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SWIMMING LESSONS

Kathy Cole

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Kathy Cole. SWIMMING LESSONS. (Under the direction of Mary Carroll-Hackett) Department of English and Modern Languages, July 2007.

As an undergraduate student, I fell in love with Fred Chappell's novel *I Am One of You Forever*. I treasured the voices, the culture, and the characters within the story. Explaining this attraction was simple; as my sister always said, "We grew-up in Ohio, but was raised by Kentucky." I recognized and related to the distinctive Southern traits in Chappell's characters because they were mirror images of my family, with all their quirks, twangs, and manners. My father, my aunts, my sister, my grandmother that died when I was just ten, all found a place in a college level literature class between William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Denise Gardenia's *Storming Heaven*. The mountain culture I worked so hard to rebel against was validated; and I was inspired to explore, and write, my view of our family's Appalachian roots. As I looked deeper into fiction by Southern writers like Flannery O'Connor, Lee Smith and Eudora Welty, I developed a need to examine a culture that I very much wanted to claim as my own, but was detached by one generation and one state. Writing Southern stories, however, proved to be difficult for me. I really didn't have the experience it took to convincingly create the Appalachian world of Kentucky. Every character sounded like my dad and the plots were grueling mountains each character needed to climb. But I didn't want to give up on exploring my identity and culture. This thesis goes beyond developing a Southern voice. Instead, it tries to focus on characters who are struggling to survive by realizing their own value. Whether they are surviving illness, death, abandonment, or midnight car rides with drunken parents, each of these characters tries to make sense of their world and how they fit into it. I wanted to explore different perspectives through the eyes of adults and children and how those perspectives are formed by their relationships with the people around them. Ultimately, I learned that the culture that I worked so hard to define before emerged in these stories because I stopped over-thinking my intentions and let the characters speak for themselves.

SWIMMING LESSONS

by

Kathy Cole

A thesis is partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts in English

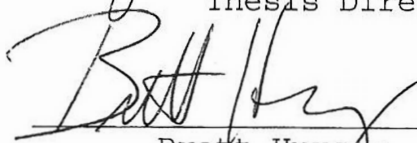
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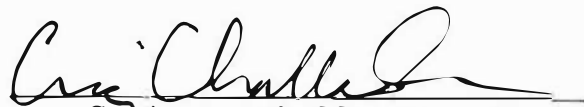
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SWIMMING LESSONS

BY

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July 2007

Dedication

To Scott, Taylor, Erin, and Cloe - their patience, encouragement and consideration helped me get half way, but their love, tolerance, and appreciation for Dad's Hamburger Helper made it possible for me to finish. Also to Cindy, Lori, Donnie, and Ronnie, I am humbled by their strength and ability to survive life. Finally, to my mom-Mrs. Hennings-make sure to step out of Ira's shadow every now and then.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Wendy Grey for her encouragement during my entrance into the graduate program. Her friendship and confidence made this thesis a possibility. I would also like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Craig Challender and Dr. Brett Hursey. I deeply appreciate their contributions and guidance as I progressed through Longwood's graduate program. I learned to appreciate, not only poetry, but the word "had." Likewise, I can never say how much I value the dedication and wisdom Mary Carroll-Hackett, my thesis director, lent to the creation of this thesis. She made sure that I stayed focused and taught me when not to resort to a snake bite. Her compassion got me through and her standards kept me aspiring to succeed. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my husband, Scott, for his patience, sacrifice and support. He read when he didn't want to, inspired when he didn't know he could, and motivated when all I wanted to do was watch *Earl*.

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Hillbilly Seatbelts

My dad loved the car, a '66 Chevy Impala, moss green with huge orange rust patches like chicken pox scabs and a slash on the hood where a naked chrome angel once stretched out, sunned herself and enjoyed the ride.

Dad bragged about Sunday afternoons in his car, flying down long country roads, one elbow cocked out the window and Conway Twitty's tinny voice crying from the radio. The angel's hard polished body broke the force of sixty-five mile-an-hour winds as the engine choked on gravel dust and heat. Yes sir, he was happiest behind the wheel, but the years had aged them both and he was ready to re-build the car.

At seven years old, I remember coming into the garage and seeing him, butt up, under the hood, rattling and banging, telling stories of good 'ole boys in Kentucky, cars on blocks with engines hanging from trees, gravel roads and drag races. I'd shake my head and he'd yell, "Give her back her beauty! That's what she deserves."

My mom worried when he started to strip out the old parts to, "update." He slung out pieces of droopy roof material, cracked door panels, and tore-up floor mats with

faded white Easy Riders on them. But when the backseat came out, sitting all cock-eyed just outside the garage door, Mom yelled the loudest. Sure, I had complained about the ripped vinyl pinching my legs and metal springs poking and scraping, but to get rid of it altogether? I just figured that we'd never have to ride in the car again.

I stood at the open door and stared into the back. Dad had taken four big ten gallon paint buckets, drilled holes in the sides for ropes to hang out and lined them, upside-down, in a crooked row. He picked me up, then my sister and two brothers, and sat us down each to a separate bucket, tying the ropes tight across our legs.

"Now just hang on," he laughed, "And if you get scared, hang on tighter." All around us was hard steel and rusty shards of metal. We could even see the road in a few places where rust ate through the floor board. But my dad assured us that what he was about to do was the best solution to the problem and engineered to be safe.

While we craned our necks to see out the windows, the engine turned over and the car lurched a few inches. He backed out of the garage and over the threshold, the car dipped and our buckets wobbled. We held on tighter with both hands and both legs. My five-year-old brother cried,

"I want out, I want out." But my dad took off. He gunned the engine and all our buckets flipped. Each one of us landed on the floor where we rolled around bumping into each other, buckets tied tight to our behinds, like turtles turned upside down. Just as I heard mom yell, the car stopped and my dad leaned back over the front seat saying, "Awww, now. Cut out the crying. Babies cry."

The kid who bought the car lived down the road from us. Before Dad would give him the keys, he walked around and around the car, explaining this and that, but the kid didn't really listen.

"Now you can't gun it, or run it till the tank is empty, 'cause you'll screw-up the engine." Dad sat behind the wheel, listing instructions on his fingers. "Change the oil every 30,000 miles, premium gas only, check the sparks every now and then." The kid sighed. When Dad did finally give him the keys, the kid handed over the check for twelve hundred and drove off down the lane. He squealed the tires as he pulled out onto the road and I heard all four buckets falling and crashing onto each other.

Dad just shook his head and said, "Damn fool, he'll wreck it in a year." But all I wondered was if he'd get a new backseat, or keep the buckets.

Ira

I lie quietly on the shadowed side of our bed, breathing in the scent of licorice and honey smoke rolling up from the bowl of my husband's pipe. Dim moonlight outlines his chubby body and he looks like an egg balanced on the edge of the bed. *Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.*

Kicking the blankets from my feet, I wait for him to notice, but he is too engrossed in the scene he imagines taking place just outside the window in the side yard. Ira chuckles, and glowing tobacco bounces where it hovers in his pipe.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"Oh, you awake?" He asks, turning the orange glow in my direction.

"Kinda," I say. "Well, off and on, I guess. Mostly fighting for sleep."

The orange glow turns back toward the window and Ira chuckles again.

"So, boys sneak out again?" I ask.

"Yep."

"Hide and go seek or ball?" I sigh and push myself up in the bed. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Three-fifteen—" he says, then stops "Oh wait, they're coming in." Ira scoots off the edge of the bed and places his pipe in the ash tray on the bedside table. "I'm gonna surprise them." He giggles.

As Ira crosses the room, I fluff my pillow. "Quick, go catch them in the act," I say.

"Aww now, they ain't doing no harm. It could be worse."

"Yeah, you could be out there with them and I could be begging from the porch for you to come back in." I try to punch my pillow comfortable and the door slowly squeaks open.

Ira peeks through the small gap, as if he's planning the perfect time to attack. Giggling, he tiptoes through the opening, switches on the hall light and continues creeping toward the kitchen.

When the light shines through the door and onto my face, I groan. Another click resonates from down the hall and Ira yells, "Gotcha!" From the bedroom I can hear the commotion of chair legs scooting across the floor as Ira says, "Ha, Ha, slow pokes. You run like girls."

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, rub my eyes with my palms and slide my feet into slippers. As Ira's rowdiness begins to settle, I hear him say, "Yeah, I saw you out there. What an arm you got." He laughs and continues, "Hey, how about some grilled cheese?"

"Shit." I say, rolling my eyes and scooting off the bed. "Ira, honey, if you wait just a sec. I'll make some sandwiches for everybody." I yell and grab my robe from the bed's footboard. Like usual he acts like he doesn't hear me, so I hurry for the kitchen. On my way, I notice a drawer hanging half open on the credenza in the hall.

"Ira?" I try again, nothing. I start to use my knee to bump the drawer closed, but a photo catches my attention from inside. Looking up at me is a picture of the boys when they were all much younger. Steven was six, Michael, nine and Jeremy, twelve, each one a perfect replica of the other. With their brown hair and dark features, they always favored Ira's family more than mine. He spends more time with them now than he ever did then.

Ira yells, "Whoa! Now we're set!" and I hear the gas flame whoosh to life.

"Don't touch the burner," I shout, quickly drop the picture and shove the drawer shut. Stepping down the hall, I chant, "Don't touch the burner, don't touch the burner."

The kitchen is so bright, I squint to see Ira standing at the stove, a ladle in one hand and an oven mitt covering the other. His face is so close to the burner, his nose is practically in the blue flame. "Well, guys, I'm not so sure I know how to work it."

"Back up." I say and I quickly pull Ira away from the flame. "Okay, grilled cheese it is. Go over to the table and socialize while I cook everyone a sandwich."

Ira puts the utensils on the counter and says, "I didn't want to wake you, but the boys were hungry." He turns, "She'll set us up right, boys. She hasn't failed us yet."

After I cook Ira's sandwich, I set out four small plates, laying two pieces of plain bread on three plates and the hot grilled sandwich on one. "Okay boys, here you go," I announce.

Ira carries on a spirited conversation with the boys while I try to balance their order to the table.

He stops long enough to say, "Thanks, honey."

"Does anyone want coffee?" I ask.

"Yeah, I'll have some and the guys..." He looks around the table and checks off each chair with a dip of his head. "One, two, three," he counts and smiles a broad smile.

I look around the table and check off three empty chairs. The weekend visits from our grown boys are coming less often. I miss them, but Ira doesn't. He sees them every day, whether they come or not. He sees them as they were.

Breaking my thoughts, Ira says, "Yeah, we all want coffee."

"Okay." I force a smile and shake my head out of the fog.

