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Wayward Girls

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WAYWARD GIRLS

by

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Amanda Osgood Jonientz
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ABSTRACT

Wayward Girls represents a culmination of my creative and critical work at the University of North Dakota. The dissertation includes a critical introduction, a collection of short stories, and a pedagogical article. In my critical introduction, I explain ways in which I manipulate narrative and time, the decisions I make about levels of discourse, my use and experimentation with conventional forms of plot, and my work in the short-story cycle genre. My collection of six short stories includes works about women at crucial turning points in their lives. Set in the Pacific Northwest, the stories range in time period from the 1940s through the late twentieth century. Many of the women in this collection have been stuck in a cycle of single-motherhood and near-poverty for generations. Others who have achieved middle-class status struggle with issues concerning their identity and feel discomfort with their class norms. Even when they do achieve a measure of financial stability, none of my characters experience security. The pedagogical article, "Multifaceted Possibilities for Creative Writing: A Hybrid Approach to Teaching the Creative Writing Workshop and Nineteenth-Century Serial Publication", explores ways in which the studio approach of the writing workshop can be combined with academic study of the form and production of nineteenth-century serial fiction.

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INTRODUCTION

The following dissertation represents a culmination of my creative and critical work at the University of North Dakota. I have divided it into two sections. The first and primary section is *Wayward Girls*, a collection of short stories about women at crucial turning points in their lives. Set in the Pacific Northwest, the stories range in time period from the 1940s through the late twentieth century. Many of the women in this collection have been stuck in a cycle of single-motherhood and near-poverty for generations. Others who have achieved middle-class status struggle with issues concerning their identity and feel discomfort with their class norms. Even when they do achieve a measure of financial stability, none of my characters experience security.

The second section, "Multifaceted Possibilities for Creative Writing: A Hybrid Approach to Teaching the Creative Writing Workshop and Nineteenth-Century Serial Publication", is a pedagogical article in which I explore ways to innovate the creative writing workshop. I proposed this article be included in my dissertation for two reasons. First, the research I conducted for this article was made in an effort to broaden my understanding of best practices of creative writing pedagogy. For me, understanding my approaches to teaching is a crucial part of my professionalization. Second, my areas of interest in literature are broad. Of course, much of my study has focused on American Literature of the twentieth century and the short story. As a creative writer, it is both natural and necessary that I understand the tradition in which my work participates. Yet, one of my areas of interest has been nineteenth-century serialized British Literature. In some ways, this interest seems tangential to my creative work. My short stories are compressed and often focus on a single disruptive event.

Serialized literature of the nineteenth century is expansive with multiple plot lines. My fiction typically features a first-person narrator and perhaps two or three other characters. Nineteenth-century fiction often features large casts of characters that readers build relationships with over long periods of time. Part of my work in this project was to explore how this interest plays a role in my work. The resulting article suggests combining the study of literature, specifically nineteenth-century serialized literature, and the study of creative writing into a hybrid workshop. I think that this suggestion offers a valuable reconsideration of the workshop and reveals much about my own creative process both as a writer and a teacher.

PART I: *WAYWARD GIRLS*

Though the stories in my collection, *Wayward Girls*, are not autobiographical, they are deeply personal. Central to my interests as a writer are the relationships between mothers and daughters. I was born in 1968 and raised in a very traditional, middle-class household. As a child, I did experience security and all of the benefits of suburbia in the 1970s and 80s. In my bubble of security, all of these benefits seemed natural. But when I first read stories like Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing," I immediately recognized familiar characters, women like my paternal grandmother who was raised by her grandparents in rural Wisconsin and who found herself pregnant and married at fifteen years old; women like my maternal grandmother who regularly received phone calls in the middle of the night to fetch her brother out of the town tavern; and women like my mother who taught me how to iron using my father's cotton handkerchiefs but who was furious when my oldest sister came home from college at nineteen and announced that she was getting married. My mother was terrified that her daughter was making the same "mistake" that she had made. I began to recognize the characters that I

wanted to write about, not just in my own family but in the families of my friends. These were characters that had made choices they didn't fully understand, choices that had long-reaching consequences and caused an unnamable and unmanageable anger and dissatisfaction that brewed just below the surface of a middle-class existence. These were women that I knew well. They spoke a language that I understood.

As a creative writer, for me the question became not just how to get at these women's stories but how to allow these women to tell their stories. In many ways, *Wayward Girls* represents my exploration of this question over a period of ten years. The collection includes examples of very early work as well as stories where I begin to experiment with narrative techniques such as manipulating time and discourse. As a writer working in realism, I am primarily interested in creating believable characters and telling interesting stories, but as I have matured as a writer, I have become more interested in exploring ways in which my narrators mediate these stories. In other words, I'm interested in how to use narrative techniques to create believable narrators and more importantly how I can use these techniques to allow the narrators to best tell their tales. In many ways, my goal in producing a piece of narrative art is to create a narrator that participates in the act of making meaning out of her own story. Firmly in the tradition of literary realism, several stories in the collection follow traditional plotlines including stories of a journey. Yet, while many of my protagonists may achieve their goal, the stories do not resolve in a happily-ever-after manner. Instead, in keeping with much contemporary American fiction, the stories resolve in disruption of the uneasy equilibrium of the characters' lives.

In my early short stories, my goal was to develop meaningful relationships between characters and to show how momentary but significant events could challenge a character's sense of security, particularly with the disruption of relationships with family members. The

story "Taken for a Ride" is the earliest example of my work in *Wayward Girls*. As such, it illustrates my early approach to techniques such as narrative and time. It is written in first person and told from the perspective of the eight-year-old protagonist, Hannah Nelson. While Hannah tells the tale of her and her sister's abduction in the past tense, the narrative focuses on Hannah's eight-year-old self. It was my goal to limit Hannah's perspective to the events of the story itself. Other than the epiphany, which happens very near the story's end, I tried to give no indication that Hannah had knowledge of her future more mature self or even what this story means to her. Though I wanted Hannah to tell her own tale, I wanted the reader to make meaning of her story. So I arranged events in chronological order to encourage the reader to experience Hannah's journey in much the same way that the young girl does. Considering this story now, I still find the characters of "Taken for a Ride" compelling as they play an important role in my more recent work; however, I realize that I would no longer take this straightforward approach to narration—one that works primarily in simple past moving from incident to incident, from complication to climax.

It is clear to me that my approach to narrative and time changed dramatically as a result of the influence of Alice Munro. When I first studied Munro's stories in one of my graduate classes, what struck me was the sense that her characters not only had a past that they were narrating, they also seemed to have a future. If we place Munro's narrators on a timeline, they often tell stories from a distant past, then make huge leaps through time to a narrative present and then project both backwards and forward on this timeline.

Consider her story "Miles City Montana," where Munro's narrator begins by telling the story of the drowning of a childhood friend. Initially, it is not apparent that this inciting incident is in the narrator's far past. But with the phrase, "Twenty years or so later, in 1961, my husband, Andrew, and I got a brand-new car" readers are propelled from the inciting

incident to the time of the central narrative that is about a road trip to visit family and the near drowning of the narrator's daughter (Munro 376). This jump forward in narrative time, though abrupt and radical, is chronological. However, Munro's use of narrative time in "Miles City" is not strictly linear or chronological. At points in the story, the narrator jumps forward to what seems to be her present with "I haven't seen Andrew for years"(382), and back to points earlier in her married life with "Once, shortly after my mother died, and after I was married"(383), and then to a relatively unidentified moment with "At dinner once in the stone house" (384), and then back to the central narrative road trip with "We spent the second night in Missoula" (385). Though each of these moments tells a cohesive tale that conveys meaning, what impressed me was the cumulative effect of this manipulation of time. With the presence of so many strands of time in the narrative, this story seems like only one of many possible narratives in this character's life. Thus, the narrative technique creates the impression that the narrator has a life outside of the story.

According to critic John Orange, "Munro's strengths as a writer lie in the direction of recognizing unacknowledged realities, mysterious depths in the ordinary, the paradoxes at the core of psychological responses, [and] our capacity for self-delusion" (87). What Orange articulates here is what moved me as a reader of Munro's fiction and what made me want to work with this technique in my own fiction: Munro successfully explores the psychological depths of her characters. Part of her success in achieving this is the way that her manipulation of narrative time develops layers of incidents that the narrator appears to be sifting through and arranging rather than a clear-cut linear chain of events that proceeds simply from one incident to the next.

As I explored the question of how to allow my characters to tell their stories, Munro's fiction has helped me understand that characters can be developed not just with concrete

significant detail or character voice or even point of view. What I learned from reading contemporary works like "Miles City Montana" is that narrators relating a linear sequence of events may not be the best way to convey the development of understanding through storytelling. Of Munro's narrators, Orange writes, "it is the action of memory which has been instrumental in fusing episodes across time which leads to [a] narrator's new understanding" (Orange 85). I learned that to achieve a sense of realism, a sense of psychological depth in my characters, I could allow my first-person narrators, especially those that have a high "capacity for self-delusion," to sift through several layers of incidents. It is this function of memory and storytelling the leads to a disruption of understanding of self.

About the process of storytelling, Alice Munro has said, "Very few people seem to want to see their lives in terms of one pointless thing after another" (np). If viewed from an external perspective, my first-person narrators are living lives of little significance—lives that make little impact on the world around them—what interests me is how they look back in this process of storytelling in order to make meaning out of what could otherwise be a string of insignificant and seemingly unrelated moments. Of all of my work in *Wayward Girls*, "The Side Man" most clearly represents the development of my understanding as a writer of how and why to manipulate narrative time. I wanted my narrator, like the characters I loved in Munro's work, to seem to have both a past and a future. By experimenting with radical shifts in narrative time, I was able to put that past and future to use through the act of storytelling. I was able to create a first-person narrator who is sifting through her memories in order to make a meaning for herself.

What has evolved into "The Side Man" is also an example of my very early work as a creative writer. The story is about a middle-aged woman, Patty, who discovers that her father had a creative life as a musician before she was born. Having always seen her parents as

stodgy, conservative, working-class people, Patty is not only surprised by this discovery, she resents it. This "secret" disrupts her sense of identity, who she is and what she has achieved in her life. It has the double impact of being revealed to her by her own daughter, Cecilia. For Patty, learning this important detail about her father's past from her daughter represents failure. Cecelia succeeded in developing a close relationship where Patty failed. In its early drafts, this story followed a very conventional structure. It began with an inciting incident, rose to a climax, and then fell to a resolution. While I found the central problem of the story compelling—the discovery of a secret and how this changed the narrator's sense of identity—the conventional narrative struck me as flat and ultimately unsatisfying. This straightforward, chronological approach also made the ending of the story quite problematic for me. In early drafting, I resolved the central conflict of the story too neatly. Not only was Patty able to recognize her conflict with her father, she was able to overcome it and form a stronger bond. This undercut the complex problems I wanted to explore in the narrative. As I revised "The Side Man," I began to incorporate radical shifts in narrative time and to disrupt chronological time by thrusting the narrative both backward and forward. My goal in doing so was to create a narrative in which Patty fuses "episodes across" her life in an effort to make sense of a discovery. The result is a narrative that disrupts chronological progression of the story and advances the narrative in an associative rather than a cause-and-effect manner.

Because Patty is telling both the story of her own discovery and the story of her father's life, the narrative appropriately begins in the simple past with the scene of the narrator's father at the family butcher shop. This beginning is significant because the narrator's father takes his place, both figuratively and literally, as next in line to his father in the family business. The first paragraph is in the simple past. However, in the second paragraph, I begin to foreground narrative time. With the phrases "Moments before, this

could have been any day", "A woman probably", and "It must have been a Saturday" (51), I begin to move this narrative out of scene and into summary exposition. I continue with "It was time" and "It was 1943" to both foreground time and to set this scene specifically on a narrative timeline before the narrator's birth (52). As narrator, Patty describes the scene with specific detail; however, she is constructing these details. She can't remember the event; she remembers a photograph. My goal here was to convey how often early memory is formed through objects that surround us in childhood, like photographs or the stories that family members tell. I want to stress that is not of interest to me whether Patty's details are real or not. What is of interest to me is that she uses them to make sense. She creates a scene and a moment that feels real to her—that shapes how she feels about her childhood and her family. At the same time, she knows that she was not present at the event. Later in "The Side Man," I propel the narrative forward radically, disrupt the chronological progression of the story by jumping back in time, then move forward again to the time of the central narrative. The result of disrupting the linear sequence of events is a more associative development of the plot. The narrator, Patty, is trying to make sense of a discovery that disrupts her understanding of who she thinks her father is. More importantly, this discovery changes how she views herself. In order to achieve this, Patty cannot present a chronological sequence of events that lead to her discovery. Instead, she has to sift through seemingly disconnected events that reveal feelings associated with this discovery. All of her life, Patty has told herself stories as she tries to understand her parents and herself. She has created a family legend so that she can understand her role as daughter, wife, and mother. The secret she discovers in "The Side Man" conflicts with the details of that legend, and she has to sift through memories to understand this change. Like all family legends, this is a story that may be told over and over. As a character

that has both a past and a future, Patty may tell this story differently next time. She may remember different details and create different significance.

The manipulation of narrative time has become increasingly important in my writing, as have my decisions about the levels of discourse that I use. In creative-writing workshops, I quickly learned the mantra that dialogue must do more than one thing. What this means to me is that while dialogue is a way to represent a character's authentic voice, at the same time, it is a stylized method of representing a character's conscious or unconscious agenda, a character's class and experience, a character's state of mind and so on. As I began to read fiction as a writer, I noticed that stories by writers in workshop tended to have long scenes that were dependent on dialogue. In contrast, the published stories we read for class tended to have very brief sections of dialogue. Otis Haschemeyer, one of my workshop professors, told us, "Talk is cheap." I began to understand that the most uninteresting scenes of dialogue are those in which characters could say what they mean and mean what they say. I began to ask myself this: If authors were not depending on long sections of direct dialogue, then what were they doing? I noticed that Milan Kundera's "Let the Old Dead make Room for the Young Dead" has very little direct dialogue. Writers like Raymond Carver, who included longer scenes of dialogue, also incorporated snippets of indirect dialogue in summary in stories like "Are These Actual Miles?." In his story "Ysrael," Junot Diaz includes sections of direct dialogue without quotation marks. As a reader, and consequently as a writer, decisions about when to use dialogue, indirect dialogue, and free indirect discourse became an interesting way to think about character development as well as showing and telling.

In the final story of *Wayward Girls*, "Thanksgiving 1979", my decisions about levels of discourse are crucial. I began work on this story shortly after having read Anton Chekov's "Gooseberries." I became interested in Chekov's use of frame narrative. At the time, I was

also studying Joseph Conrad's use of Marlow as a frame narrator in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. I was particularly interested in stories about storytelling as well as ways to embed a narrator within a story. "Thanksgiving 1979" is told in first-person by the retrospective narrator Kristina. In many ways, my goals in this story reflect my question of how to allow the narrator to tell her story, but this question had become more challenging. I realized that in "Thanksgiving 1979," there were several characters demanding to be heard. While Kristina is the protagonist and first-person narrator, her great-grandmother, Thelma, insists on telling tales. Further, Kristina's mother's, Gaylene, challenges Thelma's everchanging version of events. I recognized that these were competing narratives. I became interested in how when one narrative became dominant, other narratives were silenced. I knew that the reader had to hear Thelma's voice, but I also wanted Kristina to control her own story. Further, exploring levels of discourse became an opportunity to create tension by restricting Gaylene's ability to speak directly. During the course of writing and revising, it was clear to me that my decisions about dialogue, indirect dialogue, and free indirect discourse were crucial in achieving my goals.

"Thanksgiving 1979" is about the holiday eleven-year-old Kristina spends with her great-grandmother, Thelma. Though Kristina often spends evenings and holidays alone because her mother, Gaylene, works swing shift, this holiday is different. Gaylene is meeting her future in-laws for the first time. To make a good impression on her prospective family, this young, single mother sends her daughter elsewhere. For Kristina, the journey is both full of magic and devastating. Grandma Thelma is a bit of a wildcard. She loves to tell tales. Though interesting and with the hint of truth, Thelma's stories are bizarre, pointless, and at times hurtful. Kristina, on the other hand, feels the impact that storytelling has on her life. Much like Patty in "The Side Man, Kristina is struggling to make meaning. However, of all of

my narrators, Kristina is the most consciously engaged in the act of storytelling. Her mother, Gaylene is the tragic character in this story. According to those around her, she may not be a good mother. But my goal is to show ways in which she is restricted by the boundaries of her world.

In the story's exposition, in summary, Kristina tells how, sometimes, she and her mom would sneak on to the lot of a drive-in movie theatre. She recounts one incident when a male customer confronts Gaylene. According to Kristina, "Mom shot up from her lawn chair and even though she was a good foot shorter than he, she shouted up at his face. The spit flying from the force of her words glimmered in the stray beams from the headlights. She said his birth control glasses offended her principles and that he should leave us alone and mind his own brats. Then she turned to me and said come on, we don't need this shit" (117-118). In Kristina's telling of this incident, it was important for me to convey the intensity and action of the confrontation and to allow Gaylene's voice to be heard—to show the scene. I tried to make clear that "birth control glasses," "brats," and "we don't need this shit" belong to Gaylene. At the same time, it was important that this be Kristina's version of the incident—she is the narrator. The perspective and description of detail belong to Kristina. It should be clear that "shot up, and "spit flying," and "glimmered" belong to her. She tells this moment because it allows her to understand something crucial about her mother's situation. The incident must end distinctly with Kristina's voice. But as both a narrator and a character, Kristina's voice is influenced by the voice of her mother. She says, "At the time, I believed her when she said she wasn't afraid of little piss-ants like him, but now when I think about that chair bouncing recklessly behind her, she just seems helpless before a world of strangers who felt entitled to tell her what to do" (118). In retrospect, Kristina understands both her mother's bravado and her ultimate vulnerability. While Gaylene's influence can be heard in

"little piss-ants like him," these words belong equally to the perspective of the adult Kristina. But it is in the tension between Kristina's voice and how she represents Gaylene that Kristina can understand something about her childhood. As a writer, I felt it was important to represent Gaylene's authentic voice, yet to limit her ability to speak. It is character idioms like "birth control glasses" that make this character vibrant and important to me. Her vulgarity, while it pushes back at conventional use of language—particularly in parenting—marginalizes her as much as her age, level of education, and economic status. It was important to me to restrict her ability to speak. Therefore, she is only allowed two very short lines of direct dialogue until the story's resolution.

In contrast, I immediately introduce Thelma through direct dialogue. It is important that a reader can hear her idioms and cadence directly in sentences like "After the holidays I really gotta get on the stick" (120). Going back to the mantra that dialogue has to do more than one thing, Thelma's longer moments of direct dialogue more often than not don't carry direct information to the listener: they set the tone for her as teller of tales and they develop her character. Thelma speaks in the language of gambling and games of chance. She is passive-aggressive and often uses language for effect rather than to communicate thoughts or ideas. Her stories are hard to believe and are intended to set her audience on edge. I used direct dialogue as both exposition and resolution in the first short tale she tells. This story about her son spending time in a Turkish prison is abrupt, bizarre, and out of nowhere, especially for eleven-year-old Kristina. Yet the story is concise and timed perfectly to create an impression while Thelma and Kristina are alone in the car for less than a minute. The summary of this first story includes both free indirect discourse and indirect dialogue. The reader is to experience this story through Kristina's perspective and at the same time hear Thelma. As Kristina listens to Thelma, she thinks "I looked at him in his salesman's jacket.

The solid helmet of black pompadour on top of his head. He didn't look like he sweated much. Turkish prison I thought, and tried to imagine him in a torn, dusty t-shirt. Blindfolded. His head shaved. He was tall, over six feet" (121). The "salesman's jacket" and "solid helmet of black pompadour" belong to the narrator, Kristina. The details that she imagines, while they belong to her, are directly shaped by movies she has watched on the drive-in screen. She perceives the world through the narrative arc of movies from the late seventies. Watching through the apartment window, Kristina is influenced by the violent imagery of movies even though she can't hear the sound and dialogue. Similarly, in this moment, readers should imagine Thelma and Kristina watching Jerry through the car windshield. Thelma's voice and actions become the sound track so to speak. I insert Thelma's voice through the indirect dialogue of "Thelma told me that back in 1967 when he married his first wife Karla they went to Istanbul for their honeymoon" (121). At this point, I transition very quickly into free indirect discourse with "A man just lay down in front of their car and said that Jerry hit him. It was all a scam" (121). It is incredibly important to me that this scene convey both a visual quality and an oral story-telling quality. I want the reader to imagine the discomfort and fascination that this scene causes for Kristina. At the same time, a reader needs to hear Thelma's clipped tone that is later punctuated with the sound of her handbag snapping open. This scene both sets up Thelma as storyteller and sends Kristina off on her journey.

Consciously interweaving dialogue, indirect dialogue, and free indirect discourse allowed me to set up the longer tale that Thelma tells of murdering her first husband, Mr. VanAstebulen. It should be clear to the reader that like Kristina's world, Thelma's narrative is shaped by popular movies. In her case, these are the silent movies of the 1920s. She represents herself as Clara Bow and tells a melodramatic tale of losing her fingers in a sawmill accident. Again, I relied on a mixture of summary, to represent Thelma's actions, and direct

dialogue, to emphasize the gruesome intrigue of this tale. I then began to juxtapose free indirect discourse with direct dialogue. For example:

> Mr. VanAstebulen had come to evict her, but when he saw her lying on the bed like an angel, he had to have her. He gave her two options. Marry him or be tossed out on the streets.
>
> "Did you love him?" I asked.
>
> Of course she didn't. But faced with the streets, she became his child bride. I had never heard that term before, child bride. It both horrified and thrilled me. (131)

Here, the free indirect discourse conveys the story quickly and is owned by Thelma. Just as her story is shaped by melodrama, her language is also shaped in some ways by the language of popular culture. The juxtaposition sets this in conversation with Kristina who represents her own questions in dialogue. But then tension is created as the idioms of the two characters come together again in the summary that includes free indirect discourse that belongs to Thelma with the representation of Kristina's response to it as thoughts. It is important that both Thelma and Kristina's storytelling is shaped by versions of silent movies. This allows the narration to belong to them. Even though their understanding of character and plot, and thus their own stories, are in many ways determined by the movies they have seen, the language that they use to tell their stories is drawn from their own lives and experiences.

Like most writers of literary fiction, I think of my work as character-driven rather than plot-driven. In an interview with Annette Grant, John Cheever embraces this contemporary view: "Plot implies narrative and a lot of crap. It is a calculated attempt to hold the reader's interest at the sacrifice of moral conviction. Of course, one doesn't want to be boring….one needs an element of suspense. But a good narrative is a rudimentary structure, rather like a kidney" (51). Stories in *Wayward Girls* like "The Grand Illusion" and "By Any Other Name"

began with the idea of a character. My process or project in writing in many ways became my search for a rudimentary structure that would allow me to explore character. In my search for that structure, I noticed that many books on craft point out that there are only about three or maybe four basic plot lines available. In his book on craft, *The Truth about Fiction*, Steven Schoen titled the chapter on plot "Nothing New Under the Sun" (42). John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction,* points out that "all fiction is derivative, a fact that the good writer turns to his advantage, making the most of the reader's expectations, twisting old conventions, satisfying expectations in unexpected ways" (174). For three of my stories in this collection, I adopted an old conventional plotline, the story of a journey. "Taken for a Ride," "Wayward Girls," and "Thanksgiving 1979" all in some way feature the elements of a journey story, a protagonist who leaves home, encounters obstacles, meets with antagonists and is changed in some way.

The first story in the collection is "Wayward Girls," which like "Taken for a Ride" it is about Hannah and Rosie Nelson. In 1939, when the story takes place, the girls are fourteen and thirteen years old and "trouble on wheels" (34). Unlike the earlier version of these characters that are taken on a journey, in "Wayward Girls" Hannah and Rosie set out on their own adventure. They hitch a ride from a logging town north of Seattle to Southgate, an industrial area south of the city. Their destination is a rollerdome and an evening of escape and skating. I knew from the beginning that this was a story of a journey. Knowing this, and knowing the rudimentary features of this conventional plot, allowed me to explore useful questions about character as I wrote. Where did the protagonist want to go? How was she going to get there? You'll notice that Hannah answers these questions in the first and second sentence of the story. "Late August 1939, the weekend before we were to start high school, my sister and I made our way to the Rollerdome one last time. Rosie had arranged a ride that would take us all the way from Bellingham to the mouth of the Duwamish River and from

there we could hitch up the hill to the skating rink" (29). Given these characters, I knew that obviously they wanted to go skating. Keeping with the conventions of the story of the journey, their destination had to be someplace magical—a place full of promise. A word like "Rollerdome" and even "Duwamish River" held this quality for me.

The next question was: What did the protagonist want? Clearly, Hannah wants escape from the drudgery of her daily life—the cramped existence of her small home, the responsibility of taking care of her younger siblings. Like any young person, she wants freedom and a little bit of magic. When I described the Rollerdome, I knew the details that I gave had to carry the weight of Hannah's desire. As the girls finally reach their destination, Hannah says, "We rounded the corner and in the distance, the Southgate Rollerdome rose out of the rubbish like an alabaster palace. Its placard sign of a giant roller skate winked at me" (39). For Hannah, the Rollerdome is full of life. This is a place of safety. A place filled with happy nuclear families. A place where no "grime" or alcohol is permitted. A place where the girls can physically glide with a sense of freedom.

The next questions became: What were the obstacles that might prevent Hannah and Rosie from getting to the Rollerdome? How would they escape the responsibility of babysitting? How would two young teenage girls get from Bellingham to Seattle? These obstacles are overcome by the force of Rosie's character. Rosie is of course the type who would tie up her step-brother and leave him and her infant sister alone in the family home, which is what these girls do early on in the story. And of course, Rosie would also use the power of her developing sexuality to flirt with boys and exchange a kiss for a ride, brazenly ask for money for bus fare from a gas station attendant. It became clear to me that it would be Rosie's force of character, her growing sense of power and joy in her life, that would ultimately

put her at risk. Finally, it would be Rosie's force of character that would be the major source of tension between the two sisters.

The final question that the story of the journey allowed me to ask myself was: Did the protagonist achieve her goal? For Hannah, the answer is both yes and no. For me as a writer, it is the tension created by the choices that the protagonist has to make that gives this story a resolution that both satisfies expectations and yet provides surprises. It is important that I mention that this story incorporates a second traditional form which is "story as connection and disconnection" (Burroway 168) Janet Burroway describes this in her book on craft, *Imaginative Writing*. Essentially, this form develops a pattern of characters emotionally coming together and breaking apart. Burroway asserts that "conflict itself is sterile unless it is given human dimension through the connections and disconnections of the characters" (168). For me, this fluctuation between love and envy, anger and forgiveness, creates the central pathos of the story. This also allowed me to explore how the giving and withholding of love could be a source of power.

I have often thought that all of my stories are love stories. I would say that this is true most essentially for "Wayward Girls" which is about the relationship between sisters who really have only had each other to depend on in their world. But Rosie's fourteen-year-old quest for love and attention continually causes tension between the girls. At every juncture in their journey where I had to decide how the girls would get physically from point A to point B, or how they would overcome obstacles, I also had to decide how to unify the girls and how to break them apart. Skating became a way that I could represent this both physically and emotionally in the story. Skating, the girls can work in unison or independently. As Rosie begins to turn her attention to a group of sailors, she begins to skate in unison with them leaving her sister out of the routine. In addition to this physical representation, the dialogue

between the two girls continually returns to the subject of love and kissing. Rosie longs for romance. Hannah is not interested. The incident at the roller rink that sets up the story's climax is Hannah's first kiss, which she experiences as a betrayal by her sister. To make things worse, Rosie's betrayal also diminishes the magical power of the Rollerdome. In Hannah's perspective, this place transforms from a palace to a place where people are dribbling mustard on their shirts (45).

The separation of the two sisters allowed me to set up the story's climax giving me the opportunity to send Hannah on a new journey—the quest to save her sister. Hannah has to leave the Rollerdome and search for Rosie who has left with three sailors. Originally, I had intended that Hannah find Rosie after she had been raped by the sailors. But as I began to explore the question of whether or not Hannah achieves her goal, I was no longer satisfied with that ending. My first version seemed too expected. I also wanted this story to represent the moment before the girls' lives changed. At the crisis moment, Hannah finds Rosie, drunk, with the sailors in a tavern. Hannah perceives the menace to her sister and decides to act. She assaults one of the sailors. Rather than making the girls victims of violence, I chose to allow Hannah to assert her love through an act of violence. It is her attempt to defend her sister, a moment of triumph over danger, that ultimately changes their lives. Hannah is charged with a crime, their parents lose custody, and the girls are placed in the Good Sheppard Home for Wayward Girls (50). This pattern of connection and disconnection allowed me to understand the story's resolution. I decided to manipulate narrative time by thrusting the story into the near future of the custody trial where the state asserts its power and separates the family. This final disconnection represented the consequences of the crisis moment. However, for the story's closing lines, I shifted the narrative time back to the night at the Rollerdome reuniting the sisters in a moment of forgiveness (50).

