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Bleeding: A Collection of Poetry and Short Fiction

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BLEEDING: A COLLECTION
OF POETRY AND SHORT FICTION

by


CECILY VON ZIEGESAR

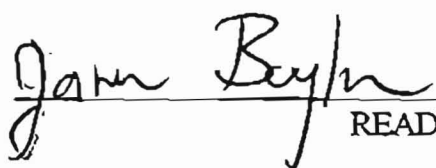
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GIRL

This woman dispenses a dime:
a silent, sanitary napkin.
She slips out of rooms
in a hurry, mysterious,
with her purse.
She sweats, bathes, drinks
--an animal--
she is not my mother.

My mother,
on the library steps in Rome,
smokes a cigarette. She bleeds
vigorously into white denim,
cocksure men
will admire her for it.
In fact they joke
about the American

schoolgirl, genuinely rapt
with desire. Now,
she bleeds, wonders how
great the stain,
how fierce the beast,
if she forgot her purse:
left off the bandage.

ROMA, 1981

In Rome I danced with the big girls.
They had the tufts of hair I longed for.
They sprayed perfume to veil their sour scent.
They sat, legs crossed, in the dressing room
wearing heels, bras, hoop earrings, lipstick,
and watched me *fute* on point: "Benissima.
Brava. Che bella bambina."

Evenings at home I stretched each muscle,
broke in new toe shoes, played the cello,
wrote in my diary and soaked my body clean.
Sunday mornings the church bells
in the Piazza Navona sang their language.
I listened as if I understood, while the women,
wrapped in scarves and rosary beads,
hurried to confess their marvelous sins.

AT THE RESTORATION OF COPAN LAS RUINAS,
I THINK OF MY FATHER

In the lobby of a hotelito
I watch an American
television show:
how to install a wood stove
in Spanish. Next week
it promises to refurbish
a spinning wheel.
I think my father
would approve. Once,
I remember he said
its the amenities
of the ancients
that keep our heads
above ground.
He would ask the senior
behind the desk,
who's back is as bent
as an orchid tree from life
in this dry place
where the taste
is always the same,
for a gin and tonic.
He'd send it back
to senior for a lime.
I write him
a postcard, a picture
of the restoration:
they keep the ruins
and my father
alive.

DIVE

For Nicole

Adorned in prophylactics we penetrate
this body's surface, precise and harmless as an emerald.
We are spies in this blue, this yellow, this spectrum
of vessels, primary and familiar.

I take your hand, careful not to swim too quickly
or kick out with a careless foot, (I have hosted
foreigners myself, know the desire to assimilate). Still,
with you I want to go native, peel off

these suits and undulate: forget the story
of the woman whose pink skin is scarred by weirs,
when she spun and spun into blindness
with bouts of Whirling's disease.

Below, the light is dim: like a fan your hand
waves past me, as if you know your way,
would show me if I'd lose my hold
of surface light, towels and sunscreen.

WHAT PEOPLE CLAIM TO KNOW ABOUT WOMEN AND HORSES

Feet in the stirrups, heels down,
I try to laugh away the latex hand
that offers a mirror. I laugh
as I accept the sight
of me inside out.

What horse is this?

What horse I sit astride
causes me to wonder
what I smell like inside?
What horse allows me
to seal my legs around it while
it carries me
rigid as a queen?

Why do I laugh at the eye:
the horse, a mirror
eyeing the whole of me?

COUNTER MIRRORS

*...they had been a man who watched himself experiencing and
a woman who watched herself experiencing; they had been a
woman who watched a man watching himself and a man
watching a woman watching herself...all reflected in counter
mirrors...*

From Kobo Abé's the Woman in the Dunes

I think of my father groping
for my mother in the elevator
as, a dormouse, I watch
through the porter's legs.

I think of my mother scrubbing
her crotch in the bathtub,
crying out at me with the sting
of insecticide. I try to recall

where I learned to lose
the caress of infancy:
new sweat, breasts, hips,
where's that mind of your own?

I think to give myself up
to my mother, start again with her,
but look: her waist is so tiny
I'm surprised to be here.

I can imagine her surprise
when I show her this poem
like a hand on her neck,
a second skin.

SOME DISTANCE

My brother, the one they call crazy,
returns from the ward
where he waited three months
for placement, somewhere nice.

He holds his arms raised up
to keep his balance, his hands
in fists, as he creeps,
crouching like a giant in a crawl space.

I imitate him as a joke, to warn him.
I say, "you look funny."
He responds with secrets in his voice:
"I have traveled a thousand light years today."

TOE

Creases in her back from lying so long,
she, with painted face and folded hands,
imagine: the skin of her foot is still
pink. Her body, nothing but pink.

Now take a foot for instance.
Keep that image of foot.
Keep that even word of foot,
that pink, pink toe. Keep that.

Now imagine the foot, the toe,
toeing the earth of a graveyard
at sunset, the sunset all pink:
nothing but pink.

Imagine: her toe lifts the earth,
her hands unfold, her back
smoothes out, her skin, still
pink in the graveyard's last light.

MOON BATH

As always on Tuesday evenings, Janet and Roy are home together. Janet watches her favorite Tuesday evening television show while Roy studies slides of blood samples from the hospital. But now Janet can feel Roy watching her from the threshold between the living room and his study. During a commercial break she looks up to meet his gaze.

"What?" she asks.

"I'm going to make you a special vitamin shake for dinner, O.K.?"

"I'm not hungry," Janet says. She slides to the far end of the couch and rearranges the cushions by her feet.

"What did you have this time?" Roy steps towards her, pulling the cushions to the floor to reveal several empty, plastic food wrappers. He snatches one up and holds it close to his face to read the ingredients. "Butylated Hydroxytoluene, Monosodium Glutamate, Propyl Gallate, Red No. 40..."

Janet moans softly, "You're not my father." When they were first married, she'd ask Roy for advice about diet and vitamins, and hid her cigarettes from him. She used to love the idea that she was his number one, first priority patient.

"I have something to show you Janet," Roy announces suddenly, discarding the wrappers.

"Is it a good thing or a bad thing?" Janet asks, yawning a little.

"It's a bad thing, I think, but it's meant in a good way," Roy explains. He shrugs, "You're going to think it's a bad thing."

"What is it?" Janet asks.

Roy backs into his study. "Come in here and I'll show you."

"Why can't you just tell me?" Janet demands, whining with the effort it takes to stand up.

"Look at this," Roy says, turning to peer through his microscope as she enters the room. He looks up at Janet and holds his arm out her, as if to pull her through the lens. "It's really amazing," he says.

"What is it?" Janet asks, "You know I don't know what to look for."

"It's your blood honey," Roy answers, "come and see."

Janet looks through the microscope, then back at Roy. "What do you mean, my blood? What blood?"

"I'm doing a study on TV. and blood. You watch a lot of TV. and I'm developing a theory that the red blood cell count is lowered by the inactivity and pituitary stimulation symptomatic of chronic TV. viewers."

"Where did you get my blood?"

Roy removes his glasses and looks down to clean them. "I took it while you were asleep," he mumbles, then looks up, replacing his glasses, "You fell asleep on the couch in the middle of Nightline. It was too perfect: I had to take it," he says.

"I don't believe it," Janet says, "What do I have to do? Hire a bodyguard?"

"But I wish you could see what I see," Roy continues, "I really think I have something."

"Oh, and what's that?" Janet asks, crossing her arms.

"The future of Hematology, that's what. Do you know how much television the average American watches?"

"No but I'm sure you do," Janet answers. "Go ahead, tell me."

"Come on Janet, you know I'm only doing this to help you," Roy holds his hands out to her, palms up. The veins on his wrists are electric blue.

"Me and the future of Hematology," Janet says, "I don't how many times you've done it, but I'm sure there are laws against this kind of thing." She returns to the couch and stretches out, face down, to allow the sounds of the television to stroke her back familiarly.

"Why don't you call your father and find out," Roy calls out after her.

"Funny you should say that," Janet calls back, too quietly for Roy to hear, "You sound just like him."