The cabinet above the refrigerator is where I keep Ira's medication. I pull out the bottle and read *Ira Hennings*, printed in bold black letters across the bottle. If he's not sleeping, Ira is like a walking zombie when he takes this stuff. I try not to give it to him during the day. I'd rather be entertained by his imagination than deal with the blandness and silence of the undead. I pop off the cap and jingle one little pink pill into my hand. After I return the bottle, I pour four mugs of cold water from the coffee pot.

"Hot coffee all around. How you drink this stuff at three in the morning is beyond me," I say and pass out the cups. I sneak the pill into Ira's open hand.

Startled, he looks up at me and mouths, "What's this?"

I point to my mouth and wave as if fanning away bad breath.

"Oh," Ira whispers and he pops the pill. "Thanks."

"Well, I'm gonna head off to bed now if you party animals don't need me," I say.

Ira doesn't even look my way. He gulps down his grilled cheese, while I head for the bathroom.

I sit on the toilet with my head in my hands and try to concentrate on peeing. Finally, relief. I roll out some paper and count the hours of sleep Ira's pill just bought me: five, maybe six, then back at it. A burst of laughter comes from the kitchen and I think back to when we used to invite Diane and Jack over to play cards. Laughing and drinking, we'd stay up most of the night with kids camped out all over the living room.

As I wash my hands, I remember a time when Ira and I were young and he joked about seeing me walking home from the library. He was out cruising with his friends, "Mustang Sally" playing on the radio. I think his exact words were,

"Damn, you are sexy. I know you need a ride from me." His description of my hips as they swayed in perfect time to the rhythm of the Motown beat made me excited. Ira's boyhood passion had been contagious and it wasn't hard to fall in love with him.

In the mirror over the sink now, I see every wrinkle, every age spot. My deep blue eyes that once insisted on Ira's attention have turned a cold gray over many years, until they match my short-cropped hair like shoes to a handbag. The swagger that once bounced my slim Motown hips has long been replaced with the slow drag of cellulite and fat. "Whew, Mustang Sally must have got up and left with Ira's mind," I joke softly as the water swirls down the drain.

I dry my hands, place the towel across the rack and click the light off as I leave the bathroom. Heading for the bed, I hear Ira's voice beginning to slow.

"Ira," I call when I enter the kitchen, "You tired yet?"

"Got the boys here," he says. He's hunched over the table and he looks as if he is holding an imaginary brochure in his hands. "We're making vacation plans for the summer."

I smile as I collect the plates. "What did you decide on? Jamaica or Europe—or maybe Motown?" I put the plain bread slices from the plates back in the bag.

"The motor cross museum! What an idea!" Ira gets excited again and slaps the imaginary brochure down on the table.

"Do you remember that old song, Mustang Sally by Wilson Pickett?" I ask, collecting the mugs from the table.

"Wilson, John Wilson?" he slurs.

"No, no, you remember." I start to sing, dancing over to Ira. "Mustang Sally, guess you gotta slow that Mustang down."

I help Ira to his feet and continue to sing. "All you wanna do is ride around, Sally, ride Sally ride."

"I got the boys here." Ira cuts in, but I try to get him to sway with the melody.

"Come on, you remember. I used to swing to the rhythm." I smile, hopeful, but Ira frowns.

"Remember the time when Michael went away to camp and—" He pulls away from me and I tighten my grip between his fingers.

"Come on, Ira, you remember, don't you? Cruising with your friends and we'd park?" I try to twirl under his arm,

but he doesn't raise his arm straight and my chin gets caught in his elbow. He drops my hand and looks at me blankly. "Remember? Ride Sally, ride?" I stop, let it go.

He turns back to the table and picks up an imaginary leaflet. "I remember Sally Perkins from Ms. Wilcox's class. She had a pet iguana that loved radishes." Pulling the chair out, he begins to laugh with his visitors again. "Hey Melvin, you remember that? We had to smash up the radishes for that crazy lizard? If you didn't smash them up small enough, the stupid thing would choke?" I watch him lean across the table, laughing about some animal that meant nothing.

"Hey, Ira? Are you ready for bed?" I ask and try to wipe a few crumbs from the table.

"Not right now, Ma. I got Melvin over. Can I just stay up a little longer?" Ira dips his head and his eyes begin to flutter.

I want to leave him there. Let him sleep on the table. Or fend for himself. I look up at the cupboard and consider giving him another pill so he would sleep all morning. I could grab breakfast and maybe shop for some groceries in peace. But I slide my arm under his and pull him to his feet. "Come on, big guy. I think you're done."

I try to guide him across the kitchen and he mumbles something about girls with books.

With a click of the light switch, the house is dark once again and we move through that darkness together.

Every Good Boy Does Fine

Five bold, black lines stretch across the page. Grouped together like rhyming quatrains, each staff contains notes of varied shape and degree. Falling, climbing, hanging on to each other, or pushing away, these black notes cling to the lines for clarity, for vision.

His story starts soft with an elegant treble clef and a two/two meter. Notes from a sweet clarinet spell out *la, ti, ti, do* which translates, "In the beginning was my birth, my mother" and continues through innocence and youth.

In the white space rests truth. Facts he can't describe, reality he won't admit, and certainty he wants to avoid. *Fa, la, la* continues the melody of the notes, dipping down into the white space as if scooping their tails into a sea of insecurity and panic. Every now and then, they pull a measure of uncertainty that plays low on a bassoon and even lower on a single cello. He fights to construct loud, bold percussion beats that drive away fear, replacing it with the light peeps of a piccolo playing a measure or two for parents who nurture and shelter. But, when Mother's not looking, a trombone and tuba slide into a

devious *fa, re, do*, exposing the trauma from recess bullies, torn jeans and ridicule. Crucial notes get pushed into white space where the void becomes tense, dangerous and secret.

Five bold, black lines stretch across the page to introduce a new chapter. Starting with the rhythmic heartbeat of a snare and a romantic *do, fa, la, la, la* of a sweet violin sweeping his heart into affection, passion. Measure after measure dance with smooth tied notes guiding euphoric saxophones and clarinets through red hair, excitement, curves and whole notes. The flute plays sensuality, lust. The trumpet blows ecstasy, climax. His rapid heart-beating snare slows to a gradual *bong, bong, bong* of a kettle drum where love affair ends, tragedy begins. The march of the kettle drum strengthens and grows angry while the wild jazz of a trumpet blows violent with jealousy and defeat. His heart crashes into white space and all sound stops. A pause.

Knowing nothing else, the bass drum picks up the march with *do, do, do, do*, until he makes his way out of the void. He conducts a pipe organ to question God, His heart, His being. High bleeding vibrato echo from brass cylinders and forces him to feel pain, then doubt, finally he knows

regret. Notes begin to collide into notes, until all that is heard is a single ivory key repeating, *me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me.*

The Innocence of Rocks

A little blonde girl of about eight or so kicked a small stone from the curb. It bounced once over a wide gap in the road, then two more times before getting crushed under the tires of a passing car. She stood another one the edge of the curb, aimed toward traffic then kicked it too. Fascinated with the *tink, tink, crack* of the stones as they skipped away, she pretended they were frogs, hopping from lily pad to log to a hungry alligator's mouth.

"Good slice," said a tall man with a red cap from the crowd and the little girl smiled, looking up at her mother who was checking the time again.

The bus stop sat centered on a narrow sidewalk between an electronics store and a Chinese restaurant and the girl was accustomed to seeing most of the twelve strangers clustered around the skinny signpost.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, she waited at the stop with her mom, never speaking to other commuters. Conversation was nonexistent in the group. Everyday, they waited together and they looked at their watches together and on rainy days, they tried to huddle together under the dark green canopy hanging over the front door of the Chinese place, but they never spoke.

The little girl ignored the strangers. She kicked rocks or twirled her yellow umbrella under streams of rain while she pretended to be at the deep end of a tropical waterfall. Sometimes she sat on the curb and drew with her finger in the grainy dirt piled up in the cracks of the sidewalk, and most times, the commuters paid no attention the girl either. Their shoes shifted in rhythm with foot traffic, moving back and forth, as people walked by and murmurs of "Excuse me, pardon me, excuse me" were all she heard from them. Except once. Once, when her mother stepped inside the Chinese Restaurant for a napkin, a young man ran through the group, pushing into people and knocking into a woman, causing her to stumble into the little girl. The man with the red cap yelled the F-word and flipped him the middle finger. After that, the girl's mother wanted to change to another bus route because she said the street was too dangerous and that made the little girl happy. The other bus stop was by the park with the big swings. But her mother decided it was too far away and they wouldn't get home in time. So they continued to come, every other day, when her mom worked.

The girl's mother worked six hours at a time at the bakery downtown. The little girl liked going to the bakery

because she could sit in the back and watch T.V. with Frankie, the owner's grandson. Her father didn't like it, though. He would say that they, "didn't need the hassle," or that they should be home. But her mother said they needed the extra money.

Whirs from the car tires sped past and the girl's mother looked down at her watch and groaned.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" An old woman poked her head over the little girl's shoulder. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Almost three," the mother said and smiled, "eight more minutes."

"Oh, thank you." The old woman relaxed her shoulders and carefully bent over to place her two big grocery bags down on the sidewalk. "I guess I can rest a little before the bus comes." She pulled some paper from one of her bags and began fanning her face. She blew a big breath. "Whew, it is hot today. Don't you think so, sweetie?" The old lady smiled at the little girl, but the little girl looked down at the sidewalk and her rock.

The mother leaned over and said, "Oh, but I meant eight minutes till three. The bus is about six minutes late." She then craned her neck to look down the street. "It was supposed to be here at two forty-five."

"Well, seems I have a little time anyhow." The old lady kept fanning her face. "I don't see nothin' coming."

The girl turned and kicked a few more pebbles into the street. Like the others, they bounced two or three times before being stopped, but one, a big one, skipped across the bus lane, bounced really hard off the side of a truck and came back, fast as anything, toward the crowd. The little girl ducked down just as the rock flew over her and hit the old woman, knocking her into the tall man with the red cap.

"Get off!" he yelled, pushing the old woman. She fell to the sidewalk, hitting her head with a loud *thud*, *smack*, *crack*.

"Oh my God!" Several people in the crowd yelled and a businessman rushed over to see about the old woman.

The man with the red cap clutched his arm as if in pain. Rubbing his elbow and whining like a little kid, he leaned in over the old woman. "She must've had a freakin' heart attack or something. She nearly broke my freakin' arm."

The businessman pushed the red cap man away. "Give me a break, buddy, you might have killed her shoving her like that."

Most of the people and the little girl stared at the old woman lying on the sidewalk. Her yellow dress was ripped and pushed up over her chubby knees, showing a pimply white left thigh and a large brown birth mark. The businessman struggled to get his jacket off and lay it across the woman's legs. One of the other women tried to look into the old woman's eyes. But the little girl saw blood dripping down the woman's forehead and squinted to see if the rock was still stuck there. Red cap man kept yelling that his arm was cut, his arm was cut, "...call an ambulance!"

