closet and pull out a straight white skirt, a white blouse and a purple cardigan. The V of the cardigan should slim things down a bit. I have a lot of V-necked sweaters.

Heidi and I walked across the lamp-lit campus and headed for the fraternity houses as we did almost every weekend. I remember that night eight years ago clearly. On our way we passed the president's house and stopped to watch a crowd of people on a front lawn and a firetruck in the driveway. Apparently someone had pulled a false alarm during one of their cocktail parties. There must have been at least one hundred people on his lawn, drinking and talking loudly. Heidi and I were amused by the drunk guests. To us, they were older people. They were real people with real jobs, getting real drunk.

"Do you think he'll be there?" Heidi asked.

"Who?" I pretended not to know that she was asking about Bud Corbet, the lacrosse player. I was secretly lusting after Bud, and when he started to hang around the tennis courts, I thought that he wanted to talk to me, but as it turned out, it was Heidi he was after.

"Bud Corbet. You know him, the lacrosse player." Heidi said.
"Oh, yeah, Bud."

"Yeah, well, do you think he'll be at Sigma Chi tonight?"

"Uh, I dunno."

"I kind of hope so."

"Why? You guys got something going on?"

"No," she answered.

Roger Carthage picks me up at seven in his sporty, red Mazda. As I step outside, I notice that it's still kind of smoggy or foggy, but this time I know that it's the moon that has to be out, if anything at all.

"You look great!" he says in what I interpret as his best Tony the Tiger impression. I twirl my ring around my index finger and slide onto the bucket seats. Roger pops in a Phil Collins tape. "In the Air Tonight" is playing.

"So, do you like Phil?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"So, do you like this car or what? The guys in Auto Body fixed it up." Roger adds. "It handles like a beauty!"

I remember the Sigma Chi's house as the one with the oversized flag of Nazi Germany hanging from the third story. They would always put the flag up the night of parties. We entered the smoke-filled house together and got in the keg line.

"There he is!" Heidi said.

"Who?"
"Bud Corbet, the lacrosse player." Bud walked over to us with two beers and handed one to Heidi.

"Hey," Bud said. "How's it goin'?"

Roger keeps the conversation going at dinner,"...see, uh, that's like sorta the same thing with me. Ya' know what I mean?" I nod my head and look at Roger with my half-closed seductive eyes. I'm not trying to be seductive though. It's a combination effect from the wine and the cold medicine that's making it a battle for me to keep my eyelids raised. It's more the cold medicine than the wine, though. Roger's been working on the drinks. This date with Roger is like being in an early morning seminar. You try and try to force your eyes open. They want to stay closed.

"Ally, you know? You know what first attracted me to you, Ally? It was your eyes. You have beautiful eyes. I saw you at the volleyball game and I thought, Ally, that Ally has such beautiful eyes," Roger says, staring at the V of my cardigan.

Roger's obviously drunk. We had cocktails before dinner and during the course of our meal, we polished off two bottles of white wine. Besides, my mother is the only one who has recently told me that I'm beautiful.

"Sí, chucha. ¿y tus calzones?" I say, smiling.

"What? What was that? Spanish? I had some Spanish in high school, but I was never really good with languages, ya' know. I mean we're in the States. Everyone should know how to speak English...."
I'd almost given up on Heidi. It was two in the morning and I
was still at the frat house. She and Bud had left me at the keg
talking with some harmless drunk. Kevin, I think his name was.
Eight years ago, I can still recall spending most of the night listening
to Kevin talking about the most interesting places he's had sex. He'd
put a lot of effort into asking me if I'd like to take a walk to the
tennis courts. He claimed to have tried it on clay courts but never
cement. Heidi's desertion angered me. I was ready to walk back
alone when she stumbled down the stairs and said that she was
ready to leave.

As soon as we stepped outside, her composure crumbled.

"Oh God! What a mess! Look at me!" Heidi whined.

"It's all right," I said, consoling her and knowing that it's not all
right. I held her tangled hair back while she vomited on the
president's lawn. The walk back to the dorms took forever.

After dinner, Roger insists on stopping at his place since it's
between the restaurant and my apartment. I explain to him that I
really don't want to stay long because I have a cold and want to get
some rest. We're on his couch and he's already removed my
cardigan and is fumbling with the buttons on my blouse.

"Take me home, please," I say.

"What?"

"I kinda wanna go home now."

"You want the lights out?"

"No. I wanna get some rest."

"You'll get some rest. You can sleep late tomorrow."
"No. I wanna sleep in my own bed."
"I'll take you home in a while."

Heidi cried, "What a mess! I don't know where anything is! My boots are back in his room! Oh God! My necklace!" She grabbed her bare throat. "I lost my necklace!" She whined. "Can you believe it? I didn't want to. I mean, I never have before. I didn't want to, b-b-but he did."

The Nazi flag that hung over the third floor of the Sigma Chi frat house was still visible. Somewhere behind those walls, Bud Corbet had raped my doubles partner, Heidi.

I looked at her wrinkled pants and her bootless feet. I offered her my shoes, but they were too small. At that moment I wished there was something evil I could do to hurt Bud. I wanted that yellow school bus of my imagination to come out and plow him over.

Then, Heidi began to apologize.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I should have never left you at the keg. I should have never gone with him. Oh! Ally, please forgive me! I'm such an idiot!"

"Relax. I'm not mad at you, Heidi. Besides, you still got my earrings on."

Heidi touched each earlobe, sighed then started to cry. No words, just tears this time. I put my arm through hers and we headed across the cold October grass.

Neither of us thought of telling anyone. In fact, she begged me to never mention that evening again. I never did. We finished our college careers and kept in touch as much as two old friends do.
Heidi's unmarried, like myself. The last I heard from her, she wrote that she was working at an accounting firm in Chicago.

Roger's on top of me now, he's breathing heavily and his kisses are sloppy, wet and taste really bad.

"Roger, could you please take me home?"
"Oh, Ally, don't you want to stay?"
"No. I really feel awful. I mean, I'm really sick."
"Oh, come on Ally!" He whined. "You'll feel so much better!"

I manage to roll out from beneath him because of his drunken sluggish state.

"Oh, Ally, don't leave," Roger begged.

I go to the bathroom, button my blouse, and put my cardigan back on. When I return to the living room, Roger's passed out on the couch, snoring. I step outside. The fog or whatever it was has lifted and it's rather a nice night to walk, but I think that taking Roger's sporty, red Mazda would be more fun. Roger was right in saying that his car handles well. I drive it to the YMCA where I park and start to walk home. I can't remember the last time I spoke with Heidi. I must have her number around the apartment somewhere.
In the early morning I convince myself that I am dying of tuberculosis. In the mid-morning, my roommate, Gisella, convinces me that I am not dying of tuberculosis. I lie in bed, holding my arm up to examine the bumps. The red one on the inner part of my right arm concerns me. I poke it and pinch it all morning. I should look up the disease in the dictionary but from my bed, I don't see one. I inhale and cough. It's already starting. Assuming that I will not go to the doctor with my concern, illness will quickly settle in, making me incapable of normal function, and death will be inevitable. It would save me the trouble of finding a new job and finding someone to publish my children's book. Gisella is thinking of moving soon. If I die now, I'll save her the cost of air fare to return for the funeral which will be a simple one. Immediate family and of course the people from Edition Insurance will all want to come too, provided that calling hours coincide with their lunch break and that there aren't too many other people dying whose deaths provide larger premiums. At work, I came across one of our larger policy-making deals that lists prices that will be awarded for the insurance holder who has certain body parts severed. One hundred thousand for a missing ear, two hundred thousand if you get your hand cut off and five hundred thousand for a limb (the entire limb).