As I began the final story of a journey in the collection, I was interested in ways that I could both incorporate and play with conventions of plot and character. "Thanksgiving 1979" is a story of a journey and it incorporates some of the aspects of a fairy tale. The character, Gaylene, in many ways plays the role of Cinderella. She is hoping for a prince charming and a happily-ever-after ending. But Thelma's role became much more complicated than the conventional fairy-godmother. In many ways, I wanted Thelma to offer Kristina a glimpse into a different world: first, through a magic-carpet ride of sorts from south of Seattle to Bellingham, next, through the consumption of a food with a magical quality—a mooncake (127). In the company of Thelma and Mabel, I wanted Kristina to feel included, fulfilled, and satisfied in ways she never had before. But I also wanted Thelma to be the agent of disruption in Kristina's life.

Some of my decisions in developing the character of Thelma are influenced by Flannery O'Conner's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. While most critics recognize the Catholic worldview that dominates O'Conner's work, I am much more interested in critics like Melita Schaum and Ruthann Knechel Johansen, who have identified O'Conner's frequent use of the Trickster figure. In particular, Schaum argues that O'Conner incorporated the characteristics of the Trickster in Manley Pointer of "Good Country People." In the course of the story, though Hulga plans to seduce Manley and expose the superficiality of his belief system, it is, ultimately, Manley who humiliates Hulga exposing her flaws of arrogance and lack of joy and belief. Hulga perceives Manley as a hypocrite. But O'Conner, drawing from the archetype of the Trickster, gives Manly the disruptive characteristics of rule-breaker, liar, and thief (Schaum 1). In doing so, she uses Manly as the vehicle for Hulga's comeuppance.

Unlike O'Conner, I am in no way interested in giving my characters a comeuppance, especially not Kristina. But in order to give Kristina the agency to tell her own story, I needed

to disrupt her relationship with her mother. Thelma was the character to do this. Incorporating some of the conventions of the Trickster allowed me to identify and develop the non-conventional facets of Thelma's character. To put it another way, the characteristics of a stock character helped me complicate Thelma's personality. She is a rule-breaker. She would much rather take off to Las Vegas in her candy-apple red Monza Spyder than be a great grandmother suffering from emphysema. Her personal frustration at being left alone by her family during the holiday, and perhaps, even her jealousy of Kristina's youth and future, result in the unnamable and unmanageable anger that brews just below the surface of many of my characters. This dissatisfaction causes her to strike out in mischievous ways. For me, what is tragic about many of my characters is that they are incapable of giving what is most needed at a crucial moment. I don't see Thelma as mean or calculating, but she is manipulative and a liar. She is particularly fond of delivering zingers to an unsuspecting audience. Even though she adores Gaylene and would like to adore Kristina, she can't help but deliver the blow: "'You know, the problem with your mother is that she thinks poor'"(132). It is this off-handed and cruel comment that disrupts Kristina's close relationship with her mother. But as painful as this disruption is, it is necessary. Thelma offers help, but she is incapable of giving guidance. Instead, she becomes the antagonist. Kristina must overcome the obstacles that Thelma presents in order to move forward. To these personality characteristics, I added a physical disfigurement. Present in all three of my stories of journeys is the threat of the sawmill. Though Thelma has qualities that are magical for Kristina, she is also vulnerable to the physical dangers of her material world. The stumps of her fingers and the rings that Thelma adorns them with are a point of fixation and repulsion for Kristina.

Because my characters are linked by gender, setting, theme, and often family, I am increasingly interested in how the stories work as part of the short-story cycle genre. This

genre includes stories that function as stand-alone pieces but that are also interrelated in some way and function as a unified whole. Cycles can be related by theme or form, as well as, place, culture, family, or character. As I am interested in manipulating narrative time and discourse in order to represent my narrators' processes of making meaning through the act of storytelling, I am interested in how the arrangement of the stories in a collection influences how readers make meaning out of the stories both individually and as a whole. In his article "The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book," Robert M. Luscher explains that the conscious arrangement of stories in a short story sequence encourages a reader to recognize "patterns of coherence" (148). As a reader of short story cycles like William Faulkner's *Go Down Moses*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Amos Oz's *Between Friends*, and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, I have been acutely aware of how these patterns cause me to modify meaning from one story to the next. When I encounter a recurring character, for example, in a new story, I find myself reconsidering the previous story's resolution. This also sets up expectations for the stories to come.

With three stories directly linked, I am very conscious of the role of arrangement. My collection begins with "Wayward Girls" for a number of reasons. First, it introduces a cast of characters that recur in three of the stories. The central characters, Hannah and Rosemarie, recur as the central characters of "Taken for a Ride." The opening story also introduces a family of secondary characters including Thelma who recurs in a more important role in the final story, "Thanksgiving 1979." Second, "Wayward Girls" introduces a theme that is central to all of my work in the collection. Individually, my female protagonists are facing crucial moments that define their family, their stability, and their identity. Collectively, whether they are fifty or eight years old, all of my female protagonists are in some ways "wayward girls." They are at odds with those around them and often with themselves. Further, conscious of

the manipulation of narrative time, I think it is important to note that "Wayward Girls" chronologically takes place after "Taken for a Ride." Placing "Taken for a Ride" third in the collection disrupts the linear sequence of time. This is reinforced by the second story, "The Side Man," which as I have pointed out, is a story in which I manipulate narrative time in order to achieve an associative effect. My hope is that when readers encounter Hannah and Rosemarie in "Taken for a Ride," albeit at an earlier point in their lives, this disruption to chronological progression of time establishes a pattern. At the same time, I don't want this pattern to become predictable, so the fourth story and midpoint of the collection, "The Grand Illusion" serves to break it. The only story written in the third-person, "The Grand Illusion" explores not only a mother-daughter relationship but also romantic love and the problems created by misperception. The fifth story, "By Any Other Name," returns to a first-person narrator, and though it is not directly linked through recurring characters with other stories in the collection, it is linked through recurring themes and patterns of language. For me as a writer, and I hope for readers, all of the characters of this collection inhabit the same fictional landscape. Their inconsequential lives and the frustrations that they suffer point to significant recurring frustrations facing women.

As it is important that the collection begins with "Wayward Girls," it is equally important that it end with "Thanksgiving 1979." This story's narrator, Kristina, is herself concerned with narratives and making meaning through the telling of stories. It is fitting that she control the end of her own story, and that she influence the resolution of the collection as well. I would say that all of the stories in this collection resolve in disruption of the uneasy equilibrium of the characters' lives. Yet I would like Kristina not only to have a past, but to have a chance at a future. My hope is that, like the women that she represents, Kristina has some agency in writing her own ending.

PART II: "MULTIFACETED POSSIBILITIES FOR CREATIVE WRITING"

When I consider my short stories as part of a collection, I think of them as individual parts of a larger whole. In many ways, I think the genre of short story cycle has provided a way for contemporary writers of literary fiction who have been trained in the process and aesthetics of the Iowa Writers Workshop to create longer more expansive works. For example, in *Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich develops a large cast of characters and multiple plot lines. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan develops multiple plotlines resulting in a collection that spans several decades. While many short story cycles are read and interpreted as novels, I think the one of the most interesting aspects of these works is the tension between how the short stories function as individual works and how the collection works as a whole. It is in this dynamic between part and whole that I see that nineteenth-century serial processes could gain relevance in the creative writing classroom.

Much of current creative writing pedagogy recognizes the affinity between composition and creative writing. Yet, the degree I have earned at the University of North Dakota is a PhD in Literature with a creative writing dissertation. Much of my coursework was devoted to the interpretive study of literature and the production of critical essays. Central to my work has become the question of the relationship between interpretive study and creative production. One place that sparked my interest in this relationship was in my study of nineteenth-century serial literature and my creative development as a writer.

In part, my interest was piqued because authors of nineteenth-century serial novels worked under conditions radically different from my own. As a writer, I have had the luxury of meticulously honing my craft by revising short works of fiction. My livelihood has not been directly related to my production of my work. In contrast, writers like Charles Dickens

were immersed in a writing process that seemed to demand that they juggle several balls at once. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson present a fascinating study of Dickens's writing practice in their book *Dickens at Work*. They point out that "Writing in serial involved maintaining two focuses. The design and purpose of the novel had to be kept constantly in view: but the writer had also to think in terms of the identity of the serial number, which would have to make its own impact and be judged as a unit" (15). The author had to think in terms of both part and whole while composing under the pressure of rapid deadlines. The master of this form, Dickens was able to produce chapters that were consistent in length and achieved their role in the overall text. Dickens's notes, or number plans, reveal that he planned the direction a chapter would go and then made notes summarizing what the chapters achieved. Further, Butt and Tillotson's research shows that Dickens was aware that "thirty slips" composed in his "normal handwriting" achieved the required publishing length of a monthly number (20). In other words, while he was writing, he was aware of how his handwritten manuscript would be typeset and ultimately how it would fit into a larger publication. While creating plot and characters, he had to consider that readers would be constantly interrupted while waiting for the next installment. He could hit his mark to achieve the necessary cliffhanger or at least create a bridge to the next number. According to Butt and Tillerson, he never wrote more than five numbers before the start of publication (14). This means that reception materials began to be published while the novel was still in process.

While Dickens complained about the brutal pressure of writing for serial publication, the constraints of this form and process resulted in works like *Pickwick Papers*, *Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*. This led me to the question which is central to my research for "Multifaceted Possibilities for Creative Writing". What could students of creative writing learn

from working under similar constraints? This question lead to several others that guided both my research and the organization of my argument.

I began to explore how a consideration of the changing marketplace of the nineteenth-century would be beneficial for creative writing. While I do not argue a one-to-one relationship between nineteenth-century publishing practices and today's market, I do believe this model is worth the attention of students interested in entering the creative fields of publishing. In particular, the advent of serial publication caused an innovative disruption in the publishing market. Consideration of how changing print technology, modes of distribution, and increasing literacy rates resulted in the success of this form may compel students to consider innovative disruptions caused by digital technology today.

I considered how a study of nineteenth-century serial publication could address some of the flaws in the traditional workshop model. Adopting a writing process so radically different from the traditional workshop approach seemed to offer several benefits for emerging creative writers. Students could be asked to produce longer, more expansive works than are typically produced for workshop. Further, by adopting the process of "publishing" while still in process could help students reconsider how they approach their own work and the work of their fellow writers. If students could take on the role of "readers" rather than critics of each other's work, their focus in feedback could change from looking for flaws to looking for possibilities.

With the changing demands of the job market for writers, I also intended to help students develop marketable skills and to conceive of careers in the publishing industry in innovative ways. Many current jobs for writers require the familiarity with digital formats and experience in composing for digital platforms. Many students do this on their own with Twitter and Facebook. My goal was to formalize students' experience with digital formats and

encourage them to recognize and incorporate skills that they already have into their creative process. Further, my goal was to encourage students to consider how historical changes in publishing practices resulted in changes in production and readership. While study of a historical moment may not provide a directly applicable skill, it will provide students with ways to consider how changes in technology lead to changes in a marketplace.

The resulting research and article offer an innovative approach to the workshop that challenges traditional approaches to teaching creative writing but is in keeping with a growing number of programs in the field.

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1. WAYWARD GIRLS

Late August 1939, the weekend before we were to start high school, my sister and I made our way to the Rollerdome one last time. Rosie had arranged a ride that would take us all the way from Bellingham to the mouth of the Duwamish River and from there we could hitch up the hill to the skating rink. But that afternoon, our stepmother didn't come home. Thelma had promised to work only half a shift at the mill. She said that if we babysat for her in the morning, we could still have our afternoon free. She must have changed her mind. She did that a lot. She'd promise that we only had to babysit a short while, then pick up a second shift.

Rosie went on about how if Thelma kept her part of the bargain we wouldn't have to do this. She said it was our stepmother's fault really. Pure selfishness. We were just free labor. That's why they'd moved us up from Enumclaw. She said we never even saw Daddy. He was out on a fishing boat for three months at a time. Thelma could boss us around any way she wanted. This time, Rosie said, Thelma was not going to ruin our good time. She applied a bright red coat of lipstick, dropped the tube into her pocket, and said, "Let's get us some rope."

Convincing Thelma's boy Donny to sit on the chair was always the hardest part. He bit Rosie. I tried to hold him down so she could get him with the rope. He was only four but his blunt little legs were solid muscle. I got more than my fair share of swift kicks. Baby Ginny woke in her crib and started bawling.

I tried to reason with him. Told him that if he'd sit in the chair and let Rosie tie him, I'd give him a piece of that butterscotch, the kind wrapped in silver paper. He stopped struggling and listened. "Two pieces," I said, "that'll be enough to last you 'til your mama gets home." He tucked his chin in and studied me. His bottom lip stuck out pink and shiny. "We

won't tie your hands this time, and I'll give you some picture books." I let go of his legs and walked to the dresser. In the upper left drawer, underneath my stockings, I kept a box of butterscotch. The day Rosie and I moved to Bellingham, our Grandpa had driven us. We sat three together across the seat of his old truck. When Grandpa tried to start the engine, it groaned and sputtered. For one brief moment, I felt relief. We wouldn't have to go after all. Then Grandpa chuckled and reached into his jacket pocket. "That's right," he said and pulled out two boxes of candy. He handed one to me, one to Rosie. "I forgot this old truck runs on butterscotch." Then he cranked the engine and it hummed all the way to our new life.

For three months, that box sat untouched in my dresser drawer next to the big bed Rosie and I shared in the front room. The only room really, other than Thelma and Daddy's bedroom. It served as kitchen, a place to eat, and a bedroom. Across from us, Donny slept in a trundle bed that was a couch during the day. I supposed the top part would be baby Ginny's when she got old enough or had to vacate the crib that sat close enough to the stove that I could stir a pot while I held her bottle. The only other furniture was the table and four chairs.

I dangled two silver slabs of butterscotch in front of Donny. He crawled up on to the wooden chair and stretched out his hand. I shook my head. "Not until you're secure."

Rosie wrapped the rope around each of his ankles and the legs of the chair. Then she looped it up around his waist and chest. "This is for your own safety," she said as she worked. I wondered if she believed it. "If your mama had been home when she said, I wouldn't have to do this." She tied the end around a rung on the back of the chair in a perfect buntline hitch just like Daddy taught her. If Donny struggled, the knot would tighten.

Seeing him strung up like that made me uneasy. "Here," I said shoving the candy into his grimy little hand. I slung my skates over my shoulder. The hard rubber wheels knocked into my ribcage. I didn't mind. I liked that their weight felt substantial as if they were all I

needed to walk out that door. Rosie grabbed her skates, and we headed for the road. "What if there's a fire?" I said.

"Won't be," she said.

"He's our stepbrother."

"He's Thelma's brat and I hate him." She quickened her pace. Her auburn hair bounced in a perfect wave across her neck and shoulders. Though I was at least a head taller, I had to skip every couple of steps to keep stride.

"Ginny's your sister."

"No, you're my sister." Her voice was hard-edged but she turned toward me and smiled sweetly. Her cheeks and chin the shape of a Valentine heart. She'd always been my little pie face.

"Could be a fire."

The smile vanished. She jumped in front of me and stomped her foot. "Hannah Mae," she said, "if you're not wanting to go, head on back right now. I'm going and I don't want to hear no more what ifs about fires or nothing else. I'm going to have the time of my life. Not you, not Thelma or those two hell-spawn are going to spoil it."

I could feel her anger rushing at me like a wild log hurtling down a shoot. Try as I might to get out of its way, I knew I'd be laid flat. But, I also knew that as quick as her anger came on, it would be gone, and she'd be all sweet and smiles again if I just played my cards right.

"How'd you get Bobby Watkins to drive us?" I asked.

She exhaled and grinned, put a hand on her hip and arched her back. She was barely fourteen but when she stood like that, a pose she had practiced many times in front of Thelma's vanity mirror, her breasts strained against the seams of her blouse and her skirt clung

to her full round thigh. If one more person told her that she looked like Rita Hayworth I thought I'd scream. Her head was already filled with fantasies from the movie magazines Thelma bought her. Nobody compared me to Rita Hayworth and it wasn't just that my hair was limp and sandy brown. I had posed like that once in front of the mirror. I would turn fifteen that September, but when I thrust my hip all that strained against the skirt fabric was hipbone, sharp and angular.

"The reason Bobby Watkins is driving us," she said, "is because I kissed him."

Bobby Watkins was seventeen years old and delivered groceries to our porch. Rosie would slip out back when he came. Just to say hello. I hadn't made much of it, but of late she had disappeared for longer and longer stretches. Now I knew why. Bobby wasn't bad to look at but he didn't seem like a boy Rosie would go for. He quit high school the year before and would work at his father's grocery for the rest of his life.

"Do you like him?" I asked.

She scrunched her face up.

"Then why'd you kiss him?"

"He has the delivery van, silly." She wrapped a ringlet of hair around her finger. "Don't you look at me like that. It probably wasn't the kiss anyways. He's heading down to pick up produce in the valley. Besides, I'd do it again to get to Seattle tonight."

"You might have to," I said. "It's a three-hour ride."

"Yeah but we'll be in the back. He don't want nobody to see us and tell Daddy. Come on," she said.

She took my hand, and we started to walk again. The afternoon was warm. Alder leaves had already started to curl and fall and crunched beneath our feet. The smell of blackberries drifted up from the ditch alongside the road. Yellowjackets were starting to

swarm and tear viciously at the flesh of ripening fruit. We reached the corner. Bobby Watkin's van sat idling behind a grove of willow saplings, but Bobby was nowhere in sight. I leaned into the cab through the open window. A tattered copy of *Mandrake the Magician* and a pack of Lucky Strikes lay on the seat. Rosie peered through the willow branches, then quickly turned around, her hand over her mouth. Bobby rushed out of the bush zipping his fly. He gave us a brusque hello. Then he grinned and said there was room in the cab for one. He looked at Rosie and said she could put her head in his lap until we were out of Bellingham. I looped my arm through her elbow and pulled her toward me. If he thought I'd let her be alone with him in that cab, he had another think coming. Rosie leaned her head into my shoulder. Bobby snorted and said, suit yourself. He led us to the back of the van and unlatched the door. The inside matched the grey of the outside. Deep, near the cab, lay a dirty old mattress and a couple of blankets. I wondered if when he agreed to give Rosie a ride he knew I was part of the deal. We should have turned around right then and gone back home. But I knew Rosie wouldn't listen and if I protested I would just feel the fool in front of Bobby. So I just watched as she giggled and bit her thumb. She hitched her leg and swung herself up into the van. I followed. We each grabbed a rod and pulled the doors shut. I heard the latch snap into place. Now there was no turning back.

The air inside the truck was hot and close. We bounced along in the darkness for what felt like forever. I tried to imagine what must be passing outside. What I thought was Highway Ninety-nine. Sweat was beading on my scalp. I could feel my hair a matted mess against my neck. We lurched to a stop and I thought of Thelma walking through the door to find Donny slumped in the chair. Sticky drool on his face. How long would she be mad at me? Last time we snuck off, she swore and threatened, but she didn't tell Daddy. The cop that rode us home told her that if he found us wandering around Pioneer Square again he'd

book us as runaways. Then he stood there and listened as Thelma ranted. Told us we were trouble on wheels. That if we weren't careful we'd end up like that girl up the street with that baby with rags for shoes. Is that what we wanted? No job. No money. To be known as good-time girls. Rosie laughed at her and said, "What if I was pregnant?" Thelma shut her mouth and blinked. I thought she might slap Rosie straight across the face. But as cool and calm as morning water she said we'd stay home and care for it. Thelma was only twenty-two, seven years older than me. At times like that, she seemed more like an older sister than a stepmother.

One of the tires hit a pothole and Rosie's head slumped over into my lap. She was asleep. I put my hand on her shoulder. Could feel her breath rise and fall. This might be when I liked her the best. My baby of a sister. Soft and quiet. Close to me like when we were little, before she seemed ready to turn on me at any minute. It had always been us against them. But more and more Rosie seemed to be standing alone. I could feel her moving away from me to someplace I couldn't follow. I wrapped my arm around her chest and pulled her close as if I were strong enough to keep her with me.

At some point, I must have fallen asleep too. When the doors of the van swung open, the stream of late afternoon sunlight blinded me. Rosie pushed herself up off my legs. Her breath was hot and stale. There was sand in my mouth. Wobbly from hours of motion, we staggered to the edge of the van and eased ourselves down. A car rushed by and Rosie jumped as if she had to get out of its way.

"Aren't you a sight," Bobby said. "Scarecrow and Raggedy Ann."

Rosie grumbled, pushed, and swam her way to the sidewalk. He laughed and said he'd be seeing us. He swung the van doors shut, climbed into the cab, and rumbled off down the street. One look at Rosie told me that we were a mess. She asked where we were. I could see

the train tracks across the street lined with idle freight cars. To my left, houses sprouted out of the hillside so steep they looked like they were on stilts. A car whizzed by and its engine echoed against great cement pilings. I looked up to see the span of the drawbridge. I realized he must have dropped us on the west side of the river near the steel mill.

"That's Poverty Hill," Rosie said. "There's a service station down around the bend."

The pimply clerk eyeballed us as we marched straight behind the building to the bathroom. Mosquito eaters flitted around the bare light bulb. The door didn't lock and the room reeked of urine but there was a dim and grainy mirror. We dropped our skates in the cleanest looking corner. I splashed cool water in my face to rub off the grime. Rosie laughed at her reflection and pulled pins from her hair. She wetted her fingers, ran them through the russet and gold strands that sprang free and looped into thick ringlets. She disappeared and returned with a brush. I didn't ask. She began to work her way through the rats in my hair. A half hour later we emerged as fresh and scrubbed as two kids rolling out of school. Rosie winked at the clerk and handed him the brush. He blushed and tucked it behind the counter.

She leaned toward him and rested her elbows on the counter. "You ever go to the Southgate Rollerdome?"

"I been," he said his hands on the cash register.

"That's where you'll find me tonight. If you go, that is. I'm Rosalynn and this here is Hannah."

He said hello to me but never took his eyes off Rosie.

"You know where someone could find a ride up the hill round here?" she said.

He ran his fingers along the inside of his cap and glanced out the window to his left. I followed his gaze and saw the handles and front wheel of a bicycle leaning up against the side

of the building. He looked back at Rosie. "A bus runs up Delridge every thirty minutes. Cost you a nickel."

"We only got enough to get into the rink," Rosie pouted. "You know where someone could find a nickel round here?"

His eyes widened in recognition. He glanced left and right as if someone might be watching, whistled a little to himself, and punched a button on the cash register. The drawer sprang open. Pulling out two nickels, he grinned and slid them across the counter. There was oil in the creases of his skin, but his nails were pared and perfectly trimmed. His hand stopped just short of Rosie's arm. She too glanced left and right before reaching over to take the coins. But she let the tips of her fingers brush up against his. "So we'll be seeing you tonight?" she said.

His hand retreated into the deep pocket of his overalls. "Maybe you will," he said.

Rosie pocketed the nickels. We turned to leave. The bell above the door jingled when she swung it open. She hesitated then turned back. "We're awful hungry," she said. He frowned. I thought we had better count ourselves lucky and start up the hill toward the bus stop, but Rosie kept on. "Nothing but fill-yer-bellies since morning," she said. "I think I might just drop before I make it to the rink." She laughed a tiny little tinkling laugh. A practiced laugh. Not her typical gut buster. I wanted to tell her to leave him alone that I had brought a little money to buy a sandwich but he had already disappeared behind the counter and came up with a lunch box. He passed her a wax paper package. She thanked him, and we went on our way.

The sun disappeared behind a ridge of fir trees. A whistle blew. The steel mill probably. We hiked up the hill. Rosie unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite.

"I wish you hadn't done that," I said.

"He's not missing much," she said through a mouthful and shoved the sandwich into my hands. Spongy bread, a thin smear of butter and one slice of salami. I took a bite and passed it back to her. "You know what I wish?" she said.

"What."

"That you'd stop worrying for one minute and have some fun." She took my chin in her hand and leaned in close to my face. "Tonight, we're free."

I pulled away from her grasp. "If you say so."

She shook her head and tossed the wax wrapping.

We had to wait fifteen minutes for the bus. All the while, scraggly groups of men joined us. We could hear them drifting alongside the building behind the bus stop. There'd be laughter and voices but the men all fell silent when they rounded the corner. They ranged in age from what looked like fifteen to sixty, with not a lot in between. Cigarettes dangled from lower lips. None too happy to see us. When the bus finally came, they let us climb on first. The driver took our nickels and watched us in the rear-view mirror. Rosie made a big production out of choosing a seat and finally took the third one from the front. The men filed in, an endless stream. Though they stood pressed together in the aisle, the driver stopped the last two from entering. Full, he said and pulled the lever, shutting the door in their faces. Their wives or mothers would have to wait on dinner, I thought, because of us. The bus engine strained against carrying so much weight and as we wound our way up the hill, the air became close with smoke and steel. I was used to the odor of day-old fish and saw dust on the laundry, but nothing could prepare me for the acrid smell of steel dust mixed with human sweat. It made my throat and eyes burn. Rosie covered her mouth. When the bus crested the hill, she reached up and yanked the bell string. The bus stopped at the next intersection. The doors opened and coughed us out onto Roxbury.

We slung our skates over our shoulders. Mine clattered against the window on the bus door. "Watch it," the driver shouted at me through the glass. He shifted into gear and pulled away from the curb.

Rosie held a handful of her hair in front of her nose and sniffed. "God, tell me my hair don't smell like that," she said. Then she laughed. "Don't you fall in love with no steel man. I won't come to your house."

"You think I'm dumb enough to trade one mill for another?" I said.

"Mill. I'm talking about love." She put her hands together and twirled. "Don't you even want to kiss a boy? You never have, have you?"

"I'm not going to fall in love with anybody," I said. From what I'd seen of love, it just meant dirty dishes and diapers. I didn't want any of it. Rosie could have her Hollywood. Maybe she was right. Maybe I couldn't stop the worry. So, I'd settle for high school. In the end, I knew she'd be right there with me. Irish twins, they called us. Took me years to stop telling people we weren't Irish. We'd started grade school together because Grandma and Grandpa hadn't wanted to part us. We came from a broken home, they said, and we needed each other. Rosie always struggled because of that. Not because of the broken home, but because she could never keep up. I whizzed through my work then showed her how to do hers. Did hers, too, more often than not.

We headed toward Sixteenth Avenue Southwest. This was a rough part of town. When the dry cleaners and the tailor's shop were locked up, groups of young people drifted here and there going nowhere in particular. As we passed them on the sidewalk, the young men would talk in loud, boastful voices and their women would sneer. The first time we'd snuck off to roller skate, we saw a fight break out right there on Sixteenth. Rosie and I had found ourselves in the middle of a crowd. One man knocked another down. He gave him a

chance to get back up. When he didn't, it was all over. Rosie hadn't stopped talking about it for a week. She kept telling the story over and over. Each time the drama took on a new shape until somehow she was the one they had been fighting over.

But on that late August night, the streets seemed quiet. It was getting dark. The street lamps came on. Though it had been a fine day, the night air began to chill and bite at our bare arms. A crumpled piece of newspaper tumbled down the gutter between the sidewalk and the street. We rounded the corner and in the distance, the Southgate Rollerdome rose out of the rubbish like an alabaster palace. Its placard sign of a giant roller skate winked at me. I felt my heart surge and race. I looped my arm through Rosie's and knew she felt it too. That the bright lights on the wall facing the street called out to us. That this was our place. The place that held us together. The place that could carry us home.

We hurried around the side of the building to the entrance. Funneled into the line under the long narrow awning. Huddled between a family of four and a young couple. The little boy in front of me turned and grinned. He wore short pants and a cap. He asked me if I thought we'd missed the opening flag salute. His father chuckled, patted him on the shoulder, told him we were just in time. His mother, who perched a little girl on her hip, smiled at me and said that the boy's favorite part of the evening was when all the service men ringed the rink and Pop Brown raised the flag. Donny would like that I thought. I hoped that Thelma was home.

At the door, Ethel Brown took our dimes and handed us each a ticket. She checked our skates for dirt and rocks that would nick the polish of the floor. She always made sure that street-grime didn't enter her rollerdome. Inside, still caught in the bustle of the crowd, I heard her ask the man behind me if he'd been drinking. I turned to watch. He said no. She leaned in and sniffed his breath, then let him through the door.

We dropped our skates with a thud on the shoe check counter. Rosie touched the red mark on her shoulder where the laces had rubbed her skin raw. A woman at the counter wrote a number on our tickets and told us that unless we wanted to skate home we shouldn't lose them. I watched her tuck our loafers in slot forty-five and forty-six. I found a bench. I sat down, plunged each foot into a tight-fitting leather boot and laced up my skates. Rosie did the same. When we were securely knotted, we stood, clasped hands, and rolled off toward the floor.