Sure, she could call her father to find out that she has no case against Roy even if she wanted one. He would speak to her in terms of the value of marriage, the complete merging of two people: his hers, hers his. Then, he would condescend to explain, as if it were an insider's secret, that at the heart of the matter the courts wouldn't be too concerned about what Roy did with her blood, especially since he is a doctor. Like Roy, he would go on to say it's for her own good anyway. This is the same father who used to sneak into her room to read her diary or look for test grades she might be hiding from him. Call him? Roy always manages to bring her old resentments to the surface.

The last time she and Roy went at each other, Janet took the head lamp they use when they blow a fuse and went outside to write a list of reasons for them to be together, and reasons for one of them to leave. That time Roy's reasons to leave her came out the longest. Among other things on the list were the facts that she is irritable, a bad housekeeper, eats nutritionally incomplete foods, isn't interested in his work and is allergic to dogs. Roy loves dogs. But now that he has taken her blood, Janet has one more reason to leave.

She reaches up to adjust the pillow beneath her head. Her arms stretch the gray material of her sweat suit: she has "teacher's" arms: they would jiggle if she were to write at a blackboard. She has seen shows on how to tone your arms at home. You hold a soda can in each hand and lift your arms up and down. She tried it a few times: of course there were no immediate results. Lately she's resorted to cigarette smoking for weight loss. One year at college she met a woman who lost fifteen pounds when she took up smoking. She smoked whenever she got hungry. She taught Janet how to inhale so it fills you up, but Janet never feels full enough. She has never lost weight from smoking, but there's always the chance that her metabolism will change to make it work.

Craning her neck around to make sure Roy is no longer watching, Janet reaches beneath the couch and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Roy has another theory--dehydration of the pores due to cigarette smoke leads to rapid aging--that she'd prefer not to hear. But the smell of smoke travels quickly, and soon she hears him call out:

"Jesus woman, now you're going to make yourself look like a shrunken apple, on top of everything else." Janet shrugs her full shoulders as she exhales. She punches off the television and rolls to her feet, deciding to eat a quick snack and go for a walk--something she does at times like these--something she's been doing quite often lately.

She sucks a sugar-free Jell-O Pudding Pop and wanders out into their yard. The moon is out, or part of it at least. In terms of the moon and the general scheme of things, Roy's taking her blood is not a very big deal. But then again, her own frame of reference, the moon included, is all she has. Her blood is a part of her, in essence it is her, the juice of her. Roy tries to pump her full of vitamins, but then he goes and sneaks pints of her away. It is a big deal. She feels that the moon, shining on her with its generous light, must understand: it has to be more tired than she is. Though it looks so small she could grasp it between her fingers and examine it under a microscope, like Roy's slide of her blood, Janet promises forever to pay the moon the respect she wishes her own blood deserved.

She lies down in the grass and orange, fallen leaves, with her hands resting on her stomach and her eyes closed. She is moon bathing. She laughs out loud, sure that she is alone. Roy has got to be kidding her.

She does watch a lot of television. She would admit that to anyone who asked. But there's no too much or too little about it. Television washes over her. Everything on has a beginning, a middle and an ending. Fat women go to parties and meet handsome plastic surgeons who see a future in their thighs. An orphan finds foster

parents who aren't allergic to cats. Murders are solved; prizes on quiz shows are given out; foods are prepared and consumed at no risk to the viewer. Deaths and births occur from week to week with no effect on the population.

Once she had even tried to take up art, sketching the trees in their yard. She even walked to the church in town to sketch once or twice. But one morning she got out her pad and began to sketch a woman being interviewed on a talk show. The woman turned her head sharply at one point, and Janet called to her to hold still. Hearing herself, Janet put her sketching away for good.

Earlier in life she read. She would immerse herself in the lives of characters in fictions, crying in pain for them, laughing with them. The novels of the 19th century especially; Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte: novels with parties and love and feasts and marriage and dreary weather and nothing to do but talk about what to wear at the next party, the next feast, the next wedding. Janet supposes it wasn't only that, the having nothing to do, but the way it seemed the case with all the women, that they spent their lives commiserating.

Janet used to think herself an intellectual. She remembers a conversation with her mother, a long time ago, when she was in college. Her mother had just seen a film.

"I read the book before I saw the movie, that was a mistake," her mother had said, "the movie was much better. Don't you hate when that happens?"

"Mom," Janet had rolled her eyes, they don't make movies out of the books I read."

After Janet left home, her mother used to go to the movie theater and spend all day. She'd make dinner for herself and Janet's father, and after eating so much popcorn, wouldn't eat any of it. She'd go two, three, sometimes four times a week. Janet thought she was pathetic then, but now she wonders what shows she watched and what she thought. What drove her mother to the theaters like that every day? Janet wishes she had been able to commiserate with her, like the women in the novels. She wishes her mother had told her more, since now for Janet to begin a novel, however engrossing it promises to be, seems difficult. When she reads she feels obligated to participate, like a guest at a party. Television demands nothing. She likes especially the idea that the actresses and actors on TV, have another life--most of them were probably single off-screen--that they can reference one reality against the other. The only life she can refer the characters in books to is her own.

When Janet's mother was first introduced to Roy, she called him "Janet's doctor," and jokingly asked if he'd help her get through menopause. Roy had answered in earnest, eager as he was to please, that he would try. Janet's mother had laughed delightedly at his determination and said, "Janet's father will certainly like you." Janet hadn't understood what she meant until now.

She hears the screen door slam and the sound of Roy's feet crunching the leaves underneath him as he moves towards her.

"Here's that shake. Will you drink it for me, honey?" Roy says, standing over her. He holds the glass out in front of him as he waits for her to sit up.

Janet opens her eyes, "I'd rather not," she says, not moving.

"Come on, it's good for you," Roy protests.

Janet sits up halfway, her elbows on the ground behind her, "I'm sure you think you know what's good for me, but thank you, I'll decide for myself."

"But your blood reads--"

"I don't care what my blood says," Janet stands to face him. He is ridiculous in the moonlight: a tall glass of brown sludge in his hand and anxious perspiration beading his hairline. "As a matter of fact I'd like it back please."

Roy's brow furrows, "What?" He asks.

"My blood. You stole it, remember? I want you to put it back. "

"Don't be ridiculous. Will you drink this?" Roy steps toward her. Janet backs away.

"Not until you put my blood back."

Roy takes another step towards her. "This is better for you than your blood. It's vitamins your blood doesn't have anymore."

Janet turns around, walking quickly across the yard and down the driveway. It feels good to walk. She can hear Roy calling behind her. He will never stop nagging. For all she knows he'll never stop taking her blood. He's probably been doing it for months, extracting more and more from her, testing and examining, showing his lab cronies. How could she sleep in their house in peace, knowing this?

Breaking into slow jog, she decides to stay up. She'll watch all the late shows, wait for Roy to go to bed. He'll kiss her on the back of her head and tell her in a sad voice to come up soon. She'll nod and say goodnight. When she hears him upstairs in the bathroom, she'll

sneak into his study and steal a hypodermic. She could do it. She could steal his blood.

She'll get some other Hematologist to blow up pictures of his cells. They must have the technology to do that now. She could paste copies all over town. It would be on the local news. Knowing Roy, he'd even recognize his own blood. To Roy that would be worse than posting up a photo of him in the nude.

Then they would be even. Walking again, Janet hugs herself, pushing her body forward into the cold, night air. The idea of Roy's blood hung up in town pleases her, but now she squeezes her eyes shut as if to hold back tears. She could be satisfied frying chicken and blow-drying her hair, like the women on sitcoms, if only she could be sure no one would steal her blood while she slept. Tonight she will not sleep. Tonight she will take Roy's blood for herself, make off with it into the night; once she goes back inside; once the late shows are over; once the moon fades. Like Roy, she could spend a lifetime trying to find out what his blood is made of, but it's the taking that moves her.