Donahugh is on TV but he's not talking about tuberculosis today. Neither is Oprah, or Sally Jessie Raphael, or Maury Povich or Montel Williams. Cristina on the Spanish Channel is interviewing
people older than twenty who haven't lost their virginity. On the
news, there is another drive-by shooting. Somewhere in a different
time zone, a car drove by the entrance to a crowded movie house
where Bugsy, Leathal Weapon 3 and Little Man Tate were playing.
The car slowed down, the head and shoulders of a kid in a sweatshirt
emerged from the back seat window. He aimed and fired his gun.
Four people waiting to see Bugsy were killed.

I get up to toast myself a bagel. Our tiny kitchen is even
smaller with a full bag of trash on the floor. I almost trip over
Gisella's gravity boots. I've often watched Gisella step into the
cumbersome pair of boots that look like they were made for alpine
skiing except for the hooks on the backs. She moved from the stool,
to the counter top, and without the grace of an acrobat, she swung
her legs over the bar, latching the hooks on her ankles to it. Once
secure in her position, Gisella let her arms drop until only the tips of
her finger nails touched the floor. Gisella's long, black, curly hair
surrounded the floor beneath her head. She says that she likes to let
all the blood rush to her brain, that it is relaxing and it helps her to
think. I'd be worried that I wouldn't be able to hoist myself up
afterwards.

The first week that I moved in with Gisella, I came home early
from work to find one of Gisella's old boyfriends, Randy, wearing the
boots, and dangling from the bathroom threshold, masturbating. I
couldn't tell if he was embarrassed or just surprised to see me when
I showed up.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I live here," I said.
When I got on the phone with the police, he zipped up his pants and said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Jody. Jody Fosterchild," I said.

We had our locks changed the following day. The city itself was small and except for the sirens, relatively quiet, but the people were kind of weird. I figured that I'd adjust.

I climb back into bed with a buttered bagel and a glass of orange juice mixed with fruit punch. There are no clean plates so I use a paper towel and try not to let the butter seep onto my comforter. An economist is now talking about the Middle East. I switch to the Nature Channel. A well-modulated voice narrates the special about fish. The camera zooms in and we see a cow collapse into the reddened water, its legs shaved to the bone by piranhas. The narrator goes on to say that fish often experience diarrhea while they eat because they try to empty their intestines so that they can fill themselves with more food. I put the bagel on the floor and fill my lap with a sketch pad. I've finished writing *A Children's Guide to Everyday Monsters* and am now working on the illustrations.

"It's a flea bite, for Christ sake," says Gisella when she comes home from jogging. "Look. I got them all over my arm." She rolls up the sleeve of her sweatshirt to confirm this.

"My God! You're dying too!"

"No I'm not! They're flea bites from that stupid dog that used to live here."

"How do I know?" While she talks, Gisella paces around the apartment, pulling off her running clothes and getting ready for a
shower. "How do I know?" she says, looking through the window and undoing her Timex watch. "How do I know?" she repeats pensively.

"Yeah, how do you know that you're just not dying of tuberculosis too?"

"I know because I've had shots. Recently too. And you've probably had them too. When you were younger. Go ahead, call your mother and ask. I'm sure that she knows." She is still looking out the window.

"What is it?"

"It's Randy, that asshole." She cranks open the screen window and shouts down, "I sold the boots, what the hell do you want now?"

"I need you, Gisella!" he hollers back.

"Fuck off," she responds plainly and closes the window. Then she turns to me and says, "He's the kind of guy you can't be nice to. If you show him the least bit of attention, he'll follow you around for weeks. You attract those types, Jody. It's funny how you do that."

I don't call my mother about the bumps on my arm, knowing that she will respond by either sending me photocopies of every article that she finds on the disease or by telling me about some bigger medical problem that she is presently suffering from, depending upon her mood. Or maybe my mother will just depress me by updating me on my brother's condition. The last time we spoke, five days ago, the tumors were spreading on his spinal column, despite the operation. Four years ago, Brian was in more pain than he should have been from his daily wrestling workouts. It seemed as if he was always off having tests at the city hospital. Finally, they found the source of his pain; bumps on his spinal
column. Fortunately, they were removable, and with the aid of a steel rod, correctly placed in his back, he should have been okay. For some reason now they're sprouting up again. The doctors insist that the cause of this disease is a genetic mistake or something but my mother holds to the conviction that there was some chemical imbalance in our neighborhood that caused it. She insists that there was too much radon in the air while we were growing up as children. My mother also feels like she should have wrapped more things in plastic and washed the vegetables more carefully. Now, she puts everything into plastic bags.

Sometimes Gisella reminds me of the way my mother moves. Authoritatively. She'd waddle about praising the newly tiled floor and the nice set of heavy, reliable pans that she got for her wedding. My mother, not Gisella. Then she'd flaunt her acquired cooking skills. "Are you paying attention to this?" she'd say. "I hope you're watching because someday you'll want to know this stuff. Someday you'll have to cook for yourself. Why, when I was your age, I was already cooking for five people, two of them were babies: your father and your older brother," she'd try to make a joke. "The other of course was your grandfather. Do you remember him?" Of course I remember him. I am master of macaroni and cheese. The only difference between Gisella and my mother is almost forty years and Gisella's advice to me; to get off my ass and get laid occasionally. This is something that my mother would never suggest.

"Are you paying attention?" Gisella says. "That's how you handle assholes."
The turned over trash cans are a sign that the monsters were out last night. Billy asks if they will come out again tonight and his older sister says, "You can bet your acre on it.

"And are you coming tonight or what? I need an answer." Gisella needs an answer. She'll probably end up at her boyfriend's house again and I'll call a cab or get a ride home with some drunk people or she'll try to set me up with some guy who was really into the environment before it achieved popular status and used to keep a worm compost box in his college dorm room.

"I used to have a shoe box with worms in it and after we'd order pizza, I'd cut up the box, with the cheese still stuck to it and I'd give it to the worms. Because you couldn't recycle that cardboard, not with the cheese on it anyway."

"Really."

"Now I have a fish tank of worms in my apartment."

"No more environmentalists," I said to Gisella. I'm sure that he would have had a heart attack if he saw the amount of plastic bags she uses, then throws away, or the way she leaves the faucet running and walks away from it. My mother would not have been to fond of him either. A worm compost box probably carries a lot of germs, in her mind.

Parties are like going to the movies for free, except that no handsome undercover cop shows up at the end to blow away the bad guy without hitting any of the other guests. I decide to go. It's the birthday of Gisella's friend of a friend's sister. I can wear all black and hang out in the corner.
"These damn flea bites!" I scratch until the inner part of my arm is sore.