Close to the rink the crowd loosened. Space opened before us with a wide hanger ceiling suspended above the rafters and a polished wood floor that shone like glass. From the looks of it, the navy was in town. Wall to wall bell-bottoms and white caps. Rosie and I found a spot along the edge of the floor. The house went black and the crowd hushed. A spotlight caught Pop Brown standing at the top of the rink. He looked to be in his fifties with a pot-belly and thinning hair, but his back was ramrod straight. Next to him stood a skinny kid in khakis, a bugle pressed to his side. From the opposite side of the rink, a member of the Southgate drill team zipped onto the floor carrying a US flag. I longed to be her. Swore I would be once I turned eighteen and could join. Believed that I could wear that flounced skirt edged with rose-colored sequins that fell just above the knees. That smart little cap glinting in the light. That form-fitting sweater. As she circled the rink picking up speed, each leg crossed in front of the other. The motion lifted her skirt, showed a hint of her thighs. A pair of pom-poms danced at the ankle of each skate. She stopped on a dime directly in front of Pop Brown and plunked the flagpole into the stand. When it hit the floor, Pop snapped to attention with a salute. The bugler barked out Reveille. The moment his last note faded, the lights came up, and the organ burst into song. Skaters edged their way onto the floor.

Rosie and I swung into motion. We raced shoulder to shoulder weaving in and out of hand-holding couples. Each time we circled the rink, we took a step toward center. We loved to start with the spiral. When we reached the middle, we clasped each other's forearm. Our legs were spread in a perfect V so that two feet pointed forward, two backward. We picked up momentum and leaned our heads back. I opened my eyes and watched patches of color and light streak by allowing the rush of dizziness to engulf me. Rosie was right. That night we were free. Here was a life without worry. I could taste it in the air that rushed through my open mouth. Or this was the closest thing to freedom that girls like us would ever know. Forearms still linked, we turned so that we were both facing forward and took off in an easy glide around the floor. All too quickly, we came upon a young woman who clung to the arm of a stocky sailor. Her legs didn't seem to know which way to go but her feet seemed determined to fly out from under her. She landed smack on her bottom, legs splayed, the sailor rutting up between them. Rosie and I separated to avoid a pile- up. A group of three or four of the sailor's comrades stood together on the outside of the rink. They laughed at the woman on the floor but clapped for our swift maneuver. Rosie did a quick spin to acknowledge their attention. I glanced at them. Those sailors in their white uniforms who could look so noble, so clean, so like they had just stepped off of a movie screen. I could see that Rosie thought so too. Her stride, that a moment before had been strong and straight began to lilt and swing. My chest tightened. Rosie exited the floor. I followed her to the ladies' room where we rolled our skirts at the waist so the hem fell above our knees. We had done this many times before, imagining ourselves as pinup girls. Somehow, though it had always earned a stern look from Thelma, I had felt it to be innocent. My beanpole legs sticking out couldn't possibly be thought of a alluring. But as I watched Rosie, I think I must

have felt some of Thelma's concern. Rosie ran her hand over her bottom to smooth the fabric, then her hand traveled down along her stocking to the dimpled back of her knee.

When we returned to the floor, we skated separately. Leisurely. The cluster of sailors whooped as Rosie sailed by. She grabbed the sides of her skirt and swung them. It was a move that we had seen in a movie musical number. We had been practicing it for weeks. I pulled up to the sideline and watched. It was as if she and her sailors were moving together in an unstoppable raucous dance. She'd zip by, turn to skate backwards and flash them a grin. They'd shuffle and twitter in response. It was like she had them on a string and each time she'd pass by, she'd draw them toward the floor. From where I was standing, I could see that they couldn't skate. She pulled up beside me breathless.

"What are you doing?" I said. I wanted to take her by the shoulders and shake some sense in to her.

"I'm having the time of my life," she answered. Her voice lilting. Unnatural. She glanced at me from under veiled eyelids. "And I'm not going to let you be a stick in the mud." She took my hand and pulled me onto the floor. We glided together. Her damp hand clung to mine. But, I could feel that she was elsewhere. I could feel the eyes of the sailors and the electric wave that coursed through her body each time we swung past them. I looked at her, red hair glinting in the light, smooth luminescent skin. She did not need my company. She needed my reflection, pale in comparison so that she could glimmer and shine. I broke stride and drifted off to the side. In my fury, I jostled a few onlookers.

"Well hi there," one of them said.

It took a moment for me to recognize him without his cap and overalls. It was the boy from the service station. "It's you," I said.

"Right," he said. "You're Hannah."

I nodded, surprised that he remembered.

"Willie." He stuck out a hand. Even in the dim light of the rollerdome, I could see that his hand had been scrubbed free of oil and could feel the warmth of the red and raw skin against mine. "Wilbur really. Willie just seems to suit me." I looked at him. His shirt collar tight against the smooth skin of his neck. He was right. He glanced over my head and said, "That Rosalynn is something else."

"Who?" I asked turning to follow his gaze. "Oh, Rosie. Sure she is." It was the same old story. "Why don't you go find her?" I said. "It's her you're here for anyway."

He grinned. His two front teeth were so large that he suddenly looked like a horse. He pushed off joining the flow of skaters circling the floor. He raced up behind Rosie and touched her shoulder. She turned to look at him, didn't recognize him, but gave him a smile anyway. Her smile was so easy. It would brighten anyone's day. It could brighten my day. They pulled up across the rink from me. I watched as she talked and laughed, talked and laughed. Willie was in seventh heaven, but Rosie wasn't with him. She kept glancing back at her sailors. Then she glanced at me. Her grey eyes narrowed. She whispered something in Willie's ear, giggled into her hand, and he glanced at me too. She gave him one last smile and wagged her finger at him before returning to the floor. He watched her go. The organist struck up "Little Brown Jug." Children exited the floor and headed for the concession stand. Groups dispersed, leaving only couples holding hands. Willie glided around the rink and stopped in front of me. He held out his hand. "Care to join me?" he said.

This was the first time any boy had asked me to a couple's skate. I felt uneasy when I took his hand. We circled the floor silently. Willie's hand was sweaty. Then he started to talk. Not to me in particular, just to fill the empty air. Turned out that this was Willie's last day at the service station. He only worked there during the summer. He was a junior at West Seattle

High School. Started day after Labor Day. He kept saying, quite a coincidence, quite a coincidence. Finally, I asked him what he meant, and he said, "You two stopping by on my last day. If it hadn't a been today, I never would have met—" he paused, "You."

The song ended. He leaned his face close to mine. Pressed his lips against mine. I could feel his breath against my cheek. Could feel his giant teeth through his lips. I pulled my head away. Over his shoulder, I could see Rosie leaning up against a pillar on the edge of the rink. Her hands clasped behind her back. Her chest thrust out. Her face was triumphant.

"Did Rosie send you over to skate with me?" I asked.

He looked off at the crowd of onlookers. Children. Old people. Everyone enjoyed watching the young couples. He said something about how Rosie promised him the next couple's skate, only if he kissed me. I pulled my hand from his and wiped it on my skirt. I hope I didn't thank him for the skate. I hope I wasn't that much of a chump. I skated off to Rosie. She stood their clapping and smiling. She would have jumped if she hadn't been wearing skates. I couldn't breathe. I put a hand on the pillar to steady myself. I could feel a deep anger gurgling out of my chest.

"How could you do that to me?" I asked.

All the light left Rosie's face. "Isn't that just like you," she said.

"What?"

"I do you a favor and this is how you thank me?"

"Favor." I'm not sure I understood my humiliation, but I felt it. Something raw and ugly had come into the rollerdome, and I would never forgive her.

"You really are a stick in the mud," she went on. "Don't you be mad at me cause you can't even get the attention of a stupid boy no better than Bobby Watkins." Her mouth was moving quickly. I watched a flush of red creep up her neck. "I'm not going to let you spoil

my good time. Not this time," she said. She stomped her skate. The wheel made a sharp crack against the floor. "Not this time." She turned and sashayed onto the rink, rounded up beside her sailors. They moved to the side to make room for her, then they closed in a circle behind her.

I felt a hot sickness in my stomach, made my way to the concession stand. The crowd surged and ebbed around me. I may have stood there twenty minutes sipping on a lemonade. A man sidled up and ordered a hotdog and a bag of peanuts. When he picked up his hotdog, he smeared mustard on the lapel of his suit. A woman's shrill laugh burst out of the corner behind me. I felt suddenly tired. All of the magic had gone out of the evening. I wanted to be home. Then Willie was back at my side. His face was flushed. Beads of sweat shone on his nose. I didn't feel angry anymore, not at him.

"She's not there," he said.

"Who's not there?"

"Rosalynn."

"She can fend for herself."

"Listen, I know I made you mad. I didn't mean to, but you've got to listen."

I looked at him. His face was more animated. His head bobbed, and he gestured wildly with his hands as he talked.

"She's gone. I've been on the floor. Skating all around. She's not there."

I considered what he said and thought about Rosie. I pushed away from the counter and skated toward the floor. The crowd had thinned. The organ droned. I peered into the faces of handholding couples. Stopped at each group of stragglers along the edge of the rink. He was right. Rosie wasn't there. And that group of sailors. Gone. I raced to the ladies' room. Called for her. Pushed open the door to each stall. She was nowhere.

Back at the shoe check, box number forty-six was empty. That little fool I thought. When I found her, I'd wring her silly little neck. My ankles sprang and wobbled like they were rubber bands. I flopped down on a cushioned bench and began to unlace my skates. My fingers fumbled with the knots. What if I couldn't find her? What if I never found her?

Outside, Sixteenth Avenue was alive with noise. Several skaters milled about in search of something stronger than lemonade. I rushed around the corner of the building. One sailor had his head tipped back and was emptying the contents of a flask down his throat. Another peed against the side of the rollerdome. They looked at me as if wondering what I was doing there. I retreated and looked up and down the street. A siren blared in the distance.

The street seemed to meld into a sea of lights and noises. A wind picked up and lifted my hair from my shoulders. I clung to my skates as if their weight could give me substance. I didn't know where to look. Rosie could be anywhere. For at least a half an hour I roamed up and down the street peering into alleyways and the back seats of cars. I thought of finding a telephone and calling our mother. I knew where she lived downtown, knew the bar she tended, knew she couldn't or wouldn't do anything. I could hear her saying in her brass voice, you got yourselves into this, now get yourselves out. I thought of telephoning my grandparents but was afraid of what they would say, afraid of what they would think. And Thelma? Even though she'd be mad as hell I knew she'd try to help me but the house didn't have a telephone. Whenever she wanted to place a call, she had to walk down to the post office and pay a fee. I exhaled and could see my breath in the lamplight. I couldn't face any of them without Rosie.

It was then I saw it tucked around the corner of the street. The Five Spot Tavern. Its neon sign blinking five-cent steak dinners, and I knew that's where I'd find her. The wood door to the tavern was painted black and had a small circle of dingy glass. Looking through it,

I could see the interior. It was dimly lit and narrow. A bar stretched along one side of the room. A platinum blond woman was pulling beer for a sailor. Small tables were clustered on the open floor. A couple of men sat huddled at the table closest to the door. They hunched over their drinks and turned their collars up to the rest of the room. They looked to be together for no other reason than to be alone with their beer. At another table sat two couples. The women wore dresses with bright floral prints and plunging necklines that revealed their broad and powdered breasts. The men wore dark suits and dangled their arms around the women's shoulders.

In the middle of all of that was Rosie. Without even seeing the empty glasses in front of her, I could tell she had been drinking. Could tell because she sat in the same slouch our father did on the nights he came in from the fishing boat. Her chair was at a right angle to the table where her elbow rested. Her hand wrapped around an empty glass. She leaned back. Her head tilted, her eyes half-closed. Her knees spread lazily in front of her. Two of the sailors sat at the table with her. They were busy flipping a coin. It sailed up into the air, was caught and flipped onto one of the sailor's sleeves. He threw his head back and laughed. The other grabbed the coin from his forearm and began rolling it back and forth between his fingers. Then the third sailor appeared carrying three more beers. He slid the glasses onto the table and nudged Rosie's shoe. She sprang upright. Her face was puffy, shapeless, but still so like a cherub. He put the full glass in front of her and patted her on the head. He ambled back to the bar for his own drinks. When he lurched back toward the table, I could see his face clearly through the smeared glass. His eyes were narrow and his grin sloped in a way I didn't like.

I pushed open the door and marched over to the table. The two sailors sitting at the table stopped talking and their eyes drifted up toward me. Rosie tilted her head. Her face

relaxed into a smile of recognition. The third sailor set his drinks on the table. He noticed me standing there. He arched his eyebrows then his mouth curled into a grin. At that moment, more than any other in my life, I felt I had a purpose, and it was to wipe that ugly leer off his face.

My skates tugged at my shoulder. I took them by the laces, swung them with all the force I could muster, and clocked him square in the nose. His head popped back and the momentum knocked him down into his chair. His face seemed flattened but there was no visible mark from the blow. He looked at me again, stunned.

"That's my sister, you son of a bitch," I said.

Then the blood started. Just a single drop. A bright red spot bloomed on his white trousers. He touched it with his index finger, put both hands to his nose. When he drew his hands away, they were covered with blood.

Rosie blinked, unable to comprehend what just happened. All those emotions that she had practiced in front of a mirror abandoned her. Her face went slack and her mouth dropped open. If I had waited one more second, I think she might have started to howl. I grabbed her by the arm and dragged her toward the door. Outside, the cold night air knocked some of the stupor out of her. For a moment, she was running beside me. We made it a block from the tavern when she stumbled and skidded onto the cement sidewalk. I looked back expecting to see the sailors right behind us. I tugged at her elbow but she just knelt there staring at the heels of her hands. Her shoulders started to shake. I thought she was crying, so I knelt down next to her. When she turned her face toward me, she was laughing. A little giggle that shook her whole body and brought tears to her eyes. She put both hands on my cheeks and pulled my face close to hers. I could feel the grit from the pavement embedded in her palms and her breath was sour.

"Why you worry so?" she said.

She was right. From the time I could remember, worry had covered every inch of my life. Worry about where I would call home. Worry that Grandma and Grandpa would vanish from my life. Worry that Thelma wouldn't like me. That Mama would put me out on the street. That no boy would think I was pretty enough as long as I was standing next to Rosie. Irrational worries that plagued my every moment, but that life had confirmed for me over and over. And I worried at that moment because right as rain I knew that this would lead to no good.

For the most part, I could have predicted how the rest of our adventure would turn out. The usual cop would find us wandering toward Mama's apartment downtown. Filthy and shivering from walking the twelve miles to Pike Street. Rosie had left her skates in the Five Spot Tavern and blubbered to him like a baby, begging him to drive us back there to get them. Just like that, she placed us at the scene. He listened, took notes in his little pad. Even then, I knew he wasn't a bad guy. He gave us each a blanket and some hot coffee. But what I couldn't imagine at that time was that he wouldn't take us home or even put us on a bus. He'd take us to the police station. I'd be charged with assault. Rosie just general delinquency. I couldn't possibly have imagined that morning a week later in family court when Thelma stood up and shouted at the judge that he should send these girls home so that they could face the music. Mama sitting next to her, stone-faced. Grandpa shaking his head and staring at the floor. The judge just waited for Thelma to stop shouting, then told her to sit down. Told her that it was obvious that she couldn't control herself, let alone Rosie and me. Told her that she better think about the two children that she still had at home unless she wanted to lose them too. Even then, I wondered if he would have talked to Daddy that way. But Daddy wasn't there. He was still out on a boat. I'm not even sure that he knew he was losing custody.

Thelma did her best by us, but she was smart enough to know when she was beaten. She sat down and listened like the rest of us. The judge cracked his gavel and said that we would hereafter be wards of the state and that until we turned eighteen we would reside at the Good Sheppard Home for Wayward Girls.

Maybe if I'd have known all that I wouldn't have started laughing with Rosie as we scraped ourselves up off the sidewalk and ran past the rollerdome. Full of people living carefree. The place where all my dreams resided. Bright and glorious.

2. The Side Man

My father wiped his hands on his apron. He checked his fingers and nails making sure they were clean before he pulled the apron string over his head and hung it on its hook. He buttoned the collar of his shirt, took a small folded comb from his pocket and brushed the bangs from his forehead. He folded the comb, stowed it away, and took his place next to his father.

Moments before, this could have been any day at Carnation Meats. The open-air market. Brightly lit and noisy. Whole chickens strung up by their feet above the counter. Signs advertising pig hocks and beef liver. My great-uncles Bill and Bud in the back arguing in German, slicing slabs of meat and arranging them on metal trays. My grandfather, wrapping an order in paper and handing it across the counter to a customer. A woman probably, with a child or two in tow. One of the children bends down to poke at the drain in the cement floor. Her pinky fits through the narrow opening. She looks up to find her mother gone and runs off down the market. A near collision with my father's cousins. It must have been a Saturday. They're not dressed for work. They're wearing coats and sweaters. They've come in from the street. They usually use the back entrance, a carcass slung over their shoulder delivered fresh from the slaughterhouse in Maple Valley. And there's Uncle Eddie with his wire glasses pinching the bridge of his nose.

It was time. The commotion stopped. The seven of them assembled behind the counter unsure of where to look but knowing exactly where to stand. My grandfather, as proprietor, in the center of the line. The corners of his mouth turned downward, forcing his lower lip out. His arm resting on top of the display case. In any other man this might have appeared casual. Dad standing next to him in the place left open when his older brother Joe

was killed in a training accident. The others arranging themselves by parent and age. Great-Uncle Bill had refused to remove his apron. He lay down his knife and stood to the far left of the counter. Irritated at the time taken from work, self-conscious, he hitched his thumbs through the belt of the apron. I could see that the white cloth stretched across his belly was mottled with dark stains.

It was 1943. I know that I couldn't possibly have been there because it was three years before I was born. Nevertheless, I can see those beefy, thick-lipped men shuffling around. Uncomfortable with their picture being taken. I can't see the cameraman. In my memory of this event, I am standing directly in front of the counter where he must have been. A place where I have actually stood hundreds of times. And my father staring at me with his clear blue eyes. Staring at me like he resents the world.

That photograph hung on the wall of my grandmother's living room in her house in Columbia City. Central to the Sunday afternoons of my childhood, it stared down at me when I played Chinese Checkers on the floor with my cousin Lorilie. There was something about that photograph that fascinated me. At first, I remember being terrified by it. All those bird carcasses. I'm not sure how old I was when I realized that those stern men in the picture were all sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table playing cards, drinking Rainier out of cans and smoking Lucky Strikes while Lorilie and I played checkers. They were a good fifteen years older than in the photo. My grandfather, who had stood at attention behind the meat counter, was crippled by gout on those Sunday afternoons. When he would shuffle to get more beer from the garage, he wore his slippers with the sides cut out because proper shoes pinched his feet. The cousins would smoke one cigarette after another, crushing butts and heaping ash in those giant glass ashtrays. My father never smoked. A filthy habit he would say. It stained

your fingernails and ruined your lungs. Just look at Uncle Eddie. He had lost his voice box to throat cancer.

They were all there. Even Great-Uncle Bill, the one with blood stains on his apron. The year Lorilie and I had been given baby dolls for Christmas, we showed them to him proudly. He raised his hands and gasped in mock terror. He insisted on calling the dolls Uga and Leigh. Every time he saw me he'd ask "how's old Uga?"

The women would sit and drink countless cups of coffee in the dining room. My grandmother, in her cat-eye glasses and floral print dress, would braise a roast now and then. Make hot potato salad with bacon drippings. My aunts would fold linen napkins matching up the corners and smoothing out the wrinkles. My mother with them. Talking endlessly about what shop had the best vegetables, the sewer backing up into my aunt's basement, the rain. Sometimes they would play dominoes and eat kuchen before setting out Grandma's rosebud china for dinner.

These were the people of my childhood. As much a part of those endless Sunday afternoons as itchy stockings were part of my church clothes. Those afternoons always felt stifling to me. Too hot. Too heavy with the smell of onions and vinegar. Never any running, no slamming doors. No hide and seek. Never an open window. Never anyone new. My parents never really broadened their circle. It was family at work and church and Sunday dinner. We'd always leave with a packet of chops for Monday. My mother said that even when times were rough a butcher's family never went hungry. I've got to say, I don't remember times ever being rough. Throughout the week it was my job to stop by Carnation Meats on my way home from school to pick up whatever cut my mother wanted for dinner.

One afternoon, my best friend Susie Schaffer walked home with me. I remember that it was raining, a fine constant mist that seemed to come from every direction. The market was

crowded. People with collars turned up and hats pulled down. People huddled under eaves. Susie and I wound our way past the stands of potatoes, carrots. Gusts of cold air kept rushing up my wool skirt, and I wished I hadn't rolled the waist band of my skirt to bring the hem up above my knees. I could feel Susie's eyes on my back. I could feel that she was afraid of losing me in that crowd. She didn't know her way around the market. Her father worked in the Sears Building in a dry office. Not here where it was wet, cold, and pungent. My father nodded to us when we reached the meat counter. Susie flashed a smile with her straight, white teeth, then peered through the glass at trussed fowl and rows of sausages. Dad wrapped up some beef liver. He wiped his hands on his apron and reached into the pickle barrel. When he held out a shiny dill dripping with brine, Susie just stood there staring with her mouth hanging open. Dad looked to me. I took Susie's hand and pulled her toward the street.

Later, Susie and I sat cross-legged on the carpet of my parents' rumpus room. She kept shaking her head and saying, "What was that nasty thing?" She was giggling with her hand in front of her mouth.

"A pickle," I said. I didn't tell her they cost a quarter each, and it was a big treat to have one. Pickles were my favorite. Instead I said, "What did you think it was?"

Susie was laughing so hard she couldn't speak. She rolled onto her back, pounded the carpet with her fists, and gasped for air. "A pig's penis," she said finally. "Some people eat those things, don't they?"

Susie was always saying things like this. She liked to shock. I think it made her feel daring. I know it made me feel daring. Just to have her as a friend felt like I was pushing some sort of boundary. She was always mimicking how Sister Marie Annette rolled her Rs or snickering at the plaster statues of the saints in the school chapel. The two of us always had

something smart aleck to say. It made me feel better. As if I knew something that others didn't.

But at that moment, it irritated me. That silly girl rolling around on my parents' carpet wasn't talking about a statue or making fun of one of the teachers at school. She was making fun of my father. But I couldn't help but see what she saw. That wet, shriveled cucumber in my father's hands. I felt my mouth opening and closing, forcing laughter out. I felt shame. I felt a softness and a sinking fear in the deepest parts of my body. Not my spiritual body that Sister Rosemarie was always going on and on about. My physical body. The skin on my belly that the wool of my skirt brushed against when I rolled the waistband. The relief that the flesh on my thighs felt when I pulled those itchy stockings off. Flesh. That was the word that was forcing its way to the front of my mind, and I could see a headless, pig carcass hanging from a giant hook. I could see one of my uncles lob off of a loin or some ribs or a rump roast. Flesh. My flesh. Animal flesh. It was all mixed together in that moment. Then I thought of my father and how particular he was about his hands. How he would sit at the kitchen table after work and trim and clean his nails. He'd rhythmically massage the muscles of his cheeks and jaw with his long, fine fingers. I knew Susie Schaffer was foolish and wrong. "Pork" I said. "Not pig. You never call the meat by its animal name." Susie stopped gasping for air and sat up, her big, doe eyes blinking at me brightly. I said, "It's pickled pork penis." That sent us both off again. Shrieking and laughing until my mother opened the basement door and told us to settle down or Susie would have to go home. All the while I felt furious at my father. Not about the pickle. Furious that he worked in a market. That we ate liver for dinner. That he played cards and drank beer. That he hadn't been killed in the war. That he sent me to a parochial school where I could be laughed at by girls like Susie Schaffer.

It was 1991 when finally I decided to buy a house. A rambler built in the late 60s on a hillside in West Seattle. My real estate agent, April, told me that it was owned by a retired, Norwegian man. "Pristine" was the word she used. It had a completely remodeled kitchen with stainless steel appliances and granite counters. The dining room opened onto a cedar deck. Looking out across the tops of Madronas that clung to the hillside, I would have an uninterrupted view of the ferry dock and Puget Sound. When she drove me to the house for the first time, she said that it was a little more than what I wanted to spend, but really, it was just too good to ignore. On the first walk through, my heels rang against the hardwood floors. Sound echoed in the empty rooms. I started to fill them with my new life. Picture myself and my children there. I took my parents along for the second viewing. My mother stood in the kitchen, clutching her purse. My father stomped through the rooms, turning on faucets and tapping on walls. He asked April the listing price. She told him. "Not worth it," he said and walked out to the car to wait. April raised her eyebrows but didn't say a thing.

It was times like these that I wished I could manage my feelings about my father. Part of me wanted to stand with April and laugh at the naïve old man who knew nothing about the housing market. When was the last time he bought a house? 1950? But the part of me that couldn't laugh knew that what I wanted, just once, was for him to acknowledge that I had done something.

To be fair, he had never given me a hard time about my divorce. He'd never said a word when Robert left me. I was grateful for that. I was grateful for a lot of other things, too. My parents had sent me to the University of Washington when a lot of my classmates from Holy Names were married right out of high school. Of course, I dropped out after a year to get married myself. My father had been furious when I got a job as a secretary to support my

husband while he finished college. And law school. That's when Robert left me. Ran off with his secretary. Told me that he just had to follow his heart. I thought about his blond, twenty-two-year-old secretary and told him that I thought he was following something else. But to be honest, I didn't really feel betrayed until that day he pulled up in his rust colored Cadillac. He'd brought the final divorce papers for me to sign. I remember that I was milky and exhausted. I had moved into a tiny apartment. Joined the rank and file of single moms. Joey, our son, two years old and obsessed with balls, was up the street at my parents' house. Our daughter, Cecelia, was four months old. She was soft and silent. Wrapped in several layers of flannel blankets, she was asleep in the corner of the front room. I signed the papers and Robert asked me if I wanted to have sex before he left. That's the way he put it. Matter-of-fact. "Do you want to have sex before I go?" I stared at him and his bushy beard. Appalled is not the right word. Disgust maybe. Fear.

As I look at it now, what scared me most was how flimsy it all had been, the life I thought I had. After Robert left that day, I sat looking at laundry spilling out of baskets, at Cecelia still asleep in the basinet, and it occurred to me that I'd just been pretending. For ten years I'd been pretending to be a wife. It was like I'd been playacting. Ironing handkerchiefs and fixing recipes out of the Betty Crocker Cookbook. I had thought those things mattered. And even before that, maybe I was playacting at being a good daughter. Going to school, earning good grades, attending mass. I thought these things mattered. Would make people love me. They didn't. They just left me empty and boring, like millions of other women. Thirty. Alone with two children. Living a block from the house where I grew up. I hadn't strayed far from that stifling circle of my childhood. So, I sat on the floor and forced myself to fold undershirts and cloth diapers. To fold up those feelings, that life, that person I had been and tuck them away in a drawer to deal with later.

Once I had finished with that, I went back to school. I became one of the few women to earn an electrical engineering degree at the University of Washington in the early 80s. I swallowed my failure every time Robert pulled up to take the kids for the weekend. Every time I thanked my parents for watching the kids while I was off at school.

Outside the house for sale, my father leaned against April's SUV and stared at the gravel in the driveway. "Who are you trying to impress?" he said. The answer was so obvious I didn't think I needed to say "you." I just looked at him. His hunched shoulders seemed to me a testament to a rigid world where people stayed in their place. Not me, I thought. Not this time.

Yes, the house was too expensive, but I told myself that I deserved it. I was being groomed to be one of the first female vice-presidents at Boeing. This was the kind of house I was supposed to live in.

I signed the papers, and we moved in the first of March. When we left the apartment, I drove the U-Haul straight to the second-hand store and had them unload all of the furniture. I would have had them take all of the kids' clothes and personal belongings too, but my daughter couldn't part with those stuffed animals and my son had his sweatpants and all of his basketball trophies. Everything that was mine, I gave to Good Will. Much in my life had come to seem like so much junk. So I bought all new furniture for that house. I wanted a clean break between my old life and my new. I wanted to sit on a sleek, black leather couch after work and drink a glass of chardonnay.

One Tuesday evening, in those first few weeks in the house, Cecelia told me that she had been assigned a living history project. She was supposed to interview an older relative

about a significant event. My daughter had just turned thirteen and was meticulous, eager to please, and overly anxious about her grades. Sometimes I worried about her being too focused on what others expected. Early on in her schooling, she had stopped asking me for help, especially with math or science. Her toothy grin could so quickly turn into a scowl as she slammed a book closed and flipped her sandy brown ponytail at me. With her, I learned that I had to be cautious. To feel my way through our relationship. She yearned for praise and could never be teased. She was determined but quick in her frustration. A misplaced word or gesture of unwanted help would result in an impatient slap or shove. A physical striking out followed by a verbal accusation. With Cecelia, everything was my fault. So unlike her brother, Joey, who was fifteen and seemed to saunter through life as though he were weaving his way down the court headed for a slam-dunk. With Cecelia, none of my tricks worked, I had to learn mothering all over again.

