

KICKING CHEKHOV

by

SIÂN BETHANY GRIFFITHS

(Under the direction of Dr. Judith Ortiz Cofer)

ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories, microfiction, memoir, and prose poetry explores the relationships between people, the pain we sometimes cause one another, and the strength we have to endure that pain.

INDEX WORDS: Microfiction, Memoir, Relationships

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SIÂN BETHANY GRIFFITHS

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SIÂN BETHANY GRIFFITHS

Approved:

Major Professor: Judith Ortiz Cofer

Committee: Richard Menke
TR Hummer

Electronic Version Approved:

Gordham L. Patel
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2002

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this collection to Nathanael, for reading my drafts and offering his honest opinion, for nagging me to work when I most needed nagging, and for not running when he had the chance; to Mom, for her support, not just now, but throughout my life; to Dad, also for his support but, additionally, for his really bad jokes; to Dr. Cofer, for helping me along the path towards being a writer; to Aunt Pat, for remembering me when I needed remembering and for giving me the financial support to make graduate school happen; and to Megan, the best sister of all time, who not only offered honest feedback on my drafts, but who once trusted me enough to jump off a garage roof when I said she would not get hurt. Thank goodness I was right.

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APOLOGIA

Introduction

Why do I write? Well, I explain to the blank page as I mar it with letters, it's not like I *want* to. It just keeps happening. I'm an ink junkie, I guess. I need my fix.

Perhaps I write for the same reason I ride. My horse reminds me every day how much more he can express without words than I can with them. He contains some essential truth. It comes through in small movements: head tilts, softened eyes, flicking ears. Somehow, I am aware that he holds all of life within those subtle movements. There is a moment in a perfect ride when I am fused with him in both mind and body, and I no longer have any words in me. In this moment, I touch truth.

If that can happen, maybe the same truth can also be in words. If I can use words to get at those moments that go beyond words, then maybe writing can be for me what riding is. I know truth is a morphing thing, but if I just write long enough, maybe I'll find a way to momentarily touch truth through the page, before it continues its flight.

Influences

The most faded book spine on my shelf belongs to Richard Adams's *Watership Down*. I was nine when I read it the first time. I can't count how many times I've read it

since. It's the one I come back to when I suspect that literature is insufficient. It's my holy book. Adams created an entire universe, as did his fictive god Frith, and he made that universe beautiful, almost recognizable as our own. He told the world from a rabbit's point of view, with its language and its desires. He taught me about voice, and sustaining it even when it is as foreign as a species.

They say an author spends her life trying to rewrite her favorite book, but I wouldn't dream of touching what Adams did for me. Every time I read the final page, I don't want to close that book. I want its magic to continue. I want the rabbits to keep speaking to me, telling me about the wind on the downs and taste of carrots when you're hungry. Adams showed me what a novel could be.

Adams's effect on me is mainly subconscious. I don't think of him when I write. I do, however, think about my friend and peer, Melissa Crowe. Melissa and I have only been in two workshops together, but in those courses, she has taught me about writing both through her critical commentary and through her fine example. I had never thought much about lyricism before reading Melissa's work. It seems strange to say that now, but it's true. Before starting at Georgia, when I thought of fine writing, I thought of the traditional masters and their love of verbosity. Those writers could really churn out the words: Dickens, Faulkner, Hardy... It was when I read Melissa's work for the first time that I realized how much impact the simple words could have. I'm sure, in retrospect, that I had been told this by some writing teacher or another, but, as creative writers know, telling is never enough. I had to experience it. Melissa gave me that experience and led me to demand poetry of myself.

William Faulkner once advised writers to “kill your darlings.” Every time I sit down to edit, I think of this phrase. I’m learning how to excise the fat and unnecessary phrases. Dr. Judith Ortiz Cofer, my friend and teacher, likes to torture me and her other creative writing students with microfiction assignments. I remember the first—she even gave us most of our title. “Wanting to ____.” We were to write a story that was two or more pages, then cut it back to a stark 250 words, approximately one typed page. I spent days deciding which “wanting to” idea I should write about, then another typing the original three page story. Then I started cutting. And cutting. And cutting. The last ten words were the most difficult to find and cut, but I did it. I managed to trim the story by a third and maintain all of the original plot points.