"Quiet." Gisella says. "Who is going to want to jump in the sack with a flea bag?"

"I used to every night." She's annoyed and needs an explanation. "Every time that I was afraid, I'd curl up on the dog bed."

"What were you afraid of?"

"Monsters. But the bed was pretty comfortable. Smudgy didn't like it anyway. She seemed to prefer the couch."

There are monsters everywhere waiting to grab your legs. In the sewer, in the cellars and in the drain pipes of bathroom sinks. On ski lifts going down, in alleyways and on the turnpike and in public rest areas.

In the basement of someone's home not too far from downtown Gisella's friend's friend's sister is having her birthday party. A big white couch is pushed against a wall to make room for the dance floor. A bright moon shines through the sliding glass door and illuminates the basement. There are two half windows through which I can see the frozen ground and the roots of some shrubs. I feel like a gopher or a mole or a chipmunk or a squirrel in the winter. I'll eat the unsalted nuts and drink, all the while wondering; what if the hole freezes up? Will I be able to claw my way back to the surface or will someone have to dig me up or will I just remain?
A long table with a stereo and a collection of records and CD's occupies one side of the room. There is a bathroom in one corner, shelves take up another corner and two couches occupy the last of the four corners. There go my corners. The top shelves are filled with bowling trophies and 4-H ribbons. The bottom two hold bottles of hard liquor, juice mixers and ice. I predict that by the end of the evening, they will collapse.

There's a long line for the bathroom and every time someone goes in, they have to pull extra hard on the door to make it close and push it extra hard to make it open. The hostess comes down and offers the use of bathrooms upstairs. Some people follow her upstairs and others remain in line. I'm drinking something that a portly guy in a stained brown shirt made me. The buttons of his shirt squeeze together and barely hold back his flesh.

"Hi. I'm Earl. You like the drink?" he breathes. It's sickeningly sweet, like Easter candy. And like sugar, it quickly demonstrates its effects.

"Yeah, it's good," I say.

The actual size, shape and color of the monster depends on its breed. Some are green and scaly. More common in the Northeast are big, fat, hairy ones with huge bellies that pop out like plucked turkeys.

Gisella's ex-boyfriend shows up, which isn't surprising since he's been following her around for the past week. The day after they
broke up, he went to Mexico for a few weeks, then came back to our apartment to try on the gravity boots.

"I want to talk to you," Randy says to Gisella.

"I've got nothing to say," she says.

Their bickering persists and people stop dancing to watch as a thickly built guy in running sneakers tries to get Randy to leave. Randy storms off but returns because his motorcycle won't start. It's too cold outside.

_Most monsters don't mean any harm. They just want to scare you. If they grab at your legs from under the bed, remain still. They'll tire quickly and find something else to play with. The monsters under your bed might want to play with your toys, so don't be surprised if you can't find them the next morning._

Grudgingly, Randy stays. Earl makes both me and Randy a drink. I excuse myself to see Gisella in order to escape dancing with Earl.

Gisella doesn't have much to say to me except that I shouldn't be friendly to Earl because he'll think that I'm interested.

"He's the kind of guy," Gisella begins. "The kind that knows no shame. You can't even be friendly to him because he will think that you're interested. He's the kind of guy that if he asks you out and you just say that you're busy, he'll call again or try to plan another date."
I take another drink from him anyway and start to ask people for cigarettes that I light using the flame of a candle from the mantle. I take my seat on the couch next to Earl and respond to his third request to dance with, "Later. Uh, maybe later." I wait in line for the restroom. Standing and shifting. The tinkle dance, my mother used to call it.

Monsters eat the socks that get caught in the dryers and washing machines. They eat mothballs too and whatever else is sweet to them that they can find in the cellar. If a monster is really hungry, it will sneak into the kitchen to eat whatever is sweet.

In the kitchen, with no overstuffed trash bag, a small black and white television is broadcasting this evening's news. I wander in and watch. A man who burned down his ex-wife's apartment with all her children in it moves by covering his face with handcuffed hands. The next shot is of a woman too hysterical to speak. I hear real sirens not from the TV. We're a few miles from downtown and should be okay.

"Dangerous times," Earl sighs behind me. "You shouldn't be in this kitchen alone. Did you hear about the two peanuts who were walking down the street?"

"No."

"One was a salted." He chuckles and his belly firmly shakes.

The familiar medley of the Addams Family theme song creeps up the stairs. Earl feels the need to bop around and snap his fingers like Pugsly.
"That was my favorite show," he says. "I loved, what's his name, Herman."


"Oh," says Earl. Uncertainty is in his eye.

On America's Most Wanted, they're searching for this woman who drives a truck, lures men into it at night and kills them before dawn. They suspect that she is heading somewhere north.

**Billy wonders who will take care of the monsters in his basement after they tear down his apartment building. He hopes that they will be able to find another place to live. If not, they'll have to roam the streets, knocking over barrels and tearing down street signs.**

I wonder what it is like to be my brother. To be thirty years old and having to put off his career and his family for a while.

"I wouldn't want to knock rockers with her, if you know what I mean." Earl says. He laughs and takes another drink. Color rises to his face and the mistaken rhythm encourages him to ask me to dance, again.

"I'll be right back," I say and hurry off to the bathroom, downstairs. There's no line. I quickly open the door and pull it shut. It sticks. It's not all the way shut. I pull it harder and with a definitive slam, it closes.

77
Earl strikes me as obnoxious. And why don’t I like obnoxious people? I like Gisella. But she’s not obnoxious, just honest.

I don’t like to believe that my grandfather was obnoxious. People say that he was fun to be with and wild. Once when my grandfather and I were driving down the Interstate (Mom was a little bit concerned about his driving and safety skills at this point and not sure if I should go in the car with him anymore) we went flying past a hitchhiker. Suddenly, he pulled over and slowed down quickly. The man on the side of the road picked up his bag and began to walk over to the car. This was when my mother didn’t overuse plastic bags.

"Hurry it up!" my grandfather yelled from the window. "We’ve got places to go!"

To this, the hitchhiker responded by breaking into a light jog.

"Hang on," my grandfather whispered to me. When the man came close enough to the car that he began to reach for the door handle, we sped away.

"Go ride your bike!" he called from the window. Mom never let me ride with him again.

"Go ride your bike!" I giggle to myself. It’s warm. There are no windows, yet we seem to be moving.

I wash my hands with smelly soap as the toilet runs. I examine the bumps on my arm. Washing my hands, and looking in the mirror for blemishes. Harsh fluorescent rays expose every blemish, flea bite and hair on my face and body. There are no tubercule nodes that I can see., just flea bites. There’s another knock
and I feel a flush of embarrassment that brings some color to my cheeks. It is now, in front of the mirror, that I see the wax sticking to my black sweater. I could try to wash it out but that would make an even bigger mess. Besides, someone just knocked. The door is jammed. I play with the lock. "Just a second. I can't seem to get this open."

Someone tries turning the knob from the outside. The handle moves but nothing else. Sweat collects in a tiny pool, big enough for a flea, in the armpit of my sleeve. Maybe I won't have to be social for the rest of the evening after all. I pull on the door violently.