That evening, she sat on one of the stools at the breakfast bar in our new kitchen, and I unpacked the Chinese take-out.

"I could talk to Grandpa," she said.

"Mongolian Beef?" I said opening up a carton. She held out her plate. I plunged a serving spoon into the brown gravy and set the container down in front of her.

"Grandad's not a real talker you know. Is Joey here?" Cecelia shook her head and scooped out food. I put one of the plates back in the cupboard.

"You're wrong you know," she said. "He tells me things."

"Who does?"

"Grandad."

"What kinds of things?"

Cecelia piled steamed rice into a mound on her plate. She glanced at me, then looked back at her food. "I don't know. Stuff about himself."

The idea that my dad talked to Cecelia wasn't all that surprising I guess. She'd spent every afternoon of her childhood at my parents' house. But I wondered what kind of stuff he had to say about himself. I was sure I could tell her everything important about that man. He was the son of German immigrants. Second oldest of seven children. He quit school before he finished the eighth grade. When his older brother Joe joined the army, Dad took his place at the meat counter. Joe was killed in a training exercise before even being shipped overseas. Dad joined the navy in 1944 and was sent to the Pacific. He survived. He married my mother, and I was born in 1948. After that, he worked at the family butcher shop. He didn't travel. Didn't read. The only book he ever bought in his life was the A volume of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. It was in the dollar bin of the bookstore he passed on his way to the bus stop. I never saw him reading it. Occasionally, he'd flip through it and look at the glossy pictures. But he had no real interests to speak of if you didn't count watching baseball and gameshows on TV. *Truth or Consequences*. Card playing, I guess. But both his parents and his uncles were gone. His brothers and sister lived in Seattle. Mom at least had the church, but after he retired, and the family sold the market, Dad didn't really seem to do anything. I suppose he could tell Cecelia about the war. That was significant. But he never talked about it. The idea of his revealing personal details about himself to a twelve-year-old girl seemed completely out of character.

That Thursday I parked on the street above my parents' house in West Seattle. Like many in the neighborhood, the lot was cut into the side of a hill. It was raining, and I didn't want to walk down the steps and across the lawn to get to the front door. I didn't want a cup of instant coffee or a piece of my mother's pound cake with jam. I could see Mom sitting at

the kitchen table. I honked the horn and waited in the car. She glanced up and waved. Ten minutes later, Cecelia bounded out of the house and up the cement steps to the street. She carried a small cardboard box. She hunched her shoulders over to protect it from the rain. She slid into the passenger seat and balanced the box on her knees.

"How'd it go?" I said.

"1941 was an amazing year!" she said. "Ted Williams hit .401 on the last day of the season. Joe DiMaggio had a fifty-six-game hitting streak. If he had hit in just one more game, he would have had a huge contract from Heinz. You know—the ketchup people."

So Dad was telling her about baseball. Nothing important. I felt relieved. Why? The answer was clear—jealousy. I knew my parents watching the kids all those years had saved me a lot of money in daycare, but I had also liked to think I'd given them the pleasure of knowing their grandchildren. I was fulfilling some sort of duty. But I had to admit that Cecelia's relationship with my father had gone beyond that. If it had been Joey, I don't think I would have noticed—that would have seemed natural. My father getting a chance to bond with a boy—the son he never had. But my father never played sports, only watched them on TV. It had been Robert who had taught Joey how to throw. How to shoot baskets. I'd always told myself that the reason I wasn't close to my father was because he had wanted a son. Though he never said this. He never said much of anything. It was just his way, I told myself. Silent and stern. Sitting at the table paring his fingernails. But even before Cecelia could talk, my father favored her. Held her and fed her. When I picked the kids up after my classes, I would find Cecelia asleep in my Dad's lap. The TV blaring. Then when she started to talk, I'd find her sitting on the floor next to his chair, offering an opinion about whatever show was on. Some of her first words were "Uh Oh Spaghettio!" My father beamed when she said it. Which irritated me more than I'd care to admit.

Two evenings later, I was unpacking some glasses. I rinsed each one in soapy water, then clean water before drying it with a towel and putting it in the cupboard. I heard a warped sound followed by a screech come from down the hall. When I pushed open the bedroom door, Cecelia was standing in front of my new stereo system.

"How do you make this thing work?" she said.

"What are you trying to play?"

"This record Grandad gave me."

"Is it an LP or a 45?"

She gave me a blank look and moved out of the way. On the turntable was a record like none other I had ever seen, thick and waxy. I bent down so that I could read the label. Bluebird Records, Joltin' Joe DiMaggio, arrangement by Les Brown, music and lyrics by Ben Homer and Alan Courtney.

"Is this a 78? Did Grandad give it to you?" I said. "You can't play it on this turntable."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you can't." I looked at my daughter. Red splotches were forming on her cheeks and neck. "Honey, this turntable only plays two speeds, 45 and 33."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It does if you know anything about records"

"This is impossible. You have to make it work. This is the multi-media part of my presentation." I knew that there was no way I could win here. She said, "I'll lose twenty points without it."

I wracked my brain for some other pop reference of DiMaggio. Mr. Coffee. Simon and Garfunkel—Mrs. Robinson. I flipped through my record albums until I found a Best Of and pulled it out. "Here," I said.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"It's a song about Joe DiMaggio. You can use it for your multi-media part."

"Who cares about Joe DiMaggio? What's it got to do with Grandad?"

I picked up the 78. "What's this got to do with Grandad?"

"Careful with that!" she said taking the 78 from my hand and sliding it carefully into its paper sleeve. She then put it in a cardboard cover and folded the lid closed, carefully. "This is the only recording of Grandad playing with a big band." Her tone was self-assured, important. I hated to tell her she had misunderstood.

"Wrong?" she said. "I'm not wrong." She grabbed a pile of notecards from my bed and flung them towards my hand. I didn't get them in time. They scattered on the floor. Both Cecilia and I scrambled after them.

"Cecelia, my father never played an instrument in his life let alone for a big band."

"He did, too. I have the sheet music to prove it." She arranged the cards in order and thrust them into my hand. The first was titled "Historical Background" and listed facts about bandleader Les Brown, vocalist Doris Day, and ballplayer Joe DiMaggio. All of these names were familiar, but they had nothing to do with Dad. The second card, "Grandad's Tragically Brief Career" detailed the audition in May 1941, summer in New York broadcasting seven times a week, recording "Joltin'Joe." *Play music here.* Then "The Untimely but Romantic End." Fall in Chicago at the renowned Black Hawk. Older brother Joe's untimely death. Joined the navy. Sold the trumpet to buy an engagement ring for Grandma.

I was speechless. Some of this was true, but how to explain the discrepancies to Cecelia, to myself. Friends had told me about their experience with parents suffering from dementia. Their stories involved lapses in memory not fabrication.

The next morning, I drove to my parents' house. There it was—the tiered rockery—forty-year-old azaleas struggling against a fungus—the manicured patch of grass we called a front lawn. The cement steps with the wrought-iron handrail. The path that led to the front door. The little crackerbox where I spent my childhood. When I knocked, nobody answered.

Nevertheless, I opened the front door and called out, "Anybody home?" I thought they must be there. I could see the car parked on the strip behind the house. I could hear the blare of the TV coming from downstairs. *The Price is Right.*

The door to the basement stairs opened and my mother came up, wearing a faded, terry-cloth robe and slippers. She was carrying a basket of unfolded laundry. "Patty," she said.

"Hi, Mom," I said.

She set the laundry basket down on the couch. She pulled the top of her robe closed clasping it close to her neck. Strings of cloth had come loose and were dangling, weighted down by balls of lint. Here and there, patches had worn so thin that I could see the floral pattern of her nightgown underneath. I tried to remember whether I had given her a new robe for Christmas or her birthday. "We weren't expecting you," she said.

I was going to say that I thought I'd just stop by on my way to work, but that sounded ludicrous, even to me. "Cecelia left a homework assignment here the other night," I said. "She asked me to pick it up and drop it at school this morning."

"Not her report on your dad," she said.

"No," I said. I sat down on a chair. "Do you know what that was about?"

My mother sat down on the couch next to the laundry and started folding. Making precise creases and smoothing out wrinkles. Making a neat stack against the arm of the couch.

"Dad told Cecelia that he was a musician in a big band."

"Yes," she said. She reached into the laundry basket and took out a pair of my dad's socks. She made sure they matched, then looped the top of one over the other and set them on the couch next to her. "Is something wrong, Patty?" She started to dig through the basket, looking for another pair.

"It's nonsense," I said.

"What's nonsense?" she said, still digging.

"Dad was never a musician."

"Oh Patty. You're the one who's talking nonsense." She stopped looking for socks. She looked at me and smiled, sweetly. "Of course he was." She told me Les Brown's band toured the West Coast in 1941. A band member named Marty Gladstone took sick when they reached Seattle. They held open auditions for second trumpet player. Her hands fluttered as she spoke. She seemed joyful, young. She told me Dad lied about his age. He joined the band for the summer. Played in Armonk, New York and in Chicago. But then Joe was killed.

"Why did you keep this a secret?" I said.

"Secret? There are no secrets in this family. Walt Johnson played 'Happy Birthday' to you when you turned four. Don't you remember?" She leaned over to the side table and opened the front panel. She pulled out a brown leather binder. My baby book, she called it, but it was really just a binder of photos. She opened it across her lap and pointed to a photo. There I was in a frock. Patent leather shoes with anklets. My hair set in perfect ringlets. Looking straight at the camera and smiling. I was in my parents' basement leaning on the knees of a man I didn't recognize. He was young, tall, thin. His black hair was slicked back,

and he wore black horn-rimmed glasses. A panama shirt. He was looking at Dad who was leaning forward in an easy chair. Dad was laughing. Wearing a panama shirt too. Animated. The camera had caught him in motion. His hands were blurred. He was reaching toward me. Gesturing. Trying to get me to do something.

I had seen this photo before, of course. I think I even recognized Walt. But that's the tricky part. What I mean is that I knew this was a man named Walt, but I had no memory of him. Not like Uncle Bill who I could connect words to. Sounds. Smells. Memories of Sunday afternoons. Maybe when I had looked at this photo before I had thought this Walt was part of the family, but as I looked at him at that moment, I could recognize that he wasn't. For all I knew he could have been a vacuum cleaner salesman my parents had invited in off the street. I could see Dad knew him. In the photo, I was posing for the camera. I could hear my mother, who must have taken the picture, telling me to smile. But Dad was caught up in a moment of camaraderie. He looked happy. Relaxed in a way I found unfamiliar.

Mom pointed at the photo. "You'd been dancing," she said. "It was so funny. Walt had played 'Happy Birthday' on his clarinet and you just started to dancing, so he just kept playing. Your dad was calling you Curly Top and your little legs were flying this way and that."

"I don't remember," I said. I looked at the photo again. There was the clarinet. I hadn't noticed it at first. Walt was holding the instrument between his knees. It was black, and in the photo, it blended into the darkness of his slacks. Unnoticeable. I felt a twinge of fear. Like I missed something vital.

"It's no surprise you don't remember. You were young. When we were first married, your dad kept in touch with people. Musicians were always coming through Seattle. But then you were born, and we quit going to the clubs. Dad was too tired and had to get up so early

for work. Walt still called sometimes. But then that stopped, too." Mom folded her hand on her lap. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Dad played trumpet?"

She nodded. "He was good. He loved it."

"But I don't remember him ever playing."

"He sold his trumpet."

"Couldn't he have bought another one?"

"I told him to. When he got back from the war. It just seemed like there was always something we needed. Then he just didn't seem to want to anymore."

Downstairs, my father was sleeping in his recliner. I can't remember a time I didn't have trouble talking to my dad. My awkwardness just seemed to fuel his indifference. There were rare times, if I sat at the kitchen table with him drinking cheap beer, that he'd tell me snippets about his childhood. About chasing the ice truck. Picking up chips of ice and brushing off the sawdust before popping it into his mouth. About pulling tar out of the pavement and chewing it like gum. To me all of his stories seemed interlaced with want. With deprivation. But to him, I think they were just moments from his childhood. Everyday occurrences not worth talking about let alone thinking about.

I turned off the TV. He sat up and looked at me, his blue eyes faded and runny. "I didn't know," I said.

"Know what?" he said.

"That you were a musician."

"Oh, that was nothing." He rocked the recliner forward, propped his elbows on the armrests, and brought his hands together. His fingers were still long and thin, but his nails

were thick and cracked. Yellowed with time. He sniffed, cleared his throat, then he looked up at me again.

"You played with a famous band leader. You made a recording"

He rocked back in his chair. His face broke into a grin. "Did you hear it?"

"No. It's a 78. It won't play on a modern turntable"

"Oh," he said. "I never tried."

"But you've kept it all this time."

He shrugged. He stood up and shuffled over to the bookshelf. There next to his Encyclopedia was an old cigar box. I recognized it. When I was a child, it had been one of those things I was drawn to, the pattern and gold lettering. But it was always just out of my reach. He retrieved the box and walked back to his chair. He handed me a newspaper clipping. When he realized that I was going to read it, he dug under the train tickets and theatre bills and pulled out a black and white photograph. It was matted in a cardboard frame and stamped with studio's name. He handed it to me.

There was an entire band—one row seated in front, a second standing behind. Most of them held their horns, but the larger instruments, the tuba and the bass, were displayed in the foreground. There, in the back row, with his hair slicked back, was a grinning kid holding a trumpet. He was wearing a tuxedo and was in love with the world.

I tried to make that scene come to life. Tried to imagine my father in that moment. Not my father—this young man in the photo. But I just couldn't. I couldn't make it make sense. In that moment, I could see my father as three people. There was the young man with dreams of being more than he was. The man who escaped, if just for a summer, what some might call his destiny. That place that had been made for him by birth and circumstance. Then there was the man that I'd invented as my father. The unbending German who had

never strayed. Who asked nothing more from life than an afternoon of cards and a bellyful of beer. And then there was this old man sitting in front of me. Folding up his momentos and placing them carefully in a cigar box. Making order out of train tickets and diner bills. Things I would have thrown away without a second thought if I found them after he died. For a moment, it was if my mind couldn't make sense of what I saw. As if I were looking at an image that I couldn't recognize. Couldn't name. Had no words for. Certainly not my father.

"How come you never talk about this?"

"You never asked," he said. He ran his hand across his hair and stared out the window. His lower lip jutted out and he chewed on something imaginary. "You were always so smart."

I sat in the chair next to my father and stared out the window. In the silence, we watched as the morning brightened. Smart, I thought. Yes, I was the girl who completed all her assignments. Who excelled. Who went beyond what was expected. The one who refused to accept failure. The one who overcame obstacles. I was the accomplished one. The one who should be proud. I was smart. But here was something I had missed. Something I could not recognize. Here was my father. Not the figure, but a man, and I knew we would never talk about this again, that this was not a moment we would share, that we wouldn't laugh, wouldn't dance, wouldn't celebrate.

3. TAKEN FOR A RIDE

Rosemarie tossed a rock into the gravel alley. The rooster froze and looked for the source of the noise. He took a deliberate strut in front of the coop. Breast puffed. With a sudden jerk, he pecked at the dirt for a stray seed. He hadn't seen us yet. We were hidden behind Grandpa's rose bushes. The waxy leaves stretched in a solid green row the length of the yard behind the house. The bushes were speckled with buds that within the week would open into a spectacular display of pink tea roses. Grandpa's pride. Rosemarie tossed another stone. She was game for anything.

She winked and whispered, "You chicken?" A year younger than me, at eight years old, she knew exactly what to say to get me to do what she wanted. I hated this game. Her game. She claimed that old rooster had met his match in us. But I could never outrun that nasty old thing with its sharp beak. So here I was. "On the count of four," she said.

I nodded. We chanted in unison. "One for the money. Two for the show. Three to get ready. And four to go."

We made a run for it. Ahead of me, Rosemarie stumbled on a clump of grass. The rooster's black bead of an eye caught mine. I stopped to help Rosemarie to her feet. She brushed off my hand and ordered me to "run." I did. My fastest. She quickly caught me. So did that cock-sure old rooster. He raced across the yard and tore the hem of my skirt. Rosemarie shrieked and threw open the kitchen door. I made it up the steps. The rooster didn't follow, but I slammed the door hard. The force shook the window of the door out of its casing. The glass fell to the floor and shattered. Grandma stopped peeling potatoes at the sink. She turned ash-white with fury.

I froze and waited for my fate.

"Come on," Rosmarie said. She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward our room. We dove under our bed. She couldn't stop giggling. Grandma stomped from the kitchen, through the hall, to our bedroom.

"Hannah! Rosemarie! You come out of there!"

Rosemarie buried her face in my shoulder so that Grandma couldn't hear her laughter. I could feel her teeth against my collar bone. Grandma sat on the bed and the spring frame creaked and sagged above our heads. Her bare arm plunged down between the mattress and the wall—groped blindly and couldn't find us. The muscle of her upper arm had gone slack with age and wobbled; the skin bunched and wrinkled on her straightened elbow. The hand was raw from scrubbing potatoes under cold water. Rosemarie pushed me just out of its reach. Grandma lowered herself to the floor. We scrambled back toward the wall. Her face appeared beneath the quilt. She spit a stray hair from her mouth. She was not laughing. She was leaning on one elbow and reaching her other arm toward us. Unable to get a hold, she pounded the floor and said, "You come out of there, I say."

Rosemarie gasped for breath.

Grandma squawked like a bellows releasing air. She pushed herself up from the floor, disappeared, and returned with the broom. Jabbing it underneath the bed, she tried to sweep us out. We just laughed and laughed. She beat the mattress with her fist then picked up the broom handle again. "You just wait 'til Grandpa gets home."

Rosemarie stopped laughing. "No, Grandma, no," she said. "He'll beat us with the wooden spoon." It had only happened once. The time that Rosemarie had gone through the house and cut all of the lamp cords with Grandma's sewing scissors, Grandpa beat her bottom until the spoon handle snapped.

The broom handle stopped. Rosemarie winked at me. Our odds were good. The mattress creaked under Grandma's weight as she pushed herself up from the floor. We watched her unlaced boots tap one, two, three. She walked toward the kitchen. Rosemarie held up her hand. We waited and listened. We heard the ring of the telephone, a muffled conversation, the scrape of broken glass, the crash into the waste bin, then nothing. This was too much. Rosemarie pushed herself with her arms. Slid on her belly out from under the bed. I followed.

From the hallway, we peeked into the kitchen. Her iron-grey hair smooth, her clothes straight, Grandma sat at the table embroidering a flour sack dishtowel. Rosemarie let go of my hand and tiptoed to Grandma. She squeezed between the chair and the kitchen table and wiggled her way onto Grandma's lap. I crept close and watched over Grandma's shoulder. The needle disappeared into the fabric then poked its sharp point back through leaving behind a trail of blue thread. Grandma smoothed the towel so that we could see the picture better. Like all her dishtowels, this one featured a chicken dressed in lady's clothing. This lady chicken was pinning laundry to a clothesline. Grandma was just finishing the words that read, "Monday" across the top. Beneath the picture, she had already embroidered the words "Washing Day." She had a different towel embroidered in a different color with a different task for each day of the week.

"Martin will be over in a few minutes to replace the glass," she said. "I want you girls to keep out of his way." She ran the needle underneath the stitching on the back of the towel and snipped the thread. The afternoon sun shone through the window and caught glints of gold in Rosemarie's auburn hair.

"Grandpa oughta kill that rooster," she said. "Then we could watch him dance around in the yard with his head off."

"Why do you girls torture that poor bird?" Grandma said.

"Because he's a mean old pecker."

"Rosemarie…"

"What?" she asked.

"You need to watch your mouth."

"Why?"

"Cause it's going to get you in to more trouble than it's worth some day." She petted Rosemarie's head. "That old bird wouldn't be good to eat anyway—too stringy."

"Useless," Rosemarie said as though that rooster was so mean he had just robbed us of a decent meal. "Grandpa should kill him anyway."

"Well he's not going to." Grandma pushed Rosemarie from her lap. "Now I want you two to play nice this afternoon. I don't want to hear another peep from you 'til supper."

Rosemarie mimicked, "Not a peep," and stretched up to give Grandma a swift peck on the cheek.

"Hannah, you make sure this scamp don't get up to no good."

I nodded and noticed that any punishment had been forgotten.

Saturday mornings were Grandpa's time to watch us. He was a man of routine. Twenty minutes after Grandma left for meeting down at the Kingdom Hall, he would march us up to Lowry's Tavern, order a beer for himself and ginger ales for Rosemarie and me. I loved Lowry's with its clean swept plank floors, the constant shuffle of boots, and men who smelled faintly of pipe smoke. Rosemarie and I sat sipping our soft drinks and played a game of checkers. We hoped to pick up some morsel of news. Most of the time, adult talk was

boring. Engines and seed. But an occasional scrap would fall, and we would snatch it up. Swallow it whole.

That day, we were lucky.

"Did you hear?" Ollie Larson said.

Grandpa swallowed his beer and set the glass down on the wooden bar. He folded his hands in his lap. "Warren Henckle," he said. I recognized that name. Warren Henckle was about thirty. I could see him rambling along Griffin Street in his worn denim overalls. His hair like straw sticking out every which way. He always seemed to be caught up in conversation with himself.

"Belt struck him square in the face," Ollie said.

"Snapped his head round in the wrong direction," Will Gottlieb said.

I imagined Hanson's Lumber mill. The constant whine of the circular saws. Dust hanging in the air. The heat of a fresh plank. One of the rubber belts failed and silenced Warren Henckle forever.

"Didn't even know what hit him," Will said.

"Lucky," Grandpa said.

"What'll happen to his wife and kids?" Ollie said.

The men shifted on their stools. Grandpa gave us a sideways glance. I jumped three of Rosemarie's checkers. She kinged me.

"Hard to say," Grandpa said.

"She must have family."

"Someone will take her in."

They all nodded. Took a sip of beer.

"Belt's a lot more dangerous than a blade," Will said. "Blade'll take off your finger, but a belt'll take off your head."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"Mill work's dangerous," Ollie said. "But not so dangerous as working in the mines. Ain't that right Hank?"

They all looked to Grandpa. He was the expert here because he had worked in the coalmines of Black Diamond. Long before I was born, the mines had shattered his knees and filled his lungs with dust. I only knew him as the street sweeper of Enumclaw. His route along Griffin and Cole was the boundary of Rosemarie's and my escapades.

"Accident in a mill might kill one person," Grandpa said. "Accident in a mine will kill 'em all." The other men nodded.

Grandpa slapped his hand flat on the bar signaling that we needed to drink up. If we followed him quiet, he would buy us each a penny candy from the counter at Jenkins's. Rosemarie always gobbled hers before we even reached the house. I liked to save mine 'til after lunch. Not because I believed it would spoil my appetite. I just enjoyed it more after lunch when Rosemarie had none.

That afternoon, my candy remained uneaten in my pocket.

Rosemarie and I had picked up a long stick. Each of us holding an end, we were busy spinning in a wide circle behind Grandpa. We turned from Cole onto Third. Grandpa stopped cold. Rosemarie dropped her end of the stick and hurled me into the brush along the side of the road. "Girls," Grandpa said. I looked up to see a ramshackle car parked in front of our house.

A man sat in the driver's seat. I could see the back of his head. He wore a hat. His left arm dangled a cigarette out the open window. His right rested on the top of the steering

wheel. He was tapping his thumb to the beat of some imaginary music. A second man leaned against the passenger door and smoked a cigarette. He wore a well-pressed, well-worn shirt. His tie was loosened. His brown jacket slung over his shoulder. He stood with his weight on his left leg. He rolled a rock back and forth under the sole of his right shoe. When he saw Grandpa, he stood at attention.

I didn't recognize him.

"Hannah." He broke into a grin. "Where's my smile?" Turning to Rosemarie he said, "You must be my Rosie. What a China doll you've become. I never seen such pretty red hair."

"Girls," Grandpa said, "get in the house." His tone told us to obey, but as we headed for the front door, we felt the pull of these strangers. We made it up the steps of the front porch. "What are you doing here?" Grandpa asked.

The man slumped a little. "Now Hank," he said. "A simple hello might be nice." His smile faltered. He looked at Rosemarie and me. "In front of the girls…Hank." Grandpa didn't budge. The man took a drag off his cigarette. "I made probation March twelfth."

"Does Constance know?"

The man scowled. "You tell me."

Grandpa looked at his boots.

The man dropped his cigarette and crushed it into the gravel. He took a step toward Grandpa. "Now Hank, there's never been no trouble between you and me." He paused. Grandpa continued to study his boots. The man said, "They're my girls. The least you could do is let me treat 'em to lunch."

At the words "my girls," Rosemarie's face lit up. "Daddy," she shouted and ran from me across the yard toward our father. His face broadened into a grin. He scooped her up and propped her on his hip, her arms around his neck, her legs dangling against his.

"I told you to get in the house," Grandpa said.

The other man opened the door, climbed out of the car, and stood to face Grandpa. His arms were crossed.

"Just a hamburger," my father said. "No harm in that." He looked a Rosemarie. "You'd like to have lunch with your daddy, wouldn't you sweetie?" Rosemarie squealed and kicked her legs. She had only been four when we came to live with Grandma and Grandpa. Sometimes when we were sent to bed without supper, I would listen to her describe the day that our parents would come to save us. Save us from the only world we knew. They're coming tomorrow, she would say in between sobs. They're going to take us to the house where we're supposed to be living, and we'll have toys and dolls and a dog. I know Mama'll let us have a dog. Daddy'll wash it in a big tin tub and when it's all clean Mama'll tie a pink bow around its neck. And it'll be mine, and it'll love me, only me. She'd nudge me with her elbow, saying but I'll let you play with it too. Don't worry Hannah, we'll all live together, and we'll all love each other. I knew she had no real memory of either of our parents. She couldn't have, because I didn't.

"Hannah," my father said. "Come say hello." I stood on the porch and looked to Grandpa. "Hannah, please." I didn't like the sound of his voice. It had a tremor. It sounded weak. Tired. My daddy was much taller and more handsome than this man. I looked to Grandpa again half hoping he would tell me to get in the house. He didn't.

"Come on, Hannah," Rosemarie said. "What are you waiting for?"

I made my way across the yard. When I reached him, he knelt to my level, Rosemarie still clinging to his neck. "That's my girl," he said. I could smell the cigarette on his breath. He reached out and took my hand. His fingernails were thick and stained yellow. I fought the urge to pull my hand away. I looked straight into his eyes. They were dark brown and searching. He had a worried look. "You remember me, don't you Hannah?" I nodded. He jerked his head toward the man standing beside the car. "You remember your Uncle Billy too, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

He laughed and looked to his brother who smiled. My father patted me on the head and stood up with Rosemarie still on his hip. "They get their manners from you, Hank."

Grandpa nodded stiffly. "Just a hamburger?" he said.

"Just lunch."

"I guess that'd be all right."

"I got a right Hank. They are my girls."

"You'll bring 'em back."

"Lickety-split. Won't even know they're gone."

Rosemarie's empty plate and my half-eaten hamburger sat on the table. Uncle Bill smoked silently, but my father laughed and told us outrageous stories about how he would take us to the circus and out on the fishing boat. Rosemarie hung on every word. When the waitress came to take our plates away, Daddy asked us if we wanted anything else. We could have anything we wanted, he said. I shook my head no, but Rosemarie said that she wanted a bowl of ice cream with chocolate sauce.

"You can't have ice cream," I said.

"Sure I can. Daddy said I could have anything I wanted." She looked at him to make sure.

Uncle Bill checked his watch, but Daddy said, "That's right. Today's a treat. Anything you want." He signaled to the waitress. "A bowl of ice cream with chocolate sauce. You sure you don't want anything Hannah?"

"No thank you."

"Suit yourself," Daddy said.

Rosemarie leaned over and whispered, "Sourpuss."

"May I use the restroom please?" I asked.

"Of course, sweetheart," the waitress answered. "It's in the back. Through that curtain."

I scrubbed the grease from my hands under cold water. I watched my reflection in the mirror and scrunched my features into my best prissy face mimicking, "Daddy said I could have anything I wanted," in a singsong voice. I was ready to be home. I knew Grandpa and Grandma would be worried that we'd been gone so long.

When I slid back onto my chair, Rosemarie was shoveling ice cream into her mouth. She avoided the bright red cherry that had topped the dessert. It swam in the chocolate. Making sure that Daddy and Uncle Bill weren't watching, she scraped every last bit of ice cream from the bowl.

"Why don't you just lick it?" I whispered.