"We need to call the police." The business man said as he wiped the woman's head. "They can arrange to take her to the hospital."

Red Cap got really mad. "Come on, man. It was the kid what done it," he yelled, swinging his hand around and pointing at the little girl. "She's always knocking rocks into cars and one finally popped back at us. It was the girl."

"You should pour some water on it." The little girl's mother quickly spoke up. "A little bit of water." Then she slid her hand over the little girl's eyes and pulled her back. "Come on, honey, the bus is coming and we need to

get home." But Red Cap grabbed the mother's shoulder bag, pushing the little girl to the ground.

"You gonna stay, lady. You gonna stay till the cops get here." As soon as the words left Red Cap's mouth, the businessman punched him in the face, causing him to let go of the little girl's mother.

Her mother fell back into traffic where she landed, bounced, and tumbled across the hood of a blue car back into the bus lane. The little girl yelled, and the businessman yelled, Red Cap yelled, and everyone but the old woman gasped. The bus stopped several feet from the crowd. The driver jumped from his seat and ran over to the girl's mother.

"She's all right, she's all right," the businessman said. But the little girl's mother was choking and bleeding and the little girl was scared and crying.

"It's her fault," Red Cap yelled, pointing at the girl. "All of this is her fault. She kicked the rock."

Allure

Seventeen stitches across your head when you fell against the bed post and cracked your skull dancing for a boy who only wanted to see you naked when you wanted him to see your soul and fall in love. You knew when it started that there'd pain in the end. After the flirting and drama for two years, you became filler for his boring life and you resented it. But the thrill of his eyes taking you from I'm-a-sweet-girl, to I-will-do-anything, held you captive. His brown eyes, excited and hungry, pulled you like a string spinning from the porch to the living room to the bedroom where you dizzily shook off your clothes and begged him to need you. You danced around him teasing, optimistic. Light tickles pushed away and you giggled, continued to dance and hoped he'd hold you close. His sweet lips smiled, this is beautiful, and you smiled, I know, but you let go of now and faded into what could be. Your feet danced onto the bed and your eyes saw only a blur. He came at you rough, distant, anxious pulling you back into the loneliness of now. What you thought was sweet affection turned shrewd and fixed, sizing up your body, but you pushed away and giggled, continued to dance, telling yourself he'd get it and hold you close.

Seventeen stitches sting and burn under a bright white bandage and your sister told you so. To get away, you focus on the sound of a propeller plane circling the clouds and remember the first time with him in the car by the air field. Your sister's lips move, but her words distort and the sound of the plane comforts you. She throws up her hands, swears and the plane plummets. Rising, rising, rising, the sound of the plane reminds you of his heart beat pounding out the words—need, want, desire, need, want, desire. The plane levels off, the stitches sting and your sister bobs her head, mouthing words you don't want to hear: married, just a toy, let go. You think of his brown eyes saying yes, yes, yes but the gash in your head throbs. Your sister mouths, enough.

Seventeen stitches gone when you see him again. Driving with his wife, he passes, winks. You run your fingers through your hair, over the rough scar and consider following them. You will show up at their little yellow house. His wife will leave in a rage. He will scoop you up, take you through the door and make love to you like it was supposed to have been. You will have a sweet family, sweet life; through his sweet, sweet eyes, you will become perfect. Gravel crunches under the tires of your car and

the little yellow house sits just beyond your bumper. You watch the screen door slam behind his chubby wife, then his hand. His sly smile scares you at first, but he keeps smiling, enticing you out of the car. You know this is what he wants. He's been telling you. You've heard his voice echoing all the time, telling you to come.

Lies and Compromise

Tom watched as Father Blossner approached the altar and slowly bowed. He wondered how the old man and his wife managed to survive on a minister's small income for almost sixty years. No kids, he thought and smiled, that must be it, voluntary simplicity.

The old rector nodded his bald head, *yes, yes* while crossing head, heart, shoulder, shoulder, before he shuffled past the rail into the choir loft. He bent to pick up an abandoned hymnal on the pew and Tom watched him leaf through thin pages. The long white sleeves of his robe fell over his hands and his head bobbed again in agreement.

A dark wooden beam just above the rector's head attracted Tom's attention and he followed the bold brown line until it converged with four others over the center of the chancel. The sharp pointed, wooden star reminded him of Christmas and he studied the complex five-tipped joint for a few minutes. He visualized himself in the bucket of a power lifter, knocking each beam until he heard the *thunk, thunk* of faux wood boxes. Tom smirked and leaned over Trish's shoulder. "Hey, do we really need to do this?"

"What?" Trish said, looking up from the service leaflet.

"Come on, all this church stuff? It's bullshit. It's fake."

Trish clicked her tongue and waved him off.

"No really," Tom continued, "think about it--"

Trish looked at him. "Tell me what you think about a pink and blue wedding party. *That* would be helpful at this point."

Tom glanced over the blood red carpet at the front of the church. The last time he attended a church service, he was eight and his aunt made him go with her. The only thing he remembered was how the thought of drinking the blood of anything was gross and wrong. "Come on, this guy," Tom motioned toward the rector, "is a sinner just like rest of us. Why do we need him to justify anything? And, no, pink and blue is too baby-ish."

"Tom, don't be stupid," Trish said and smoothed her dark hair. "An hour of church is all you have to sit through. Think you'll make it?"

Tom shrugged, "Is it all necessary? Candles, songs, costumes, ceremonies? Pink or blue, we have all our lives--"

Trish cut him off, "Tom. This is important. Someday we'll have a family and we will want to--"

"No kids. We already agreed." Tom broke in.

"Go wait in the car if you're that miserable, cause I'm not going to talk about it anymore. If you're here—I mean really here—then you'll deal. It's called compromise." She popped her head up, stiffened her back and Tom considered leaving, calling the whole thing off. "You said you loved me. You said you were ready for this," she added.

Loved her, he thought, this wasn't my idea to begin with. I was happy living together, but she changed her mind. Two years ago, when he met her, her hair was wilder, blonde, long and curly, and she was relaxed, thinner. They'd sat around his cousin's coffee table, celebrating a successful final in History 351. Then, love wasn't an obligation. She'd passed him a joint at the same time David Bowie screamed, "Ahhhh, wham, bam, thank you ma'am..." Wasn't nothing about family and weddings then, he thought.

Tom grabbed his coat and whispered, "I just don't see why I need all this shit." He slid down the seat, but the sanctuary door creaked open stopping him. A few congregation members came in and an old man and woman made their way down the aisle.

"Morning, Tom," the woman said as she walked by. Her eyes met his, pinning him for a second and he realized it was his third grade teacher.

"Morning, ma'am." Tom said and shifted back to his place next to Trish.

"You've been talking about me," Tom whispered.

Trish smiled as she watched the two walk by. "Stop staring."

The couple, Mr. and Mrs. Crawley, moved down the pew to take their seats. "Head, heart, shoulder, shoulder, kneel and pray; who the hell is she trying to impress?" Tom thought as he watched them.

The rector clapped the book closed. A gold stole rested over his old bent shoulders and the red paisley pattern trailed down past his mid-section where it stopped at his knees. It looked as if the heavy cloth pulled the old rector's head down into his chest, curving his spine into an unnatural C.

"Sorry, babe," Tom whispered.

"I love you anyways," Trish said.

Tom looked back over at the Crawleys and whispered, "Are they like a million years old?"

"I don't know."

Tom noticed how Mr. Crawley's thin neck stretched up out of a tight white shirt collar, like a turtle head poking out of its shell. His spotted bald head bobbed every time he looked down at the hymnal in his lap and Tom wondered if he was ever very strong. He asked Trish, "How long has she been with him?"

"Actually, I think he's her sixth husband. She's been divorced a couple of times," Trish whispered. "I was the flower girl in one of her weddings. I don't remember the guy she married, but the wedding was here, in our church."

"Damn," Tom giggled. "See? Who's lying now? And I thought until death do you part was a permanent thing."

"For you it is." Trish said and jabbed him again with her elbow.

"Well, I guess if that's what you gotta tell yourself." He laughed. "Women like this wedding shit, but he must've been way lonely."

"Yeah," Trish rolled her eyes, "That's probably it."

The organ vibrated to life and the little blonde Crùcifer in his oversized white robe led the members of the choir down the aisle, followed by the acolyte. They met the rector at the end and climbed the few steps to the alter area.

Trish sang along with the hymn as Tom watched her lips open around each note. Her blue eyes smiled at him while her mouth resonated with music. He smirked, but then noticed bits of spit gathering in the corners of Trish's mouth and he looked away.

Straightening the crumpled yellow papers in the pulpit, the rector cleared his throat and said, "Good morning."

"Good morning." The congregation replied in unison.

"O Lord, you have taught us that without love, whatever we do is worth nothing." He paused for breath before continuing.

Tom rocked back and forth on his heels, his hands crossed at the wrists behind his back. "Well, here we go," he whispered, "judgment time."

Throughout the service, Trish prompted Tom when to stand, kneel or sit. In between movements, he watched the Crawleys and noticed the Mrs. giving the Mr. the same prompts. To deepen his humiliation, Tom noticed when everyone was invited to come up and take communion, Mrs. Crawley slid her arm up under husband's to lead him to the altar. But, when the usher stood at the end of Trish and

Tom's pew with his hand out, Trish started to slide her hand under Tom's arm like the doting wife and Tom pulled away.

"You go ahead," he told her. With a quiet growl, Trish moved past him. Her long shirt pulled against the top of the pew to reveal the small bulge of her belly. Man, he thought, she has been putting on a few extra pounds.

She joined the line of people waiting to receive communion and Tom watched as everyone returned to their seats. Hyper children ran from their parents, while shy teenagers with slumped shoulders hurried self-consciously back to their seats. But a pretty young college girl caught Tom's attention by winking at him.

Damn, Tom thought and he watched her shift down the pew across the aisle from his, clumsily knocking leaflets onto the floor. When she bent over to pick up the papers, her low cut shirt fell open and Tom stared at her small braless breasts until Trish appeared at the end of the pew.

"Oh, hi," he said and shuffled down to make room for her next to the aisle.

"Wine? So early in the morning?" he joked.

"Not funny, Tom." She knelt to pray.

Tom peeked over at the student, who shrugged as if to say "You're taken."

But Tom shook his head no and mouthed, with a shrug, "Not really."

After the service, the rector stood outside the church doors and greeted each person as they left. Trish and Tom waited at the end of the pew while most of the people made their way toward the door, politely talking and catching up on a week's worth of gossip.