"Stand back," I hear. A thud. The door is unmoved. The voices outside decide that they will relieve themselves from the balcony on the second floor. This will probably not please the contingent who decide to relieve themselves just outside the sliding glass door which is below the balcony. Most of the women are more keen on waiting for the upstairs toilet. Some of them say fuck it and drop their pants outside too. They'll all regret this on Monday.

The four walls stifle me with their embrace and I decide that I'll die tonight. I may pass out and choke on my own vomit, or else I'll run out of air and suffocate, or there will be a fire and everyone will forget about me, or I'll go crazy and bang my head against the tiles until they loosen and fall to the floor with the blood and guts of my inside. I shake the door and scream. I tell them to hurry up. I'm dying.

"I'll die in here!"

Earl's voice and breathing say that they'll get me out soon.

Someone's got a screw driver.

79
"And not the drink, if you know what I mean," he chuckles.

From hot to cold. Fever to chills. I pace like a caged animal, like my mother in the kitchen.

In one of those moods, my mother came home from work and was cooking. Edgy and tired; symptoms that could easily be cured if she was a drinker but she wasn't. She was a cooker. And a good thing too. If she weren't, we'd never eat. Daiquiris for dinner. Ha, ha. My father was walking in and out of the kitchen. She'd bend over the open oven, and scoot to the fridge. He'd stride though, making the trays on top of the refrigerator bounce. The ice machine dumped its cold load. Musical and unchoreographed was their evening dance. Graceful, like the toilet brushes that dance on television.

"I said to get two cans of tomato paste," my mother said.

"What did I get?" he asked.

"Tomato sauce. It's not the same. It's not as thick."

"You want me to go back to the store?" my father said, not meaning it.

"No." She is insincere as well.

She was moving a hot pot full of fresh tomato sauce to the counter. He was trying to take a quick step across the kitchen. A basketball player, making his way to the threshold with a fake, then a dribble. He was not fast enough and the two collided. The contents of the pot leaped into the air, splattered on the front of my mother's sweater, then plopped onto the tiled floor and skidded across the threshold onto the rug in the dining room. She howled and cursed.
This is the first time that I became aware that "fuck" was a part of her vocabulary.

The toilet keeps running which is making my stay here in a stranger's bathroom not as relaxing as it should be. I've jiggled the handle a thousand times. The toilet accidentally flushed a few times. I'm wasting water. Plopped under a pink basin and a dirty bathtub hidden by a flowered shower curtain. Cold tile. A bottle of VANGUARD disinfectant in hand. I read the warning; "Harmful If Inhaled. Harmful or Fatal If Swallowed. Do not breathe spray or vapor mist. INTENTIONAL MISUSE BY DELIBERATELY CONCENTRATING AND INHALING THE CONTENTS MAY BE HARMFUL OR FATAL. Avoid contact with eyes and skin. Wash thoroughly after handling." I could end it now. But how horrible and without excuse. One long squirt. It drips down the rounded underside of the toilet. It stinks like a public rest room and I wonder why the people who live in such a nice house would have a can of this cheap stuff in their bathroom. It seems to me that they would have a can of Glade or potpourri or candles. But then again, maybe they do have an overflowing bag of garbage that was taken out especially for this evening's party. Maybe they have monsters in their cellar too. Most likely, those monsters are scared away by the music, the lights, and the pissing from the balcony and below. Instead, they go outside to tip over barrels and knock down street signs. Unless they get tired and come home early. Then they'll want a nice quiet place to stay. The bathroom. The pipes, the sink, the toilet. I shut the lid, plug the drain, and close the shower curtain.
Another knock at the door and a "you still in there?" Some guy named Bob has got his tool kit out and is going to pry the hinges of the door. The only problem being that the hinges are on the inside and there is no room to slide a screw driver underneath the door. Still, they fool around with the lock and tools.

"Yup."

"How are you doing?"

"I'm doing all I can to keep from shitting my pants."

"Isn't there a toilet in there?" It's Earl.

"Go away, " I say, meaning Earl, but I fear that Bob has taken this opportunity to dance.

Loud music starts and I'm wondering where Bob is, where anyone is. A song about cold nights and warm hearts and drinking fruity beverages made in blenders. The house shakes. No doubt that someone next door will call the cops soon if not for the loud music then for the guests pissing outside. They'll turn down the tunes for a bit. Then the people will start to go home to relieve themselves. Bob is back and I hear the scratches of a something in the lock. Gisella's voice.

"I think it's stuck. I'll go call someone."

Within the cement walls of Gisella's friend's friends sister's bathroom, my head aches and spins. An elderly man, who I think is dead now, once told me that there are three types of people in this world; Cranks, Deadbeats and Oddballs. According to his model of the universe, things make sense. While watching the eleven o'clock news, it was easy to say that the protesting French farmers are a bunch of cranks. Throwing bicycle racks at armored police. In
another part of the world, the angry men chanting and holding signs with words in an alphabet that I can't understand are cranks as well. Oddballs who go for days without eating or who set themselves on fire to make a point.

I look now in the mirror. More of an effort to smile. I'm trembling.


"You'll be out in just a minute. We called the fire department. They're on their way." I picture a bomb blowing the door off its hinges while I'm forced to huddle in the bathtub with the monsters. I open the shower curtain, just to make sure that they are not there. They're not but some are invisible. If a monster grabs your leg, remain still. I want to throw up. I can't. Am I an oddball? I think.

I normally don't smoke but the urge to light a cigarette with a candle overtook me. Wax on my black sweater. I wish that I hadn't done that.

I wish that I had paper to write a letter and begin it with, "When I think of you, I think of dead baby birds fallen from trees in the springtime, frogs splattered in the road and worms in puddles after a spring rain." Except I don't know who I'm thinking of. Or my rabbit, Peanuts, who froze to death during an unusual cold spell one spring. I fed her and watered her and found her the next morning after the storm. I wanted to bring her in at night but my parents were tired and not in the right frame of mind when they said that she'd be all right outside. To prove I was right, I took my frozen
Peanuts inside and placed her on the table, next to the rug with the tomato stain that neither parent would clean up. This stiff white bunny. What I hoped to be a shocking symbol of my misery. I put her on the table and made myself a cup of hot chocolate. Unfortunately, my plan was foiled by my brother, who took Peanuts over to his friend's house before my mother ever got to see her. All the while, I was enjoying a cup of hot cocoa and watching cartoons, waiting to hear her shriek.

To write without paper. Toilet paper but it's too thin. Instead I find a tube of All Day Frosted Apricot lipstick in one of the drawers. Never been used. It's from a free gift package that you get at a department store when you spend over a certain amount of money on make-up. This friend's friend's sister has a lot of free gifts in her bathroom drawers. A half ounce bottle of Age Controlling Cream, a half ounce container of scented body cream, a tube of Chocolate Brown Luscious Mascara, and a pocket sized mirror. The mascara is tempting but the lipstick seems like the best to work with. I could use it to leave some advice on the wall next to the mirror for the next person who comes into the bathroom. I could list all the ways to tell if you have a fatal disease.