She ignored me and picked up the cherry with her fingers. She placed it on her spoon. Then, licking her thumb and finger, she gave me a look—a look that said try and stop me. She popped it into her mouth. She opened her lips slightly and checked to make sure

that I could see the cherry, glistening and red, balanced on her tongue. Then she bit into it. She rolled her head back and fluttered her eyelids as if she were experiencing some sort of supreme satisfaction. I knew this was all a performance. I wanted to give her a swift kick in the shin and tell her enough, it was time to go home. She dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin and looked at our father who had been talking quietly with Uncle Bill.

"Daddy," she said.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"You said I could have anything I wanted right?"

"Well, honey I think you've had enough—"

"Oh, I'm not hungry anymore." Her voice was full of promise. "I just want to come home with you."

Happiness spread over my father's face like a light had been shone on him. I felt a stab of fear. I don't think that Rosemarie knew what she was suggesting. I'm sure she just wanted to please. Give him something back for the joy she'd had out of the afternoon, out of that bowl of ice cream. Maybe she was just trying to get at me. Either way, I could see she had said just the right thing. From the moment those words left her lips, she had our father wrapped around her finger.

"Well I think I'd say that sounds like a mighty fine idea." He grinned and leaned back in his chair. His eyes lost that worried look.

"Max," Bill said. "You told Hank you'd have 'em back this afternoon."

"That I did." Daddy didn't look at him. He continued to smile at Rosemarie. "But it don't make much sense does it. My girls living with their grandparents."

Bill took a quick breath. He motioned with his head and both men rose and walked over toward the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" I asked Rosmarie.

"What do you mean?" She asked in the same voice she used with Daddy. I could have slapped her.

"You know that we have to go back to Grandpa's."

"You just don't like it cause he likes me better. He thinks I look like a China Doll."

"You're gonna get us in trouble. Daddy too."

"When'd you become such a beasley?"

I bristled. This was a word that the two of us had invented for the prissiest goody-two-shoes girls in school. "I am not a beasley," I said.

"A perfect beasley."

I told her I wasn't and then she said, "Prove it."

Daddy floated back to our table. Bill shook his head and worried the felt brim of his hat with his fingers. "Well don't you think we should at least tell him you're taking the girls? Get 'em some clothes?" he said.

"No need," Daddy said.

Rosemarie smiled. I knew what she thought. She thought this meant she would be getting new store-bought clothes.

"I think you struck on a good idea Rosemarie. What about you Hannah? How'd you like to come home with me?"

"I think you should take us home," I said.

He mistook my meaning. "Then it's settled. Bellingham it is."

I didn't bother to correct him. I knew it wrong, but Rosemarie's words echoed in my head drowning out the worry for Grandma and Grandpa. Prove it, she'd said. I held my breath and did.

The stairway and hall leading to Daddy's apartment had a sharp sour smell like urine and something worse. He had one room above a tavern. Other than Daddy's bed, the only furniture was a square kitchen table with one chair that was shoved right up against the only window and a dresser with a lamp. On one wall was a sink and mirror.

Those first nights, he'd make us dinner—a slice of bread and cold beans out of a can. The constant sound of music and an occasional biting laugh drifted up from below. On the third night, Rosemarie and I were tucked soundly into the bed he had made up for us on the floor. Daddy turned off the lamp, took a seat in front of the window, and smoked a cigarette or two. When he thought we were asleep, he tiptoed to the door and joined his friends downstairs.

"You awake?" I asked.

"Yeah," Rosemarie said.

"You hungry?"

"Yeah."

I crawled out of the bed and walked over to the table. I unwrapped what was left of the loaf of bread and sawed off a slice. I returned to the bed and handed the bread to Rosemarie. She sat up, held it with both hands and nibbled.

"Don't get crumbs in the bed," I said.

She looked at me for a moment, silent, then burst into a never-ending wail. I put my arm around her shoulder and we rocked back and forth together. I wanted to say, there, there, and pat her hand, to sing "You are my sunshine," but I couldn't. If I opened my mouth, I'd start wailing too. We lay back in the bed, her head on my shoulder.

"What do you think Grandma's doing?" she asked.

"Sleepin' silly."

She snorted a little laugh. She turned over and propped herself up on her elbows. Her face was close to mine.

"Naw," she said. "She's doing the dishes. She's scrubbing plate after plate and then she's drying them with a dishtowel and then she's stacking them one after the other in the cupboard. Boop," she said and poked my nose. "Everything in its place."

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"Cause there were only two dishes tonight."

Rosemarie threw her head back on to her pillow.

"She's sitting on our bed," I said. "She's got one hand in her lap and the other on your pillow. She's wondering where we are." Rosemarie turned toward the wall, her back toward me. "She's wondering when we're coming home."

She was quiet for so long that I thought she had fallen asleep. Then she said, "I gotta pee." The toilet was down the hall. Shared by the four men who rented rooms on the second floor. To get there we would have had to leave the apartment and walk the length of the bright, smoke filled hallway.

"Can't you hold it?" I asked.

"No."

I thought for a minute and said, "Use the sink."

I dragged the chair for her to use as a stool. Rosemarie crawled up, hiked up her night shirt that was really one of Daddy's undershirts, and pulled down her underwear. She didn't look at me as she eased her bottom over the porcelain basin. The faucet didn't give her much

room. We didn't have anything to use as toilet paper so she quickly pulled up her underwear and ran back to our bed. I moved the chair back to its place by the little table and looked for something to scour the sink with. No soap. So, I just ran the hot water rinsing the sides until the smell went away.

We'd been there almost a week when she arrived. It was Friday morning. She'd driven alone all the way from San Francisco. Daddy was sitting at the table with a full ashtray, an empty cup of coffee, and the morning newspaper spread on the table. I woke up early that morning and watched as he had washed, shaved, and oiled his hair at the sink. He had put on a clean shirt. A sharp odor filled the room.

Rosemarie and I were sitting cross-legged on the floor playing with some toys that Uncle Bill had dropped by. A box of hand-me-downs. Clothes. Two rag dolls. A bag of wooden blocks. Two pairs of roller skates. Rosemarie and I had begged to go outside to try out the skates, but Daddy had refused so we made a small town out of the blocks and took our dolls on various adventures. Rosemarie's doll kicked over all the buildings of our town with her gargantuan legs. I was afraid that we were getting too loud. I looked to Daddy expecting to be hollered at, but he just stared out the window. He bit a fingernail and lit another cigarette. At that moment, his back stiffened. He sniffed and smoothed his hair. I dropped my doll and stood behind him. Resting my hands on his shoulders, I could see out the window. A black car had stopped in front of the building. A woman climbed out of the driver's seat. She wore a small black hat shaped like a teardrop. It perched at an angle on the top of her head. A single black feather swooped in a curve across her dark brown hair. The

feather fluttered in the wind. She paused to open her purse. She took out a cigarette and cupped her hands so that she could light it before she strutted into the building.

I counted the seconds it would take her to climb the stairs. Seven. Eight. Nine. There was a quick rat-a-tat-tat at the door. Daddy didn't move. Neither did I. The muscles of his shoulders tightened. Rosemarie looked wildly at the door and then at us. For just a second, I thought we were all going to stay silent and pretend that no one was home.

"Open up Max. I know you're in there." Her voice was gruff and impatient.

Daddy put a hand on top of one of mine and gave me a little pat. "Open the door for your mother."

Hearing the word mother, Rosemarie jumped to her feet and raced to the door. She turned the knob. The door flew open with such force that Rosemarie was shoved backward against the wall. My mother's mouth was a flash of red lipstick. I could feel the heat of her anger. I stepped away from Daddy and braced myself.

"I knew you'd come," Daddy said.

"Just what do you think you're doing Max?" she said.

He flinched. "Connie, I just think it's best—"

"Best," she said. She took a drag from her cigarette. "Look at you." She flicked the lipstick-stained end of her cigarette with her thumbnail and a sprinkle of ash fell to the floor. She turned to the beds, Daddy's mattress and the pile of blankets and quilts on the floor. She walked around the perimeter of the room and kicked a stray block. She glanced into the sink. "Best," she said again. Her upper lip was curled. I wanted to tell her it wasn't that bad. Instead, I watched in silence as she picked a stray piece of tobacco from her tongue. "Look at this place," she said.

Daddy slumped a little in his chair. "What do you want from me?"

She jerked her head. Her eyes widened. "I want you to leave these girls alone. Leave 'em where they belong"

"Shouldn't they know one of their parents gives a damn about them?"

She took a breath and walked to the table. She looked past Daddy out the window.

"They're my girls," Daddy said.

She took a final drag from her cigarette and bent down to crush it into the ashtray. Her face was close to his. "What makes you so cock sure?" she said under her breath.

Daddy slammed his palm down on the table. "Jesus Connie, you're a real piece of work."

A smile flickered on her lips. "Am I?"

Daddy was standing and raising his free hand to strike her. Then he caught a glimpse of Rosemarie's pale face and rigid body still pinned between the wall and door. His arm dropped to his side.

"I thought so," Mama said.

Daddy crumpled back into his seat and pressed the heels of his hands onto his closed eyelids. "You're one mean bird." he said limply. "What'd I ever do to you?" His shoulders began to shake. His voice trembled

She let out a sharp laugh. Turned to us. "Come on girls. Time to go home."

Rosemarie followed Mama obediently out into the hall, but I moved toward Daddy, wrapped my arms around his neck, and buried my face in his shoulder. The entire time, I had longed to go home, but now. He put his arm around my waist and held me tight.

"Hannah!" Mama said. "I said it's time to go."

I lifted my head. He didn't look at me. "Can we take the skates?" I asked. He put a hand on one of my cheeks and nodded.

The three us of sat on the front seat of Mama's borrowed car. Rosemarie watched her intently. She turned the rear-view-mirror so she could touch up her face. In the daylight, I could see how young she was. I guess she was an attractive woman. Her face was wide and shaped like a heart. The hair above her ears looked soft and downy. But I couldn't call her pretty. Her eyebrows were plucked, and she penciled them into dark arches. She applied new lipstick in the shape of a little bow. Her lips lost, somewhere between a pout and a smirk. She gave herself a satisfied look, readjusted the mirror, and started the engine.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," she said. "You two hungry. Mama'll stop and get you a sweetie."

Rosemarie's face brightened. "I like sweeties," she said.

"Of course you do," Mama said giving Rosemarie's knee a quick squeeze.

Just like that, she had won my sister over. In the silence that followed she glanced at me. I said nothing. Clearing her throat, she asked, "You two know any songs?"

"I do. I do," Rosemarie said. She started to sing, "Three blind mice, three blind mice."

Mama joined her, her voice high and girlish, "See how they run. See how they run."

As they reached the end of the line, Mama sang loudly drowning out Rosemarie. "They all ran after Grandpa's wife, she came after me with a carving knife. Three Nelson girls."

Rosemarie broke into gleeful laughter. "That's us. We're the Nelson girls."

"Grandma never went after us with a knife," I said.

"Just you wait," Mama said then laughed. Her laugh was harsh, guttural. She and Rosemarie continued to laugh and sing. They seemed to be having a fine time when all I

could think about was Daddy slumped alone in that room. I gave her the hardest look I could muster.

Seeing me, she stopped laughing. "What are you lookin' at saucer eyes?" she said.

Rosemarie laughed hard and jabbed an elbow into my ribs. "That's a good one. Saucer eyes."

But Mama didn't laugh. "You know Miss Hannah, the times when we're unhappy, we need to focus on making other people happy. You need to work on that if you want people to like you." She turned to me and smiled for the first time. And I saw it. Her face beamed. Something about that light frightened me. "It's like bringin' a little bit of sunshine into a room."

I turned and looked out the window.

"I guess you don't want me to like you," she said. "Suit yourself."

Her words stung, and I didn't want her to see. She and Rosemarie went back to their singsong games, and I watched the countryside roll by.

When she pulled up to the house in Enumclaw, Grandpa came out to collect us, his legs crooked and bowed. Grandma stood watching from the front porch.

I climbed out of the car and without closing the door and ran to Grandpa. I could hear Rosemarie screaming, "Take me with you Mama. I love you. Take me with you."

With Grandpa's hand in mine, I turned around in time to see Mama give her a swift sideways glance. She said, "All right sugar," and reached over to pull the passenger door closed. Rosemarie pressed her laughing face up against the window. I could see her mouth the words: "Saucer-eyes."

Grandpa was stunned.

"Hank!" Grandma said. "Where's she taking Rosemarie? Stop her!"

It only lasted for a moment, but we all stood as if lost. Grandma wringing her hands. Grandpa shuffling toward the street. Me with my mouth hanging open as though my whole life had just drifted away. Then, the car rounded the corner. Mama had only driven once around the block.

The driver's door swung open and Mama emerged, composed and laughing quietly to herself. She pulled Rosemarie from the car and pushed her toward Grandpa. All the while Rosemarie was screaming, "You need to stay, Mama! You need to stay!"

"No darling," she said. "This is no place for Mama." She patted Rosemarie, tried to sooth her, but at this point it all seemed like a cruel joke. "Don't you worry honey. Mama'll be back and take you for a ride again."

When she finally shook off Rosemarie's hand, she looked up and caught my glance. "You needn't bother to come Miss Hannah."

I looked away.

"You don't bring no sunshine into a room."

I could hear her heels on the gravel as she marched to the car without so much as a goodbye. I could hear her slam the car door. I could feel Rosemarie breeze by to wrap her arms around Grandma's waist and sob into her apron. I could breathe again as gravel spun out from under the tires and Mama sped away.

It wasn't her words that hurt. It was that the safety of home that I had longed for during the past six days was gone. From that day on, whenever I turned from Cole onto Third, I half expected to see that borrowed car gleaming in front of our house and Mama's special brand of sunshine come to light up the room.

4. The Grand Illusion

Leigh was puzzled by men. Not just Henry—all men. She had been married to one, Paul, the "love of her life." From the start, the marriage had been an open relationship and had produced one child, Natalie. It had lasted a total of three years and eight months in the early 70s and had gone badly when Paul met Barbara. He never tried to hide that he had a girlfriend on the side. Leigh confronted him. She told him that now that they had a child, she no longer felt comfortable with their arrangement. He said that she couldn't change the rules in the middle of the game.

After Paul, were others. Charlie, for instance. He was terribly handsome, good to her daughter, and an aeronautical engineer. She enjoyed that he paid for dinner and never asked her to unload his dishwasher. But she could never get over his penchant for baby-talk. After sex, she would lie in the bed and listen. The cooing and the beginning of words with a b sound just ruined it all for her. Mark had seemed promising. He worked at a bookstore and gave massage on the side. She liked that he rented a room from a female friend and preferred to sleep over at Leigh's apartment. He taught Natalie how to play chess. But then one afternoon, when Leigh was face down on his massage table, her naked bottom covered with a hand towel, her legs limber, her skin well-oiled, Mark interrupted the ambient forest sounds to explain to her that he had been abducted by aliens. This detail in and of itself would not have bothered Leigh. What she found disturbing about the story was that Mark insisted that the aliens had murdered his father. Then there was Greg. He was a long-term substitute at Natalie's middle school and had a certain allure. He wore his thick brown hair in a ponytail and rode a motorcycle. One night, when Natalie stayed over with a friend, Leigh allowed herself to go home with Greg. After they had made passionate, if only fairly satisfying love,

she had darted from his bed to his bathroom. And she wouldn't even have noticed it if not for the scented candle burning on the tank. Above his toilet hung a framed letter. Leigh squinted to read through the reflective glass. It was a letter of recommendation from one of Greg's mentor teachers describing his professional qualities in glowing terms. This is when she started calling herself unlucky in love.

Leigh was from Boston, but she lived in Seattle where she had a job in an art supply store near the University District. She started working with cut glass in the early 80s. It was decorative art that people could hang in their windows to add a splash of color to the room. It sold well while Natalie was in high school.

Around this time, Leigh started to frequent the Grand Illusion. This was a café and cinema on the north end of University Avenue. It was once a small house built over a storefront, but now, the main floor interior walls had been converted into archways. This made the café seem like a large living room with coved ceilings, a sagging horsehair couch, and a wood burning fire place. During the day, students occupied the small tables, but in the evenings the clientele was older, mostly middle-aged men. At first, Leigh thought they were all professors, but really, they came from all walks of life. They were house painters, computer programmers, sometimes math professors. It was this place that they seemed to have in common. This place and nowhere else to go. They liked Leigh and welcomed her into their conversations. They listened to her stories and laughed at her jokes. She had that staccato way of speaking of someone from New England. To make them laugh, all she had to do was say "baked potato." A favorite subject, a real crowd pleaser, was the story of a date gone bad. He invited her to play tennis, she said, and she bought a whole new outfit. White shirt. White skirt. Even new shoes. She'd played well. Avoided completely embarrassing herself. But when the game was over, he walked behind her, slapped her on the ass, and said, "Way to go,

pork chop." What did that mean, exactly? Was he calling her fat? Was this some sort of sexual advance? Who could tell these days?

They said that she was witty, and for Leigh, it felt good to be the center of attention with no alternative expectations.

One night, she shared a table with Henry. He too was an artist and often worked on his intricate, almost thumbnail-sketch-sized-ink-drawings of insects under the bright lights of a corner table. Henry was old in the conventional sense of the word. His thick hair was completely grey. While he was always neat and clean, he appeared to wear the same brown crushed velvet jacket every day, winter and summer. Describing him to one of her younger co-workers at the art supply store, Leigh once commented that the thick lenses of his glasses magnified his eyes in a way that made him resemble one of the insects he loved to draw. She held her index fingers up to her eyebrows to illustrate the wild, overgrown hairs. "Boing," she said.

For years, Henry had been the biographer of artists who were known as part of the Northwest School. While his writing was well received, had done much, in fact, to promote local artists, his own work never garnered attention. He had existed on the perimeters. Now, a prominent downtown gallery had graciously offered him one room for an opening. A retrospective of sorts. When he invited Leigh, he reached across the table, took her hand, and said he would be honored if she would attend.

This was the first time Henry ever touched her. No one at the Grand Illusion had ever touched her, let alone held her hand. Leigh was taken off guard. She looked down at the table. She saw what she could feel instinctively. The hair on the back of Henry's hand and fingers seemed to stand up. A sensory reaction to the warmth of contact. Little antennae

feeling their way. "Yes. Of course. Wouldn't miss it for the world," she said and withdrew her hand to sip her coffee.

Leigh had let her thick, dark hair go completely white. This process started in her late twenties with a dramatic streak of grey right down the front. It made for a good conversation piece. "Natural highlights" she'd said. Throughout her thirties and forties, the streaks of silver became more prominent, but her skin remained flawless and the combination suggested that Leigh was at peace with herself. She appeared to be aging gracefully with no genuine anxieties or fears.

Natalie, who'd moved to Virginia to work for a think tank, was the only one who worried about her. She called weekly, dutifully at ten on Saturday mornings, and tried to get Leigh to admit to impending disasters. Had she scheduled an appointment with a doctor about the numbness in her hands? Had she read the material that Natalie had sent about the individual health insurance plan? Did she consider that taking on a thirty-year mortgage meant that she would be making payments until she was in her eighties? Leigh would listen politely, quietly gazing into an empty teacup. When she hung up the phone she would promptly go out to make a purchase with her credit card.

Natalie worried constantly about her mother's love life. She always had. In truth, it was Natalie who portrayed the loss of Paul in tragic romantic terms. As Natalie retold the story of her parent's relationship, Leigh would smile indulgently when she noticed that her daughter edited out some of the most important details of the last thirty years. Like Natalie's shock when she and a few girlfriends had visited her father and had been appalled to find stacks and stacks of pornographic magazines dating as far back as 1984. When one of the young women suggested that maybe Paul had a sex addiction, Leigh shrugged and said that he

was a figurative painter. He needed a stock of photographs when he didn't have access to a live model. But that had only fueled the woman's concern. Leigh listened when she described in disturbing detail Paul's monochromatic blue and grey nudes of females with cloth sacks over their heads. "Realism," she said. "He is aiming for a certain level of realism."

But to hear Natalie, one would think that her parents' married life had been bliss. Natalie seemed convinced that the reason Leigh never remarried was that she was pining for her first husband.

On the night of Henry's opening, Leigh stood at the entrance to the gallery. She could see him through the glass doors. A group of people clustered around him all with plastic cups of wine. Behind them, walls were covered with Henry's drawings. Even framed, they were so small that they looked like black and brown specks against the stark white. In this well-lit space, she could see Henry's face clearly. It was animated and engaged. She moved to the side as one of the doors swung open. A burst of heat was followed by a burst of sound—the murmur of voices, the shuffling of soles against the hardwood. The door swung shut and a young couple brushed past her. The man paused in the shelter of the entryway and lit a cigarette.

"What the hell was that?" the woman asked.

The man chuckled in response and shook his head. Leigh watched them. He took the woman's hand, and they stepped out into the night. When she turned back to the gallery, Henry was staring at her. His eyes looked giant and blinking through his thick lenses. He gave her a quick wave and a smile before turning his attention back to the people surrounding him.

Inside, she made her way straight to the bar and asked for white wine. She drained the plastic cup, set it down and nodded so the bartender would fill it again. Only then did she make her way toward Henry.

He turned slightly away from his group and held out his left arm in a gesture that seemed intended to draw her into a private conversation. "I thought you'd never get here," he said.

She wanted to say something witty, but all she could think of was "Traffic was terrible." When he smiled, she said, "They've closed the viaduct."

"You look spectacular," he said. He ran his hand from her shoulder down to the silver bracelet that encircled her wrist as if to indicate the part of her that he meant. Leigh felt the giddy flush of wine in her face.

"It's my birthday," she said.

"I'm not going to ask," he said, "but you don't look a day over fifty-five."

Leigh swallowed more wine. She was fifty-three.

Just then, the owner of the gallery approached with a well-dressed couple to introduce to Henry. Before he turned his attention to them, he took Leigh's free hand and said, "Come out for a drink after all this. We'll celebrate."

Leigh returned to the bar and refilled her cup before she made her way to look at the art. The drawings were familiar, though she had to admit that the framing did a great deal for them. Glancing at the cards next to each drawing, she noticed that there weren't many sales. They weren't that expensive, six, sometimes seven hundred dollars. She looked back at Henry and noticed he was watching her.

As she moved from drawing to drawing, she navigated her way in, around, and next to small groups of people. All of them talking about something interesting. None of them

interested in Henry's work. Leigh glanced past a couple to catch a glimpse of Henry. He was such a small man with fine little features. Squirming in his brown jacket like he was ready to molt.

A woman brushed by Leigh and muttered to no one in particular, "I don't know why some people even bother."

Later, when Leigh tells this part of the story to her co-worker, she has trouble explaining her actions. She says, "It just seemed that he might be mistaken for one of his insects and be thrown out with yesterday's trash. I was the only one who seemed to notice that there was a human being in there. I had to do something."

She approached the gallery owner and told him that she'd like to make a purchase. She led the way to a piece that she hadn't really seen before and indicated that this was what she wanted. It was matted as a triptych in a wooden, rectangular frame. Three images of the same beetle rendered in walnut colored ink. The image on the left looked down on the beetle from above. Its hard shell glistened. Compared to the width of its body, its head looked undersized. Mandibles protruding. Legs poised to scurry. The central figure pictured the beetle with its wings extended. Four translucent appendages lined with delicate veins. The final showed the beetle turned on its back. Its soft underbelly exposed. Each segment delineated and vulnerable. Six legs splayed and inviting. Each of the fine hairs waiting, quivering, sensing. A gasp escaped her, and Leigh turned away.

The gallery owner drew a card of stickers from his pocket. He placed the red dot on the drawing's card. An eight-hundred-and-fifty-dollar birthday gift. Leigh glanced across the room toward Henry to share the moment. He seemed surprised. She raised her cup.

When she tells the story, Leigh doesn't mention that just then a woman drifted to Henry's side. She appeared to be around forty. Maybe older. Maybe younger. It was hard to

tell. Her short hair was dyed a reddish-brown and spiked into sharp tufts all around her head. She wore a form-fitting, black cotton dress that offset the wildly colored scarf she had draped around her neck. She kissed Henry's cheek then rubbed it with her thumb to remove the lipstick. She straitened his collar, took his arm in a proprietary way, and joined in his conversation as if she were with old friends. Henry put his arm around her shoulder. Next to this woman, he suddenly seemed tall and strong, even vibrant.

Leigh turned back to her purchase. The gallery owner was still standing there making polite small talk. He indicated that she should follow him to his office where he would write a receipt, and she would sign a promissory statement indicating that she would visit the gallery within three days to pay for the drawing. Leigh didn't have to be told that galleries did not accept credit cards.

When she returned to the main room, Henry and his young woman were nowhere to be seen. Leigh tossed her plastic cup into the trash and left.

After the show came down, Leigh picked up her triptych. At home, in her living room it confounded her. Where would she hang it? In the living room it would constantly have to be explained. Hanging it in the kitchen presented obvious problems. The bedroom was out of the question. That left only the bathroom and the entryway.

Instead, she covered the drawing carefully in bubble wrap. Then, she packed it in insulation. The excessive amount of tape that she used seemed partly to secure the packing, partly to ensure that the drawing didn't escape. She wrote her daughter's address on the front with a black marker. For a return address, she used the number for the Grand Illusion. When the woman at the post office asked her the value of the package, Leigh hesitated then said, eight hundred and fifty dollars but no, she didn't want to purchase insurance.

She only returned to the café once and that time only made it as far as the door before turning and walking away. She reasoned with herself that she should be economizing, that she could make chamomile tea more cheaply at home. She told herself that she wanted to remember the café as it was. The rest, she decided, should be promptly forgotten.

5. BY ANY OTHER NAME

Mom was at it again. The staff nurse from Westley Gardens called me this afternoon to let me know that they recommended moving my mother from her apartment to the full-time care unit. She was showing signs that her dementia was worsening the nurse told me. My mother was refusing to respond to her own name insisting that the staff call her Betty. I listened and okayed the transition. Wondered if they'd called my brother or if that burden would be on me. I didn't mention that my mother had done this before. Had a history of changing her name, so to speak.

The truth is that Mom always hated her name. When I was a kid, she said that Myrtle was an old lady's name, and that she was no old lady. One time, she decided to call herself Linda. Another time it was Janet. She made my dad call her that for over a week. I remember seeing a sheet of notepaper crumpled on the kitchen counter. It was covered with the name Janet in my mother's elegant cursive. In each of the fifty or maybe even sixty versions of the name, the letters took on a different slant as if she were trying out exactly who she wanted to be. But in the end, everything started to unravel. Dad kept slipping. Mom realized that in order to really change her name she'd have to go to the bank and order new checks, call the phone company, the light company. She asked Dad how she could explain to all those people that she was changing her first name. He was no help. For starters, he said, she'd have to drive downtown to the Social Security Building and change it legally. There might even be a fee. That settled it. She was stuck with Myrtle.

She might have been stuck with Myrtle. But I think it was around that time she started to wonder if she was stuck with my dad. I'm pretty sure she felt like she was stuck with me, but I would bet money she never felt that about Johnny.

My little brother Johnny was annoying as hell. He was what we called hyper. On the way home from mass one Sunday, Johnny kept sliding across the back seat and crashing into me. Mom had just cleaned the seats with Armor All. It was hard to keep in one place, and once Johnny's butt started going there was no stopping him. Dad thought it was funny to swing around the corners wide and fast in Mom's Impala station wagon. Johnny giggling and squealing each time. I sat there and watched the muscles in Mom's neck and shoulders tighten. I'm not sure if it was the motion or the noise.

Johnny crashed into me one too many times, so I made a tight fist with the knuckle of my middle finger protruding like a spike. When he came sailing across the back seat, I dug it deep into the slack muscle of his upper arm. He let out a falsetto scream.

"Enough," Dad said. He raised his hand up in the middle of the front seat. "You want me to pull over?"

Johnny scootched to his side of the back seat and picked up his Mousy. I hated that grubby little stuffed toy. It had been his constant companion since before I could remember. All of its fur was rubbed off, one eye was missing, and the stuffing had been mercilessly kneaded out of the neck so the head hung loosely to one side. Johnny was always sniffing that thing. I looked away. Dad lit a cigarette and pushed the button that rolled down his window.

"That's mussing my hair," Mom said. Mom would always do her hair up special to impress the lookilous at Mass. She'd spend Saturday evenings putting in hot rollers and sleep with a scarf wrapped around her head. What fascinated me most about this process was the self-control she must have had. I imagined her holding her body rigid, not even turning in her sleep to prevent those rollers from biting into her scalp. Sunday mornings, she removed the rollers and teased and sprayed each hair into place. The wind from the open window lifted, not single strands, but whole clumps of Aquanetted curls.

"You want me to smoke with the window closed?" Dad said.

She covered her hair with both hands. "Put it up."

Dad ignored her and exhaled smoke through his nose. My stomach churned. Oblivious, Johnny started singing the Prayer of St. Francis and rubbing Mousy across his top lip. With one hand, Mom started fiddling with the buttons on her door handle while still trying to hold down her hair with the other.

"There's something wrong with these buttons," she said. "Not even a year old and the Goddamn windows are broken."