"Trish, honey, you look good." Mrs. Crawley stopped at the end of the pew. "It's nice to see y'all this morning. How you been feeling?"

"Oh, good. good. I've had the jitters off and on and it makes me a little nauseous. Well, you know what I mean," Trish said.

"Honey I sure do, after six of my own, I know right about where you are. It'll subside." Mrs. Crawley patted Trish's hands and grinned.

"This is my fiancé, Tom." Trish said and she tried to get Tom to wedge between the two women, but Tom just put his hand on Trish's shoulder and grinned. He looked away to search for the student by the door.

"I remember, I remember. Tommy was in my class once. What do you think of the church, Tom? Think it'll do?" Mrs. Crawley asked.

"It's nice." He said, feeling his face flush.

"I had all of my weddings here, all so beautiful."

"That's nice." Tom said and Mrs. Crawley grabbed Trish's elbow to lead her toward the door. She began talking about flowers and cake, leaving Mr. Crawley behind with Tom. The student showed up and squeezed between Tom and the pews, pressing her chest against him as she passed.

"Excuse me," she said with a smile.

"No problem," Tom said and thrust his hands in his pockets, watching her walk away.

Mr. Crawley grabbed Tom's elbow and said, "Today's service was a good one, you think?"

Tom shrugged, "I guess, so. I mean, I really don't get it."

"You reckon, in time, that sweet girl you brought gonna help it make sense?"

Tom laughed a little and pulled his elbow away. "I'm sure she will, sir. Thanks."

Just outside the huge mahogany doors, Trish waved Tom over to meet the rector.

"Honey, this is Father Blossner. He's agreed to conduct the ceremony."

"Good to meet you. Good to meet you." The rector shook Tom's hand.

His grip was light and Tom felt his delicate bones and dry, scaly skin against his palm. "Hello," Tom said and bowed his head a little.

"Looks like she's planning a good service, thanks be to God."

"I guess I trust her to know what's best, sir."

"Well, as I said, without love—" the rector smiled at Tom.

"Sure, yeah, sure," Tom said.

"Well, we'll get through the wedding before you know it," the rector said, "but we need to set a time for council."

As the rector continued talking to Trish about plans and ceremonies, Tom craned his neck to see over the crowd and debated whether or not he should try to catch the college student before she left.

Left For Dead

The cat died in my mom's kitchen. Unnoticed for two months, it lay rotting under discarded, white plastic grocery bags next to the abandoned stove. My sister found it while digging through old bags of bread, fast food trash and empty boxes of doughnuts, searching for mom's blood sugar monitor that she swore, "Is somewhere in that damn kitchen!" Instead she found the cat balled up on an old seventy-eighth edition of the Register Herald from June, 1972—a keepsake announcing my mother's divorce. Mom had sprinkled baking soda all around.

"I was wondering what come of him." Mom said with a sly grin while my sister and I tried to carefully remove the carcass. His frantic expression and bulging eyes looked exactly like the maternal scream that came from learning that my younger brother was headed to Iraq.

She lived with the stench of that cat while binging on candy and mushy fruit, until finally, her neighbor started knocking on the door and gathering the mail. Calling her name, the woman tried to peek in through the windows, but instead of Mom greeting her and carrying on about Eastern

Star, she hid behind the curtains and watched her old friend start to worry.

"Her neighbor called, she thinks Mom is dead." My sister's voice sounded distant, impersonal on my cell phone. "I don't have a key. Do you? God, we'll have to break down the door." But as we met up at the front of the house, we heard Mom call from inside, "It's open. Come on in."

Crossing the threshold, the rancid, lonely smell of that house made us so queasy, we had to stand outside and get used to it before we could go in.

Too embarrassed to look at us, Mom fumbled through the dark living room toward the door, her only attempt to explain was a shrug. She asked my sister how the kids were doing in school. My sister drilled her about insulin and candy. "You used to love candy," she told me. "I still do," I told her.

She followed us around as we cleaned and straightened. My sister left, hurling threats of nursing homes and doctors as she hurried to make a recital on time. But I stayed and tried to make sense of an old woman and a dead cat.

Swimming Lessons

You stand inside the glowing circle of the street lamp next to the car, hands thrust into tight jean pockets. Cold wind blows across your bare arms causing tiny hairs to bristle and you shift from one foot to the other, mumbling, *come on, come on*, to the moths whirling like tadpoles above your head.

Twenty minutes ago you were sleeping on her couch, only to be startled awake by your father stumbling across the living room looking for his shoes. You remember falling asleep watching *Saturday Night Live*, while he did nasty things to her in the other room.

"Let's go!" Now you yell and kick a few bits of gravel toward a small, creepy gnome statue next to her mailbox.

They stumble through the screen door onto the dark porch, laughing between gross tongue kisses and unsteady steps. He looks fat in his tight shirt. She tells him that he's sexy. He grabs her and, in a ballroom pose, they dance around the wooden swing. For a moment you look away from the intoxicated tango across the front porch, but then you look back. They end in a swaggering dip and she begs him to stay. He promises her he'll be back as he pulls her up close to him. After a few minutes, he turns to go. She

hangs her arms around his shoulders like a limp winter scarf and follows him, staggering down the front steps onto the lawn.

"How are you going to get home?" she asks. He spins around, falls against the car and they both laugh.

"You should just stay here with me," she says.

"Ehh." He waves her off as if shooing a bug from his ear. "She can drive." He nods and tosses the keys your way. They both laugh when the key-ring hits your shoe, bouncing to the ground with a chink, chink.

"But she's only fourteen," she says. "Can you even reach the brake peddle, sweetie?" Her words slur and you notice how the make-up streaks her bloated face, blurring the image of the glossy mid-forties single you met six hours ago at the mall.

You liked her then. Earlier her pony tail fell neatly down her back and she looked stylish. You thought maybe he'd made a better choice this time.

"No, you should stay here," she says and turns to weave her way back to her house. He reaches out to stop her.

"We can't stay here, baby, I got things to do in the morning. I gotta go home tonight." His deep voice is

affectionate and his reply makes her giddy. He grabs her by the hips, pulls her up next to him and whispers into her ear. She giggles. You drop your head and focus your eyes on the loose gravel street.

"She can't drive, baby, she's just a kid," she finally says.

"Dad, I don't think I should," you say, shifting from one foot to the other.

He cuts you off, turns and sways back and forth, trying to steady himself in front of you. She peeps over his shoulder and you take a step back.

"How do you think I learned how to swim?" He flails his arms for emphasis. "My dad took me down to the pond and threw me in. I damn well learned how to swim or drown. You do the same." He bends down and swipes at the keys a couple of times before he snags them with his fingers.

"Here ya go girl—learn how to swim." He slaps the keys into your palm.

"Dad, I don't want to drive all that way. It's nothing but country roads." You're not afraid to drive. You've done it before with your mom. But only a few blocks, during the day and Mom was sober.

"You mow the grass, don't ya? It's the same thing. You'll be fine." He grabs your arm, pushing you toward the driver's side door. The cold air wooshes past your face and you are in over your head.

* * * *

The car stinks of sour beer and vomit. You regret not staying with Mom for the weekend. He said he missed you and he wanted to do something fun for a change, maybe spend some money on you for your birthday. But he ended up running into her when she was buying a trashy bra from Sears.

He fights to adjust his seat all the way back and you pull yours closer to the wheel. You turn the key and several little red lights pop up across the dash.

"What if I wreck?" you ask.

"Go slow," he slurs and leans forward to roll the window down, then falls back into the seat. You silently list his instructions over and over in your mind: stay to the right of the yellow line, watch for cops and stay on the back roads. You pull slowly away from the front of her house into the dark street and try to visualize driving the

lawn mower. The car lurches. "You just ran over her garden gnome," he says with a giggle, "Switch on the headlights."

He leans forward and opens the glove box. "We need some music. That'll settle you down."

After making a choice he pushes the cassette into tape-deck with a *click, click*. A few minutes later the loose twang of guitar strings accompanied by George Jones' deep voice blares from the dash. His loud drunken voice sings along. "He stopped lovin' her today. They placed a wreath upon his door. And soon they'll carry him away--"

You yell, "Dad, turn it down, I don't want to get pulled over."

"..And soon they'll carry him away, he stopped lovin' her today." His wailing drowns out your request.

* * * *

The cassette had played through and ticked off at the end, and now you feel as if you're floating on your back in a pool with just your face above the still, silent water. It's easy getting used to the motions of driving, but you're still searching the dark for cop cars, remembering

what your cousin used to tell you when the two of you snuck out at night.

"It's easy to tell the difference between a regular car and a cop car," she said as you ducked between bushes and trees. "Cops have square headlights and regular cars have round. If you see a car coming, look at the headlights and you'll know." You remember trying to tell the difference, only to get blinded by staring straight into the beams of oncoming cars.

Telling the difference is just as hard now as it was when you were a kid. Horns blast past your window and you struggle to focus your eyes back on the road. Cop or not, you can't tell. Your car takes a sudden swerve to the right and your arms are jolted by the unexpected movement of the wheel.

"Whoa, girl." His heavy hand grabs the wheel and pulls you back into the right lane. "Stay over here and quit overdriving. You're all over the damn place." His hoarse voice sounds sleepy. "Just keep it steady and don't miss our turn up here." He points to the green street sign quickly approaching to the right, but you're going too fast to make the turn. The tires slide on the loose gravel as you brake and try to veer onto the road. The front of the

car bounces a couple of times over mounds of dirt and grass and the front wheels end up in the shallow ditch across the intersection.

"Damn it! I told you to go slow. Now back it up and go again." He cranes his neck around to check the dark country road for cars.

You want to yell, "This wasn't my idea!" But you decide not to make it worse. You slide the gear into reverse and slowly back into the middle of the intersection, straighten the car and continue down the road. You won't cry. You won't. You gulp for air and try to remain calm.

* * * *

His apartment is just a few miles ahead on the left, but you're thinking about the woman back at the house. She's nothing like your mother. You remember stories about your parents meeting at a movie theater after school. In their wedding pictures, they were young and he was so handsome. Your mom says they were in love, but you think that is just a lie. She tells you the stories about her life changing when she got pregnant with you. She dropped

out of school, they got married and he resented her for the whole thing.

You catalog all the women he has dated that you know: the Baptist, the crazy redhead from work, the crier, and the one with all the kids. Now he's with this one: the drunk. You wonder what attracts her to him. Like all the others, she begs him to stay and he never does. She calls and he ignores her.

"Watch this car behind you, it's a cop," he says, surprising you.

"What?" You try to spot the headlights through the rearview mirror. "Are you sure? Cause the headlights look square to me. Or is it round? Crap, I don't remember." You squint at the bright reflection in the mirror and catch an outline of the patrol car's emergency lights mounted on the roof.