TRIPE

Mrs. Breslin decides to make tripe. Her husband has invited friends from work to dinner, and she wants to make them something new. Without success, she has looked for tripe all over Manhattan. At the grocery store they don't know what it is. The butcher tells her it's has gone out of fashion and suggests she buy sweetbreads, but Mrs. Breslin finds the prospect of bringing back a trend with her Tripe exciting. Early that morning, while the housekeeper prepares the children for school, she calls a slaughterhouse, in Queens.

Although she has never been to Queens, she dresses in what she thinks must be the appropriate garb: baggy jeans and a huge turtleneck sweater. Her husband hates to see her dress this way, he says it looks as if she's hiding something underneath her big sweaters and long skirts. But because she always gains weight over the summer, she has to wear big clothes in early Autumn. She calls this her in between stage: when her fat clothes are bulky and make her look bigger than she is, and her thin clothes are too tight. But she will not need to make appearances until this evening, so what she wears this morning is of no consequence. For now, the preparations are a priority. She prides herself in her dinner parties as they are her sole responsibility in the Breslin household: they are her domain.

Mrs. Breslin descends in the elevator with her children, Hugh and Whitney. Bathed, fed and pressed into dry-cleaned school uniforms, they are something to be proud of. Yet none of their good looks are due to her. She had no part in waking them, bathing them,

dressing them--even what they ate for breakfast is a mystery to her--the housekeeper has tended to it all. She bends towards Hugh, now nine, to smooth the light hair across his forehead. He ducks away. Glancing self-consciously at Whitney, her seven year old, she straightens up again. As the elevator doors roll open, she stares at her daughter's knobby knees, envying the way they poke out just below the hem of her green plaid uniform: they are so skinny. Though she knows it's unhealthy, Mrs. Breslin wishes she had her daughter's legs.

She kisses Whitney quickly and waves good-bye. Other people's children wave back at her as they board the bus. She avoids trying to kiss Hugh, having learned her lesson. He is still at that stage when anything female repulses him. She nearly cried the first time he pushed her away as if she were contaminated. But Mr. Breslin laughed at her: "It's normal," he said. When he himself turned his back to her in bed that night, she wept. There she was with her husband next to her, crying out with loneliness, the children sleeping in the adjoining room. She forever wonders why it is that she feels most depressed when she is not alone. She had always thought it would be the other way around. Things never turn out the way you think. She turns to look for the doorman to get her a cab to Queens.

Leaning back into the black vinyl of the cab seat, with her hands behind her head (she doesn't want the thick smell of scalp in her own clean hair) she takes stock of her preparations for dinner. She must use the Spode tourrine--a gift from their wedding--the tourrine is perfect for tripe. But should she serve the salad before or after the dinner? Mr. Breslin likes his afterwards: it makes him feel

less full. She doesn't want her guests to feel overfed: she will serve the salad afterwards, then just berries and coffee for dessert. The tripe, served in the gold leaf tourrine, will be her chef d'equipe. Folding her hands comfortably over her pocketbook, she smiles at the thought.

Mrs. Breslin pushes open the gleaming glass doors of the slaughter house. She expects a smell. Blood or manure, something. But this place smells of Windex and Pine-Sol. A beige rug with tiny stenciled blue flowers covers the floor and two clean, brown armchairs rest in the corner. Where are the sick calves screaming for their mothers?

She introduces herself to the white-haired secretary seated behind a large metal desk.

"I'm Mrs. Breslin. I made an appointment." The word just slips out. She feels like she's in a doctor's office.

"Oh yes, Mrs. Breslin," the secretary answers. "Your package is waiting for you. Without the fat yours was about thirty five pounds, which comes to \$176. 50 with tax."

Mrs. Breslin realizes she should have asked how much it would cost on the phone. Mr. Breslin won't believe she spent this much on dinner. She'll have to buy cheap flowers for the table and say they are something exotic--he'll never know the difference--but she will be held accountable for every penny wasted. Her tripe had better be good.

Mrs. Breslin rides the elevator down to a refrigerator room labeled "Cold But Not Frozen." She knocks when she reaches the door. A man in a woolen watchman's cap and down parka opens it.

"Mrs. Breslin," he says, "I've been waiting for you." Mrs. Breslin has never been waited on by a man in a refrigerator. She doesn't know what to say. He reaches up and heaves a large, irregularly shaped package wrapped in brown paper off a shelf. She takes a deep breath.

"Why is it so big?" She asks.

"We gave you the whole abdomen. You asked for stomach lining. We don't do special cuts," the man answers curtly, then smiles.

"But what am I supposed to do with the rest of it?"

"You got a dog?" The man asks, laughing.

She stares at him: "No, I don't have a dog." Obviously this man had never tasted tripe. She resists the urge to explain to him proudly that this is only the beginning of a delicate process. He should be honored to have her, a gourmet, in his freezer. But he dutifully carries the package to the elevator and leaves her.

Mrs. Breslin is not truly sorry to see him go until she reaches the ground floor office. Pressing the open button of the elevator, she quickly bends down to embrace the package with all her strength. The doors roll closed just as she gets a good grip. She presses the open button again, this time calling to the aged secretary for help. With some difficulty they get the carcass out of the elevator and onto the street: the secretary holds the elevator door while Mrs. Breslin kicks and rolls the package along. She hails a cab and afraid it might smell in the back seat, has the cabby put it in the trunk.

Mrs. Breslin gazes out the cab window on the ride back to Manhattan. It is raining. Everything is gray and similar in the rain; bits of newspaper dissolve in soggy lumps on the sidewalk; black

umbrellas bob in and out of buildings. Everyone on the street moves quickly, unthinkingly, because what's important in the city is what goes on inside. She tries to imagine these households now, at lunch time. The television on in the kitchen; the older children, like hers, off at school; the baby sleeping in the bedroom with the door closed because the washer makes such a racket; the smell of fresh bread and ironing; the woman of the house eating fried dough and drinking coffee as she talks back to the daytime soap operas. In Mrs. Breslin's home the housekeeper has finished the dishes, has made all the beds; she listens to the radio and eats leftovers while the first load of wash spins dry. The Breslin's house smells of furniture polish, always.

Mrs. Breslin watches as the storefront signs change back from Spanish to English and she no longer feels like a stranger.

"Where are you from?" she asks the cabby, noticing the long and unpronounceable name on his cab license.

"Rhodos. Greece," he answers quickly, glancing at the rear view mirror to catch her gaze. "It's beautiful there."

"Yes." Mrs. Breslin answers. She's been to Greece, on her honeymoon. Mr. Breslin dragged her to a restaurant that had belly dancers. She tried to eat squid like all the other Americans there (she was under the impression that the Greeks themselves knew better), but Mr. Breslin insisted it was the thing to do. That was the thinnest she has ever been. She wanted so much for Mr. Breslin to feel that he had made the right choice in taking her for a wife: she fit into a size four.

Mrs. Breslin looks out the window: a bank clock reads two o'clock. The guests arrive at six. She runs through a mental list of

what needs to be done: the tripe, shower, dress, ice in the ice bucket, cocktail napkins. She can send the housekeeper out for flowers and get her to chop crudités. They'll order a pizza for the children.

She worries about what to wear. Her in between stage skirts are voluminous tents, fine for day wear, but she needs evening wear: she should buy a dress. She leans forward to ask the driver to stop at Bergdorfs and wait for her. She'll just run in and grab something.

Mrs. Breslin enters Evening Wear on the second floor and is summoned by a rack of black cocktail dresses. Sizes twelve, ten, eight, six--she takes one of each, and hurries into the changing room. Mr. Breslin has told her she looks nice in black; black is thinning. An attendant follows her, waiting expectantly outside the door.

"How are you doing in there?" The attendant asks.

"The eight doesn't fit right," Mrs. Breslin, a little out of breath, calls over the stall door. She hopes there won't be any little ripping sounds as she pulls the dress over her hips again. She'd started with the eight, hoping she'd be somewhere in the middle. Even a ten seems to be out of the question.

"Those run a little small," The attendant calls. Instantly, Mrs. Breslin is relieved. Surely she could wear eights in other designers.

"Would you like me to get the ten for you?" The attendant asks.