I knew that the driver's side lock was on. Dad locked them to keep Johnny from running the windows up and down. At the time, I thought Dad must have forgotten because he continued to stare straight ahead. Mom grew increasingly frantic. Then, she reached over and grabbed the wheel. The car careened onto the gravel shoulder. Dad slammed on the brakes. Johnny slid off the back seat and the full force of his little body slammed into the back of the front seat. Taut plastic sprung him back onto the cushion. He looked dazed for a minute. He picked up Mousy and started to sniff it. He glanced at me then fastened his eyes on the floor. His head lolled to the side and a trickle of blood started down his forehead. The metal ashtray that was built into the back of the seat had cut him. Neither of my parents turned around to check on us. Even Johnny knew it was best to stay quiet.

Then Mom got out of the car. She slammed the door and started walking. Her heels dug into the loose gravel and caused her to lurch and stumble. She paused and straightened her skirt. Dad drove alongside her.

"Get in the car," he said through the open window.

"Screw you," she said. I was sure that the people in the cars whizzing by us on the busy street could hear her.

"Get in the car."

She kept walking.

"Fine," he said and put his foot down on the gas. The wheels spun a little kicking up dust and gravel. We lurched back onto the road. Somebody honked hard and long behind us. I turned back to give the driver a dirty look and caught a glimpse of Mom. I don't know if she saw me watching her. At that moment, she seemed so small. She clung to the handles of her shoulder bag with both hands as if they kept her from falling. It was only a block and a half before Dad turned on to our street, but the whole time I watched her hunched figure retreating into the distance, I marveled at the fact that we were leaving her behind. For just a moment, it seemed easy.

By the time she got home, Dad had put a Bandaid on Johnny's forehead. He was making the three of us ham sandwiches. I sat on the counter and watched. Johnny was spinning in the corner singing "Yertle the turtle wears a flowered girdle, has no teeth just a pointed beak. It's Yertle the turtle" over and over again. Dad shook his head. Just then, Mom came through the door. I might have been the only one who noticed. Clearly, the walk hadn't calmed her down. Her face was white as she watched us and listened to Johnny. Dad tapped the bottom of the mustard bottle with the palm of his hand.

I tried to smile. She walked right close in front of me and said "You think that's funny don't you. To teach him things like that."

"Now, Myrtle," Dad said. He sat the mustard bottle on the counter.

"Don't you now Myrtle me," Mom said, and she grabbed the mustard bottle and threw it directly at the ceiling. It clung there for just a moment. The mustard at the mouth of the bottle must have formed a vacuum just strong enough to hold its weight. We all stared. Then it fell and broke into several pieces. Mom just grabbed Dad's keys from the counter, grabbed

Johnny by the shoulder, and stormed out. I held the dustpan while Dad carefully picked up the chunks of the glass bottle. Dad wiped up the mustard from the floor. He didn't clean the spot from the ceiling. That yellow stain was there for years. As long as we lived in that house I think.

That was Mother's Day 1980. At that time, those giant Goody Combs were all the rage. Every kid at school had one sticking out of their back pocket. God how I wanted one of them. I must have begged and begged because Mom finally broke down and bought one. Not a Goody Comb. The Big Comb sold at Sears. Its color was bright. Florescent pink. Mom's choice, not mine. But the color wasn't the problem. The shape was all wrong. It was square not curved. And it had the words "Big Comb" in huge block letters on the handle. I was disappointed, but the next morning I shoved it into the back pocket of my jeans. Johnny and I headed for St. Francis of Assisi Elementary school. He was wearing his corduroy coat. He didn't like that it hung to his knees like a girl's coat so he'd reach his hands deep into his pockets and hoist it up. He had trouble walking that way, holding his arms to his sides. About a block from the school, some kids were walking behind us. I heard one of them say "Big Comb" and snicker. I kept walking, my head forward. It was Matt LaPlant. A sixth grader. And then, "Tammy's got a Big Comb."

"Shut up Matt," I said over my shoulder.

Someone shoved Johnny, and he flopped into the grass like a turned up beetle, arms pinned to his sides, legs flailing. Matt grabbed the comb out of my pocket. He was walking backwards on the sidewalk in front of me holding the comb up above his head chanting, "Big Comb. Big Comb. Tammy's got a Big Comb."

I lunged for him and the comb. He took off running up into the empty lot beside the school yard. I ran after him. He tore through the trees to the field behind the school. I almost had him when he tossed my comb to Tina Gross—the tough girl. She was sitting on a rock with a group of her friends. Tina just grinned and took off running. I chased her down at the edge of the field. Knocked her into the dirt and tried to wrench the comb out of her hands. She was just laughing and kicking at me the whole time. A group of kids circled us jonesing for fight. Chanting "Big Comb. Big Comb. Tammy's got a Big Comb." I couldn't breathe. I finally got ahold of the comb. I was sitting on Tina's chest. I started hitting her with the comb. She wasn't laughing anymore. She was holding her arms up in front of her face. The kids stopped chanting. I just kept hitting her. I just kept hitting and crying. Hitting and crying.

She shoved me off and gave me one swift punch in the stomach. I couldn't breathe. The bell rang and all the other kids ran toward the building except Tina. She stood over me as I lay on the ground holding my stomach. Snot was running down my nose.

"What is wrong with you?" she said. She brushed the dirt from her clothes and started for the building. Then, she turned and looked at me. Her blue eyes so pale they had almost no color at all. I swear that some of her eyelashes were white. "You coming?" she said. I got up and wiped my face with the back of my sleeve. We headed up the hill toward the school.

That afternoon, Johnny and I opened the front door to find every light on in the house. We lived in a tri-level house that had been built in the late 60s. Maybe it was the evergreens that lined our yard, but no matter how many lights she turned on, Mom complained that the house was always dark. All of the windows were open. The stereo was blaring. The soundtrack from the movie *Guys and Dolls*. Mom was in the kitchen spreading

peanut butter on celery sticks. "Want one?" she asked shoving the plate toward the edge of the counter. She licked her fingers and wiped them on her apron. She moved her hips to the music and hummed. Johnny munched on a celery stick.

The song, "Luck Be a Lady Tonight" started. Mom reached over and grabbed my hand. She swung me into the living room to Marlon Brando's strained pacing. I tried to keep up with the few steps she had taught me, but my body felt bulky and awkward. My knees kept bumping in to her swift-moving legs. I'd danced with her a hundred times, and her grace always amazed me. One thing she had was pizazz. For her dancing wasn't just fun, it was a performance. I think she was imagining herself in the world of that movie. All that beautiful Technicolor. So much more vibrant than the avocado shag carpet and walnut paneling of our living room. The song ended. We flopped down on the couch. She laughed.

"You're a good dancer, Mom," Johnny said from kitchen doorway.

"You think?" she said.

"Yeah," I said.

She turned and looked at me. She took a pack of Virginia Slims out her apron pocket, lit a cigarette, and held it between her long index and middle finger. "I want you to remember that," she said shaking the cigarette on the beat of each word for emphasis, "that's what's important." She inhaled deeply and smiled, satisfied.

"What?" I asked.

"You've got to know how to bring a little sunshine into the room." The needle thunked at the end of the record. "I wish you'd think of that sometimes." She stood up and waltzed to the stereo. She flipped the record and set the needle. Music started.

She waltzed off to the kitchen. Bottles clanked in the refrigerator as the door swung open. She poured Johnny a glass of milk. She sang along with the record. Her light, lilting

voice drifted through the house. Johnny sang with her. She laughed. I looked down. There was Mousey on the couch next to me. I grabbed him and held him close to my face. His one beady eye glared at me. I shook him by the neck. The eye flopped back and forth. I looked toward the kitchen. Mom and Johnny were still singing and laughing. I took the eye between my thumb and index finger and pulled it free from the string. I popped the eye in my mouth and rolled it around on my tongue. Then I swallowed. I could feel as it went down my throat. It felt stuck—lodged somewhere behind my chest. But I knew that it had reached my stomach. I knew that beady eye was looking at me from the inside. I shoved Mousey deep into the cushions of the couch where he might be lost for days.

"Tammy," Mom called from the kitchen. "Come in here so we can plan your birthday party."

This made me uneasy. That upcoming Friday was my eleventh birthday, but to my knowledge, I'd never had a birthday party. There were a few yellowed snapshots of me as a baby. Chocolate smeared on my face. A cake with a candle sitting on the tray of my high chair. These were not memories so much as documents that proved my birthday had been celebrated. I knew that other girls in my class at school had parties but after the first few invitations were ignored, I stopped getting them. During recess, I would spin on the parallel bars while small clusters of girls with neatly combed hair slowly walked around the perimeter of the playground and shared secrets. The surly kids would play games and sometimes I played too but I wouldn't call that having friends.

So at Mom's suggestion of a birthday party, I felt sweat starting to form on the palms. Mousy was watching. I cleared my throat.

"Who do you want to invite?" she asked. She was standing at the kitchen counter. Johnny busied himself eating celery. Mom opened the pack of ten invitations. I walked to the

kitchen and picked one up. The card was several shades of pink and pictured Strawberry Shortcake. On the back it said "Time for something sweet." My stomach churned. She picked up a pen.

"You don't have to fill out invitations," I said. "I'll just tell people about the party."

"Then what would I do with all these?" she said. She waved her hand at the pile of cards on the counter.

"I can fill them out," I said.

"Not with your hand writing," she said. She snatched the card from me and poised her pen ready to write. "Now, tell me who you want to invite."

"Tina Gross," I said.

Mom looked at me. "That's an unfortunate name."

I shrugged. She wrote the name. She moved the pen down to the When line and wrote Friday, May 17th at 7:30. She moved the pen to the Where line. It hovered above the paper.

"So where do you want to have this thing?" she asked.

I held my breath. I couldn't imagine anyone coming to my house. "Farrell's," I said. Farrell's Ice Cream Shoppe was a local ice cream parlor. I had only been there once or maybe twice with my family. It always seemed crowded. We had to wait in a long line at the restaurant's entrance that funneled us past old timey glass jars filled with striped candy sticks and giant lollypops. Bright and glistening. I often dreamed about having a birthday party there, but never thought it would actually happen. In my fantasy, I ordered the Pig Trough. This was literally a wooden trough filled with ice cream. It took four waiters to carry it to the table. They hoisted it on to their shoulders pall-bearer style and raced from the kitchen and through the restaurant while a fire siren blared and a bell clanged. They would deposit the

trough on the table, sing happy birthday, then chant "Oink, oink, oink, oink," while everyone else on the restaurant staff clapped and hooted. It was spectacular.

"Farrell's," Mom said. She wrote this down, then set both the card and pen on the table. Her mood had suddenly deflated. She may have been worried about the chaos of the restaurant or the cost of a party may have suddenly hit her. Either way, I could see she hadn't thought this through. She didn't seem interested in filling out any more invitations.

"Are we done?" I said.

"Are we?" she said. She slid the invitation into the envelope and wrote Tina on the front. "I'll just leave her last name off. She'll know who it's for." She handed it to me to seal. I loved the taste of glue.

The next day at school, I opened my lunch box and found four pieces of celery spread with dried and cracked peanut butter, a box of raisins, a nickel and two pennies for my milk, and the *Peanuts* comic strip clipped from the evening paper. It featured Charlie Brown, Lucy, and Violet. The girls' heads were tilted back and their mouths open. The dialogue bubble read "That's why they call you failure-face." It made me smile. Tucked underneath my food was the invitation to Tina Gross. I tore it into tiny bits and tossed it into the trash with the rest of my lunch. I tucked the change into my pocket and my lunch box back in the coat rack. Sister Rosemarie waved me out onto the playground even though most of the class still stood in line at the hallway door waiting for the hot lunch cart to rattle down the hall.

The playground was empty except for a stray dog that sniffed and peed along the fence. I picked up a red rubber ball. It was May, but the sky was overcast. A grey that was mirrored in the cement pavement of the playground. Wind bit through my jacket. Kids trickled out. I began to bounce the ball against the wall. A ruddy-faced boy in high water jeans

let out a yell and ran to the monkey bars. Then the yard was filled with kids. The sixth graders were busy organizing a game called Smear the Queer. Our gym teacher taught us that one.

The key to this game was to be on the team with the balls. That day, I was. I waited patiently while the others rounded up younger kids to line up against the wall. There was Johnny with his brown bangs falling into his eyes. He wiped his nose on the back of his bare arm. He had left his corduroy coat inside. He was always along the wall. I took my ball and threw it at him as hard as I could. He winced. Later, I would tell him that I had done him a favor. I had gotten him out of there early. But at the time, I could see the welt bloom red and violent on his upper arm. He sniveled and limped to the sideline. Tina nodded at me acknowledging my strike. She was on the softball team and said, "Good arm Tammy." I felt my chest swell with something like pride. Maybe it was her praise. Maybe it was because she called me out by name. I don't really know, but when the bell rang I ran up to her and asked her to come to my birthday party that Friday at Farrell's. Her mouth dropped open. Not to speak just to stare. Then she said, "Sure, why not" and ran off to her classroom.

That afternoon Johnny went over to his friend Ricky's house. When I opened the front door, the house was completely dark. Normally, I would have sensed that something was wrong but I was too caught up in Tina Gross and Farrell's so I grabbed a Pop Tart and headed to my room. When I closed the door, Mom was behind me so quickly that I've often thought she must have been hiding in my closet ready to pounce. It was four in the afternoon, and she was still in her bathrobe. Her hair was matted against the back of her head. At times like this, I was afraid to look her in the face in case she had forgotten to put in her false teeth. She had worn a bridge since she had fallen off her bike as a kid. Her parents hadn't taken her

to a dentist and over time, her two front teeth turned grey, died she said, and fell out. It both terrified and fascinated me that without her false teeth the front of her mouth collapsed inward like the mouth of a turtle. I kept my eyes focused on the floor. She wasn't wearing any socks.

"Where's your brother?" she asked without saying hello or asking about my day.

"He went over to Ricky's to play."

"Oh." she said. "Right." I couldn't tell if she remembered who Ricky was or not. I didn't care really. I just wanted to be alone and eat my Pop Tart.

"Tammy, I have to ask you something," she said. "You like it here, don't you? You like your things, your room."

"Sure, Mom," I said. At times like these it was smart to say as little as possible. A question was never just a question.

"What if I were to go away?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, move away. Would you want to come with me?"

I took a quick short breath. I honestly didn't know how to answer. I remember thinking maybe I don't have to say anything at all. Maybe I can just stare at her like I don't understand the question. I didn't, not really.

"Who would take care of Dad?" I said.

She lifted my chin and looked straight at me as if she were trying to read something in my face. "You love your dad, don't you?"

"Sure, Mom."

"Well," she said, "you two fucking deserve each other." She walked out of my room and slammed the door behind her.

Looking back, I realize now that there's a difference between experiencing something and understanding it. Sure, I lived through this, but there were things going on in that house that I couldn't possibly have understood. Things between my parents. Things about my mom. I don't claim to understand them now, even as I tell this. Of course, within a month or two she'd be gone. Run off to San Diego with a sailor who she met waiting in the line at the bank of all places. And though I tell myself over and over that I'm wrong, it's what I said and did in that moment and the ones that followed that I believe in my heart were the cause. Not of her running away and leaving Dad. That was inevitable. But of her leaving me and taking Johnny with her.

Friday at 6:30, I waited patiently by the front door. Johnny hovered at my side clinging to Mousey. I had dug it out of the couch that afternoon. I might have been feeling remorse for nailing Johnny with the red rubber ball. I might have been feeling excited about my party. Either way, I snuck into Johnny's room and tucked Mousey into a shoe. I told myself that he would like it better if he found Mousey himself. Mom rummaged through piles on the kitchen counter looking for her keys. She was wearing a smart jumper over a blouse with a flounced front. The fabric of the skirt, almost certainly polyester, was woven with strands of turquoise and gold. Her hair was done up. All in all, she looked her Sunday best. I refused to put on a dress and instead wore a pair of bell-bottom jeans. My only concession to Mom was my checkered blouse with giant Gibson-girl sleeves. Dad sat with his feet kicked up in the recliner. Mom told him to get ready, and he said, "Oh no, this is your party," and spread a newspaper across his chest like a blanket. "You're taking Johnny, right?"

Mom shook her head and blew air through the gap between her bridge and teeth. This made a spitting noise. She marched into the kitchen and gabbed his wallet and keys from the

top of the refrigerator. She stood in the doorway to the kitchen and took all the cash out of his wallet before throwing it on the floor. She waited a second or two. When he didn't respond, she thrust the money into her purse, grabbed Johnny by the shoulder and me by the forearm, and marched us out to the car.

Tina and her mom were waiting inside the entrance to Farrell's. Tina's mom had her daughter's pale blue eyes. She didn't smile when Mom greeted her. The wait for a table seemed endless. Not because the line was particularly long, but because I stood silently with Tina and listened to Mom pepper Mrs. Gross with questions. Where did she grow up? Did Tina have any brothers or sisters? What did her husband do for a living? What neighborhood did they live in? Oh, they lived in an apartment. How interesting. She'd always wanted to live in an apartment. All those other people around. Meanwhile, Johnny zigzagged his way up and down the line of people. Brushing past strangers' legs to press his face up against a jar of peppermint sticks. Leaving a moist lip print on the glass.

The hostess stowed us in a booth. Mom and Mrs. Gross sat on one side of the table. We three kids on the other. Mom and Mrs. Gross took off their jackets and lit cigarettes. We opened the sticky menus.

"So what's it like working as a bank teller Mrs. Gross," Mom said.

Tina's mom said, "Please, call me Sam."

"Sam," Mom said. "Is that short for Samantha?"

Tina's mom smiled. "Samantha always seemed a little too fancy for me."

"I know what you mean," Mom said. "My name is Elizabeth, but I've always gone by Betty. Plain old Betty's good enough for me."

Johnny started to squirm on the slick plastic of the booth seat. He grabbed hold of the table with both hands and started bobbing his head back and forth.

"Now sit still, sweetie," Mom said. She turned to Tina's mom and said, "He's always had a lot of energy."

"I know what you mean," Sam said.

Johnny didn't sit still. He kept bobbing and knocking his body into my shoulder. I couldn't move any farther away from him. I was already crowding Tina in the corner of the booth. I kicked him hard in the shin with the heel of my foot. He yelped and sat still. He started singing his Yertle the turtle song. First, it was just humming, but then he started to mumble the words. I glanced at Mom and Sam.

Sam was laughing and shaking her head. "Boys," she said.

Mom wasn't laughing. She was staring at me.

A cheery waiter appeared at our table. He couldn't have been more than sixteen. He wore a straw hat with a red, white, and blue ribbon, and a white shirt with matching arm bands. "I've been told there's a birthday girl here tonight," he said.

"That's me, that's me," I said waving my hand.

"Well, then," the waiter said. "What can I bring for the birthday girl?"

"The pig trough," I said.

"The pig what?" Mom said.

"The pig trough," the waiter said. "It's enough to feed the whole—"

"Tammy Marie, don't be ridiculous. No daughter of mine is eating anything called the pig trough. She'll have a hot fudge Sundae, just like everybody else."

"Five hot fudge Sundaes?" the waiter said.

"What did I say," Mom said. Her voice was way too loud, even for Farrell's.

"Look lady, I just—"

"Don't you lady me"

"Five hot fudge Sundaes," the waiter said and backed away from the table.

"The pig trough," Mom said shaking her head. "Do you believe that? She has a real talent for embarrassing me," she said.

"Kids will be kids," Tina's mom said.

Mom pointed at the menu. "It's the most expensive thing on the menu. Who pays fifteen dollars for ice cream? I try to do something nice and this is the thanks I get. Unbelievable."

A few moments later, a different waiter arrived with a tray of hot fudge Sundaes. He put one in front of each of us and walked away. There was no siren. No one sang happy birthday. No one chanted.

Johnny and Tina ate their ice cream in silence. Sam and Betty continued to smoke and titter and exchange anecdotes about their lives. I sat and watched my ice cream melt. I refused to pick up my spoon. To keep myself from crying I kept thinking to myself How did you think it was going to go?

Later, in the parking lot, it started to drizzle. Tina and Johnny hung together underneath the awning while Mom said goodbye to her new-found friend. I climbed into the back seat of the Impala. Mousey lay there on the seat. I looked up at Mom and felt a surge of blinding fury. I took Mousey by the head and tossed him out the door. He fell into a puddle right behind the front tire. I pulled the door shut. Johnny and Mom walked to the driver's side of the car. Johnny opened the door and crawled in across from me. He immediately started looking for Mousey. Mom climbed in and started the engine. She backed out of the parking spot and gave one last wave to Tina and her mom.

"Where's Mousey?" Johnny said.

"What?" Mom said.

"Where's Mousey?"

"Did you leave him at home?

"No. I brought him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Well, if he's not in the back seat, you must have left him at home"

I didn't say anything. It was easy. I pictured Mousey, wet, run over, covered with an oil slick, and I smiled. Even now it makes me smile to think of that filthy little thing squashed and sad in some parking lot. Johnny was frantic for days, maybe even weeks. I never said a word. I just watched and let it happen. And then they were gone. Johnny along for the ride while Mom was off living some half-rate fantasy in San Diego. I was jealous, of course. Angry. But I was always angry and long ago, it occurred to me that I was the lucky one. I got out early. For the first time in my life there was silence, and I realized that I didn't need anything from her. Nothing that she was capable of giving anyway. But Johnny, he just went feral. He's just always been one of those people that never seems to know what hit him. Maybe I should have helped him. They were only gone three months before Mom decided to come back and go back to being Myrtle.

6. THANKSGIVING 1979

It was Thanksgiving 1979 when I met my mom's grandmother, Thelma. I was sent to spend the holiday with her. Whisked out of sight, because Mom was going to meet her boyfriend's family for the first time. She was twenty-six years old, and I don't think I understood what a big deal this was to her. Maybe she saw this as the moment when Prince Charming was going to swoop in and save the damsel in distress. If she played her cards right, it was her chance at happily ever after. I can see now how an eleven-year-old daughter might have mucked up this tale.

That fall, Mom and I were living in a one-bedroom apartment in Midway, a strip of Pac Highway that ran between SeaTac airport and the suburbs that sprawled from south Seattle to Tacoma. Our apartment was in a two-story brick building with an external staircase and breezeway. Our front yard was the trash-strewn parking lot of the 7-11. The backyard was the drive-in movie theatre. At that time, Mom worked at the airport putting price tags on merchandise sold in the terminal gift shops. She described to me how she would sit perched on a stool for eight hours at a table piled high with cheap trinkets that guilty men on business trips brought home for their families. She told me how she used one little gun to apply price stickers to the bottom of shot glasses and another to shoot the plastic price tag hangers through the ears of stuffed huskies and clams with dangling black legs. Every afternoon, we'd walk together from the apartment to the road—she in her grey work smock and polyester pants. Her dark, wavy hair pulled into a short pony-tail. Rather than walk the extra two blocks down to the light, she'd wait for a break in traffic then dart across the four lanes to the bus stop. When she reached the other side, she'd turn and give me a wave, her round face

beaming. I like to think of her this way, young and pretty. The trouble is that even then, I think I sensed that she was always running away from me.

Because she worked swing shift, I spent most evenings alone in that apartment. We didn't own a television set, and when I was tired of lying on the shag carpet and watching the shadows cast by the lights of passing cars leap across the walls, I would climb on our bed and watch the movie screen from the bedroom window. Without the sound, I was free to create the characters and dialogue for myself. But the story was always the same. The movies all seemed to start in the same sunny neighborhood. Kids riding idly on bikes. The sound of their laughter drifting up with the smell of fresh cut grass. The sun a dance of light and shadow as the leaves moved in a gentle breeze. A fresh-faced girl with feathered hair and a checkered halter-top walking home from high school. She'd meet a boy in tight jeans. He'd take her for a ride in his Galaxy 5000 and park in some secluded spot. They sat on the hood of his car and drank beer or threw stones into a gravel pit. Just when I grew to love them, and they to love each other, they'd be slashed or strangled, left for dead in a ditch. These were my bedtime stories.

Sometimes, on her nights off, Mom and I snuck onto the movie lot with two folding lawn chairs. Huddled together between parked cars we caught most of the sound. The teenagers that worked the lot didn't care, and the teenagers in the cars were too busy to notice. Only the occasional dad seemed bothered. One cared enough to get out of his station wagon. He wore a pair of horn-rimmed glasses and a short-sleeved shirt tucked in to his slacks. He stalked over and told my mom that we had to leave. She said who was he to tell us to leave and we weren't bothering anybody. He said he was a paying customer, that she offended his principles and that she was setting a poor example for me. What happened next, I will never forget. Mom shot up from her lawn chair and even though she was a good foot shorter than

he, she shouted up at his face. The spit flying from the force of her words glimmered in the stray beams from the headlights. She said his birth control glasses offended her principles and that he should leave us alone and mind his own brats. Then she turned to me and said come on, we don't need this shit. She grabbed her lawn chair and marched toward the break in the chain link fence. At the time, I believed her when she said she wasn't afraid of little piss-ants like him but now when I think of that chair bouncing recklessly behind her, she just seems helpless before a world of strangers who felt entitled to tell her what to do.

That Thanksgiving, her most recent boyfriend, John, was introducing her to his family. She said it would be best if I didn't come along. She had high hopes for this one. "You understand," she said. I said that I did, not because I understood, but mostly because there was nothing else to say. I was just beginning to sense her embarrassment when check-out ladies at the grocery store would ask her how old her little sister was, and I'd butt in that I was eleven and her daughter. I had just begun to notice that no matter how many reminders my teachers sent home with me that she never attended a parent teacher conference. "Things are going to be better for us," she said. And I believed her. Honestly, I would have been content if she had just left me in the apartment with a turkey TV dinner like she had the Thanksgiving before, but she and John had talked it over. She said it was Thanksgiving and "we've decided that you should spend the day with Thelma." I wondered what part of this "we" I was.

Mom told me that Grandma Thelma had grown up on Lummi Island and spent most of her life working in the lumber mills in Bellingham. Mom warned me that she was missing three fingers on her left hand, the pinky, the ring, and the middle finger. When I met her, I realized that "missing" was a euphemism. Her pinky was little more than a nub but the other

fingers had been cut off right above the first knuckle. Before I met Thelma, Mom had peppered me with strict instructions to be polite and not stare at her fingers. But this was nearly impossible. Thelma wore rings on those two longer stumps. They were just costume jewelry, one green cut glass and the other a large silver oval inlaid with turquoise. There was something peculiar and terrifying to me about how those rings caught the light and how she'd drum them on the table like colorful, disfigured fingernails.

Thanksgiving morning, Thelma and her youngest son Jerry were to drive me up to Bellingham. Mom was in a frenzy. She'd already stuck her thumb through her pantyhose, burned her neck with a curling iron, and smoked half a pack of cigarettes. By ten, she managed to get her dress over her head. I was sitting in the living room in the bent-wood rocker, picking strings of fiber off of the woven seat. She walked the length of the room and spun in a circle to give me the full effect. Her hair fell in glossy dark curls around her face. She wore velvet. A peasant dress she called it. A simple floor length skirt with a wide satin belt tied in a bow in the back. The bodice and sleeves were lined with a frill of lace. Its deep wine color set off the ivory skin of her chest and neck. She wore a black choker. Her round cheeks were blushed, her eyelashes mascaraed and curled, her eyelids shadowed. "How do I look?" she asked.

I climbed out of the rocker and stood before her. Tucked the lace of her bra neatly under the neckline of the dress. "Like a million bucks," I said.

She wrapped her arms around me. I drank in her scent of hairspray, make-up, and menthols. She was warm and soft. I could sense her excitement. This was going to be a momentous day. One that would change our lives. I felt a sudden dread that if I didn't stay with her through this day, I would never be with her again. I vowed never to leave her. But, there was a swift rap at the door, and she let go.

"Gaylene," Thelma said. She threw her arms around Mom's neck. "Where have you been keeping yourself?"

Mom brushed off Thelma's embrace but held on to her hands. "Look at you," Mom said. Though she may have been tall in her day, at seventy-eight Thelma was closer to my mom's height. She had short, thick hair that was pure white. Her glasses were large and round in plastic frames that covered the upper part of her face. The lenses were slightly tinted. She wore white polyester pants and a bright red cowl neck sweater that covered her waist and bottom. She was wiry and small boned, but her stomach bulged out in a round paunch that she patted.

"After the holidays I really gotta get on the stick." She gave a laugh that turned into a cough that wouldn't stop. Mom looked over Thelma's shoulder at Jerry, who was standing behind her.

"Oxygen tank's in the car," he said.

Mom took Thelma under the arm and walked her down the breezeway. The sight of that wisp of an old woman gasping and choking made me want to slam to the door to the apartment and lock the dead bolt. Jerry held out his hand to me so I took his broad open palm. I remember that morning as crisp and full of sunshine. When Mom and Thelma reached Jerry's Buick LeSabre, he rushed forward to open the rear door. Mom eased Thelma down onto the cushion of white vinyl. Body inside the car, feet still firmly on the pavement, Thelma fumbled for the oxygen tube that lay on the seat next to her, but once it was in her grasp, she tucked a prong into each nostril and gave the knob a twist. With the quick intake of oxygen, the coughing subsided. She relaxed, and only then did she see me standing at the bottom of the stairs. "Don't you hang back, Kristina," she said. "You come give Grandma a hug."