"Shit," you whisper.

"Be steady, just drive. Maybe we'll make it home," he slurs.

Trying to recall all the times you ran off the road or drifted into the other lane, you ask, "How long has he been following us?"

"For a little while. Keep looking ahead," he says.
Your eyes blur and your hands grow hot and sweaty.

"You're okay, he just wants to scare you. Just drive,"
he says, his head laid back against the top of the seat,
pretending to sleep.

"He's going to pull us over," you say. "He's going to
pull us over."

Your dad reaches over and guides the wheel as you come
up on a four-way intersection. "Take it easy," he slurs
and you slow to a stop. Blue lights suddenly bounce around
inside the car and across your dad's face. His half open,
blood-shot eyes flash every time the light crosses.

"What do I say? What do I do?" you ask, while looking
over your shoulder through the driver side window.

He shifts up in his seat and smooths back his hair
with a spit-licked hand. "Hold on, I'll handle this. Roll
your window down."

You place a palm on the handle waiting, but the cop
car passes by and turns left at the intersection in front
of you. Sirens blaring and lights flashing, he speeds off
in the direction of town.

"Well, there you go." He laughs and nudges you in the
arm with his elbow. "What'll I do, what'll I say?" he mocks

you and bits of spit build up in the corners of his mouth. He pushes the eject button on the cassette player, flips the tape to the B side and immediately old George sings, "...cause she was hotter'n than a two dollar pistol, she was the fastest thing around--"

You want so much to jump out of the car, call him a bastard and blame him for all the bad shit in your life. You want to scream at him, tell him that he's selfish and can't come around anymore; he's holding you under and you can't breathe. You want to get out of the car and run, but you don't. You betray yourself. Just when you think you can stand up to him, you laugh a little.

"Yeah, I looked kinda stupid," you say.

You agree that your mother would freak if she knew and you promise not to tell. "I won't tell her, I won't," you swear as your stomach throbs. Sliding the gear shift into drive, you continue down the dark country road. George Jones moans about drinking away lost love and you turn the car into the parking lot of your dad's apartment complex, secretly vowing, as you park the car, never to swim again.

St. Maria Goretti Cemetery for Women

"Well, once you get over the initial shock of it all, you'll pep up about the whole thing," I said, but Jackie kept fussing.

She paced back and forth next to her grave in the corner lot, cottony white skirt fluttering across those long brown legs and she wrung her hands over and over and over again. See, she'd stop every now and then to poke her round brown face through the crepe myrtle hedge, her long black braids tangling in the web of branches causing her to curse, "Damn these trees."

Well, that's why I decided early on not to waste too much time on this one. You can tell right away which one is a lady and which one is a t-r-a-m-p. I suppose she was anxious for her family to arrive, 'cause she kept watching the street through those shrubs like the Christmas parade was about to pass.

To some degree I guess I could relate. I struggled with my own separation anxiety for years after I showed up at St. Maria's. But staying was my only choice. Lucky for me, though, I grew to like my spot in the cemetery. I'm way over there, next to the pond along the lilac row and Rose of Sharon. It's peaceful and fragrant with lots of

hills and, well it's really nice after you look at it awhile. I supposed Jackie will get used to her place too, after some time.

"Honey, I've been there and trust me, this will fade into old memories." As I told her this, I really expected her self-pity to last longer than my patience, so I added, "Look, if it makes you feel any better, they'll probably only grieve real hard for a couple months, then they'll start to see life in a whole new way."

"What?" she said crying, wringing her hands and jumping at the smallest peep from a bird. She was not really listening to me anyway. "Why are you here? Are you going to help me?" She stared up into the green tarp stretching across the top of the funeral tent like it was about to cave in on her.

"Honey, this is my home." I hopped off her gravestone, straightened my crimson silk dress and reached out a pale hand for an official handshake. "Myrna Kay Ratzenburn, just in case you didn't hear me before. I've been here since nineteen-hundred and twelve." I had told her all of this when she arrived, but I don't think she listened then either. Her mind, understandably, was on her family and her funeral, both of which were about to be

before us at any minute. But I have to say, I was surprised by the turn-out of locals. No one but me showed. Some of the older cemetery hosts used to be very supportive of new arrivals. In the early days, they'd get together under the willow groves for a meet and greet, but when all the trees and grass were cleared away for the new fast food restaurant next door, it got wearisome meeting in the drive-thru lane with all those cars and kids screaming "Happy meal, happy meal" all the time.

"Nice to meet ya." I smiled and curtsied, then leaned in real close for a polite response, but she backed away. So I just curtsied again. Always elegant, never rude, my mother taught me that.

But that Jackie, she just turned away and said, "What is going to happen now?" She craned her neck through the hedge again and smacked herself with a really thin branch and it must've surprised her a little because she cursed again, many times.

"Honey, I'm not really sure, but I think you need to relax a little." Right off, I noticed that she popped her knuckles like my younger brother, Stan, used to do. I worried that she'd decide to stay and the knuckle popping would endure for eternity, so I quickly thought of

something to say. "Ooh, looka here, white roses. St. Maria loved white roses. She used to say that they were pure, like the angels and the young girls. They do make such a pretty arrangement. Nothing worse than an old carnation, except maybe a Lily of the Valley." I straightened the fresh cut flowers.

"Look, do you really need to be here?" Jackie spun from the bushes. "Are you like that man at the hospital? You gonna guide me through this, then push me off somewhere else? I hope you know something, because I think I'm lost." Then she cried some more.

I picked out a big rose bud from the arrangement at the foot of her grave. "Not me, sugar. I don't guide anybody anywhere. I'd probably lost half this graveyard if it were left up to me. I don't really make very good decisions. I guess that's why I ended up here at such a young age." I strolled over to her. "Like you, I was about sixteen? Seventeen?" I asked. But she didn't budge with any details, so I thought it only right to give her mine. "Anyway, I was one of the youngest arrivals on my row. Way, way over there." I pointed toward the lilacs with the rose. "No, wait a minute, Charlotte Connelly was much younger than me, but the poor child has such a deformity.

Tsk. Bless her heart. Oh and Herkimer. But he doesn't really count."

I told her Herkimer's story. He bled to death from a terrible genital accident caused by a barbed-wire fence and a box of marshmallows. It actually turns out to be kind of funny. Seems, in about the year 1922, he stole a box of little pink marshmallows from a corner drug store. When he took off to running from the store assistant, he didn't see the fence between the fields. His stolen goods were found hung up, next to his torn short pants and dangling manhood. To this day he regrets having not worn denims more often, or undergarments, bless his heart. "He only gets to stay here because we feel so sorry for him. After all, he left the most offensive part of his masculinity on that fence. He's just about one of us without it."

"Give me a break, lady. Why do you think I care about that? You just keep rambling on." Jackie said over her shoulder. She made it so snotty I could've slapped her, but I didn't.

"Why don't you tell me what's got you so wound up and maybe I can help you out?" I said.

"Look, I don't want anything from you. I want you to leave me alone. But I'm sure that's not going to happen."

She stood there, staring me down with her arms crossed, and I backed up. I would've left her and her sarcasm right then and there had it not been for my shoe getting stuck in the mud and the bet. Honey, I had to make sure that I won the bet. Since the fiasco with the drive-thru, the other cemetery attendants started to get cranky, so they came up with two different bets. The first is placed when a new tent goes up on the grounds. You see, all the attendants put points on the cause of death, simple enough. The pot goes to the one who guesses the cause first.

The second bet is quite a hoot. They try to see how many cars they can back-up in the drive-thru lane at one time. Shirley Mason got the highest with fourteen when she learned how to short the speaker. Genius, that one. All those fat people sitting in their cars hearing, "Fuzz, Fuzz, your order," and "Fuzz, fuzz, repeat fuzz." You'd be amazed at how long a pregnant woman will wait for a Shrek III Banana Fudge Sludge Sundae and extra large fries.

"What's your problem anyway? Why you bugging me?" she asked.

"My situation is, well, both complex, and not important at the present." I said as I started to pull my

shoe loose from the mud. "But you might want to open up someday and—"

"Well there must be some deep dark secret that keeps you wandering around. Ghostly haunts and unfinished business. Oooooohhh." She leaned toward me wiggling her fingers around.

I tell ya, if you would've asked me right at that moment, I would have told you that that she was afflicted. She kept pressing me and pressing me to the breaking point.

"Now honey, I'm just curious, that's all," I smiled. "Please, go ahead and share your troubles." I said and sniffed the rose. "Tell me what you did to get yourself here because my history would only put you to sleep."

"No, no, no, it's not that easy. First it's you, then me." She reached down and grabbed my arm, turning my wrist over. "Seems you got more issues than I do." I looked down at the thick brown stitches zigzagging across my wrist and pulled my arm away. I didn't want to tell her my horror stories. This whole thing wasn't about me. Wasn't supposed to be.

But I told her what little I could remember about my arrival. "My demon, little lady, was a man who made me think he could cross worlds at will. My husband just

wouldn't leave me to rest in peace. That mean old man would chase me through light and dark, life and death, earth and sky if I let him. Oh and the awful, awful things I would endure. All because he's just jealous. Jealous because I am beautiful, cultured, twenty years younger than him and desirable to men my age." There, I said it.

"Oh please," she said crossing her arms.

"Oh honey. You know what? Believe it or not, this funeral might bring you peace after all. You're gonna watch it all play out and you might end up feeling better about the whole thing," I said and handed her the rose. "Not everyone stays because they have unfinished business. Some just don't want to leave."

"Oh, really? What makes you think you know anything about me?" She tossed the flower into the grave.

"We're the same. We're here and I bet, once you get to know me, you'll agree that we are the same."

"We're not the same," she said. "You are a ghost. I am not. I have things to figure out. Arguments to make right. You wander around crying over an old man. I'm not ready to—"

"Aww honey, I don't cry over—no. Wait, look there," I said, pointing at her headstone. "Jackie Renee Cornell.

What a beautiful name." She flashed one of her annoying looks and started to walk away, but I grabbed her by the elbow and finished my thought. "It says that you were born on October twenty-fifth, nineteen-hundred and ninety-two and that you died March fifth, two-thousand and six. Whew, honey, that makes me-well."

"Yeah? So? And what are you hiding from?" she asked me. I let go of her elbow and stepped back.

Jackie clicked her tongue and stepped away. What was I hiding from? My husband was long gone, my mother too. I told her, "What I mean is, you are here, it's carved in stone. You can't change what happened now. You and me are in the same boat. We both ended up in the same place." I smiled. "There's no use in fretting, honey. It's not a bad place. Your family, they won't see you today. They will watch a big box drop in a hole and they will, or will not, mourn. Sugar, you've done what you done and now you have to learn to put up with it."