Unfortunately, the final product was a disaster. My readers couldn’t keep track of who my three characters were or what they were doing; however, the assignment taught me a lot, even if the story failed. For one thing, I learned that some stories are better off long. More importantly, though, I learned how to make my verbs do more work, how to choose my adverbs felicitously, how to decide which details to keep and which to excise. In short, I learned how much excess there was in even a seemingly short, short story. I find I am starting to torture myself with microfiction assignments even when Dr. Cofer is not there. I like the spareness it lends my writing. It seems an essential step in the quest for poetry.

Finally, when I think I couldn’t ever lay down another word, I read Flannery O’Connor. Why she affects me, I can’t really say. She loved Catholicism for the very ideals that I couldn’t believe in. And yet, there is something about how she viewed the world, in all its warped ugliness, that I can’t get enough of, and when she starts talking

about it, I start thinking about it, and pretty soon, I'm writing about it for no other reason than that I can't seem to help myself.

Maybe the attraction lies in the vividness of her writing. O'Connor never pulls a punch. When a thing is ugly, she shows it as ugly until her readers are squirming in their seats. O'Connor's world is a bleak one, almost hopeless, and something in me resists believing she was totally right. But I think she saw many of its elements clearly. She chose these elements to bring to her readers, then left her readers to draw their own conclusions. I love that precision, that choosing and expressing of the appropriate detail, and I hope to incorporate that into my own fiction.

Craft

From my first creative writing class onward, my teachers always talked about the "craft" of writing. I hate the term. "Craft" feels like a stand-in. No one wants to say writing is an art or a science, that it is work or, worse, luck. The truth is, it is all these things.

The word "craft" implies that anyone with the right kit and a couple hours on the weekend can put together a story or a poem. Don't worry about talent, it says. No skill required. Just follow our simple instructions and you, too, can become a writer. I can see why introductory classes would want to promote this idea. It does not intimidate. It invites. It gives confidence. But it gives all these things at the expense of reality. Writing is no birdhouse. You can not write by numbers. The truth is, there is no kit. If

there were, none of the good writers would have ever bothered. Writing would have lacked its necessary challenge.

By saying “craft,” we suggest that insecurity and fear of failure aren’t immediate concerns. By saying “craft,” we dismiss the same insecurity that leads us to expect the best of ourselves. Craft says good enough is just fine. It robs of our desire. By saying “craft,” we deny that writing is art, which it is, and that not everyone can do it—maybe not even us.

And writing is not just art, either, because that is not enough. Art will get you as far as language. If you have talent, art will help you to be lyrical. But storytelling has rules. It has structure. It has form. You can break a story down into elements (character, plot, theme, point of view, setting), rewrite the story with a change in one or more elements, and rebuild it. It is a science—a science whose rules we may not understand, but a science nonetheless. And I think that any scientist worthy of the title would agree that if one knew all the rules and all the possibilities of a science, it would no longer be worthy of pursuit. If we’re really lucky, though, and really diligent, we’ll understand the form or science of writing just enough to mess with it. (We could blow ourselves to pieces doing this, but that’s a necessary risk.)

As in any science, experimentation is essential. A writer hypothesizes a story, tries to write it, examines the results, and forms a new hypothesis. It is through experimentation and only through experimentation that writers progress. Often, we call it “drafting.”

When I teach my Introduction to Creative Writing class, I might get my students to buy all this. They might even like the idea that writing is neither strictly science or art,

but a hybrid of the two. But they don't want to believe the next part. They don't want to know that writing is work. My students want to believe in Muses. They want to believe that writing is brought about by divine inspiration, and that once they decide to become writers, they will grow some sort of radio antenna that will pick up said inspirations. I don't blame them. I want to believe this, too. Someday, I tell myself, the gods will decide to favor me.