1. Do you wake up and wonder, why the fuck you are here?
2. Do you ever feel trapped, held back by your disease?
3. Do you know someone who likes to masturbate in gravity boots?
4. Do you get flea bites on your arms and mistake them for tuberculosis?
Are you repulsed by pudgy, balding men named Earl and attracted to tragedies in the news?
Have you ever gotten a limb cut off?
What kind of monsters live under your bed?

I could write these questions down in red lipstick but it would come out sloppy. Instead, I wonder again what it is like to have a steel rod in my spine. I once asked my brother.

"It's not so bad," he said. "I'm just glad that I can walk."

Then, a few mouths later, I asked him the same question, which he could not answer because he was in too much pain. The rod is still serving its purpose to keep his spine straight but the bumps have not stopped developing.

The chatter of drunk people having fun is what I hear through the door.

"Let me out." I say, not knowing if anyone can hear me.

"You'll be all right," says Gisella. "You'll be fine. You hear those sirens, they're for you."

"Don't be such a baby," my grandmother would tell me. I often wondered if Grandmother did eat nails for breakfast as my father so often suggested. I used to cry so hard in thunderstorms until one day she gave me a giant smack across my bottom and I've never whimpered again over the weather.

In the drawers are also some bottles of prescription medication. Nothing too exciting though. I could change the labels or mix up the pills but that wouldn't be such a thrill. There is nothing
for my hair. No barrettes to play with. No combs or brushes or even gel. Nothing to pry open the door with. I look in the mirror and see my reflection. I look tired. I am tired. I lie back on the floor with my feet dangling over the bathtub. Perhaps I’m a deadbeat. Let them play outside.

Last weekend I was talking with a drunk engineer. He described the difference between tension and stress. He calculates the mathematics necessary for the building of bridges to answer important questions like, *How much tension is needed to hold things in place? Just how many tons can be piled on before it will collapse?* I got tired of his talk and left him standing at the bar alone. Now, here in the confines of a windowless bathroom, I cannot escape the noise of the toilet.

If I had my natural bristled brush and wide-toothed comb on me now, I’d take the comb and rake through the brush, scraping out hair. The white stuff at the base of the bristles. Is that my hair or some other stuff? Lint junk? Monster shit? I don’t know. This is like a long subway ride. I wish that I brought a good book. Instead, I pick at my nails. And when it comes right down to it, I don’t know if swallowing VANGUARD would do any harm to me at all. They could be lying. You never know. Who’s to stop them? I know that I wouldn’t.

My brother ate Ajax once when he was little. Not enough to kill him though. My mother freaked when she saw him on the kitchen floor licking a powdery substance from his hand. She saw the spilled box, then looked toward her child and grabbed the phone.
A loud hiss and rush from above leads me to believe that the ceiling will soon collapse in and rain on me. Upstairs the toilet is flushing. A ringing doorbell. The party has awakened the neighbors. Music cuts off in the middle of a beat and the hostess politely speaks to the cops. They leave, the door closes, and one by one people start making excuses to go home. What, no fire department?

Thirty years ago or so, my mother and father drove a '53 Ford across the country. My grandfather went with them as a chaperone. She said that they went out to California to visit her brother who had just moved there. Along the way, maybe it was in Ohio, they saw a tornado pass. She was scared. "The sky was blue for most of the way," my mother told me. "Then, we drove into this area, this strip of highway with open fields, like farms on either side. Ohio, I think that's where we were. Or maybe it was Oklahoma. I'm not really sure. Isn't it terrible, my getting the states mixed up like that. God that's just awful. It was different. Seeing a tornado, I mean. I felt this pressure in my ears. It was sort of like what I experience in planes only less severe, or maybe it was more like what I feel when I've been swimming for a while. Of course, you know all the problems that I have with my ears now and my eyes too. Doctor says that I need stronger prescription glasses." She was squinting. "Not just for reading anymore, you know."

"I want to know more about this tornado," I said.

"Well, you know this happens when you get older."

"So what happened after you saw the tornado approaching?"
"Well, I can remember, we'd shut off the radio and were enjoying this peaceful silence. I can't remember, maybe it was broken, but it wasn't on. Or maybe there wasn't a radio. I can't remember. It's not important. But then again, Your father was almost asleep in the back seat. Granddad was driving and I was resting next to him in the front. 'Look,' he said. I thought that he was just going to point out another billboard or another sign that told us how many miles more to where ever. There was really nothing else to do in the car, so I looked. And there was a dark funnel of clouds in the distance. It didn't seem real at the time. It was like a picture I'd seen somewhere. We drove for a few miles, all the time, watching it. It got closer. I was a little nervous and I told my father. He told me that there was nothing to worry about. And I wasn't really worried until I saw other cars pulling off the road. I asked him if we should pull off too and maybe get into a ditch because for some reason I remember there being a ditch on the side of the road. He said that if we got out of the car, it might just fall on us anyway. Then I said something like I was afraid of being blown away in the car. At this point I think your father woke up."

"Then what happened?"

"Oh, I don't know, it was really crazy. We looked to where we'd seen the funnel cloud and it wasn't there anymore. We couldn't find it. It was like it just disappeared, probably went in the other direction."

"Weren't you scared?"

"Certainly we were, driving and not knowing where that cloud had gone."
"Oh, and there was this other time, on the way home from a camping trip. You probably don't remember but, we all thought that we'd seen a UFO. You know, like a spaceship." She stopped her story to ask for her handbag. "Can you reach back there and get me my handbag?" she said.

"It's right here," I picked it off the floor and handed it to her. I'm always handing her things. Getting her things. Doing things for her.

"Jesus! Don't put my bag on the floor. It'll get all dirty."

"You put it there."

"Oh. Well, I shouldn't have and I hope that you don't do that with your handbag. Speaking of which, where is your handbag?"

"I don't carry a handbag." I said.

"Oh." She paused and removed her glasses which she handed to me. "Here, put these in my case in my handbag. Be careful, don't scratch them." I did as I was told, taking care not to mark the glasses. "As it turns out, the UFO was some kind of advertisement. It was very believable though, with the bright lights that we could see for miles."

What UFOs sound like. The hiss of toilet water. Imagine smashing my head into the tile. This room is so small and there's nothing else to do. I wish I'd brought a good book or at least seen a tornado. The knocks getting louder and more insistent. The rescuers have arrived.

"How many people you got in there?"

"One, just one. Just me."
"Get against the back wall and cover your head."

"What?"

"We know. We're going to cut down the door and we just don't want anything hitting you. So, stay calm and go to the back of the room, farthest from the door, cover your head, stay put." There is some fuss outside. I can tell that the hostess is reluctant to let some fire fighters break down her bathroom door. Oddballs. Firefighters are oddballs partly because breaking down doors is in their job description.

The evening air is cool and metallic like a trash can. Gisella walks with me. Earl offers a ride.

"No thanks. I'd rather be eaten alive," says Gisella. The second half of her response escapes under her breath.

"Where's Seth?" I ask.

"I think he and Randy went out to a late night place."

"Do they know each other? I mean, does Randy know that you go out with Seth?"

"Not yet. Maybe it will come up. I don't really care. It's more important that I get you home to bed tonight without your brains splattered all over the bathroom floor."