"You don't know *'what I done.'* I died. It wasn't my fault. I ain't like you," she finally said. "I died and I can't fix it. So what do I do now?" She plopped down in the chair next to me and gazed into the empty hole spread out in front of us, but she was kinda calm. Contemplative.

"Don't ask me. I stayed here. I just ended up hanging around, being a mystery to folks like all these other poor souls. I'm nothing more than a flash at Halloween and a cold chill in the drive-thru." I plucked a white lily from an arrangement and pitched it aside like a weed. "But, you know what? I like it here. I've had more peace here than any place and I like it." I watched a long line of cars pull up beside the grave.

Jackie hurried on over to the curb, watching while her family and friends gathered around. Six big men carried her shiny coffin over to the grave and set it down.

"Honey, maybe you better come over here and watch with me," I said, waving at her, but she went right on. She stood right in the middle of the group. "Ooh, sugar. I can't watch these things. I'm gonna on now and when you need me, I'll be around."

"Wait, aren't you supposed to stay?" she asked, making her way back through all those people.

"For what?"

"For me. What am I supposed to do when they leave?"

"Oh, no, sweetheart, but if you want me to stay—" I said, turning to squeeze through the myrtle.

"Who will be here when they're gone?" she asked, motioning to her family.

"Well, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Gribble are usually out and about at this time of the afternoon. I'm sure they'll be coming over to size you up. But don't tell them anything," I said, "I mean, about..." I pulled my sleeves down over my wrists.

She thought for a minute and then turned to look at her grieving family. "It wasn't supposed to be like this," she said.

"Aww, honey, I know." I went over to her and patted her back. "I think you should probably be here. I'll come by later and find you." She didn't seem too comforted. "Look, most young people just go on home with their families and that's what I expect you should do. You wouldn't be happy living around here."

"I didn't mean to do this—for this to happen like—he was just supposed to feel bad. They were supposed to find me—" She stood there, crying and regretting, looking at the ground.

"We all have our reasons," I said, as her mother sobbed and fell to her knees when the coffin was placed in

front of her. I peeked over at Jackie and gave her a little push toward her mother.

After a beautiful service and sad good-bye, Jackie took my advice and went home. She followed her mother out to their car like a puppy and never looked back. I'll admit that I was proud of her, and a little jealous. Every time I come to one of these fiascos, I think, maybe, I should have done the same thing. Gone home and haunted that mean old man every last day of his life. Spilled his coffee every day and stolen his keys. I could've just been a regular pain, but I didn't—I stayed here. I'd have to live with that—well, you know. Just before I could head back, a very cranky and disagreeable-looking old man peeked his head through the myrtle and asked, "Hey you. Could you tell me just where the hell I am?"

"I'm sorry honey, I think you must be mistaken." I told him. "This is St. Maria Goretti Cemetery for Women and if you still have all your *parts*, I must ask that please find your appropriate spot outside of our borders." After all, we *did not* need his kind messing around here.

Sketchbook

On page four, a landscape of your front yard the day I left. Dark bold outlines deliberately lead the eye through leafy trees, rolling hills, your old house and you, standing under the striped awning, holding that poem you wrote that was something about finishing sentences and your loving wife. You hoped I would read it and finally understand why you wanted me to stop confusing love with friendship and leave, but I couldn't. In the picture your body is a shadowy figure with no detail. I don't remember drawing it that way. It looks like you are motioning me to come in, but as I think back, you were waving good-bye.

On page six, a quick sketch of my new place. Light lines make up a foreign landscape, full of old stone pastures and gray skies, an ancient building here or there for accuracy. I tried to depict home, community, but the figures came out disproportioned or crooked. I convinced myself the light wasn't right that day. The wind blew or my eyes stung. I told myself that I could come back to it some time, but the inspiration fades. I start to see imperfection and warped shadow.

Page ten is dark. Thick gray charcoal smears reveal nothing but white space, random gaps in angry marks and

slashes. From the start I wanted to draw for you the beautiful roses blooming in my back yard. Three tall thorny stalks bent over an old barbed wire fence. The same image you shared with me from a boyhood memory, except some of these branches ducked between uneven squares of wire stretching toward the beams of sunlight just past the hedge. Each stem held several fragrant red blooms. A deep blue skink caught my eye between the roses. It would have been a perfect detail, but he scampered away, eluding me and my stub of charcoal by escaping under a log, across the yard to the shed where it hid. I went back to the roses and your voice echoed, "No, never again." Frustrated, I scratched the drawing out in black and left it alone. Charcoal wouldn't have worked anyway.

Page thirteen, a portrait of a friend who helped me forget where you were for a while. She looks out from one continuous line, circling around her body discovering eyes, lips, breasts, winding its way around and through her until the curves of her hips and thighs blended with arms, hands. The single gray line falls off the edge of the page and passion mixed with fascination lingers into pages fourteen, fifteen, sixteen.

On page seventeen a brilliant sunset in bright red, purple and orange coloring pencils. I drew a girl in specks of lime green and yellow just below the horizon line, fluttering and mingling with fireflies in the darkness. Like me, she is confused and off to explore what is left of a life planned with you. The eye should be drawn to the dramatic setting of the sun, the letting go of the day. I considered putting this one on canvas, highlighting the graceful rays with gold leaf and decoupage. I thought it would be a nice Christmas gift for your mother, if I'd had the chance to meet her.

From page eighteen to the end, I struggled. I drew pictures of birds in flight, trains, and a river. Unhappy, I decided to give up trying to impress and close, instead, on a still life. The candle we used to celebrate your daughter's birth and the bottle of rum you bought me when my divorce was final, a few letters, an apple and a dark, velvety backdrop, I thought you would appreciate this one the most, inconsistency with isolation. Varying degrees of pencil lead and no color, this sketch reminded me of you. I drew your face into the shadow. You were tiny lines, hidden from everyone but me.

Oliver's Pen

Oliver Cranson opened a new bank account today, a strange decision for a man who six months ago resolved to become anti-social, anti-religious, anti-everything. He wanted to clear his life of the cancer-causing ruckus that came from the outside world. In his opinion, his wife, Shirley, died because she ran too much. She ran to go shopping, ran to the doctor's office, ran to the beauty parlor, then finally ran straight to the grave with a tumor the size of an apple on her brain. Oliver was smarter than that. He would go like a real man: heart attack or old fashioned shoot-out.

His interest in everything dwindled to almost nothing after Shirley's funeral. Not because he loved her. No. As a matter of fact, he'd waited her out. He wanted her to go first, relieved when she finally did. After fifty-four years of marriage, marked by equal contempt and the absence of passion, he had developed a need for her physical presence only. As long as she clanked around in the kitchen or slammed the dryer door shut with a loud bang, he was not alone. But since the silence took over the house, he found himself emotionally kinked.

After the funeral, when all the visiting family members returned home, Oliver felt wrecked and emotionally vandalized. Deciding where to begin his new life was a puzzle he didn't have the patience to solve. Fifty-four years and he was both finally, and regrettably, independent.

Then, after three months of frustrating silence, he tried suicide. But when the poorly tied knot gave way, he took it as a sign to keep on living. He would get back to the Masons or bowling, anything to break up the quiet.

Financially he was okay. Social Security and retirement was enough to live on easily. He thought, though, that he needed a little more, a little flash without being excessive.

Usually, his daily routine involved going to Kroger's for dinner items, hamburger, vegetables, ice cream, and then McDonald's for coffee and a biscuit and home again. Today he spontaneously decided to turn right into the parking lot and take what was left of his wife's life insurance to open the Oliver's Survival Fund. OSF, he imagined himself calling it. What he would do with the money remained unknown to him. Maybe he would take a couple of classes at the community college, finally

studying those Russian spy subs docked under Florida that his Mason buddy Ted talked about. Or maybe cruising up and down the shoreline on a sailboat would be better. Whichever he chose, he believed that fate would make it happen.

Oliver's future started with the young lady who processed his transaction. He thought she was nice enough: smooth skin, nice smile, small breasts. He was happy for her as he studied the three little replicas smiling at him from an oak picture frame on her desk. Got her figure back fast, he thought.

She seemed to be in a good mood and he was actually a little nervous when she placed the paperwork in front of him to sign.

"Okay, Mr. Cranson, two hundred fifty thousand will be moved from account 670-43326-4570." She aimed the sharp end of the ball point at each number as she read them off, "...into account 589-77784-3265. Whew, what I could do with that." She giggled, then proceeded to direct him. "You need to sign and date at the bottom and I will witness here. After that, you will be ready for bikini weather in the Bahamas." She laid a pen down in front of him and he signed his sloppy signature.

As his hand quickly slid over the paper, leaving cursive black letters behind, he thought of himself at age eleven, crafting his full name over and over until the autograph looked right. Caught between using the large curly "c" with swooping "s" and squiggly "n" or the bold C-r-a-n-s-o-n to show authority-machismo-he'd spent hours writing, scribbling and writing again. This time, though, he chose the sloppy version, fixed the date on the right hand line and placed the pen on the desk next to the girl's skinny arm.

"There ya go. Done and done," he said.

"Oh, that's yours to keep. It's a gift for starting a new account." She smiled, gathered her papers and stood. "Okay, just give me a sec and I'll have my manager run all of these through and that'll be it. You'll be on the beach in no time."

Oliver turned as she rounded the corner of her desk. "Thanks, but dunno where I'm gonna end up yet." He clicked the pen nervously in his hand as she left seeking her manager.

He liked the smooth click of the pen. It felt heavy, mechanical, complex. A polished gold and black with the new rubber finger rest for a more comfortable grip, pretty

snazzy. Oliver was impressed. He considered the sizable expense the bank exhausted to show appreciation for his business. You're welcome, he thought.

Down the center of the pen was a message window that changed with each click: *Green's Bank and Loan; (465)-555-2678; Friendly Services; With You in Mind; <http://www.greenb&l@banks.com>; A Smile Every Time; Low, Low Interest Rates.* He read the words as they flipped by, clicking the plunger faster and faster each time. He felt like a little kid fascinated with a new gadget and it became a game to see if he could predict the next slogan it would land on. But when he stopped this time, the message read, *Look beyond money for happiness.* He clicked the pen again and it read *Find direction from within.* Hmph, he thought and clicked the pen again.

Make use of your limited time with generosity.

He started to get frustrated, wondering who allowed the bank to take over the Moral Majority. He clicked the pen again.

Self-satisfaction is gained through charity.

That's it, he thought, and dropped the pen on the girl's desk. Junk.