"No, no." Mrs. Breslin responds quickly. She is blushing red hot. She gets dressed without trying on the twelve. She'll take it, cut the tag out and wear it. No one will know.

In the time it takes to go ten more blocks in Manhattan's upper East side, she hunts in her purse for the pocket knife she uses to open letters. Finding it just as the cab approaches the massive green

awning of her apartment building, she slides the collar of her new dress out of the shopping bag, and neatly slices out the tag. The number twelve falls to the floor. Hurrying into the building with her new dress, she forgets the monstrosity in the trunk. The cabby summons the doorman himself, and the two of them carry the package to the elevator for her.

Pushing her sleeves up, Mrs. Breslin kneels on the bathroom tiles. She begins to unwrap the brown paper, tugging hesitantly at first, then more vigorously when she sees that it is many layers thick, until she reaches bloodstained waxed paper. She hurries to the kitchen for the housekeeper's yellow, rubber cleaning gloves.

The last layer of wrapping off, Mrs. Breslin looks at her purchase. It is an unrecognizable, bloody mass. As if for directions, she heaves it over to look at the underside. She pokes it and watches as it wobbles slightly, but resists. She returns to the kitchen to retrieve her husband's electric carving knife.

As she carves in search of the stomach lining, blood spatters the white sides of the tub, getting in her eyes and hair. She grits her teeth and plunges further in with the knife, until she finds what she thinks must be the stomach. She discards what's left over in a trash bag, reluctant to take it to the back door where it will be taken away as trash. All this wasted and she spent so much.

She returns to the stomach. With three forceful swipes of the electric knife she has it flattened out down the length of the tub. The lining will be trickier. Leaning her head into the tub, she holds the meat at eye level. Just where did the inner lining begin and the outer lining end? For all she knows, this isn't the stomach at all. The gall

bladder maybe. Or even the pancreas. Cows are big animals. She swipes at the hair in her mouth with the back of a gloved hand, smearing blood on her jaw. Then, fixedly switching the knife into a low setting, she eases it back into the meat, driving it in parallel to the bottom of the tub.

The electric knife is too big for such fine work. What she hopes is the stomach lining frays in contact with such big blades. She reaches for her purse, which, in her hurry she has left on the bathroom tile. Then she pulls out her pocket knife.

The meat is tough and blue and hard to cut. It gleams with a viscous residue she hopes will boil off. This knife works better, but the work is slow. She looks at her watch. Four-thirty: Hugh's soccer and Whitney's tumbling are both over. The housekeeper will return with them any minute. She looks hard at the meat, as if trying to will the stomach lining away from the muscle, and sees that she has cut around the edges of a rectangle. She lays down the knife, reaches in, grabs two corners and pulls with all her strength. With a horrible, rubbery ripping sound the stomach lining comes away in her hands. She is left with a flat, shiny, blue rectangle of flesh, about one inch thick, and thirty odd pounds of garbage.

She hears the children at the front door and rushes her prize to the kitchen sink, tossing her gloves into the trash. As she hurries down the hallway to greet the children, she glances back into the bathroom. The trash bag full of waste rests alongside the bathtub: no longer white, but strewn with watery blood and stray bits of butchered meat.

Whitney drops her backpack on the floor and begins to howl when she sees her mother. Hugh's eyes open wide but he remains silent. Mrs. Breslin laughs. She is tempted to turn the sight of her, dirty and disgruntled, into a sort of chasing game for them. Raising her hands up like claws, she snarls, curling her lips away from her teeth. Then she notices the housekeeper looks frightened too. Mrs. Breslin raises her hands to her face. It is caked with dried blood. She looks down and sees that her sweater and jeans too are spattered and stained red. She looks up at them. "I'm cooking," she says, holding her arms out for a hug. Whitney screams again and Hugh hunches his head down into his shoulders. The housekeeper wraps an arm around each child and leads them into the den.

Mrs. Breslin hugs herself and picks at the dried blood on her elbows as she follows them. Already forgotten, she watches from the doorway as the children settle in to the bright, clean images on the television screen. Sitting cross-legged on the floor directly in front of the screen, they are entranced. Behind them, on the couch, the housekeeper thumbs through TV. guide to find a show she'd rather watch. To Mrs. Breslin they seem far away and strange, their skin almost translucent in the square beam of television light.

What a day she's had, and now, it would be amazing to see the little piece of meat cut out of the flesh in the bathtub become food, yet she is anything but hungry. Her daughter's screams resound inside her, leaving room for nothing else. How could she frighten them at a time when she's trying so hard to make a nice dinner, look attractive in her new dress? She moves away from the doorway and down the hall to the bedroom.

She should shower and change, she decides. Pink rivulets of water slide off her body and into the drain as she washes the blood and smell of meat, the evidence of her efforts, away. She washes for the children, although she would have wanted Mr. Breslin to see her covered in blood. Dried off, she pulls her new, sizeless dress over her head. It falls smoothly across her middle, even a little big maybe, but the zipper in back gets stuck halfway up. She strains her arms behind her, trying to ease the zipper down without ripping anything. Sweat begins to bead on her upper lip as she lets her arms fall to her sides. She's so exhausted: she takes a deep breath, but it's useless to try to fit into the dress.

Yanking her body free of the black material and reaching for her worn and familiar bathrobe, she strides out of the bedroom to search for her children, to embrace them, to eat with them. Without hesitation she passes the kitchen where the tripe waits in the sink, and the bathroom where the flesh of the animal remains.

MIMICRY

1. The stairs are hard to manage with the boxes in her arms and the railings: her hips could be wide enough to get stuck. She knew a girl in high school called Patty-O, round as an O, who got stuck between two lunchroom tables once when she underestimated her width. Students had to get up and pull the tables away from each other to free her. So she knows the body can play tricks on the mind.

2. She's in the hospital for starvation. They call it an eating disorder, but I prefer to call it starvation since the problem is she doesn't eat. She used to be a model, but she's too old now. The doctor says it's her fear of old age, but I say she's just gone nuts. She only eats lettuce, right off the stalk, and smokes cigarettes, because neither one has any calories. Some eating disorder. Anyway, every time I go see her I bring something to eat, something you can't get in a hospital. She thinks I do it out of spite, since I usually end up eating the thing myself, but it's really for her.

This time I bring her a falafel sandwich: it's like a hamburger without the meat. It's something I think she'll try because she's never tasted it before. Something I've had and like enough to maybe convince her to take a bite. I bring it to her still hot, from a guy with a souvlaki cart downstairs. I like to buy things from people with carts. I feel as if I'm making a statement like, yeah, I'm a local guy and I'm buying from this other local guy who's smart enough not to

pay rent for a store front and who's food I trust because we have this "hey, I'm a local" thing going.

3. She gets into trouble looking for the keys to her son's studio, since she's the kind of woman that could live out of her purse: she always has tissues and aspirin when you need them. Giving up on finding the keys, she pounds door with the palm of her hand and sings into the hard wood: "Richard, wake up, it's your mother!"

4. So I bring her this sandwich. She's tired as usual, because she's starving. She shakes her head at the falafel, no thank you I'm not hungry she says, you have it though. Real polite. Then she kind of shoves herself up on the pillows, but it's more like just her head moving up on a stick, since that's all her body is. Once she's up she reaches over to the night table and pulls this big cloth bag onto her lap. She gets out a hairbrush and starts to brush her hair. After about three brushes her arm is tired, and she asks would I mind? So I go over and start brushing her hair. It's gray now and kind of stiff, but I remember when it was brown and all over the place, when she was a model. She used to say she had "big" hair. I know I do. I got it from her. I have to cut it all the time, or I feel like some sort of fruity rock singer. She says I look Greek. I could tell her that the Greek I got her tasty falafel sandwich from was absolutely bald, but what good would that do?

•

5. She can only imagine what's going on behind the brown, painted door: bologna wrappers, dirty underwear, stained sheets. She

still imagines his sheets with the words LED ZEPPELIN printed in blood, from the tattoo on his rear end. As far as she's concerned, the stain is still there, though it's been years since the tattoo was new enough to bleed. Soon she gives in to the idea that Richard is asleep and should not be disturbed. Leaving the boxes by the door, she returns to the stairwell.