I white-knuckled the wrought-iron handrail, but Mom gave me a look that said I better hustle my butt over there. So I did. Thelma reached up for me with both arms. As I bent in, I felt her lips brush my cheek. Her turquoise ring bit into the back of my neck.

"Now you run around the other side of the car. You're ridin' in the back seat with me."

"Mom," Jerry said. "What if you need to lie down?"

"What would I need to lie down for?" Thelma's breathing became short and shallow, so she lifted each leg into the car and leaned her head back. "Won't even let me drive down to pick up my own granddaughter and now he's telling me I need to lie down."

It was a two-hour drive to Bellingham. Jerry looked at me and nodded toward the back seat. I walked around the other side of the car, opened the door, and slid in next to Thelma. Jerry shut Thelma's door. I watched him say goodbye to Mom. I thought that I was going to cry.

"You know," Thelma said. "Jerry spent some time in a Turkish prison." I glanced at her to check for signs that she was pulling my leg. She was staring serenely at her son. I looked at him in his salesman's jacket. The solid helmet of black pompadour on top of his head. He didn't look like he sweated much. Turkish prison I thought, and tried to imagine him in a torn, dusty t-shirt. Blindfolded. His head shaved. He was tall, over six feet. Thelma told me that back in 1967 when he married his first wife Karla they went to Istanbul for their honeymoon. A man just lay down in front of their car and said that Jerry hit him. It was all a scam. Grandpa Maxi had to go over to bail Jerry out. "But now he's married to Luanne," she said, "who's one of them Jehovah's Witnesses so we don't talk about it." Jerry opened the driver's door and climbed in behind the wheel. Thelma snapped open her handbag and took out lipstick and a compact mirror. She removed the oxygen from her nose, applied the bright

red shade to her lips, turned to wink at me, and without so much as a glance at my mom, we were off.

That giant car with its wheel suspension sailed up out of Midway to the interstate, through Seattle, and toward the dense forests of Northwestern Washington. The farther north we went the narrower the road felt as Hemlocks and Cedars sprung up in a wall on either side of the freeway. Then it all opened up for a moment when we dipped down into Everett, winding through cement underpasses and merging with oncoming vehicles filled with aunts and uncles, cousins itchy in starched clothes. We crossed the Snohomish River that dumped fresh cut logs into Port Gardner Bay destined for the saw and the stink of the pulp mill. I spent the ride staring out the window, but I could feel Thelma watching me. Every time I looked over at her, she pretended to be asleep.

Just north of Everett the sky clouded over and a fine mist began to fall. Jerry pulled off the freeway and into a gas station. He claimed that the roads were slick and he felt one of the tires pulling, but after he added just a puff of air, he stood under the eve of the cinder-block building and smoked a cigarette. When he exhaled, the smoke barely left his lips before it was whisked away by the wind.

"He's determined to take everything away from me," Thelma said. "Won't even let me be in the same room with a cigarette." She smiled and patted her handbag. "Hired a home helper to keep an eye on me. She's from the Philippines. She's at my house right now cooking our dinner." She screwed her eyes up and looked straight at me. "What kind of person doesn't spend Thanksgiving with their family?" All I could think of was the obvious. Me, I wanted to say, but before I could open my mouth, she looked over at Jerry again and told me how he took her car keys away that spring just because she zipped down to Las Vegas without telling anybody. She turned toward me and grinned. "I wouldn't let him take the car though." She

reached over and poked my thigh with her index finger. "A candy apple red Monza Spyder." Her body wriggled with a quick wave of pleasure. "You know, when they found out your mother was pregnant, they sent her up to live with me and your Grandpa Maxi. They wanted to get her away from…" she looked me square in the face. I wanted to ask her who, but I was afraid if I said anything, she'd move on to something else. At that time, no one, especially my mom ever talked to me about my birth and no one ever mentioned so much as a word about my father. To this day, I don't have any real idea who he was, but when I was really young, I thought that a stork must have dropped me at my mom's door by mistake. Then I began to think that my father was any one of those men she'd sometimes bring home to whatever apartment we were living in. The morning after, I think that she'd feel bad about herself, about them, and she'd try to shoo them out the door before I was awake, but I was always straining to catch a glimpse of them with their beards and their blue jeans and their work boots.

"Well," Thelma said. I waited for her to continue, but then Jerry was back in the car.

"Everything all right back there?" he said.

"Fine. Fine," Thelma said. She examined the fingernails of her intact hand and pushed her cuticles down with the point of her turquoise ring. "Enjoy your fresh air?"

Thelma's house stood on a couple of acres just north of the city of Bellingham. It was a manufactured home, a dark brown doublewide on a cinderblock foundation. The door from the car-port opened into the kitchen. Entering the house, I was hit by a wall of heat and the odor of roast turkey and old dog. But underneath all that there was something else. Layers of sweetness and tanginess I couldn't then name. Before I had closed the door behind me,

Thelma's two aging hounds raced around the corner. When the Basset hit the linoleum his nails skittered and he struggled to catch himself before he slid into the wall. But the Blood's nose immediately found my crotch. Thelma's home-helper Mabel was frying something in an electric pan at the counter. She turned and smacked the dog's nose with the flat of her hand. "Leave it!" she hollered. "Rufus. Chompy John. Bed!" Rufus ducked his head and gave a sad wag before he slunk off to a pillow in the living room. Chompy John gathered himself up off the floor and scampered after him. Mabel was the same height as Thelma, only three times as heavy. She was wearing a short-sleeved, royal blue cotton dress covered with a pattern of giant white flowers. Her thick calves were bare and her terry cloth slippers that revealed dainty red toenails. It was hard for me to tell how old she was. Her face had few wrinkles and her hair was jet black and too perfect. A wig, I thought.

I found myself a spot on a sagging horsehair couch and eyed the silent screen of the TV. Jerry made sure Thelma settled into her recliner with her oxygen tank. Then he left to spend the holiday with his in-laws. The minute the door closed behind him, Mabel popped her head around the corner, flashed a smile, and said in high sonorous voice, "Thirty minutes."

"She's got a mouth full of marbles," Thelma said, but she took the tubes out of her nose and sprang up from her chair. "You and me got a job to do." She led the way to a room that was really part of the kitchen. It was separated from the living room by a half wall of shelves. The table was turquoise Formica with chrome legs. A deep scratch ran across the surface and the matching vinyl chairs were ripped and patched with grey duct tape.

I wondered about the room where my mom would be sitting down to dinner. I thought of John. The handful of times I met him he wore a checkered shirt. He had short dark hair and glasses. His mother must look just like him and his brothers too. He probably

had a sister and there were bound to be cousins, even grandparents. Then I pictured my mom again in a high back wooden chair, and she looked so alone. I wondered what she'd say about me. Whether she'd say anything at all about me. I told myself I didn't care and tried to believe it was true.

Thelma bent over a carved wooden chest that sat in the corner of the room. She pulled out a bright pink tablecloth. She spread the cloth over the table and began to shake it. As it unfurled like a flat sheet, I saw that it was striped with threads of dark pink and yellow silk. Small squares of mirrored glass dangled from the border. It released a bitter but not unpleasant odor. She smoothed the cloth and checked to make sure that it hung evenly from each end of the table. Then she went to an oak cabinet with glass doors and lifted out a stack of three plates. She handed them to me, and I set them around the table. One was chipped and had a dark crack in the glaze but the other two were perfect. The pattern on the plates was blue. The border was a mix of geometric shapes and flowers. Thelma turned each plate so that the pattern in the center faced the chair. She laid out the silverware and crystal goblets. The glass was thin, so thin that I imagined taking a bite out of it.

The surface of the bureau was covered in knickknacks. I reached out and touched one, an ebony framed glass box that encased a single piece of ivory that had been carved into a pagoda, a willow tree and a bridge. For a moment, I believed that I could climb in and look down on the heron standing in the water. "A whole world in a little box," Thelma said.

First Mabel brought out the turkey. She carried two large bowls filled with chunks of meat and gravy. Rufus and Chompy John barked and leaped on either side of her. I thought they might knock her over in their excitement. They quieted down when she put the two bowls on the floor next to the table. Their barking was replaced by the sounds of lapping and chewing.

Mabel cooed at each dog. She reached behind Thelma and cracked a window. A quick breeze whipped through the room, and she returned to the kitchen. I don't know how many trips she made, but each time she returned with a tray or a bowl in each hand. When she was done, the dogs had finished their meal and were sleeping on the living room floor. Mabel took one last trip to the kitchen to remove their bowls. Before she sat down, she closed the window. The table was laden with foods as brightly colored as the cloth. My own experience of Thanksgiving dinner consisted of a tuna sandwich or a frozen dinner in a foil tray, but what I saw before me wasn't what I imagined would be my first Thanksgiving, either.

"Aren't we having turkey?" I asked.

"That's for the dogs," Thelma said and piled her plate with golden brown lumpia and sweet peanut sauce. Mabel scooped bright yellow paella onto her plate. I nibbled at a sweet potato empanada, was pleased, and decided to be more adventurous. I reached for a bowl that was filled with dense white chunks.

"Don't eat that," Thelma said through a mouthful of food. "That's raw fish."

"It is not raw," Mabel said. "It's cured in vinegar."

At that meal, I swallowed foods I had never dreamed existed. Some sweet, some fiery, but all brightly flavored. Those two women told me stories about their children. Mabel's oldest son Jesus was planning to come to the United States next Fall. He was going to study chemical engineering at the university. Thelma told me that her second son Francis had raced go-carts until he was thirty-five when he crashed and separated his right shoulder. They competed for my attention. I felt important, like a guest of honor. They squabbled and tittered and fell into a comfortable silence. At that meal, I ate my fill. But it wasn't over, Mabel whisked away dishes and returned with a flan and a plate of thick, glazed cookies. She pushed the cookies toward me and said, "Moon cakes, for luck."

"Swallow one of those, and you'll never be the same," Thelma said.

I picked one up. It was heavier than I expected. I bit into the dense pastry. Chewed slowly. A rich, caramel flavor filled my mouth. When I swallowed, it was as if that richness filled my body all the way to my fingertips. This was no pumpkin pie.

"Good?" Mabel said. I nodded.

I took a second bite. This time my tongue shrank from something salty and sulfurous. I wanted to spit it out, but both women watched me intently. I kept chewing.

Thelma smiled and said, "It's only lucky if you eat the whole thing."

When I had, Mabel disappeared into the kitchen behind a pile of dishes. Thelma put her hand over mine and said, "Now you go outside and have enough fun for all of us."

The November rains had stripped most of the maple leaves from the trees. A few still dangled here and there, but the rest rotted in scattered piles of yellow and brown. Stalks of wild grass stood tall and seed clusters weighed down by droplets of water clung to my pant legs as I crossed the yard.

For the first time that day, I was alone. I enjoyed the freshness of the damp air. Thelma's yard was really just a small clearing surrounded by scraggly second growth trees and a collection of falling down outbuildings. What might have once housed goats or sheep now served as a lean-to protecting what I guessed was the Monza Spyder. The car was covered with a blue plastic tarp, but the headlights winked at me, challenging me to come take a look—to confirm that it was real. I climbed over a pile of old tires to get closer. Three or four bungee cords were stretched across the hood and hooked into wheel wells to hold the tarp in

place. I pulled at the plastic and there it was, candy apple red. I didn't know why, but this was important to me. When I pulled the tarp back down over the car, a field mouse darted out.

I could see it weaving its way through the mesh of bent grasses like an oversized beetle. It skittered up onto the pile of abandoned tires then disappeared. I waited for it to reemerge on the other side of the tires. But I didn't see it. The promise of catching that little rodent was too much. I walked to the tires and began to poke around.

Though it was nestled in a pile of decomposing leaves, one of the tires sat flush on a cement pad. I peered down inside to find about three inches of standing water. The mouse was trapped. It swam to the inside wall of the tire. Its little claws pawed wildly, but it couldn't get a hold on the concave rubber. I watched as it swam to the other side with the same futile result. I picked up a stick and knocked at the side of the tire. The mouse paused as the sound and the vibration passed through its little swimming pool. When nothing further happened, it started swimming along the edge again searching for some escape. I knew that I could put the stick down into the tire and give it a little bridge to freedom.

I looked up toward the house. The windows steamed up from the heat and the full day of cooking. A curtain clung to the condensation, and I noticed a dark brown stain where the fabric was discolored. I could see Thelma through a sliding glass door that led into the living room. She was sitting in her recliner with her head tilted back. Her oxygen tank sat next to the chair. She looked small and frail. As if she might be swallowed up by the chair or waste away to nothing. A wave of gloom washed over me. Maybe I felt the weight of the unending grey sky. Maybe I just felt too out in the open, but I suddenly longed for the walls of the apartment to close me in, to make me invisible. I thought that Thelma was sleeping, but then she raised her left hand and beckoned to me. It was a strange gesture—her hand like a hook pulling the air and all that was in it toward herself. All I could think of were those

stubs where fingers should have been. I pretended not to see her and glanced down at the mouse. It was still swimming in circles clawing frantically at the smooth inside wall of the tire. If it could just get a foothold, I knew that it would be free in seconds. I looked back toward Thelma. She beckoned to me again. I tossed the stick toward the car and made my way to the house.

I slid open the glass door and stepped inside. The heat was stifling.

"You looked a little lost out there," Thelma said. "Not quite sure what to do with yourself." I shrugged. "Dominoes with an old lady?" she asked.

"I've never played," I said.

She rubbed the palms of her hands together. "Grandma'll fix that."

She removed the oxygen tubes from her nose and made her way to the dining room table. The cloth, dishes, and Mabel were gone. From one of the rooms down the hall I could hear the rhythmic snoring of the dogs and the murmur of a television. In the center of the table sat a bowl of candied nuts. Thelma went to the bureau and picked up a wooden box. She unhooked the hinge and removed a square of green felt to reveal a set of ivory dominoes. She dumped them on the table, flipped one here and there. When they all lay face down, she used both hands to stir the pile. The stone in her ring kept twinkling in the light. She chanted, "Round and round and round she goes, where she stops nobody knows." She stopped stirring and told me to draw eleven. When we each had selected our tiles, she shoved the rest to the side. "Bone yard," she said winking.

She told me to draw one for a starter. When I reached for the pile she said, "These really are bones." I hesitated. "Elephant tusks." I picked one and turned it over. A double six. "My first husband brought them from Africa before World War I." She selected one of her tiles. Holding it with her silver ring and thumb, she ran her right index finger along its

edge. "Oh, the stories they could tell. If only bones could talk." She put her tile down. "They can't. But I can." She grinned at me. I put a tile down. Before I could pull my hand back, her fingers were wrapped around my wrist. "Did you know I had a husband before your Great-grandpa Maxi?" I shook my head.

"Now that's a story." She took another tile and tapped it on the table. "Mr. VanAstebulen was the richest and the meanest man in all of Bellingham." She paused as if to let this sink in. Then she told me to place my tile and that the year was 1917. She had just moved from the island to attend the Washington State Normal School for teachers. But what with the war and all the young men off in Europe, she was able to get a job at the lumber mill. That, of course, was owned by Mr. VanAstebulen. She told me he was tall and thin and wore his hair oiled. He had a long mustachio, and he oiled that too. She slid a tile across the table. "You may not believe this," she said, "but when I was a young woman, I was very beautiful." Seeing her yellow teeth backed by silver fillings, I couldn't believe that she'd ever been young. She told me that she looked like Clara Bow from the pictures.

"What are the pictures?" I asked.

"Picture shows. Movies." She claimed that her hair had been chestnut brown and hung to her waist. She cut it when she started work at the mills. That would have been a fool's game, she said. With hair like that, her head would have been whipped round the wrong way in no time.

She drummed her fingers on the table. I admitted that I didn't have a match. She pointed to the bone yard.

She told me she lived in one of them tenement buildings down by the wharf. He owned those too, Mr. VanAstebulen. Every morning she trudged up the hill to a twelve-hour shift feeding log after log through the saws. "They said women couldn't do it, and I was only

fifteen." That was only four years older than me. "It's important to be able to make your own way in the world." She rhythmically pushed at the air, her left hand leading her right. I followed her movements carefully as if I could see the log—could hear the buzzing of the saw. "Then one day, I slipped." She lurched forward in her chair a little. I leaned back in mine. "In the blink of an eye, they were gone." She grasped her left hand with her right and held it up in front of her face. "I looked down, and there lay my fingers—one, two, three—in the sawdust and the blood. I fainted straight away." She popped a candied nut into her mouth and took another tile. She held it to her lips for a moment then placed it on the table. "Three weeks later, I awoke in my room in the tenement house." She had been in a fever and fallen behind in her rent. Mr. VanAstebulen came to evict her, but when he saw her lying on the bed like an angel, he had to have her. He gave her two options. Marry him or be tossed out on the streets.

"Did you love him?" I asked.

Of course she didn't. But faced with the streets, she became his child bride. I had never heard that term before, child bride. It both horrified and thrilled me. Apparently, Mr. VanAstebulen was terribly jealous, so he kept her in his mansion with stuffed bears, lion skin rugs and the like. One day, after a terrible row, he locked her in her room. She was desperate. Tired of her life. She threw open the window and looked across the bluff to the waves crashing below. Finally, she knew what to do. Clinging to the ivy that covered the side of the house, she made her way to freedom.

The dominoes lay untouched on the table. "Where did you go?" I asked.

She made her way down to the beach, but just as she reached the shore the storm broke. Rain fell in torrents and the tide cut her off from the way she had come. She found a small shack on the beach and sought shelter. There she found him. A young man with golden

brown hair. Her handsome beau, Maxi. He had been living like a hobo in that cabin since he'd gotten out of the army. He had it set up with everything that he could need—a little cook stove, a cot. He welcomed her in and built a fire in the stove so that she could warm herself. "The storm raged all around us, and we fell in love."

"Were you happy?" I asked.

No. She knew that Mr. VanAstebulen would never release her. Spring passed into summer, and she spent every day with Maxi, but she had to spend every night with Mr. VanAstebulen. She paused and looked at me to see if I understood that significance of that. I didn't. She said that she didn't know what to do. Then one afternoon, she and Maxi were on the lawns in front of the house. Mr. VanAstebulen returned unannounced and caught them together.

They fought. He struck Maxi who fell, his head hitting a rock. He was out cold. Mr. VanAstebulen told her that he would take her away forever—that she would never see Maxi again. She sunk down on the bench and sobbed. Mr. VanAstebulen laughed triumphantly. "And then I knew," she said. "I saw as clear as day what I needed to do. I snuck up behind Mr. VanAstebulen and gave him a quick shove. He fell to his death on the rocks below. The waves carried his body out to sea, and he was never to be heard from again."

She stopped. She started to hum a tune and drew a tile from the bone yard. I didn't know what to think. Part of me wanted this to be true. But if it was true, that would mean I was sitting with a murderer. She gleefully popped another nut into her mouth and crunched it noisily. If it wasn't true, I wondered why all stories had to end in death. And if they did, what that meant for me. And what did that mean for my mom?

As if she could read my mind, Thelma said, "You know, the problem with your mother is that she thinks poor." Thelma laid down her tile, turned toward me, and folded her

hands in her lap. "There is a difference between being poor and thinking poor. Don't you ever forget that. I don't want you to ever think poor, Kristina. You're too good for that. Don't ever think poor."

She blinked behind those large glasses and stared at me, silent. I could hear the wheezing of the air as it inflated what was left of her lungs. I didn't know what to say because I realized that I knew exactly what she meant. Yet, I felt frozen in my chair, like the light of the moon had just gone out. I felt a dull feeling that I now think I always felt as a child—an urge to protect my mother. Protect her against meddling strangers, against no-good boyfriends, against family that was supposed to love her.

"I don't like this game," I said.

"Suit yourself," she said. She stood up and went back to her recliner. She fitted the oxygen tube in her nose and gave a swift twist to the knob. She leaned her head back and hummed to herself with her eyes closed. I sat there in front of that great heap of bones. Past her profile, I could see through the sliding glass door. The afternoon light was fading but from that vantage point I could see the pile of tires.

I raced out into the yard. This place that had seemed full of wonder only thirty minutes earlier had transformed into a junk yard. A place full of trash. I didn't have to go near the tire. I knew what I'd find there. What I'd always find. My knees buckled, and I collapsed on the wet grass. I gasped and the sound that came out of my mouth was a whimper of fear. I wanted to stuff my mouth full of earth, but I knew even that couldn't stop that sound. I could hear my own heart beating. It kept repeating, I think poor, think poor, think poor.

Much later that night, when I was safely back at the apartment, I flopped down on the couch in the living room. Shadows stretched and fell across the wall like a stunted picture

show. Mom turned on the fluorescent light in the kitchen. She looked at me and said, "You were quiet on the ride home."

I didn't say anything.

"Did you like those damn dogs?"

I shook my head.

"Don't you think Grandma's a hoot?"

"I don't know," I said.

Mom sat down beside me and put her hand on my knee. "Did something happen?"

"No," I said and leaned my head against her shoulder. "It's just something she said."

I could feel her body stiffen under my cheek. She started to breath more quickly. "What did she tell you?"

"Nothing," I mumbled and closed my eyes.

She pulled away from me. With a hand on each of my shoulders, she turned my body so that I was facing her. She leaned her face close to mine. Searching. "I can tell that she told you something. Was it about me? What did she say about me?"

I'd never seen her scared. Her face looked strange and distorted. Her makeup was smeared and tired. Her eyelashes clung together in little clumps. She gave me a quick shake. I could hear Thelma's words ringing in my ears. I looked at her and saw her for the first time in the way I see her now. My Mom. My poor Mom. Saddled with me.

She shook me again. "What did that crazy old bat tell you?"

There are moments that can change a life. I know that it seems small, but looking back, I know that before that day, I was a child. Not a child in the sense that people like to think of children as carefree because I had cares, and I had my share of woes. And innocent's not the right word, either. But before that day, I didn't know that lives could be different.

Looking at my Mom's face caught in the shadows, I had a glimpse of the future. Not my future. That still remained unwritten. But I could see Mom's future clearly. I could see her fattened with age and alcohol and sitting alone in some apartment. Any apartment. In Seattle, in Portland, in Denver—it didn't matter. The interior of her life would remain unchanged.

What I didn't know then was that we were on the threshold of what I have come to think of as the best time in our lives together. She would marry John and quit her job at the airport. She would enroll in community college and earn her GED. She would even start work on an AA degree hoping someday to work as a travel agent. But through all of that, it was as if she couldn't change the direction of her story.

I sat there staring into her face. I longed to be forgiven. Even now, I'm not sure for what. Maybe for just being born. I wanted to beg her not to think poor. What I did realize then, and I still think that this is true, is that what I had been longing for most my whole life was to protect her from the end of her own story.

Looking at her then, I knew that if I didn't answer she would slap my face. So I told her the only truth I thought she could hear. "She told me some stupid story about killing her first husband," I said.

She released my shoulders and stood up from the couch. "Mr. VanAstebulen." She laughed. It was an ugly laugh. Deep and throaty. She walked to the kitchen table and dug in her purse. "So, how'd he die this time?" She bent her head to the side so that her hair fell away from her face. "Poison? Struck by lightening?" She lit her cigarette. "Thelma changes the details surrounding his death but the ending is always the same."

I moved away from her to look out the window. The drive-in screen was dark. The parking lot empty. "She killed him," I said. "Gave him a swift shove off a cliff. Then she married Grandpa Maxi and lived happily ever after."

"That's a laugh," she said. "I lived with them, you know. Before you were born. They used to fight like cats and dogs." She pulled me back on to the couch and put her arm around my shoulder. "When Grandpa Maxi died, she had him cremated. When she dies, she says she wants to be buried holding the urn with his ashes. You know why?"

"No," I said.

"So she can have her hands around his neck for eternity." She looked at me and smiled a little. "Romantic, huh? That was no happily ever after, I tell you. You're too smart to believe everything you hear, Kristina. Not like me." She shook her curls and winked. "Not like me."

We sat there together and watched shadows cast by the headlights of passing cars crawl across the wall. For the five minutes it would take her to smoke her cigarette, I knew that she would sit quietly and let me stay close to her. I wanted to tell her that I wanted to be like her. That there was nothing wrong with the way she was. But I also wanted to believe that this was not my story. That I would be free to change my ending.

Multifaceted Possibilities for Creative Writing: A Hybrid Approach to Teaching the Creative Writing Workshop and Nineteenth-Century Serial Publication

In her book *Rethinking Creative Writing*, Stephanie Vanderslice suggests "that it is entirely possible for an MFA program to serve more than one master—that of traditional craft" and that of the demands of the changing marketplace facing graduating students (65). In effect, Vanderslice asks us to consider the benefit of teaching craft, while at the same time introducing students to the practical and commercial concerns of the publishing industry. Moving beyond the singular focus of the traditional writer's workshop, the programs that Vanderslice uses to demonstrate the success of this approach illustrate a growing "diversity of curricula" being used to teach creative writing. This coursework offers students options in "digital media, nonfiction, screenwriting, autobiography, the profession of authorship, [and] teaching creative writing" (67) as well as practical publishing experience ranging from niche markets such as letterpress printing (68) to publishing laboratories that teach aesthetics of book design and the practical aspects of book production (70). However, these approaches go beyond simply exposing students to the demands of the marketplace. Innovations in how we conceive of the teaching of creative writing encourage students to broaden how they conceive of creative writing careers. They are introduced to the role of writers in work in public education, arts administration in literature, and literary editing. In addition to completing coursework and internships, many programs require that students participate in community literacy outreach programs. Vanderslice suggests this multi-faceted approach "may ultimately result in a stronger, more sustainable literary culture" (65).

I wholeheartedly agree. For too long, creative writing programs have focused primarily on development of craft while insulating students from commercial concerns. Doing

so may provide students with time to focus on developing their art form; however, I would like to suggest that this insular approach limits students' ability to think creatively about professions available to them and also limits their ability to consider how innovations in technology are potentially changing the publishing industry. In this paper, I explore problems that result from institutional insularity and from the paradigms of the traditional workshop itself. I present my own suggestion for a hybrid workshop that has multifaceted goals. In the process, I present three approaches that strive to incorporate both current publishing practices and digital technology in ways that effectively prepare students for professions in creative industries. These student-centered approaches look for ways to tap into existing student knowledge and interest in order to expand student skill set and broaden developing writers' concept of authorship and a creative life.

Having recently completed work on my PhD in English Literature with a Creative Writing Dissertation, I speak from the bifurcated experience of studying literature in the traditional academic classroom and writing in a traditional workshop setting. While I benefited greatly from my program, I often wondered as both a teacher and a student about what could be gained from bridging the gap between the academic and the studio approach. Drawing on my research interests, what I propose here is a hybrid of a genre study of nineteenth-century British serial literature and the creative writing workshop. The following questions guide my work: (1) What can developing writers gain by understanding the demands of a changing marketplace? (2) What pedagogical practices will allow students to focus on possibilities rather than flaws in workshop fiction? (3) How can students explore writing practices that encourage expansion rather than compression? And (4) How can study of a historical publishing paradigm help students recognize and develop skills with digital technology as well as read and understand the development of genres? (5) Rather than seeing

the concerns of industry as a threat, I will suggest that constraints of industry and technology have historically and can in the present day spark creativity and production.

To begin considering these questions, I would like to point to pedagogical practices in another field of creative arts, the visual arts. A common requirement of BFA and MFA programs in painting and other visual media is the study of the Old Masters of the Renaissance. Students who are developing their own craft and technique with acrylic or found objects are required to learn the techniques of oil painting. Though they may practice abstract expressionism or installation art, students commit hours of labor to reproduce a work by a Renaissance artist. Focused on production rather than interpretation, this approach differs significantly from study of Renaissance art in a course in Art History. The assigned historical artist and painting bear no direct correlation to a student's practice or interests. The pedagogical goal of this kind of study is not that 21st century artists start painting like Antonello da Messina. Instead, students learn painstaking techniques specific to the production of oil painting: color, layering, and light. Students must adjust the pace of their work when using a media that takes months to fully dry. Developing artists may or may not incorporate these techniques into their own practice. However, this study provides visual-artists with a knowledge of technique, a knowledge of historical schools and practices that contribute to their own, and an appreciation for methods other than their own. Further, I would argue that for any creative artist, in addition to developing one's own style, it is vital to explore creative practices radically different from one's own.