Until the gods come, though, there's the work. Herman Melville once said, "God help me from ever completing anything." He described the published manuscript of *Moby Dick* as "a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught." Melville understood the value of revision. First drafts aren't hard. In fact, they're fun, which is probably why my students believe writing is fun—they don't bother with much beyond a first draft. Neither did I when I was an undergraduate. I've only truly learned to make myself revise in the last few years, and I still hate it. I can pound out a story at about the rate of 2-3 pages an hour, which makes me one of the fastest drafters I know. Unfortunately, those story drafts are full of the unnecessary. The pacing invariably staggers. The word choice isn't precise. It's not until I stare at it for the fifth (or ninth, or twentieth...) time, tinkering and tinkering, that it starts to become decent. Usually, the "final" draft is about half the length of the first.

Fortunately, revision comes last, or else I would never write at all. By the time I revise, I'm fairly committed to finishing the tale. My process is this: play in the journal. Write down anything that occurs to me. When a thought from my notebook haunts me, I usually end up rewriting parts of it there, fleshing out the idea. If the idea has really got a hold of me, I start thinking of it at awkward times (usually in class, when I am supposed

to be learning). I have to furtively grab my notebook and write down the new angles before they leave me.

Once I have all this, I head to the computer and type. Then, I procrastinate until I realize that I have to either revise the story or go crazy. I start revising in spurts, cutting sentences and paragraphs and adding new ones. Then, I stare at the new product, completely lacking all my former confidence in it. I keep revising until I decide the story's not so bad. When I can't think of another change to make, I send it out. When it gets rejected, I revise again and send it out again. If any of my stories ever gets published, then I suppose that one will be done, or maybe I should say, done enough.

It is back in the journal phase that luck becomes so important. Because even though I tell my students that there are no muses, sometimes I still get a visit. These visits are usually in the form of an overheard conversation that triggers my imagination, or in a documentary program that gets me thinking, or a dream. Sometimes a smell will get me, or the construction of clouds in the sky. I could call these things perceptiveness, but the truth is, I was just plain old lucky to be in the right spot to hear what I heard, see what I saw, or smell what I smelled.

But that's not craft. None of it—not the choosing of the words, the structure I put the words in, the fact that I made myself do it, or even the possibility that I may have some talent. I can't tell my students I have the kit for art, science, work, luck. We must, simply, write. If the balance between the four elements is harmonious, maybe they or I will be fortunate enough to get to be a writer.

Writing About Myself

My grandmother always told me that it is egotistical to talk about nothing but yourself. She may be right. I wonder about it sometimes, when I'm typing up yet another story in which I am the central character.

She told me, too, that it is wrong to speak ill of the dead, and while the characters in my story aren't exactly dead, the people who they were in those distant times and places have passed on just as surely as Elvis or Kurt Cobain. They've kicked the bucket, gone on to higher glory, or are burning in hell, but they surely don't exist today as they once did, and neither do I. We have all changed, molting our old selves like snakes shed their skin. But like Kurt Cobain, Elvis, and all the other people we're not to speak ill of, the lives of the dead, in many ways, reveal the lives of the living.

To write memoir is to break sacred taboos. And I keep doing it. My first successful story—the first my undergraduate creative writing teacher told me I should try to publish (words I'd never heard her say to anyone)—was a memoir. On the surface, I wrote about a fifth grade skating party; what I hoped to show was the social Darwinism that we learn early and learn well. When I sat down to draft, I didn't know that I was going to write about humanity's depravity, or about how sometimes prejudices do exist without being taught. I just wanted to depict the bizarre world of the California roller rink. When I allowed myself to relive the moment through the story, however, I realized I would talk about much more than the carpeted mushroom stools and scurrying disco lights.

I write memoir because I feel like I missed the big moments the first time around. I didn't realize how essential they were, what they said about life. It seemed like any other day, until I thought about it years later and realized it was a story. I think everyone does this: we let life go by. We don't question it. We don't always wonder "why me?" When we do, we don't always demand answers. I would like to magnify life through my writing. I want to bring back that moment and make myself look again. If I can discover something new, maybe others can, too.

Flannery O'Connor said that if you survived childhood, you have enough material to write for the rest of your life. I think she realized the potential of moments. Childhood is where we learned the rules for how our world would work. Sometimes, we have to relearn them. I suspect that these moments lead to insight.