6. While I'm brushing her hair she starts talking and going through the stuff in her bag. She gets out a couple of magazine clippings of her at a fashion show about thirty years ago. The "ripe season" of her career. She shows them to me and starts saying things like didn't that dress go terrific with my eyes? And look how long my hair was then. I say something like, yeah, that's really nice, but then she goes and asks me this: she says, Richard (she likes to call me by my whole name) do you still think I'm attractive?

7. In her car, she presses her forehead against the steering wheel and tries to imagine the kind of dream Richard would have:

On a dirt road in a desert somewhere out West, he squats to take a crap. Finished, he pulls up his jeans, wincing at the pressure on his already sun-scorched rear. Licking his lips and scratching himself, he begins to walk.

He walks on and on through a scene that looks more like the set of a cowboys and Indians movie than real life. He sweats and wipes his forehead with a gritty hand. It is too hot to even think about cool glasses of something or other or to see mirages, and yet...

There is a Native Indian in full tribal garb walking slowly towards him. When the Indian reaches him he doesn't even stop, just hands him a paper bag full of something, and continues slowly on. The paper bag it turns out is full of raw meat. He eats it in big, wolfing fistfuls.

That, she imagines, is what Richard would like to dream about. Her thoughts sicken her.

8. She always looks at me like I'm some sort of beast. She smokes her cigarettes, blows smoke right in my face, and points to my boots and my suede jacket. She points to my hair and at my butt where I got a tattoo that says LED ZEPPELIN when I was fifteen. She found out about it like a day later because the tattoo bled into my sheets. She was making the bed and saw LED ZEPPELIN in dried blood. She's never been that pissed.

9. She comes out of her reverie, startled to find herself behind the wheel of her parked car. Sitting up, she inserts the key into the ignition but hesitates before turning it. The food in the boxes she left for him--cheese, bread, peanut butter, catsup, crackers, raisins, eggs--whatever she could carry from her own kitchen, will go bad soon. She decides to try and wake Richard up again.

10. This time while she points out all my "vulgaritys," I go over to the window to look out and see what the rest of the city is doing. Everyone looks the same from up there. Even the cars look the same: everyone's an insect. I start thinking about a thing I read in the

paper last Sunday. About how one of our big psychological hang-ups is that we're all afraid of being eaten. Some animals imitate each other to keep themselves from being eaten. Like this kind of butterfly that imitates Monarch butterflies because Monarchs are poisonous: if you eat a Monarch you die. If another butterfly can mimic a Monarch it isn't afraid of getting eaten. Those people down there, my mother, me: we're all afraid. The way she handles it is she tries to disappear: if you're invisible, you're safe. But what do I do?-- I don't look too much like anyone else--maybe that scares her.

11. Though she's sure her body has enough fat to live off of for months, she feels tired and hungry from fasting: the stairs seem steeper this time. Reaching her son's door, she sits down to rest. She's hot: she can feel her thighs stick together. She glances at the boxes: a lover of excess and filth, Richard will be glad for all this food. Nauseated, she closes her eyes, recalling her own neat, empty cupboards. With her head tilted back against the apartment door, she begins to cry softly.

12. I turn around to look at her, all crinkled up like an old letter in the white sheets. I go over and give her a push, but she's out cold, in some kind of starvation sleep, like when I found her crying in a little heap at my doorstep, before I brought her here: I picked her up and she passed out. She's always passing out. So I pull her legs out straight and turn her over on her stomach. Her back is covered with bruises and sores: the princess and the pea. I trace her shoulder

bones with my hand. She looks like a fossil, like I'm digging her out of this bed: finding my own history.

11. The door opens behind her head and as she falls back, Richard is there to catch her. She scrambles away from him when he bends to pick her up. "I'm too heavy," she protests. Turning her head, she catches a glimpse of his apartment, strewn with dirty clothes and dishes. "Can I come in and clean up?" She asks him, from down on her hands and knees: somehow she can't manage to stand up. Richard's dark head looms above her. Her head spins and she closes her eyes: soon, he has her in his arms.

12. When I was little, she always tried to give me back rubs. She said it would feel good. I think she just wanted to feel good for doing me such a great favor: for being such a sport of a mom. I'd tell her I didn't like them, that I didn't want one. She kept saying you're going to like this one, you haven't had a really good one. You'll like it. So she made me do it. She rubbed my back, and the whole time she kept saying, you know you like it. And the whole time I was thinking, she's hurting me.

Now I think maybe I should have let her rub my back longer. I should have let her do it until I figured her out a little. I could have closed my eyes and pretended it was me rubbing her back: what could I do to her? Where did it hurt her? What was she afraid of?

I take a tube of hand lotion out of her bag and squirt some out in my hand. I start rubbing at the bruises. If I rub hard enough they might go away. If she can feel the push of my arms she might want

to get strong: eat something. I rub at the bruises and close my eyes. I feel my hands sweat with the slime of the lotion and her skin. I try to think about Monarch butterflies again and how we're afraid of getting eaten, but the smell of her skin keeps me here.

IN CHURCH

As they receive a blessing from Father Deluce, Sandi watches the girls kneeling beside their sponsors: older women, serious and Catholic. The sponsors hold their hands in some significantly Catholic manner that Sandi tries to imitate. Soon she discovers that it is not an acquired skill, but a thing one does naturally as a Catholic: Sandi is not Catholic.

If Sandi were Catholic, she would be Italian. She would have thick, dark hair and shapely, hazel eyes, not the pale, pinched, open face of her Swedish heritage. Her Mama would be huge and generous, her Papa would be dashing and impetuous. They would teach her how to cook before she could read. Christmas would be paradise: she could cook the whole meal as a gift and at table the family would exchange rosary beads, holding hands to give thanks. The family would communicate so well they could recognize each other by smell.

Chamomile tea is the pervasive smell in Sandi's house. Her mother brews it to soothe her nerves: there is no room for other odors. Sandi's mother is a thin, nervous woman who heats frozen fish sticks for dinner and mixes mashed potatoes out of a box. Sandi's father reads the paper over dinner and continues to read while Sandi's mother washes the dishes. Sandi always wants to ask to cook and cleanup so they can talk, but she doesn't want to embarrass them.

Anne's family is never embarrassed. Once, Anne's Mama brought her own bra to the table, just to show Sandi how big she is: a size D. After Sandi looked at it, a little embarrassed herself, Anne's Mama draped it over her Papa's wine glass, just for kicks. Sandi's mother would have dropped dead if she were there, but Anne's Mama just howled at her own big joke. Sandi never forgot her laughing at her own joke: she had always thought it impossible, but that was before she knew any real jokes.

Here she is now giving Anne away to God, or taking her back, she isn't sure: that's some joke. She's been in church before but it was always Presbyterian, on Easter or Christmas Eve: she got dressed up. Singing with the hymnal, she would see how long she could go without taking a breath. But this is no time for games. Sandi turned fourteen last week and Anne is having her communion: they are almost grownups. Still, no matter how hard she tries to play the part, watching the other women and mimicking their gestures, Sandi seems to get it wrong. When Sandi and Anne reach the pulpit Father Deluce takes Sandi's hand and says, "You're not Catholic, are you, dear?" Sandi shakes her head, ashamed she's so obvious. "Go sit down over there," the priest orders her, pointing to a pew.

Anne's real sponsor, her Aunt Claudia, can't come today: she's in court. Anne's Mama is there too, making sure they don't take advantage of her sister. The courts don't side with women, Anne's Mama told Anne and Sandi. This time, Claudia's husband, Paulo, has gone through her apartment again in search of the ownership papers for the Pest Control company they ran together. Claudia owns the business: it is her only source of income. Anne's Mama wants the

courts to make it law that Claudia's husband can't come within five hundred yards of her property or person. That way, says Anne's Mama, Claudia will never have to see him again. Anne told Sandi in private that Claudia herself didn't want to go to court, that it was all her Mama's idea, that Claudia still wanted to see her husband once in a while. But Anne's Mama is going to do everything in her power to keep him away.