In her challenge to reconsider creative writing pedagogy, Vanderslice encourages us to explore ways in which we can increase students' marketable skills. In doing so, she suggests that we have a dual purpose of teaching craft and preparing for the workplace. Indeed, two of the innovative approaches that I will describe in this article do just that. I would like to take

this challenge further and suggest that we take a multi-faceted purpose in teaching creative writing. In order to achieve this, we could innovatively explore ways that we can incorporate historical and genre study of narrative fiction into creative writing pedagogy. My goal in challenging creative writing students to study and adopt production practices of nineteenth-century serial fiction in a semester course is not to ask them to write like Dickens. Instead it is to give them a new perspective on their own practice. I believe we can look to historical genres to learn valuable lesson on narrative craft, and that a shift in practice can profoundly change students' understanding of their own work. And while the study of nineteenth-century publication may not directly correlate to skills students need in today's marketplace, I believe that study of a historical moment when publishing practices were rapidly changing as a result of technological advances could encourage students think innovatively about current changes possible in digital platforms.

Concerns with the underlying paradigm of the traditional workshop

To begin a critical examination of the paradigms of the Writer's Workshop, it is important to consider this pedagogical model as part of the larger institution of the university. Further, it is important to remember that the institution of the Writer's Workshop was developed in the historical context of the post-war period—a moment that privileged the modernist aesthetic. In his literary history of the development of the Writer's Workshop, *Workshops of Empire: Stenger, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War*, Eric Bennett convincingly argues that in the immediate aftermath of World War II, under the growing pressures of the Cold War, "old rivalries" or the far right and far left "made way" for the "vital center" (2). Bennett explains that

American writers and intellectuals affiliated with that "vital center" believed that the

> complexity of literature provided an antidote to the sloganeering amidst slogans run amok. No more *Arbeit macht frei*; no more *Workers of the world unite!* Under the rubric of good intentions (the argument went), politics led to reductive formulations, and reductive formulations eased citizens into violence" (2).

The result was the development of writing programs that strove to be apolitical in the protected university setting. This was a space intended to provide writers with an "insularity and remoteness from the common life" (Bennett 15). Writers were encouraged to develop complexity and craft instead of interfacing with the broader public or popular culture.

Though this space was intended to allow artists to develop without having to concern themselves with the pressures of industry, the insularity of the workshop model resulted in writers producing fiction for the limited audience of the workshop. As Tim Mayers points out, "the workshop's greatest strength—that it provides apprentice writers with a responsive audience, becomes ironically its greatest weakness" (qtd. in Vanderslice 90-91). It is true that the workshop provides emerging writers with an audience of like-minded readers who are focused on the development of craft. These are careful readers and thoughtful critics, yet they are often part of the same home institution.

Further, it is widely understood that while the workshop setting potentially frees writers from commercial concerns, it does not provide insulation from ideology. The focus on craft as well as the insulation from both political and commercial concerns is fundamentally part of New Criticism. While the workshop model has produced literary fiction that is rich, varied, complex, and worthy of study, as Mark McGurl and others have pointed out, it has an identifiable style and a program aesthetic. John Barth identifies this aesthetic as primarily the short story form. Barth complains that fiction produced in creative writing programs favor "Compression […] showing not telling […] implicativeness, singleness of effect, epiphanic

peripety, psychological realism" (6). It is easy to see how this aesthetic fits well with the values of Modernism and New Criticism. However, Barth points out an added pedagogical value that the short-story form brings to the workshop. He explains that the "conventional short story" is effective in the workshop primarily because:

> we can hold [it] in the mind's eye of the seminar; in the allotted hour or so we can attend with some critical efficiency both to representative details and to overall matters of pace and plot and narrative viewpoint. What's more, as the season wears on we can come to know the author's characteristic strengths and weaknesses and idiosyncrasies of imagination, and can assess a new effort in the light of its predecessors, a sort of mini-oeuvre" (6).

The short-story form lends itself to the institutional time slot of the classroom period. This pedagogical advantage afforded by the short story results in many contemporary fiction writers composing work that is published in small journals produced by university presses, such as *The Kenyon Review*, *The MidAmerican Review*, and *The North Dakota Quarterly*. Circulation of these journals is relatively small and allows for the development of emerging writers. However, readership of these journals is primarily writers. Further, stories from journals and collections are often anthologized or included in creative-writing textbooks and then read as models for craft by university students. My point is that the same way that the workshop model has insulated writers from the broader public and culture, the short-story form has insulated writers from a broad readership.

As this pedagogical approach favors a dominant aesthetic, many critics of the workshop argue that it also supports the dominant social order. As Rosalie Kearns writes in "Voices of Authority: Theorizing Creative Writing Pedagogy," two norms of the creative writing workshop effectively work as validation and gatekeepers for the literary establishment.

First, the workshop critique that focuses on flaws undercuts the "competence or expertise" of the emerging author. In Kearns's experience, the workshop audience perceives "some violation of an aesthetic norm" as "a mistake rather than a deliberate artistic choice" (793). According to Kearns, this limits an audience's ability to read material that is experimental and new. Second, Kearns points out that the so called "gag-rule" or traditional practice of silencing the author during workshop serves not only to limit arguing and explaining in the workshop but to effectively silence marginalized groups who "already feel silenced, thus furthering their feelings of alienation and disempowerment" (793). While many writers, myself included, have benefitted from the workshop, it is imperative that as teachers we reflect on ways in which traditional workshop practices that have been naturalized and considered neutral can silence some of our students. In doing so, we need to develop pedagogical approaches that draw on and support existing student expertise. Further, we need to develop classroom practices that encourage all emerging writers to contribute actively to the creative process. Finally, rather than focusing on flaws, we should adopt practices that allow students to consider possibilities.

Innovations in Creative Writing: Immersion over Isolation

Creative Writing has been a growing area of study in English Departments in the United States. In 2009, there were 336 graduate programs and 313 undergraduate programs (Vanderslice 3). It is an accepted reality among students in these programs that writers of literary fiction do not make a living from their creative work. However, with the shrinking number of full-time teaching positions, the traditional model of supporting one's creative life with teaching is also no longer a reality for many. Further, programs that insulate writers from

commercial concerns of industry produce an increasing number of graduates with limited knowledge or skill required in a changing literary marketplace.

In contrast to programs that strive to protect developing writers from the exigencies of a rapidly changing market, there are those that embrace a broader concept of creative writing. Such programs envision the instruction of writers not just through the traditional studio approach for developing craft. They look for ways to immerse developing writers in academic studies of literary history and genre, as well as practical application of historical printing practices and contemporary book design. Further they make efforts to consider the students' future professional life and in doing so consciously incorporate processes and concerns of the publishing industry. For example, integral to the University of North Carolina at Wilmington's BFA and MFAs in Creative Writing is the program's Publishing Laboratory. The laboratory was developed out of courses taught by former literary agent and publisher, Stanley Colbert. On its webpages, the Publishing Laboratory describes that it "incorporates into the apprenticeship of creative writers an applied learning experience in the process by which literary manuscripts, including their own, are designed, shaped, and edited into books and published to a wide audience of readers". Far from insulating creative writers from the concerns of the publishing industry, UNCW's Publishing Laboratory demands that its students consider not just the textual craft of their work, but to conceive of it as a designed publication. Immersed in the entire publication process, students learn the business of writing, including use of design software and professional practices of self-promotion. Further, students have the opportunity to learn methods of marketing titles for a broad audience. According to the Publishing Laboratory's Mission Statement "all published works serve the dual purpose of providing a valuable learning experience and contributing to the culture of humane letters as literary arts of the highest quality, reflective of the aesthetic and ethical values of the

department". The goals of the Publishing Laboratory provide students with skills that will allow them to sustain creative lives following graduation. By gaining valuable applied skills, students can pursue careers not just as teachers of creative writing but in the creative industries of editing, publishing, books arts, and new media. Yet, central to the Publishing Laboratory's mission is the development of a sustainable literary culture. Clearly, this involves more than the creation of a community of writers. It involves a community of writers that is knowledgeable of literary trends both historical and present day, and aware of how publishing platforms can potentially reach broad audiences.

Innovations in Creative Writing: Possibilities over Flaws

In his work on digital and hybrid creative writing course design, Michael Dean Clark encourages teachers of creative writing to analyze their own practices. He suggests that as teachers of creative writing we must go beyond simply replicating the workshops of which we were a part. In his own teaching and course design, he incorporates the best practices of fiction writing, while at the same time looks for ways to encourage "collaborative work, digital learning, and [use of] creative platforms [with] an emphasis on helping students better articulate the marketability of their skill set" (64). Rather than encouraging students to work in an insular environment with the goal of producing short stories for publication in small literary magazines, Clark's approach has the potential to broaden students' concept of how to use their creative skills. In his article, "The Marketable Creative: Using Technology and Broader Notions of Skill in the Fiction Course," Clark describes his method that emphasizes collaborative work and an understanding of workplace roles such as group lead, communications specialist, editor, and writer. In Clark's laboratory approach, students learn fiction theory and at the same time receive instruction on the digital tools used for production

during the course. While Clark's goal is to replicate the collaborative dynamic of the workplace, his approach is reminiscent the leveling processes of a digital role playing game (RPG). Role players (students) learn to use the technology needed in the game (course). In the process, they create characters, and they learn narrative options. In this way, Clark incorporates game play in order to effectively teach elements of fiction writing as well as train students to work collaboratively and increase technological skill.

Clark's method is drastically different than the traditional workshop in crucial ways. In his class, students collaboratively author a thirteen-thousand-word narrative. During composition, Clark imposes an external creative disruption in the form of a "challenging story twist" (67). As opposed to workshop model in which students play the role of critic pointing out flaws in a text while an individual, silenced author listens, Clark's model allows students to work together in various production roles to voice and address concerns with sections of text. He argues that by imposing an external pressure he "pushes each [group] to generate creative solutions to external requirements within their own narratives and shows them their stories from different vantage points than they might otherwise have" (67). Not only does Clark encourage students to experience authorship as a collaborative rather than a solitary process, he also helps students understand how external constraints can increase creative and strategic thinking. In this model, external constraints are seen not as a threat but a way for students to develop solutions. This is radically different than a teaching model that encourages students to fixate on flaws. Participating as the reader of a developing text, Clark actively offers writers alternate narrative possibilities. This creates a dynamic audience and author relationship that pushes students beyond planned or fixed outcomes. In Clark's approach, there is no individual author working to create a text. Instead, students who worked in small groups to produce a work in parts, work together as a large group to revise the work into a cohesive whole.

Corporate authorship is not unique to our time. Incorporating study of literary history and genre would provide students with an informed historical understanding of the development of authorship and literary culture.

Innovations in Creative Writing: Expansion over Compression

At the Rochester Institute of Technology, Trent Hergenrader explores ways to incorporate digital pedagogy and game studies into the teaching of creative writing. In particular, he is interested in ways that Digital Role Playing Games (DRPGs) encourage participants to create fictional worlds and explore methods of characterization in ways that are productive for fiction writers. Exploring ways that these narrative-based games encourage participants to explore possibilities rather than presenting strict linear storylines, Hergenrader has identified a way to allow students to experience narratives as open-ended. Using the principles of gaming, Hergenrader effectively teaches two foundational elements of craft, characterization and narrative. In contrast to print culture, Hergenrader points out that DRPGs encourage players to:

> become active producers, rather than passive consumers, of game related content. This
>
> includes learning digital tools to create new levels and mods as well as inspiring other artistic output, such as drawing illustrations, recording videos, and writing fan fiction; players often share mods, artwork, and fiction in online communities and request feedback from their peers. (47)

Participating with the text of DPRGs, students constantly create content and engage with a broad audience and writing community. By bringing these principles into the classroom, Hergenrader helps students interested in pursuing careers in creative industries of writing,

editing and publishing to identify and build skills necessary of work in the marketplace. Integral to this participation is the creative construction of characters. It is easy to see how this gaming practice is similar to the craft skill of characterization.

Yet, the experience of participating in a DPRGs is essentially different for students than the study of traditional print media. Often, when students consume and sometimes when they create print media, they perceive narrative outcomes as fixed. It would be beneficial for creative writing students to study literary genres that encourage readers to anticipate multiple narrative outcomes. Often more expansive than the short-story favored by the workshop, these genres would challenge developing creative writers to consider ways in which they might satisfy and challenge reader anticipation.

While still keeping in mind the recognition and development of transferable skills, we could look to historical genres for lessons about narrative development. Shifting from an interpretive focus of the academic classroom to the production focus of the creative writing classroom could allow us a new perspective on the work of old masters.

Why Incorporate the Production Model of Nineteenth-Century Serial Publication into the Twenty-First-Century Workshop?

In their critical work on nineteenth-century fiction, Linda Hughes and Michael Lund suggest Victorian readers experienced serially published texts in a way that was fundamentally different from how we experience these texts. For example, with a novel like Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* which was originally composed, published over the period of nineteen months, readers participated in David's coming of age and professionalization as a process that emerged during a year and a half of reading. At crucial moments in story, readers were forced to wait and wonder about their favorite characters' fates. Reception materials

show that during these enforced gaps readers didn't sit idly waiting. Instead, like students of Michael Dean Clark and the UNCW's Publishing Laboratory, they participated in the publishing process, discussed characters, and anticipated possible plot outcomes. They engaged actively in letter writing. They wrote and read reviews. In some cases, these directly affected an author's plans. Critic Carol Martin has established that even George Eliot, who is well-known for her "artistic vision" and refusal to "pander […] made numerous alterations and adjustments to fit the demands of serialization. Eliot was aware of these special demands and wrote to produce the most effective installments she could" (3). Initially, in her composition of *Middlemarch*, Eliot had planned to introduce the character Dorothea in Part I, but to leave her out of Part II in order to develop plots concerning other characters. However, reviews of Part I reveal that readers focused almost entirely on Dorothea's plot ignoring those concerning other inhabitants of Middlemarch. Martin points out that audience response made it clear to Eliot that her initial plan was a "mistake" (190). Readers had formed such a strong emotional bond with one character that they would "demand more news of Dorothea—soon" (194).

Writers like George Eliot saw one of the advantages of part publication was that it allowed time for readers to deliberate and experience a deep impression of plot and characters. However, this extended relationship with the text also allowed readers the time to formulate clear expectations about narrative possibilities. In their article, "Studying Victorian Serials," Hughes and Lund suggest this experience of reading a text over an extended period in effect merged the time of the narrative with that of the reader's life "until the text ceased to be entirely an aesthetic object or product and became instead a process, a story lived by both characters and readers alike" (239). The experience that Hughes and Lund describe here seems to go beyond a reader engaging with characters as emotional surrogates. Over the extended

period of months and, in cases, years, readers immersed themselves in a fictional experience imaginatively developing deep emotional investment with fictional characters. Readers did not view the text as a complete or untouchable object. Instead, they experienced the reader, text, author relationship as a dynamic one in which they had an emotional stake. This dynamic encouraged readers to feel entitled to express those expectations through letters and reviews. Because these were written during the process of composition, they presented external pressures that authors like Eliot and Dickens found themselves responding to.

Hughes and Lund have pointed out that incorporating reading practices that extend over a longer period of time and emphasize breaks can fundamentally change students' understanding of and experience with nineteenth-century texts. My question is, what could this approach offer to creative writers in the twenty-first-century?

To diversify the creative writing curriculum, I suggest the study of nineteenth-century fiction and serial publication practices would introduce students to fiction that fostered a dynamic relationship between author, audience, and text. A course that combines historical study of nineteenth-century serialized literature and publication practices with a creative writing workshop would allow students an opportunity to immerse themselves in a production practice radically different from their own. This approach could offer students a deeper understanding of historical development and literary genre. Further, students could explore ways in which the external constraints of a publishing paradigm can spark creativity. Approaching course design with multifaceted goals could effectively incorporate strategies from the approaches of Clark and Hergenrader in order to allow students to produce text according to different roles, and to incorporate use of technology in ways that encourage students to broaden their digital skills set. At the same time this approach would incorporate study of historical publishing practices and genre to shift the focus of workshop critique from

a focus on flaws to a focus on possibilities. As student writers composed their installments, readers would respond with reviews and letters that expressed attachment to characters and anticipated possible narrative outcomes. By taking on three roles, writer, reviewer and fan, students could learn to invoke an audience outside of the insular workshop. Finally, working under a nineteenth-century serial production model could encourage students to produce long and expansive pieces of fiction that are often not possible in the traditional workshop.

The graduate-level creative writing course that I envision is designed for a sixteen-week semester. Following Michael Dean Clark's model, I would break this course into three phases. During the first phase, students would meet for four weeks to be introduced to a nineteenth-century serially produced text and serial publishing practices, and to learn the roles and digital tools necessary to complete the work for the course. During the second phase of the course, students would produce eight fifteen-page installments. In addition to producing creative text, students would also produce short, informal reception materials for other members of their group. These would be newspaper reviews and fan letters. The final two-week phase of the course consists of regrouping in a classroom setting with the goal of considering the works as a whole and for composition of a reflective piece.

Phase One:

The first section of this course would be focused on introducing students to the historical context of serial publication and introducing them to the technology that will be used in the course. In order to achieve this, students would read one Victorian text and practice writing short, informal reviews and fan letters during the reading process. One possible text for this project would be Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White.* This novel offers multiple opportunities to for students to learn the process of both serial reading practices and

production. First, unless the students have taken a Victorian Literature course, the likelihood of them having read this novel before is slim. This is important because it would give students the opportunity to experience reading in part not whole. Part of my educational approach would be requiring reading to be done, as Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund and other literary scholars of serial fiction suggest, over time with enforced breaks. Of course, reading the 40 parts of *The Woman in White* could not be done weekly over the course of a semester, but groups of four parts could be read over ten weeks. To support student understanding of consuming parts rather than wholes, I would require that students compose and publish reception material for the weekly reading assignment. These could take two forms. Writers could compose newspaper reviews or they could compose fan letters directed to the author that expressed what they hoped for in the plot. Students would be asked to not only to review the content, but to express which characters they had formed strong bonds with and to make predictions about what they anticipate in upcoming installments. Particularly, I would ask them to focus on concerns that they had as readers for the characters they were becoming attached to. In this way, students would creatively explore narrative possibilities based on the characters' attributes, motivations, and background. Not only would this invite students to participate as both consumers and producers of the text that they are reading, it would encourage them to explore the relationship between characterization and narrative. Further, this process is intended to encourage students to consider how authors generate narrative possibilities rather than working with fixed outcomes. The production of reviews and fan letters encourage students to participate in the active reading practices of the reader of serial fiction, but more importantly, this practice will help emerging writers learn to invoke an audience outside of the workshop. Participating themselves as invested and active readers will help students construct a reader for the fiction they will produce later in the semester.

Production of these reception materials will introduce students to the multiple roles they will be playing during the second phase of the course as well as introduce them to the technical skills required to produce and post their work on the learning management system (Blackboard or Canvas).

Further, during this four-week introductory phase, students would read one installment of the primary text with the goal of understanding how the serial novels were published in their original context. *All the Year Round*, the magazine in which Collins's novel was originally published, is digitized on *Dickens Journals Online* at djo.org.uk. I think that it would be important to make the discussion of at least one installment focus on this context. Reading one week's miscellany could increase students' understanding of how the text had to fit into this larger context. In his book, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers*, John Sutherland explains that "No writer in *All the Year Round* could forget for a moment the mechanics of publication. The pace, narrowness and need for 'incessant condensation' cut away all fat; the responsiveness of the sales to any slackening tension kept the novelist nervous and alert" (172). Reading the text of the novel in its original column form as it appeared alongside other articles would help introduce student readers to the narrowness of the space as well as how articles had to fit the editorial voice of the overall publication. This project would help students gain an understanding the constraints of nineteenth-century publishing practices. Further, understanding how individual authors had to comply with the editorial voice of a publication could introduce students to the concept of corporate authorship. Reading the text in this context could help students recognize the relationship between external publication concerns and author craft choices and potential creative solutions.

The final week of the first phase is devoted to instructing students how to plan and prepare for an expansive project. During this week, I would teach students to construct a

contemporary version of Dickens's use of number plans. For Dickens, these columns of notes were not only a prewriting plan for upcoming installments that included detail such as which characters would appear, which events he planned to include and even particular dialogue, but they were also a post- writing method for tracking what had actually appeared in the installment that was composed. This method of planning could be likened to storyboarding in sequential art or film production. When taking on the challenge of writing an expansive work of fiction, students must develop strategies that help them focus on overall design or structure. One thing student writers may find interesting about Dickens's method is that while it was detailed it was not rigid. This prep work seems to have provided him a plan of how to weave together several strands of plot. Yet his approach was minimal enough to allow for flexibility in the act of composition. Studying a master of serial form's work practice could provide students with creative ways to conceptualize and manage their own workload. This approach also shows Dickens awareness of audience throughout his process. As a writer, Dickens was aware of his audience's need for characters that were recognizable but not stereotypical. He understood that central characters had to reappear at regular intervals to ensure that readers wouldn't forget them and would understand their importance. This also shows a keen eye for shape and pacing. Each installment had to end with enough of a cliffhanger to draw readers back and also a bridge to the upcoming installment that would help readers make sense of the twists and turns of a plot.

Phase two:

The goal of the second phase of this course would be to provide students with an opportunity to produce and discuss longer, expansive pieces of fiction. The question I would have to ask would be: What could provide the production demand that was part of serial

writing while at the same time being reasonable within the larger context of students' other demands? Following the model of the National Novel Writing Month challenge, students could be asked to produce ten 5,000-word installments. This corresponds with the NaNoWriMo project for a novel composed in one month. However, perhaps a more productive project would be to ask students to produce eight weekly installments of 3,100 words. This would result in 25,000 words, the projected minimum requirement for a market published paperback. This would give students the experience of producing a significant amount of text in a short amount of time. At the same time, this would allow students to actively read and respond to other student writers' work.

In addition to challenging students to compose a different kind of work, it would be my goal to shift the writer's workshop discourse from a focus on flaws to a focus on narrative possibilities. This goal would be accomplished in two ways. First, as students write their fiction for the course, they would be instructed on how to invoke a broad audience. As Timothy Mayers suggests, consideration of "audience addressed" and "audience invoked" is "a profitable one in workshops" (qtd. in Vanderslice 91). Mayers encourages workshop practices that teach writers to consider not only the actual readers in the workshop, the audience addressed, but also an imagined reader for whom a text is intended, the audience invoked. For example, if students are interested in writing genre fiction such as mystery or thriller (a good match for a course that studies *Woman in White* as a primary text), it is important for them to imagine the needs and experience of an audience outside of the classroom. In this genre, writers should actively anticipate reader response to clues and narrative possibilities. Writers should also anticipate reader frustration with plot complications that are too convoluted or don't allow a reader to imagine an outcome. Workshop readers taking on the role of audience, writing reviews and fan mail, would shift the writer's perception of the reader's role. Rather

than writing to the actual readers in the workshop class, writers would be asked to write to an audience that actively anticipates and predicts. In this way, students practice invoking a broad audience. As they produce their fiction, students write to an imagined readership. As students read each other's work, they respond as invested readers.

While my historical model is nineteenth-century publication practices, these are in some ways analogous to practices in twenty-first-century digital media such as game development. Through recognizing this relationship, students could recognize transferable skills. My goal here is to encourage students to reconsider the relationship of author and audience in the creative process. During the process of development, games go through the alpha, beta, and gold phases. Game designers, like authors, may have a "pure vision" of the game they want to develop. However, this concept is not produced in isolation because ultimately, designers want to produce a game that people will play. Early in the production process, games go through alpha testing. While flaws are pointed out during this phase, alpha testing also allows a designer to interact with a player base. Players who participate in the alpha testing give feedback and suggestions. These are often incorporated into the developing game. The process of game design values developers who engage with and respond to player needs and interests. As students produce their expansive fiction, they will work with small groups of "alpha" readers. Students will post their drafts digitally. As I mentioned earlier, to help students explore the experience of reading the part rather than the whole, I would assign weekly composition of critical reviews or fan letters that emphasize reader anticipation. I would continue this process as the class reads student produced work. For example, a class of twelve could be divided in three groups. This would formally assign each writer three readers/reviewers. As students approached *The Woman in White*, I would also ask them to approach each other's work with a focus on how the text achieved the "commercial

imperative" of the serial. Rather than asking students to critique the elements of craft in the work, student reviewers or fan mail writers would be asked to focus on what parts of the work encouraged "readerly interest in the story in progress" (Allen 38). Their assigned readers will read and respond with reviews and fan response. Because of their crushing schedule, students will not be asked to revise earlier drafts; rather, they will focus on responding to their alpha reader's interest, anticipation, and prediction.

While alpha reading would take place digitally, the classroom workshop during this ten-week phase of the course would become a beta testing phase. Again, this model incorporates both elements of game development and nineteenth-century reading practices. During the beta testing phase of game design, games are released to a broader audience. During this phase of development, player experience continues to mold the final product. As in the traditional workshop, students would submit sections of their project for reading and response of the entire class. However, in this approach, the discourse community of the workshop itself could take on the community aspect of what is referred to as "Magazine Day." By optimizing readers' experience through engendering excitement at the end of installments, nineteenth-century writers and part publication led to the reader communities surrounding what is known as "Magazine Day." Because part publication was released on the same day monthly, large groups of readers, not just solitary individuals, awaited its arrival. During the enforced interruptions between publication, those communities of readers discussed their predictions for the outcomes of plots. Rather than focusing on how a work is incorporating an element of craft, such as imagery, students would be asked to form a community of readers to discuss the effect of a single image or event in an installment. They could discuss or evaluate the possibilities the work promises.

In addition to producing an active community of readers, composition for part publication would allow a different experience of revision. Rather than fixing flaws in drafts of composed texts, students would be concerned with developing character and narrative possibilities in upcoming installments. For example, students could explore how in the composition of serials writers had to end installments on moments that created excitement in order to draw back readers. But writers also adapted works in progress to fit reader expectations. In the insular environment of the traditional workshop, this sounds like sacrilege, something that interferes with the autonomy of the author. However, adopting the approach of alpha and beta testing would allow writers to conceive of the role of author and reader in a more dynamic way. Further, in the workshop environment, students can become protective of what they consider to be "their material." The insular environment of the workshop encourages this attitude—writing is conceptualized as coming from an individual and often erroneously understood to be based in their own experience. In a workshop that incorporated serial publication, this notion could be disrupted. Students would be encouraged to produce work in an intertextual environment where they are free to respond to and adapt the work of other authors.

Phase Three:

In keeping with goal of recognizing transferable skills, the final phase of this course would be the "gold release." In this final phase, student groups would have the opportunity to read the experimental novels as a whole. Students groups would be asked to reread the novels as a whole. Certainly, the goal of this process could give emerging writers the opportunity to see how craft skills have grown over the course of the quarter, but more importantly, this reading would focus on how in the text character development affected final narrative

outcomes. Again, rather than focusing on flaws, readers would be asked to focus on the following questions: How do character attributes contribute to the choices a character makes? How do character choices contribute to the development of narrative? How are readers' expectations met and challenged?

Finally, this two-week period the student writers to read and reflect on the work they produced during the course. In many ways, writers in this course are asked to participate in an immersive role-playing game. In reading and responding to each other's creative work, they would be asked to imaginatively take on the role of reader. In composing their reviews and fan mail, they would be asked to write from a persona of reader. In composing their fiction for the course, they would be asked to take on the intense production schedule of a nineteenth-century writer. As such, the goal of the course would not be the production of a creative piece that necessarily would be revised with an eye toward publication. Rather, the goal of the course would be learning from the activity itself. This approach demands risk-taking from writers. They would be asked to write in a way that they may not be familiar with. They would be asked to share their text at points they may be unsure of. Therefore, grading in the course must support this kind of risk-taking. Therefore, I would adopt the approach suggested by Stephanie Vanderslice. She writes, "I encourage risk taking by focusing all of the grades (yes, all of them) on the quality of the critical introductions students write to all of their work and on the quality of their written responses to the work of other student. I do not grade their creative work, although I always respond to it in detail" (34). Using this as a model, grades for this course would be based on the reception material the students produce in the role of readers and on the reflective essay they write during the final phase of the course.

Conclusion:

My course proposal is based not only on possibilities sparked by existing innovative approaches to creative writing. It is based on my experience as a graduate student. I attended an institution with a small English department, and an even smaller creative writing faculty. This was both a supportive and productive environment. But, my only pedagogical model was the traditional workshop. While this resulted in my growth as a writer, I have to ask the question: Did it prepare me effectively for a competitive job market and did it prepare me to be a good teacher? As I look to models that offer innovation, I was struck by a comment made by Philip Gerard of UNCW's writing program. In describing his program's approach, Gerard said, "We always design courses with this in mind: What course did WE want as students?" (qtd. in Vanderslice 72). I keep this in mind as I design courses. I believe that a course that incorporates a model of nineteenth-century serial production with the traditional workshop would offer students an opportunity to immerse themselves in a creative endeavor that would allow them to develop their craft skills as creative writers. It would serve the dual purpose of helping them recognize and develop marketable skills in a changing marketplace. Finally, considering genre and practice of a historical moment in print culture could give them new ways to consider the dynamic role of external constraints and audience expectation in their creative practice and production. And, it could give them a new perspective on their own creative work.

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