My dry heels clicking with every step. I am still shaking. The noise of an empty city late at night. Police cars and ambulances driving on the boulevard parallel to where we're at. I look to the parting clouds in the night sky.

The late, late night news. A woman is stopped at a red light. Two men break into her car and shove her aside. One drives. The
other puts his hand over her face and uses the other one to rip off her necklace and watch. He opens the door and tries to shove her out the passenger's side but she is still attached by the safety belt. Instead of being flung from a car going forty miles an hour, she is dragged along the road at this speed.

Now my mother and my father mostly eat take-out or go to restaurants with specials for senior citizens. Deadbeats.

Monsters need to sleep too. They do it in the daytime.

While watching cartoons the next morning, Gisella and I decide that a change is needed. It wasn't fair that Sylvester be deprived of his mouse or bird. Let him have it once in a while so that he at least doesn't lose his motivation. Nothing seems fair to me anymore. Gisella agrees and tells me that she's moving out West.

"People are more tolerant out there," she says.

"Cranks, deadbeats and oddballs," I say.

"What?"

"There are three types of people in this world; cranks, deadbeats and oddballs."

"What am I?"

"An oddball, I think."

"What are you?"

"Deadbeat? Oddball? I'm not sure."

"Well, you do complain a lot. I think that would grounds for qualifying you as a crank."
"I don't know. I'm still not sure."
A buzzing noise in Baxter's head made it difficult for him to cut with a steady hand. The first thing Baxter found when he cut into the cadaver was a yellow liquid substance that covered his plastic gloves and got all over his white lab jacket. It stunk horribly and looked like melted corn bits. The substance was fat and on his first day in anatomy lab, he resolved to be a thin man. Because the cadaver assigned to him was one of a seventy-year-old woman, he had to probe through much more fat than he would a man's cadaver, to get to the important parts of the body like the muscles, tissues and organs. The procedure did not bother him as it would most other people. Not everyone is cut out to be a doctor.

Baxter was not squeamish nor was he easily excited. Once, when he was in the third grade on a bus ride home from school, he recalls running over a first grader. He remembers how the bus bumped off the ground and how the kids shouted with excitement from the unexpected movement. He remembers too, the bus driver pulling over seconds after it happened, after someone yelled, "Stop! It's a kid!" Baxter was one of the first to run to the rear window of the school bus to see someone throw a coat over the child's tiny body. Baxter's mother picked him up that day from the scene of the accident. He walked away, seeing the bus driver cry. Some other kids were crying too, but not Baxter. His mother praised him for how marvelously he had handled the situation. Baxter wondered about that bus driver sometimes. Where was he? Did he resolve himself to
a lifetime of drunkenness and solitude? Was he emotionally ruined for the rest of his life? Was he in jail?

They had thoroughly dissected the dorsal portion of the cadaver in their first week of class and were now working on the shoulders and limbs. Baxter penetrated the skin with just the right pressure. As he began to peel the skin away, Baxter noticed that the ringing in his ears had subsided. He shrugged and said, "They must have stopped talking about me."

"Who?" asked Becky, his lab partner.

"I'm not sure, elves maybe, but my ears just stopped ringing. My grandmother always told me that a ringing eardrum is a sign that someone is talking about you."

"It's actually symptomatic of hearing loss, sinusitis, or bad allergic reactions," added Becky. Becky was the type of person who always looked like she needed a nap. She studied too hard, and too late at night.

"Yeah, I know," said Baxter.

Baxter and Becky named their cadaver Wendy because he came to lab one day humming the Beach Boys tune of the same name. Baxter was indifferent to whether they named her or not, but Becky insisted since it was one of those things that she had looked forward to in medical school. In her opinion choosing a name for the cadaver was right up there with giving each other proctological exams, and occasionally sneaking nips of ether from the chemical lab. Wendy had been dead for over six months, making the skin and muscle stiff and difficult to manipulate. He wished for something fresher, more supple.
"I want something fresher," he joked as he pushed aside a vein. "They don't get any better than this," someone called out. "Try the market next time. You know, the deli section." The groans resounded throughout the laboratory. How many hands did this hand touch or shake? Baxter got to wondering as they studied the bones of her right index finger. Did she wash before every meal? Did she play an instrument? Paint her nails? If so, what color? How many bowls of oatmeal did she mix with this hand? Did she even like oatmeal? Did she pick her nose?

"Baxter, look at this," Becky said. He moved around the table to where Becky was working on the woman's left hand. "Look," she said holding back the skin. "Look at the bones." Baxter looked and noticed that the bones on the hand didn't quite line up. She must have broken it and it never quite healed. Was she a lefty?

Baxter returned to his apartment around seven at night and got out a can of chicken noodle soup. The hand-held can opener was old and difficult to use. Baxter cut his finger and sucked on it until the bleeding stopped. His other roommates went out for a bite. Baxter took his soup to the living room, where he sat in front of the television and began eating it hardly pausing in between slurps, until he felt his lip being burned by the hot liquid. He paused, turned on the television, then finished his soup. He swallowed the last bit of broth, put the bowl on the floor and turned the television to Nintendo. Double Dragon. The ringing returned to his ears when he was on the third frame of the game, almost near the end, when he had to make his imaginary hero advance while hurdling oncoming barrels, and fending off a constant flow of attackers. So engaging

95
was the game, that an hour passed in five minutes and his roommate, Stanley, returned.

"How far have you gotten?" Stanley asked. Without saying a word, Baxter leaned to the left in order to let Stanley look over his shoulder.

"Not bad; look out for the thugs with the tire irons!" Stanley said.

"I thought those were sticks," Baxter said.

"Do sticks make a clinking metal sound when they drop?"

"No," Baxter replied.

"Are sticks shaped into perfect right angles?"

"No," Baxter answered, this time agitated.

"Oh, oh, and here comes that bitch with a gun. Look out for her man, she's gonna get you! Hah!" The cartoon image of the martial arts wizard fell backward into a stack of two-dimensional trash cans with a resounding thud.

"Thanks a fucking lot," Baxter said before shutting off the T.V. Baxter went into the kitchen to make himself a peanut-butter sandwich before going back into the living room, where he found Stanley at the television set with the joy stick in hand. He sat on the couch for a few minutes watching Stanley play ice hockey. When he finished eating his sandwich, Baxter went to his room to read. After a few hours, Baxter went into the darkened living room to see Stanley's face aglow with the brightness from the television. His fingers were quick and intent but his face was without expression.

"I'm going to bed," said Baxter.

"Night."
"Are we still on for racquet ball?" Baxter asked.

"Of course. Six o'clock."

"Night."

In his sleep, Baxter found himself in a doctor's office, facing a young boy. He thought it odd that an eleven-year-old should be his doctor. The boy asked him questions, something about abdominal pain and a chronic running nose. Then, Baxter realized that he was the doctor and that he had to treat the boy. He told the boy to lie down and the boy did, right on top of his desk. While the boy lay there, face up, Baxter scribbled a prescription on a piece of paper and handed it to the boy. The boy sat up, thanked him for the diagnosis and then said, "What about my nose?"

"What about it?" Baxter asked.

"It's runny. I can't breathe through it," the boy whined.