Anne's Mama's hatred for Paolo started at Claudia's wedding. It's her favorite story to tell, and what a picture of a wedding she paints when she tells it. The reception had to be held before the wedding in order for Claudia and Paulo to catch the only flight to the island of Malta, for their honeymoon. Paolo's family convinced Claudia's family that the party was the most important part for everyone, so why not rush the vows instead? Anne's Mama consented, only because she didn't like the idea of her sister and her new brother in law, "her babies," flying on full stomachs. Of course they threw a huge party: three bands, champagne punch, Osso Bucco and Manicotti prepared by Anne and her Mama, Chianti, a cake with real Mascarpone cheese, and a table full of gifts. Claudia waltzed with her father and tangoed with her Anne's Papa. She and Anne's Mama got the whole party to dance the Funky Chicken, all except Paulo, who missed the dancing entirely: he was too drunk.

As Anne's Mama describes: Paulo was drank so much punch he couldn't even sit down in a chair, let alone stand. They found him on the bathroom floor, sleeping peacefully in his wedding suit. Claudia's father and Anne's father had to hold him up straight to take the vows. Anne's mother has never been so ashamed for the family. She

ends the story, always teary-eyed, with Claudia, wheeling Paulo to the gate in a borrowed airport wheelchair. According to Anne's Mama, the family never forgave him.

Sandi's mother doesn't like Anne's Mama: she says she acts as if she has personally given birth to everyone in the world; but Sandi would never tell Anne that. Secretly, Sandi wishes Anne would like her mother as much as Sandi likes hers, but it's impossible: every time Sandi's mother opens her mouth, it's to say something bad about Anne's Mama. Even if the topic at hand is unrelated, it always gets back to Anne's family.

Once, while Sandi watched a made-for-TV movie about a high school girl who has three boyfriends and has to decide on one before they all find out, her mother came in and watched over her shoulder. When one of the boyfriends licked the girl's neck and told her she tasted like grapes, Sandi's mother clicked off the television and said, "if you want to watch trash, go back to Anne's house." Another time, while her parents were out, Sandi ordered a pizza for herself. When her mother came home to find the empty pizza box, she said, "Do you want to be so fat you can't fit into a regular chair, like Anne's mother?"

Sandi has noticed how her own mother only plays with her food. Every morning she eats an orange for breakfast. It isn't just that the orange is all she eats, it is the way she eats it: first peeling the rind slowly and carefully, then picking off the white stringy layer underneath and making a little pile on top of the rinds. Finally, she pulls off the clear skin covering the fruit itself. Most of the orange winds up on the table. Sandi tries to think of it as a religious ritual--

her mother seems so dedicated to getting at the inner fruit--but it makes her sad to see her mother so intent on an orange. Silently she prefers the full figure and hearty appetite of Anne's Mama.

Anne's dark head nods shyly as she and Father Deluce feign the sacrament. Sandi decides Anne's family's zeal for food must be directly connected to Communion: every meal a reminder of their faith. Her heart swells with admiration. When her part of the rehearsal is complete, Anne turns around and sticks her tongue out at Sandi, rolling her eyes back in her head, as if she'd rather be anywhere else than in church. As they leave for Anne's house, Sandi doesn't say how much she'd give to take her place.

* * *

Sandi returns to church for Claudia's funeral. She is compelled to mourn with the family, since she spends so much time at Anne's house. The funeral, beautiful and slow, can not obliterate the image of Claudia's horrible death. She died from the inside out, the way a microwave heats up food, after eating the poison created to exterminate termites. It took three days. At last, Anne's family is embarrassed: Claudia's suicide shows her lack of faith. Now, the faith of the family is in question. Anne's Mama had to do everything in her power to persuade Father Deluce to perform the funeral services, convincing him finally with a promise to prepare a full, six course Neapolitan meal for him.

Anne holds her Mama's arm as they sprinkle holy water out of tiny, glass vials over Claudia's closed, mahogany coffin. Sandi tries to

imagine holding her own mother the same way, but wonders when and for whom they would grieve. When would they ever feel this mix of emotion: shame for such a grave sin and sorrow for the death of a relative; love for an aunt and sister and hatred for the husband who drove her to this; attempted forgiveness for all? Anne and her Mama seem blind on their resolve to forgive. Sandi looks up at the crucifix above the altar: Jesus stares back painfully. Sandi wonders just how different letting yourself get nailed down by your hands and feet and eating termite poison are. When Father Deluce asks the family to sing a mournful Latin dirge for Claudia, Sandi only hums the tune: the words are beyond her.

* * *

One day, when she returns home, Sandi has an idea. She asks her mother: "Mother, if you were going to take Communion, would you eat it, like swallow the cracker and everything?" Her mother looks at her and Sandi waits for another attack on Anne's family. Surprisingly none comes. Instead, her mother says, "You know no one eats the wafer, it tastes awful. Everyone waits until they get out of church and then they spit it out in the parking lot."

Sandi crosses her arms. "I don't believe you," she says.

On Sunday night, while her mother waits behind her in the car, Sandi toes the ground in the parking lot outside Father Deluce's church. In the beam of car headlights, Sandi can make out clumps of spat out wafers, glazed with frozen spit. Sandi bends down to pick

one up, and though it is covered with dirt and strands of dried grass, she puts it in her pocket. Before turning back to the car, she gazes up at the church, glowing white in the moon light: a picture of churchliness. Next door, Father Deluce's house is dark and quiet. Sandi reaches in her pocket to feel the soggy wafer. Surely Father Deluce must know about this? Perhaps even he does it, spitting the wafer into his cuff as he reaches for the blood of Christ. How can he keep people like Anne's Aunt Claudia out of hell if he too is a sinner? Sandi turns her back on the church and Father Deluce's house and walks back to the car. As she slides into the front seat, her mother gazes at her, eyebrows raised, challenging and expectant. Sandi only shrugs. "I couldn't find anything," she says, as her fingers squeeze the melted wafer in her pocket dry.

FIND YOURSELF

1. At the age of seven Olga's father asks her mother how they could have had such a funny looking child, a child who looks like a beetle. Her mother says no, she doesn't either. She looks like a ballerina, like the ones on the jewelry boxes. Either that or a Barbie doll. Because her father has the deeper voice, and sounds more intelligent, Olga takes his word for it.

2. The fourth grade homeroom teacher, Mrs. Leahrnitt, teaches Olga that she is incorrect. She does not write straight enough, or evenly enough. She does not dot her 'i's, and she crosses her 't's over her 'l's.

When her school friends sleep over, Olga's mother takes them on nature walks in the Palisades, instead of sticker shopping or roller-skating. When they come home from their walks, Olga's mother teaches them how to prepare swordfish.

3. When she is ten, Olga's mother gives her a photo album for Christmas: to keep safe those memorable moments of her life. Her father gives her three books: A Very Young Rider, A Very Young Dancer, and A Very Young Gymnast. Inspiration Books, he calls them.

Olga spends the rest of her Christmas vacation sitting on her bedroom floor, cutting out the pictures in the Inspiration Books and pasting them in her album.

4. At thirteen, Olga decides to become a gymnast. Her father tells her she's too short. Her mother advises her to go on a diet. Olga takes up horseback riding.

5. At a horse show, Olga watches Lyla Roquefort enter the ring on her gray gelding, Rhythm. Lyla's legs are long, slim and muscular in her beige britches, and black polished field boots. Her nose is long and upturned. Lyla and Rythm canter around the ring and take the

fences perfectly, effortlessly. Olga wishes she would trip in the mud and break her back. Or at least belch loud enough for people to stare. Olga tries to imagine what Lyla would look like going to the bathroom, but can't.

Olga's horse is named Sleepy, after the dwarf. Sleepy is so arthritic by the time Olga is good enough to compete, that she retires him to pasture and gives up riding. Her mother sighs at her decision, saying wistfully that it was the only thing that she was ever very good at. Her father pats his wallet and her head, and tells her she made a fine decision.