People shuffled by just outside the office door. He glanced at the pen on the desk and wondered how they managed to cram so many little sayings into the white tube inside. Probably just the ones I saw, he thought, but he scooted to the edge of his chair, picked up the pen and began to unscrew the end. The tip dropped off when the brass spring popped out. The ink stick encased in the white message tube slid into his hand. As it rolled around in his palm, he read *Green's Bank and Loan; (465)-555-2678; Friendly Services; With you in mind; <http://www.greenb&l@banks.com>; A Smile Every Time; Low, Low Interest Rates*; nothing more, nothing less. He squinted into the clear message window and saw nothing. He tapped the pen casing on the desk and nothing fell out.

The young lady appeared from the hall. "Almost done, Mr. Cranson. I'll be right with you in a sec, 'kay?"

Oliver jumped, scooped the pen's pieces into his lap and said, "Umm, okay. A, a, it's okay." As he quickly reloaded the parts into the casing, he marveled at the technology. He hummed, *It Must Be My Imagination*, along with the piped-in music and clicked the plunger again. When he turned the pen once more and looked in the window, it read, *Things always happen for a reason*. He clicked the

button and the message changed to *The knot of despair is loosened by faith.*

"What?" He shook the pen and the words did not change. Oliver looked over his shoulder, shifted around in his chair, wiped his hand on his pant leg and read the message again.

The knot of despair is loosened by faith.

Faith in what, he thought. God? He clicked the pen and the new message simply read, Yes.

He jumped up out of the chair and hurried to the door, calling to the girl, "Excuse me, excuse me, but I really need to be somewhere. Are we done here?"

"Well, we are having some trouble with our server, but it will only be a few minutes." She started down the hall and noticed Oliver clicking the pen rapidly. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Well, as long as we hurry it up." He clicked the pen. "I really have to—"

"Sure, I'll see what I can do to hurry the process along. Have a seat and relax." She turned and quickly walked back down to the bank manager's office.

Oliver clicked the pen and repeated, "Open, closed, open, closed, out, in, out, in." He sat down in the red

velour wingback across from the young woman's desk and watched the black letters blur past the clear window, afraid to stop on any particular phrase. Are you kidding me? He thought, what's in this pen?

His thumb grew tired of the constant motion, but as he tried to switch to his index finger, it slipped, stopping on the phrase, *Patience is a virtue*. Oh how cliché, he thought, and he clicked the button one more time.

You get out of life what you give to others.

Oh great, he thought, what ever happened to happiness is just a phone call away? He pushed the plunger and the message read, *Happiness is just a phone call away*.

"Whoa." Oliver threw the pen on her desk and shifted around in his chair. Wiping his hand across his mouth, he stared at the black and gold stick. Convinced that there must be a computer chip predicting his thoughts somewhere inside the pen, he grabbed it again and began to click the plunger repeatedly. He stopped and the pen read, *You should rather be consumed with faith than overtaken by greed*.

"Hmmp, greed. I'm not consumed by greed." He started to chew on his fingernail and clicked the pen again. "You

ain't kidding me, all you bankers just want people to give up their money."

A penny saved is nothing, but a penny given away is redemption.

"Ha!" Oliver shouted at the plastic pen in his hand. "Caught ya, banker man! You can't make any money if people ain't saving. What are you getting at?"

A woman walking by the door stopped and asked, "Sir, may I get you a cup of coffee or something?"

Oliver turned, pushed the button, and thrust the pen toward the woman. "What does this say to you?"

Reluctantly the woman took the pen, held it up in the light and read aloud, "A Smile Every Time."

He jumped up and looked at the pen. The black words read, *A Smile Every Time*. He clicked the button again and the pen read, *Low, Low Interest Rates*. He shook the pen and clicked it again, but the lady had walked back into the hallway toward the bank manager's office. This time the pen read, *Stop searching and believe*.

"Believe in what?" Oliver asked slumping back into the chair. "Since when is God filtering the word through the bank?" He looked up in the corners of the office for cameras and clicked the pen again.

Happiness is within the confines of generosity and forgiveness.

"If you are God, why am I here?" Pleased that he had asked the big question, Oliver was sure he stumped the person on the other side of what had to be a computer chip. He wiped his hand on his pant leg again and squeezed the button again.

Life should not be about why you are, but what you are.

He rolled his eyes. "Vague, like a fortune cookie. You're not God. You're a goddamned fortune cookie with a computer chip." He clicked the pen again.

Give and you shall receive.

Oliver laughed. "Didn't see that one coming. Suppose you want me to give it all away?" He clicked the pen and smiled at the three little faces inside the oak frame.

Oliver, what are you looking for?

He looked at the pen and read the question two more times. What am I looking for? Images flashed in his mind of himself in a classroom, sailing a boat, having dinner with a beautiful woman. "What am I looking for?" He brought the pen up close to his face and studied the words.

What am I looking for? I'm looking for an easy way out, he thought as the girl hurried in with the paperwork.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Cranson. I believe we have it all together now." She shuffled through the papers to the back page. "Sign here and you'll be done." Oliver cupped the pen between hands.

She pointed out the second to the last line on the page; just beneath it, a fancy signature read, Sara Hughes.

"This is you?" Oliver asked and pointed at the name.

The girl leaned over and smiled, "Umm, yeah.

Remember, I needed to witness? I went ahead and completed the rest of my pages while I waited for the server."

"Oh." Oliver looked down at the pen. The black letters now read, *With You in Mind*. He signed his name.

"Will you send me a card so I can use the bank machine?"

"Sure will, but it will take about a week and a half." She smiled and bumped the picture as she collected the papers across the desk. "Thank you so much for coming in today. Here are your copies."

"Those your kids?" Oliver asked.

"Oh, no. Those are Mrs. Haning's kids. I'm just borrowing her office while she's out."

"You got kids?" Oliver asked.

"Umm, no. I've only been married about eight months now. No kids yet. Gotta save up for these things."

"Oh," Oliver said.

"Do you have kids?" she asked.

"Grown. All of them. Three. One boy, two girls. Gone. Scattered around the country. Wife died in December. Brain tumor." He clicked the pen a few times and the message landed on, *Green's Bank & Loan*.

"Well, I don't think I need anything more. But here's my card if you have any further questions." She held a card out across the desk between two fingers and smiled. Oliver thought of his wife.

"I'll buy it from you for one-hundred thousand dollars." Oliver crossed his arms and leaned back into the chair, flipping the button on the pen.

Sara choked and laughed, "My card? I'm giving it to you for free."

"Don't you need that kind of money? I could come by your house, fix some things, mow the grass every now and again."

"My husband mows the grass."

"Well, I don't see as to where I'll have time enough left to spend it." He looked down at the floor. His quick

decision made him nervous, but he thought of Shirley. "You want kids, don't ya?"

"Mr. Cranson, I think maybe you have the wrong idea."

"I'll buy it from you. One-hundred thousand. Either you want it or you don't." He clicked the pen and remained firm.

She stood, placing one hand on the phone receiver and one hand on the desk. "I don't know what you are offering, Mr. Cranson, but I do not want your wife's life insurance money. I need nothing further from you, thank you."

Oliver stood, surprised that the girl turned him down. "Look. I'm an old man. My kids never come around. Don't you think your husband'll--"

She smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Cranson, but I think taking your money would be the wrong thing for me to do. But I appreciate your generosity."

Clicking the pen, he turned to leave. "Two-hundred thousand? The whole account? I could come by fix some things, make it legitimate," he said with his back to her.

"No. Thank you, but no." She picked-up the receiver and started pressing buttons on the phone. Oliver left the office, rolling his papers up into a long cylinder. He clicked the pen open, closed, open, closed, out, in, out,

in as he crossed the lobby. He thought about the last message, about Sara's rejection, the three beautiful girls and as he approached the exit, he dropped the pen into a small brown trash can.

What am I looking for? He thought about the question and ineffectively answered it a few times. A better man, a better father, a peacemaker, all of those things were ideal, but really all he wanted was to hear was the annoying bang of the dryer door, or at least an easy way out of the silence.

We All Go To Hell

"Damn you," she cried. "When are you going to stop doing this? It's selfish!"

The day he was born, the doctor flopped him into an outstretched receiving blanket and declared, "It's a boy." A smiling, young nurse hurried him over to a clear plastic bassinet to clean him up, get him ready to meet his new family.

He'd had a forceful scream and she'd cried when she saw one perfect little arm thrust straight up, fingers open wide grasping the air for something to hang on to, umbilical cord, uterus, Momma.

Now he yelled. "I only did it once and I realized it was stupid." He stared at the floor and squeezed tense fingers tight around his wrist. "I'm not like other teenagers, you know."

She tried to grab his arm to inspect the damage. "Your skin is hatched to pieces. Once—my ass!"

He fought to hide, to keep her off, but she persisted until he gave in. Squinting through tears, she saw the blur of countless slashes, crusty scabs, crosses, slashes.

"What does this accomplish?"

He pulled away and rushed past her, out of the kitchen and into the living room, "It's not that bad. I was playing with the cat. She did most of them. I only did about twenty."

"Oh and twenty is not that much?" She followed, remembering his little blonde head bobbling between open arms as he learned to walk. His sweet smile and ambitious eyes focused on the floor trusting, gullible. He had dared to lift a little foot, only to find weak legs always willing to let him fall.

Now, his heavy skater shoes stomped across the living room and he flopped on the couch with her close behind. "Do you need to go back to the therapist? I can take you, make you an appointment." She sat, facing him on the couch. "Maybe you just need to work on your coping skill..."

"Christ, Mom, I don't need therapy," he said, pulling his jacket on and zipping it. He focused on the frayed spikes of threads at the ends of his cuffs and began to bite and pull them loose.

"What can I do..."

"It's not you." He pulled his sleeve down over his fingertips and held it tight.

Shaking, she placed her hand on his back. "Then what? Your friends, your grades, what? Why can't I help you?"

He slumped back against the couch and stared at the floor through long hair. She swept her fingers across his forehead, tucking the messy bangs behind his ear. When he was eight years old she would cut his hair really short. Shave it like the popular kids, so he would fit in. Had that been a mistake, she wondered. His grandfather's blue eyes stared at her now, red and defiant.

"I'm here for you," she tried to say.

"Stop it, Mom." Baggy jeans swished as he walked away. She cried as a slideshow of failures overwhelmed her. She never corrected his foul language—those were just words, self-expression. She yelled at him for getting a D in math—he really needed to consider his future. She pushed him to play baseball—he would have been good at it. She let him quit—I couldn't force him.

She considered waking her husband, letting him deal with it this time. But she thought again. He'd just say it was teenage angst. What the fuck was teenage angst anyway? Out of involuntary habit, she began to chew her ragged thumb-nail.

The therapist said drugs. Maybe we should reconsider the disadvantages and give in to them. Focused on a cobweb in the corner of the window, she gnawed until the skin under her nail tasted like rust.