"If the prescription doesn't work, just cut it off. It's only the inner cavity that's important anyway."

The boy thanked him once again and left his office. Baxter was horrified the next time he saw the boy in his office. Baxter recognized the boy's noseless face. There was no blood or scabs. There was just a blackened hole in the center of his face, like a skeleton. "Thank you doctor," the boy said. "Now all the girls in the sixth grade want to go out with me."

"I was kidding!" Baxter shouted, "I was just joking! Can't you take a joke?" Baxter awoke shortly after this dream to the sound of Bernard, his third roommate, in the kitchen. He raised his neck and looked at the time on the digital clock. 4:21. Where the hell has he been? Baxter wondered.
"Where the hell have you been?" asked Stanley, also awakened by Bernard’s entrance.

"Out," said Bernard, and they went back to bed.

Some practical joker brought a bag full of plastic flies and placed them on the noses of each corpse in lab the next day. There were a couple of shrieks, a few chuckles and a sigh. Baxter didn't find it amusing and Becky was too tired to notice. They cut up Wendys' legs. Wendy had fat legs. Baxter couldn't believe how she ever got that fat. There was almost no muscle in her calves and thighs; she probably had arthritis in her later years and didn't use those muscles much for walking. Baxter thought about his grandmother and compared her to Wendy. His grandmother was much smaller and thinner but she did have a certain pudginess that comes with age. She'd probably look just as nasty under the knife. Ten years ago, Baxter's grandmother took too many sleeping pills and washed them down with gin. No one really noticed that she had a drinking problem or thought that she might be depressed. She was just Grandma Millie to them. Sure she drank a bit at weddings but everybody does. The only time it was a problem was when she inadvertently set off the fire alarm after throwing a foam football at the groom. No one was sure where she got the football or the incentive to toss it from. She also had her share of pills. At age sixty-seven, who doesn't? Her suicide was dismissed as an accident. It was easier explained in the newspapers and besides, Grandma Millie requested in her will that no autopsy be performed.
After lab, Baxter and Stanley played racquetball. They began by saying that they weren't going to play long since they both had a lot of work to do and besides, Baxter's ears were driving him crazy. If they weren't making that ringing noise, then they were blocked, like he was on an airplane. The more he smashed the ball and skipped around the court, concentrating on scoring points, the less he felt his ears. Baxter and Stanley played for three-hours, stopping twice to get sips from the water fountain, and once to change the band-aid on Baxter's finger.

They showered, ate out and got home late. Bernard was out again. It was midnight on Friday and they decided to go to The Gutts, a downtown bar that featured nightly entertainment. It was late enough so that they would not be charged a cover. They got to The Gutts and ordered two beers. The Gutts was the kind of bar that most people do not know about, despite the fact that it was frequently written up in the police log for the fights that occured outside the place. Although the band was breaking before its last set, they knew that it was a punk rock one by the holes in the low, paneled ceiling. Slam dancers. When a particularly uplifting song would come on, the dancers would jump high, trying to hit the ceiling with their heads to make an impression. Sometimes one dancer would jump too hard and make a hole. Bernard was at the bar too. They talked to him until the band started up again and he went to dance.

"Bernard, a punk rocker. I never would have guessed," said Baxter.
"You should look at his record collection. He likes polka music too. I think he gets it from his parents though. He's in one of the bands, like the ones that play traditional ethnic songs with a punk twist."

"Like what?"

"Like, they'll start out with an Irish jig, completely normal, then some guy in the group will wail on his electric guitar. I've seen them practice before. It was pretty impressive, pretty sick," said Stanley.

"How come I never knew about this?"

"I dunno. I think that he told you once but you probably weren't listening."

In the three months since Bernard moved in, Baxter and Stanley have never really felt as if they knew him. They found Bernard, their third roommate, through the classifieds. So far, so good. The only annoying habits he had were playing the accordion and coming home late. Stanley went over to talk with a woman he knew. Baxter sat alone at the bar with a good view of the stage. The lead singer was bouncing up and down, hollering into the mike. His jeans were tight and he had his shirt wrapped around his waist. Baxter wondered what his legs looked like from the inside. He guessed that they were pretty strong and muscular. He could almost picture the sinewy layers of ligaments covered by only a thin layer of fat. His chest was nothing to marvel at though. It was just a basic chest without any extra muscle tone. A slight paunch poked from the singer's jeans and Baxter thought that in this guy's stomach there was a soft layer of that chunky corn-like stuff called fat. Baxter
sipped his beer and watched the dancers for a minute. He saw
Bernard bouncing up and down, his head touching the ceiling each
time, softening it and making an impression. Finally it cracked above
him and the people who witnessed it began to holler and clap.
Bernard was huge and Baxter had seen him without clothes on since
he frequently went without them around the apartment. After he
took a shower or in between the time he woke up and got dressed,
he walked around the apartment naked, not bothering to close the
blinds of the bay window. Baxter had seen Bernard naked so many
times that he no longer thought about the fat that would ooze from
his body if someone ever cut him open.

The loud music worsened the ringing in Baxter’s ears. He left
The Gutts in a senseless fog, not really sure of what anyone was
saying, or if anyone was speaking to him at all. When he got home,
he lay down in his bed and tried to sleep, but could not. There was a
pounding sound deep within his ear drums, like people marching in
boots. Heavy and dull. He thought of an army, marching into battle.
The pace was steady and quick. It must be hard to march fast and in
sync, he thought. The beat was regular, like a heartbeat. It felt like
his heart was in his head, like he had swallowed it or something and
could not get rid of the noise. He took some aspirin and eventually
fell asleep.

Baxter woke the next day with a headache. He turned on the
television and watched cartoons for a while, then he walked around
the shopping district. He always thought this to be the safest place to
walk. While out, he saw a woman walking into Jordan Marsh. She
looked naked from a distance. Baxter could not believe it, a naked woman in broad daylight, shopping at the downtown Jordan Marsh. He followed her inside only to discover that she was wearing a cream-colored blouse and pants of the same color and material. They were neatly tucked in and revealed the natural curves of her body. Something else struck him about this woman. She had approximately the same-sized breasts as Charlene, a woman he'd had a short relationship with four summers ago. He was never really sure if he could have called her his girlfriend or not, although they did go out to the movies, and to dinner often. At the end of the summer they said that they would keep in touch, but Baxter waited to hear from her first and he never did.

Around Christmas time that year, he did hear about her. He heard that she died in a car. Some said that it was suicide, that she purposely let the car run, filling it with toxic fumes, and that she happily lay across the front seat, and welcomed her end. Others said, in all seriousness, that she just didn't know how to drive a shift. They said that there was something wrong with the car's exhaust system. Charlene was parked in front of a video rental store for an estimated thirty minutes. There was another person in the car with her who also died. It was a guy, probably a new boyfriend. It was a cold night, which explains why they left the car running. Were they having sex? Arguing over what movie to rent? Was he convincing her to die with him, in some sort of ritualistic double suicide? Baxter preferred not to believe this one because he thought that he knew Charlene better than that. He recalled one time when they talked about death under the influence of a bottle of bad wine. She
believed in an afterlife of sorts. She thought that there had to be something better than this although she did admit that her life was not all that bad. Then, she did a strange thing. Charlene took her Swiss army knife from her bag, the one they had used to uncork the wine, and said, "If I stabbed and killed you right now, where would your soul go?" Baxter had to think for a moment, first of the logistics of the situation and realized that if she did lunge at him with the knife, he could easily overpower her.