6. When she is seventeen Olga attends a society dance at the Waldorf hotel. She wears a strapless gown and high heels. She has a date. When she returns to her assigned seat after checking her stockings and zippers and makeup in the bathroom, her date waves his cigarette at her feet and tells her she has toilet paper stuck to her shoe. Olga spends the remainder of the dance wondering who has seen her make the journey from the bathroom to the table. She's sure that her date has moved a little bit away from her.

7. For the Physical Education requirement at the University Olga takes Yoga. In the end of every class there is a fifteen minute period of relaxation during which everyone lies down on their backs while the instructor speaks in an hypnotic tone on the relaxation of each part of the body. As opposed to relaxing it, Olga picks each part of her body up off the floor as it is mentioned. When the fifteen minutes are over, she is standing, bewildered.

The Yoga instructor lends her a book called Fun With Yoga. He recommends that Olga read the chapter on meditation, to help her settle. Following the rules, she practices meditating for thirty minutes every morning. The book tells her to imagine her breath coming in through her feet and out the top of her head, and on every exhale to repeat her silent mantra. Olga imagines her head is a pot full of dirt out of which a tree is growing; her breathing, the tree's sustenance. Olga's mantra is the word "agua."

8. After graduating from school Olga lives with her parents and works at a publishing house, in the autobiographies department. She is distracted by the published works lining the shelves of her office, and reads them instead of tending to her paper-work.

At home she keeps her parents informed on the merits of reading autobiographies. She tells them how much can be learned from one person's experience. Her mother asks if she won't try and write one? Her father tells her that if anyone should write an autobiography in the family it should be he. Her mother says it's nice she's trying to find herself, and advises that she see an astrologer to help her find her soul mate, someone else to share her life's discoveries with. She recommends that Olga read a certain self-help book called How to Make Love to the Same Person for the Rest of Your Life.

9. Olga visits an Astrologer who tells her that she must find a playmate from her past life who can be her soul mate and lover in this life.

At home she meditates. Instead of repeating her mantra over and over she tries a new visualization exercise to conjure up memories of a past life. She must begin with a clean, white space: in her mind she sees a white, porcelain bathtub, with the words Once Upon a Time written in big, black, capital letters down its length. To rid herself of this image she forces her eye down the drain of the tub. She concentrates on her breathing. Instead of returning to the image of the tree sprouting from her head, she imagines a baby pushing its way, head first, out of her skull. As it rises up, the baby's body lengthens and grows hair. She gives the body a beard, a pair of glasses, and a penis. She names him Allen Ginsberg.

10. Olga runs into Lyla Roquefort at a dance wear boutique. Lyla is trying on spandex aerobics clothing. Olga is buying wool tights. Lyla is pregnant.

"God, what a coincidence," Olga says.

"I can't believe you remember me, that was so long ago," Lyla says.

"You were better than me," Olga accuses her. "You had that great horse."

"I can't even remember--was it Rhythm?" Lyla asks.

"Yeah." Olga changes the subject. "What's it like being married?"

"Married? Oh, I don't know, kind of nice. It's fun to have someone around all the time. We work out together and cook and stuff. We're looking forward to children. Why? You look good, are you in love, Olga?" Lyla smiles at her.

"In love?"

11. Olga meditates for hours. She no longer uses her mantra, instead she spends time with Allen Ginsberg. She imagines skinny-dipping with him, screaming and jumping off a diving board, their fat smacking the water. They give each other shoulder rides, and do handstands. He recites long passages of Shakespeare for her, standing naked at the edge of a pool, water dripping from his beard. They do yoga together, naked in the grass. And they write together; he, one line, she the next, and so forth.

12. Olga lies in the bathtub looking down the length of her body. She closes her eyes and concentrates on the warm water surrounding her. The water becomes flesh: Allen Ginsberg's hands, caressing her. They work over her toes and ankles, rub up the back of her calves and thighs, come around her belly and breasts and up her neck, stopping at her lips. She hears her own voice say the words, "beautiful." When she opens her eyes she sees that they are her fingers touching her lips, and blushes.

13. In her office, Olga takes off all the jackets covering the autobiographies on the bookshelf. She sits down at her desk and looks at the pictures of the authors on the back flap of each one. She studies their faces; a balding man, a red haired woman, a man with a bow tie, a woman holding vegetables, a man with a poodle, a woman in a leotard, ecetera. Olga pulls her typewriter towards her, closes her eyes and begins: Once upon a time...

THE WITTENSTEINS

Nestled among fat, dark Ponderosa pines and overlooking a clean, narrow river stands a white Canadian farmhouse. The man who built this house was, in fact, a Canadian farmer. He raised pigs and sheep and cows for meat. He had a smoke house, an outhouse and an icehouse. He had a large vegetable garden and grew oats in the fields to feed his livestock. He drew water from the well and drove a horse drawn plow. Then he sold his farm to a wealthy New York couple for their summer home.

This New York couple naturally made some renovations. They put down wall to wall carpeting. They installed a washing machine and showers and an electric stove. They used the old sheep barn to house the goat who was part of the wife's experiment in cheese-making. They installed docks and diving boards in the river. They bought a Boston Whaler to pull water-skiers, a canoe to go fishing and a sunfish for sailing practice. They hired a local farmer to cut the grass in front of the house to create a more idyllic view. The husband bought a pair of good binoculars to look for Great Blue Herons and Ospreys. It could be said that they adjusted.

In spite of these renovations the couple were careful to maintain the original prim beauty of the place. Considering the curious activities that were to go on inside, the house was as inconspicuous to the eye as its new residents. Until studied closely, the Wittensteins looked to be simple, good-natured lovers of the outdoors. The nearby Canadian farmers loved their appreciation for

out-of-the-city life and left them alone to enjoy it. They did not question the many visitors who appeared infrequently at their neighbor's house. Only a few bored farmers' sons watched as the couple frolicked naked in their section of the river. They did not wonder at the enormous quantities of chocolate syrup the couple purchased at the local grocery. They kept a respectful distance, quietly pleased that such good city people had made an asylum in their homeland, pleased that they had not moved to tarnish it.

Henry and Vivian Wittenstein were not cow milkers or potato diggers, but they did participate in an activity as exhausting in its method. They were what the people in the city called "swingers." They had started swinging in college in the seventies and kept right up with it. For them it was not merely a fad, but a religion. They had become zealots of this odd institution, following the doctrines of physical pleasure and spreading the word to many of their friends. They invited their converts to their house in the Canadian countryside to partake in wild sensual adventures, as a sort of vacation away from the tense, repressed life of the city. Other close acquaintances of the Wittensteins, unaware of what went on behind the white window frames of the quaint Northern farmhouse, were thought of as a sort of project by the couple. The Wittensteins invited these people up North to enhance their friendship. Their goal was to enlighten them: turn them on to the swinging life.

Kilroy Newman was one such friend. He had gone to college with Henry and Vivian in the early seventies but had managed to avoid all participation in their erotic escapades. In fact he knew nothing of them. Kilroy had studied his way through life, taking each

day as a new problem to solve, each person as a geometric proof. He had tutored Henry in logic, Vivian in statistics: he knew them only on those terms. He was their greatest challenge.

The Wittensteins had painstakingly planned his visit. In mid July, twenty years after they had all graduated and moved on, they invited him up from his saltbox house in Northern New Jersey, where he lived alone and worked as a computer programmer. Vivian reminded him of how hot it is in New Jersey at that time, and how he stood the chance of dying a little sooner from smog inhalation. Henry promised him the fastest, most exhilarating time of his life. After weighing the pros and cons in his usual studious manner, Kilroy accepted.

What the Wittensteins did not tell him was that they had also invited Alison, Vivian's younger sister and a familiar guest at the house, for the same two weeks. It was their plan that Alison would establish a relationship with Kilroy on an overnight camping trip in the first few days of his visit. Upon their return to the house, if all went well, she would tactfully introduce him to the joys of the swinging life with the Henry and Vivian. Alison had been successful previously as such an envoy, and they were confident in her ability to deliver the message to Kilroy.