In her book *Bird By Bird*, Anne Lamott describes walking around with her son when he was a small boy and everything was new to him. As they walked, he would point out all the little details she'd become accustomed to overlooking: the crazy shape of the clouds, the odd color of a mailbox. She said that this is how the writer should be in the world: "present and in awe." When I revisit my life through memoir, I'm looking for the essential details—all the ones I might have overlooked when I was being distracted by living a moment instead of examining it. I want my memoirs to reflect the world by having a narrator that is present and in awe. By discovering the details, I discover the world.

In Conclusion

I had the idea for starting *Kicking Chekhov* before I started graduate school, and here I am, two years later, at the end, revising like crazy to try to make the product meet the intention. I must confess, I have the nagging sense that *Kicking Chekhov* is not quite as cohesive as I hoped. In my work, I explore the boundary between fiction and reality, experimenting with the proximity of the genres. I know these stories or memoirs blur the fact/fiction binary. This could be potentially confusing to my readers, which concerns me. How will they know when to take a story as fact and when to assume it is fiction?

The point of view is no help; some of the third person stories, “Fearless” for example, are memoir. I inserted the third person narrator to give myself the psychic distance I needed when I wrote it. In fact, only “Windfalls” is purely fictive, although I feel I know the place and the people who live there well enough that it is as true as anything else I’ve written. Then again, some of the memoirs I wrote contain an “I” that is so exaggerated or that feels so far removed from who I am now that I barely recognize myself.

This is all to say that, in a way, all of the stories are true, and all of the stories are lies. In this, they resemble any writing, but perhaps in a way that is more obvious than readers are accustomed to facing.

I keep looking at the stack of pages that aren’t quite done and wonder where the stories came from. Some, I know, came from rainy days when I felt inspired. Others from sunny days when I had a story due and had to write despite myself. “Windfalls”

came from the Idaho wind, and the idea of it that I couldn't shake. Most came from my childhood.

These are more excuses for the stories than answers to my question. Where *did* it all come from? Certainly not from me, did it?

As I said before, when I tell my students that writing is work, they don't believe me. Work is something that involves a hardhat and a jackhammer. I don't tell them that, when I write, I need those very tools. Yet I could not write well without my hardhat and jackhammer, metaphorically at least. I require the power to dig and the protection from what I find. My students will have to discover this on their own.

When I look at *Kicking Chekhov* now, the stories are just a stack of words that I've read and read until the words don't even seem to be mine any more. Right now, I mainly feel very disconnected from my work. When I'm not actively revising it, it's just another big pile of papers.

A song by Dar Williams describes people "walking around, with their little shoes bending." This is closer to how I feel about my stories and the people who inhabit them than anything else I can imagine. The characters are living away inside that big manuscript, carrying on without me. I'm not sure what this means; it is a sensation unlike any I have felt about my stories before.

Lately, I've been trying to push this idea one step further. I've been letting my stories try to walk on their own, sending them off to journals in search of publication. I hope that the eyes that read them fall in love with the characters and places somehow. I want them to feel for them at least a little of what I feel.

I don't know why I want my stories published any more than I know why I write. I guess I have some external motivation: publications get you recognition; recognition gets you jobs. But as soon as I try to acknowledge this as my true, selfish motivation, I know that it isn't true, and that I have no idea what my motivation is. I've decided that I write because I want to find small doses of truth. Perhaps if I publish, others will help me reach those truths.

But I also think that truths are like pieces of soap in murky water. When we try to grab them, they shoot through our fingers. *Kicking Chekhov* is my attempt to hold one of these truths. In all of the stories, I find the moral that Stu imparts to Jay. Stu kicks Chekhov because he feels Chekhov can take it. What I have found is, all of us can take it. We would not have the clichés about terrible events making us stronger or bumper stickers about shit happening if somewhere we did not know that we are stronger than we give ourselves credit for. In life, we tend to deny our own endurance. If I'm successful, though, my stories will grab that truth, the fact of our strength, and show it to my readers before it slips away again.

WHY I'M NOT PRETTY

“Siân,” Mrs. Laughlin called. “Come here for a moment.”

Am I in trouble? I put the Star Wars cigar box that held my scissors, Elmer’s glue, and colored pencils in my desk. I scooped out my chair and hurried up.