"Maybe you need to go live with your grandma," she said to the empty room, to the place where her son had been. Her mom could solve anything with one trip to the mall and a Chinese lunch. She picked slivers of skin away from her cuticle and the grooves around her nail seeped with crimson blood. She imagined her son in his room, a sharp razor slicing into pale skin over and over until he achieved a perverse work of art suitable for a Marilyn Manson CD jacket. She just didn't understand. What kind of relief could streams of blood bring?

She flinched and her teeth tore flesh, but she continued to chew her short nail even shorter, tasting the bitter tang of salt and considering no alternative.

The Last Thing She Said to Him Before She Died.

The only light in the room came from a long fluorescent bulb over the head of Delia's bed. It seemed to Emmett that she was able to string the death watch along for much longer than the "few hours" her young, chubby-faced doctor had predicted earlier that morning.

Emmett looked down at his watch. 2:30. Maybe they'd only be there an hour or two more, he thought, scanning down her pink body to her feet and back up. A vein in her forehead faintly pulsed in time with the heart monitor next to the bed and her thin lips cinched tight, as if fighting against the passage of words. Now and then something managed to escape. "Damn you," she'd say when Emmett came near, "Damn you."

Arms crossed at the wrist behind his bent back as he paced, Emmett felt nauseous at the trembling sound of Delia's voice. Heel, toe, heel, toe, he tried everything to occupy his mind, but he kept going back to the time, the clock, pushing it to move faster. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her lying there: pink pajamas, tight fists, all those hate-filled memories suspended on her angry tongue. She reminded him of Snow White, encased under a brilliant

blue glass. If he didn't touch her or kiss her, she'd never wake up.

"It's all right, Momma, we're all here," he said, then snuck a glance at his daughters, Penny and Bonnie, to see if they'd heard him clearly enough. Penny, the oldest, sneered at him and with a smirk, he turned away to pace again.

Delia's arms and hands stayed rigid. Large purple-green bruises outlined the spot where needles had been taped for two weeks as they tried to revive her. The spots looked like big hand prints that seemed to grow from day to day. The bruises were the only part of Delia he could look at. Delia often had one or two. She provoked me, he thought, every chance she could get. When I visited friends, stayed for dinner, drank too much, slept over, every single time I went to see Louise. Emmett clicked his tongue. All the money I brought in, all those times I stood by her. She never loved me like a wife ought to, he thought. "Sixty-three years," he said, and then clicked his tongue, "Sixty-three."

"No Daddy, you've been married fifty-eight. I'm only fifty-seven in June. Remember?" Penny said, leaning over her mother's leg. "Fifty-eight."

Nodding, he said, "Oh, yeah, fifty-eight."

He paced past Delia's dying arm, comparing the bruises, the size from minute to minute. His leg brushed up against the metal bed railing, bumping Delia slightly and she tensed even tighter. "Damn you, Emmett," she moaned and the vitals monitor's monotonous beeping skipped.

"You're okay," he said, without stopping, but then added, "It's okay, Mother, you're not alone." He smiled toward Penny.

Penny wiped Delia's forehead with a cloth. Rolling her eyes at her father, she said, "I know, I know. You gonna be all right, Momma. Go on home. You want another pain shot?"

"She don't need no damn shot." Emmett looked back at Delia. "The doctor was just in here twenty minutes ago." He turned, but Penny pushed the button several times for the nurse.

Bonnie roused from sleep and stood up from her chair. A long silver chain wallet jingled against the metal chair arm as she stretched. Groaning, she said, "Do you think that nurse'll bring me a Percodan? I got a splitting headache."

"Bonnie! Really—" Penny turned from her mother and said. "This is not the time or the—"

"Aw now," Emmett cut her off. "Penny, no need for all that." Emmett pulled out his wallet. "Bonnie, honey, you need a dollar or two to go down to the snack bar and getcha a Coke?" He pulled out a fifty dollar bill and offered it to Bonnie. "Here, take this and getcha a Coke."

"Yeah, Pop, thanks." Bonnie grabbed the money and shoved it into her jeans' pocket, "Y'all want anything?" she asked, looking around the room, pointing her finger at Penny as she passed.

"Naw, honey, thanks." Emmett patted her on the shoulder. "You go ahead."

Penny leaned over and pushed the nurse's button again. "These people are useless. Momma would've loved a Coke right about now." She started to cry. "Damn nurses. Momma would love a Coke."

"Emmett," Delia frowned and, with her eyes still closed, turned her head in Emmett's direction. "I should've left you then. I should've taken my girls and—"

Penny stood and wiped Delia's face with the cloth. "Oh, Momma, don't start on Daddy again. Just rest."

Emmett leaned over the bed as the nurse walked through the door with Delia's clipboard. "Aww honey, you're all right."

With Penny on one side and Emmett on the other, they both patted Delia's hands and smoothed her hair. Emmett repeated, "It's all right now, you're gonna be all right."

The nurse politely tapped Emmett on the shoulder and smiled, "Excuse me, sir. I need to—"

With a loud gasp, Delia shouted, "If I'd have known that boy was yours sooner—"

The nurse stepped back and Emmett tightened his grip on her arm.

"Delia, just go on home now." His voice grew stern.

"Jessie told me he was yours. You and that woman and I didn't believe him. That boy that used to come around. And now he's married your daughter." Her finger pointed in Emmett's face and her eyes locked on his. He thought he saw images flicker across her blue eyes, coming from a place deep inside her that Emmett was never able to understand, flashes of their stillborn son, his infidelity, his abuse.

He gripped her arm tighter and Penny laughed, "Oh Momma, don't be foolish. Ed's not Daddy's son. Why Daddy, she just don't know what she's saying."

Emmett looked away. "Delia, now hush all that nonsense."

"You tell your daughters about their brother, Emmett. You tell them about that woman."

Emmett released his tight grip and slapped the bed with both hands. "Damn it, Delia, I stood by you—"

"Tell them, Emmett."

Emmett stood straight. "This is how you repay me?"

The nurse pushed against Emmett's back, "Sir, please, you've injured her arm." As Emmett backed away, Delia moaned.

"I haven't loved you for so long, Emmett, so long." Delia's eyes closed.

Penny began to pray, "Our father—"

"It's all right." Emmett wiped his hands down his pants' legs.

Penny continued her prayer in monotone. "Who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name—"

"Leave me be, Emmett," Delia frowned and dropped her chin.

"Sir, please—" The nurse squeezed past him, reached across the bed and pushed the call button.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done—" Penny rocked back and forth.

Emmett backed away from the nurse. His arms dropped by his sides, shoulders slouched.

"On earth as it is in heaven—" His daughter didn't look at him.

Bonnie stepped in the doorway. "Pop, you got change for this? The Coke machine only takes fives and ones." Bonnie stood in the doorway with the fifty dollar bill in her hand.

In the bed, Delia finally slipped back into silence.

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While Penny sobbed into her cell phone, Emmett sat next to Bonnie in the waiting room. They both stared at the floor.

"So I missed it?" Bonnie asked.

"It's all right, honey." Emmett placed his hand over hers. "Your mother's death was a cruel thing."

"I waited all freakin' week and I missed it." Bonnie cracked open a can of soda.

"You see, Daddy," Penny sat down next to Emmett and placed her oversized purse on her lap. "This is what I'm talking about. This girl needs lessons on how to be a grown up."

Bonnie sat up and leaned across Emmett. "So what were her last words?"

Emmett pushed her away and stood. "Jibberjash. Nothing but jibberjash." He walked over to the large plate glass window and looked out across the huge parking lot. His daughters discussed their mother as he watched his son-in-law, Ed, unlock the blue mini-van.

"Something about Kentucky? What was it Daddy?" Penny asked.

"Jibberjash," he whispered as Ed closed the van door. He tried to understand the pain Delia had gone through. Her death, her life. Emmett cleared his throat and spoke up, "Jibber..."

"Yeah, Daddy, jibberjash. I guess she was just going crazy. Seein' things and all. She actually thought Ed was Daddy's son. How about that?" Penny sat, opened her purse and pulled out her cell phone. She dialed the flower shop and ordered three big bouquets of peach carnations. "That

ought to be pretty. Don't ya think?" She closed her phone and patted Bonnie on the leg.

Emmett watched Ed cross the parking lot until he disappeared from view. That's that, he thought, and turned back to console his daughters.

Stitch

As a kid, I always looked for small, dark places under stairs, in the back of closets, or in the farthest corner of the upstairs store room to use for hiding spots. The best ones were secret places with thick, black silence that I could sneak into and become invisible. When I found the perfect spot, I'd back slowly into the shadow, hold my arms out in front of me and watch the yellow light slide like water down my arms and hands until it dropped off my fingertips with a splash.

I hunkered down into the smallest tightest ball my tiny body could make and let the blackness soak into my skin until I heard nothing, not even the fast rhythm of my own breath. I would stay there for hours, blinking my eyes open and closed, open and closed, happy with the evenness of the dark both surrounding and inside me.

Sometimes I feel my mother there. She taught me how to sew with my eyes closed, learning how to trust. She handed me a tiny needle and thread, showed me this stitch and that and called them by name: slipstitch, whipstitch, backstitch. I liked the way the words ssss across my tongue like Sally Salamander slinks into silver satin. But,

when I wasn't careful, the sharp tip of the needle jabbed into my fingertips and made me cry.

My mother taught me how to lick the end of the thread and slide it through the tiny eye of the needle and not to worry if I didn't get it right the first time. She taught me a blind stitch and told me only to use it when I want to hide ragged seams from critical eyes. She taught me to cross stitch when I wanted to be fancy and we counted together, three-four-five-six blue cross, blue cross, grey cross, stone cross. My mother instructed when to loop and when to knot and how to anchor all my loose ends so they wouldn't become frayed or untangled.

I would put my hands around hers and feel them work needle into fabric, making something beautiful for me to wear to school. She worked fast, but never finished. My father always called. The sound of his voice reminded me of carnations and lilies, black dresses and dirt, Jesus' praying hands embossed in silver and tears. My stomach would start to ache as I remembered peeking over the side of my mother's black coffin, seeing only the rounded tip of her nose, thick brown stitches across her cheek, around her chin and the pink and yellow patchwork quilt my grandmother made. Then my father called and I reached for her hands to

hold them tight. But she slipped away and the needle jabbed into my fingertips and the sting grew, the tighter I held. My father called. His voice forced her from my grasp. My father called and I let go, forgetting the names of the stitches and their purpose. My father called and I opened my eyes seeing nothing, but feeling sick. My father called, Bethany Lynn Davis, and I scooted out into the bright yellow light. My father called and I tried not to cry as I rushed past the heavy white sewing machine like a ghost in the laundry room. "Here I am." I said, but he punished me anyway for running away.