On the day of his arrival, Kilroy took no real notice of Alison. She was a small woman with a tight black braid, pale yellow skin, and huge, brown eyes. Her visage demanded no special attention. Kilroy lay in the porch hammock and looked at the river with more interest than he paid *her*. Alison and Vivian baked inside, hoping his

soul would be soothed by the mix of buttery aromas and the slight sway of the hammock. They watched him intently through the glass doors as they mixed and poured, waiting impatiently for him to communicate. He looked so rigid and citified with his gray hair so neatly combed and his seer-sucker suit so newly pressed, Vivian suggested they run out and pour dough all over him straight off, but Alison restrained her.

"Just wait," she said, picking up her lump of dough and moving it to a little table just inside the glass door to the porch. The better for Kilroy to see her. She knelt down, pushed up her sleeves and went to work. As she kneaded, she watched her subject sway back and forth in the hammock out of the corner of one eye.

As the sweet smell of dough grew nearer, Kilroy's vision slid appreciatively through the glass doors to the women in the kitchen. His eyes rested admiringly on Alison, kneading at the table. He watched the tight, thin muscles of her forearms, flexing as they plied the fleshy lump. He watched her pale, serious forehead furrow in concentration. He licked his lips, took a deep breath, and kicked off his loafers.

His gaze was roughly obstructed by Vivian, a tall, wide-hipped woman with dyed auburn hair and creased, boisterous, blue eyes. She had come out to get the ball rolling, taking the loss of Kilroy's shoes as a sign.

"Do you like what we did with the kitchen? Of course you didn't see it when we first came, but there wasn't even a regular stove." She peered at him, and continued, smiling like a monkey, "You look like you need entertaining. I'll tell Alison to take you down to the

shore. I have to watch the bread." As she spun into the house, her purple Turkish pantaloons swishing beneath her torso like turbulent water, she called out, "Alison, sweetie, will you take Kilroy down to see the dock and things. He's looking a little vague out there."

Alison took Kilroy by the arm and walked him gently down the hill through the softly scented air, to the river. At the water's edge they met Henry, busy with a rake, smoothing out the many truckloads of sand he'd had dumped to make a beach. Henry was a giant, imperious man, with black, crazed hair, beady gray eyes and a startling, booming voice. He gave them a warm, extensive greeting: "Aha. Here are the twin travelers of torpid time, come to share my haven; prance upon the waves with me and I will feed you magnificent meals of magpie, goat, and chocolate ice cream. Welcome loves." He flourished his rake like a king and bowed.

Kilroy shrugged and glanced at Alison, "Shell shock. Tragic, really," he said, with mock gravity.

Alison laughed and hugged Henry firmly, "What's this about chocolate ice-cream? I thought you'd gone back to hunting and gathering out here in the woods. She poked Henry's prodigious gut and giggled. Henry looked over her head at Kilroy.

"Tell me soldier, how goes it on the neon shores of Jersey?"

Kilroy shrugged again, hands in the pockets of his suit, "Not bad, it keeps me on my toes."

"Aha. If that's your response then you're not really with us yet. Alison, I have a mission for you, take this man camping at once!"

Alison raised her eyebrows and looked at Kilroy, "Aye ruler of the mighty sands, but does the fair-haired one wish to come?"

Kilroy took his hands out of his pockets and looked at them. He looked back at Alison, then at Henry who nodded at him encouragingly. He put his hands back in his pockets. "Sure, I'll go," he said, shrugging again.

Dinner that evening proceeded with the usual hooting and hollering at the Wittenstein table. Henry told the story of how his kidney stones had fallen out and passed around the little jar in which he'd had them preserved. Vivian explained the complexities of making goat cheese, most importantly that neither she nor Henry liked the taste of it. When Kilroy expounded on the delicate flavor of the bread, Alison blushed in spite of herself, and Henry and Vivian were quiet long enough to beam and nudge each other enthusiastically. The evening was brought to a close when Henry grabbed Vivian about the waist and commanded to all that it was time for bed. Kilroy tromped upstairs obediently. When Alison heard him finish in the bathroom and close his door, she joined her sister and brother-in law in their bedroom.

The family pawed and pruned each other, muffling their exclamations appropriately. Vivian suggested they run down the hall and drag Kilroy out of his pajamas and into their bed. The other two pinned her down and told her to be patient. In the meantime, Kilroy stayed up late making a list of reasons why he liked Alison a lot, and reasons why he didn't like her at all. The first side of the list came out longer than the second. In fact there was no second list. He couldn't sleep for his worrying about what it all meant.

The following afternoon (Kilroy had managed to stay in bed until two), Kilroy and Alison were sent in Henry's jeep to a hidden meadow in a forest on a hill above their house. They were equipped with flashlights, sleeping bags, hot dogs, marshmallows and a flask of peppermint schnapps. Alison had caught Kilroy trying to roll his shaving kit up in his sleeping bag and whisked it out of his hand. "You don't need that. We're going to get so dirty that it's going to look like *I* have whiskers," she declared, laughing.

Alison drove them up the logging road to the meadow where they were to camp. She built them a fire, sending Kilroy to look for kindling. She rolled out their sleeping bags and sprayed them both with insect repellent. She picked blueberries in the meadow, while Kilroy pretended to watch the sun set. He sat pulling the grass out of the ground beneath him, gathering his own useless pile.

While the sun finished setting and the fire blazed with appropriate warmth, they sat side by side and roasted hot dogs on the ends of sticks. Alison began:

"Have you always been single?" she tried to keep from sounding incredulous.

Kilroy flinched like he'd been poked in the stomach and pulled his hot-dog stick towards him. "I think mine's done," he said.

"Watch out, it's hot," Alison said. She waited for him to answer the question. Then went on, "Well?"

Kilroy looked up from his hot-dog just long enough to answer. "Yes, mostly," he said.

"Even in school? Not one girlfriend?" She asked again.

Kilroy looked a little annoyed at having to delve into his lonely past. He thought about it a while, "No, I don't think so," he answered, and went back to his food.

Alison suddenly snatched her stick away from the fire and dropped it on the ground, "Shit, mine's on fire!" Kilroy leapt up and began to stomp on the hot-dog furiously. Alison couldn't help it; she burst out laughing. "Fire," she shouted, giggling, "Fire! Call 911, this is an emergency." Kilroy stopped stomping and stared at her. He look at the charred, mauled hot-dog, chunks of it still attached to the burnt stick.

"Ha," he said, the closest he'd come to laughing. He looked at Alison sheepishly, "I'll make you a new one," he said.

As he pushed another hot-dog on to his stick, Alison asked him a different question, "So what do you do?"

Kilroy thought for a moment. He sat at a desk and typed programs into a computer. He drank coffee and ate lunch. He fed his cat and watered the plants. He went out to the movies alone sometimes. He couldn't think of an answer. Not one good answer. He began to laugh. He screwed up his eyes, opened his mouth and hollered.

Alison was terrified. "What's wrong? Do you need a drink of water?" She reached over and pounded him on the back, "Can you breathe?" Kilroy reached behind him and grabbed her hand. He gasped for breath and nodded his head, "Yes! " he shouted, "Yes," still gasping. Alison took her hand back and waited for him to compose himself, still startled.

Kilroy took a deep breath, "I don't know what's so funny, but I feel wonderful." He looked up at the night sky and took another deep breath, "It must be the air," he said.

Alison stood up as if on cue. She leaned over and pulled the stick in Kilroy's hand out of the fire. Then she sat down again, in his lap. "Feed me," she said and handed him back the stick. She opened her mouth. Kilroy held the end of the stick near her mouth obediently. He looked like a dentist hesitating before surgery. Alison chewed and watched the hill over Kilroy's shoulder, ready to signal the Wittensteins.

The following two weeks were uneventful in so far as the weather remained mild and pleasant in the Canadian countryside; the farmers continued to cut hay and milk cows and shear sheep as usual; there were no floods or natural disasters of any kind. The white farm house overlooking the river remained sturdily, prettily standing in its cluster of pine trees, as it probably would for decades. But upon occasion, a forest animal passing near the house, might freeze, frightened, and prick up its ears to an ecstatic whoop issued from within.

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