"I dunno," he said. "Nowhere, I guess."

Baxter thought about this as he studied the woman in the store. She moved around the handbag selection and he unconsciously stared. She had the same firm breasts as Charlene. He could not believe it. Baxter always thought that breasts were unique, like snowflakes; that there were no two pairs alike. What also did believed is that if he cut them open, he'd find the same liquefied fat that he found in Wendy's and in Charlene's, unless of course one of them had breast implants. Wendy did not. Charlene did not, at least he was pretty sure of that. But this woman, he did not know.

"May I help you?" a voice said. It was the salesperson. His unconscious staring at the woman in beige had apparently been noticed. Slightly embarrassed, Baxter went home and read about muscles and ligaments until late that night. He spent rest of the weekend in his apartment, studying and sleeping.

In lab on Monday, they cut open the chest cavity. For some reason, Baxter expected the heart to be bigger in size. He could not explain why he thought this since he had studied the organs and
knew their approximate size before he dug in. No bigger than Baxter's fist was the tiny blood sack.

"You go first," he said to Becky and she leaned over the body and sliced into the aorta. He watched Becky. The skin around her eyes was dark with sleeplessness or ether. He could not tell. He watched her bony hands and thin wrists maneuver the tissue surrounding the heart. Becky had little girls' breasts, but he guessed that if he cut them open, some of that liquid corn bits stuff would be there. His ears were blocked again and he swallowed hard in an attempt to clear them. It did not work.

The next day in lab, upon uncovering Wendy they found a beer can in one hand and an empty pack of cigarettes in the other. Obviously the prankster was at it again.

"Thanks for the beer," Becky said, putting it in the pocket of her white lab coat. "I'll have it with my lunch." Baxter threw away the empty pack of cigarettes.

They spent the rest of the week dissecting the stomach, the genitals, the feet and finally the head. The brain was the most fascinating thing for Baxter. The stories that he had heard before about being able to pull on the long tube-like tissue of the brain and stretch it out were not true. Becky was a little disappointed. She tugged on a bit of the tissue and a piece of the brain popped out, making a suction noise. Becky shrieked at her folly and ran to retrieve the bit of brain that went flying across the room before the lab assistant did. Baxter pulled out a section with more success and explored the cranial cavity. This is really getting inside someone else's head, he thought. Baxter started to think about the time he
told Charlene the truth about his age. Four years ago, he told Charlene that he was twenty-five years old and doing his residency as an anesthesiologist for the local hospital. Charlene was three years older than Baxter. Something made him not want her to know the truth of his age, so he lied. She never believed him and on the night that he decided to confess the truth to her, Baxter was more surprised than she.

"I had a feeling that you weren't twenty-five," she said.

"How's that?"

"Well, you mentioned a few times that your mother still made your lunch."

"Oh. Are you pissed?"

"No."

"Are you flattered?"

"No, should I be?"

"Well, I didn't think that you'd go out with me if you knew that I was three years younger than you," he said.

"Age doesn't really bug me. Now, aren't you flattered?"

Their relationship was never quite the same after that day. Charlene often told baby jokes and although this didn't really bother Baxter, the fact that he was reduced back to a college freshman and not a medical student in the course of a few weeks did.

The brain was thoroughly explored. The cadaver was reduced to a heaping mess of human material. Skin, hair, bones, organs, blood, muscle and fat were put away to be disposed of in the proper manner. They said good-bye to Wendy. Anatomy exam would be the following week.
When Baxter got home, Bernard was warming up for the band by playing his accordion.

"That's enough," said Baxter, "We've finished with Wendy today." Bernard continued to play and Stanley asked, "Who's Wendy, some girl we don't know about?"

"She's my cadaver. We finished dissecting her today."

"Like I said, is she your girlfriend or something?"

"Very funny. Let's go out."

That night they went to The Gutts again. They went earlier this time and paid the cover because Bernard's band was playing. Baxter and Stanley drank a lot. It had been a long time since Baxter felt this drunk, maybe the last time he was in college. He drank so much that he even got up to dance and soon he found himself contributing to the head imprints in the soft ceiling. Bernard's band, called Defecate the Truth, dedicated a punk rock version of Wendy, by the Beach Boys, to Baxter. Soon Baxter's head began to ache from the dancing and from the ringing in his ears. He took a seat at the bar. A man wearing a black leather jacket was sitting next to Baxter. Baxter guessed that he was in his sixties or so. He did not have much gray hair, but he did have a lot of wrinkles.

"What do you think about death?" He caught Baxter off his guard.

"Are you talking to me?" Baxter asked.

"Yeah, I am. Don't think I'm weird or nothing, but I just want to know. I mean, like man to man, what do you think?" He did not pause long enough for Baxter to respond and Baxter was glad because he did not really how to answer. "Suppose, now, just
suppose, I'm not really gonna do this but, suppose that I took a gun out of my pocket, right here, right now, and shot your sorry ass to kingdom come. Just suppose this now, cause I don't have a gun on me. But suppose I did blow you away right here, where would your soul go?" The never-ending dull noise in his ears prevented Baxter from giving a response.

"I dunno," Baxter said. "I just don't fucking know."

"Well, you know what I think? I think that we all go somewhere, whether it's another place, or another country or another space. I'm just not sure yet. Sometimes I have these dreams you know, dreams that I'm an emperor or king in some ancient land and that I have all these people who listen to me and respect me." He paused and took a healthy gulp from his bottle. "You ever see the movie Highlander?"

"No."

"Well in that movie, they got this guy, this guy who's immortal. But there's another guy who's immortal too. Well, there are three of 'em but, 'there can be only one'."

"Oh."

"You ever kill someone?"

"No."

"Well, there was this kid, I used to drive him to school everyday. I was a bus driver. I didn't know all the kids that well but, one day I was driving and I swear to God, it wasn't my fault, he ran under the back tire to get a paper that blew away or something. I ran over him." He took a long, hard drag of his cigarette before extinguishing it. "Man, it was the worst fucking moment of my life.
Sometimes I think that I see him, the boy, in the street, in stores anywhere. Damn near killed myself trying to follow what I thought was him crossing the street once. Almost wish I had." He paused for a moment to light another cigarette. Baxter ordered two more beers.

"Am I boring you with all this shit?" the man asked.

"No, not at all, go on," said Baxter. The ringing sudsied and he leaned back to hear the man's story.
Epilogue

Laughing at yourself is great, but it is also fun to laugh at others. Unfortunately, sometimes people are offended. Within the fictional world, one can create characters that resemble people one wishes to laugh with or at. The realm of fiction therefore eases the tension and embarrassment for everyone.

*Just because you can't hear yourself, does not mean that you're not talking.* - Spoken when the headphones broke during *Gone with the Wind*, the *Completely Unrelated radio show* on WMHB, a community radio station.