“This is Mrs. Howell.” Mrs. Laughlin said. “She’s the speech pathologist. She’s going to work with you once a week.”

I looked up at the strange woman. She was smiling, but it was a little smile. I wasn’t sure what a speech pathologist was. She put out her hand. I took it because I was probably supposed to. I looked towards Mrs. Laughlin to make sure, but she had already turned back to teaching the class.

Mrs. Howell talked while we walked down the hallway. “I work with lots of the kids at this school,” she said. She was looking at something far away at the end of the hall, but I didn’t see anything down there. “The kids I work with have lisps, stutters, and other problems, so we work to fix them.”

Cindy had had a lisp on the *Brady Bunch*. She fixed it by saying tongue twisters. Maybe I was just going to play word games like that for a little while. That wouldn’t be so bad, maybe. I looked back towards Mrs. Howell. Her face frowned as she hurried us down the hall. I didn’t think she would want to play games.

Mrs. Howell stopped by a door next to the school office. There was no number on this door, which was weird because all of the classrooms had numbers. She brought a

ring of keys from her pocket and quickly flipped through them to one with a strip of black tape on it. It opened a small room. I didn't know there were classrooms this small at West Elementary. Maybe that's why it didn't get a number. It was smaller even than the principal's office. One wall had papers covered with large black splotches on it. They must play in this room, I thought. That would be fun. I always liked art class. Maybe Mrs. Howell would let me draw some pictures for the wall, too.

In the center of the room was a small wooden table. Mrs. Howell pulled out an olive-green plastic kid chair next to the wooden teacher chair. "Have a seat," she said. She smiled, but I thought maybe the smile was a lie. She was trying to make me feel not scared, like the nurses did at the doctor's office before they gave you a shot. The last time, when the squirrel bit me and Mom said I had to go so I wouldn't get a locked jaw, I jumped and got stuck twice. The nurse yelled and said that's what I got for being scared.

Mrs. Howell sat down and looked at me over her glasses. "Mrs. Laughlin tells me you have a problem." She paused and looked at me. I wasn't sure what she wanted me to do. "Do you want to tell me what that problem is?"

Mrs. Laughlin thought I had a lot of problems. I didn't answer my math problems fast enough. My brain wandered when she talked about the history of Ohio. Usually, I missed the ball when I was playing outfield in kick ball.

"You suck your thumb, Siân." Mrs. Howell was staring at me.

I kept looking at her. I wanted to suck my thumb now, but I thought that would get me into more trouble. Instead, I just looked at Mrs. Howell and held my tongue.

"Now, Siân," she said, "you know only bad kids suck their thumbs, right?" She was still smiling at me.

“I’m not bad,” I said. My voice was small. My throat felt small, too. I wasn’t bad, though. Not really. I knew Mrs. Laughlin said I was, but Mom said she was wrong. I was pretty sure Mom knew more than Mrs. Laughlin, even if she wasn’t a teacher. Compared to most of the kids in class, I was pretty good. I didn’t get hyper. I didn’t talk in class. I never got in fights.

Mrs. Howell looked over her glasses at me. “Are you questioning me, Siân?” She reached into the brief case next to her brown shoes and pulled out a manila folder and a yellow pad. “It seems to me that good girls don’t question their elders.”

Perhaps Mrs. Laughlin was right. Maybe I was bad after all.

“Now, Siân,” Mrs. Howell continued, “Do you know why sucking your thumb is so bad?”

My eyes looked at her while my brain scrambled to think of an answer.

“Because... because Mrs. Laughlin told me not to?”

“Well, that’s one reason. Why else?”

I couldn’t think of another reason. Mom and Dad told me to try not to suck my thumb anymore, but they said it was because I was a big girl now. They didn’t say it was bad. My forehead felt tight. I tried to concentrate.

“Because,” Mrs. Howell said, “it will ruin your teeth.”

Mom said sugar ruined teeth, which was why I wasn’t supposed to have any. She gave my sister and me carob chip whole-wheat cookies and honey-sesame candies instead—and those dates rolled in coconut with the almond on top, my favorite. And sugar was why we had to brush our teeth every morning and night for Daddy’s inspection, too.

What did sucking my thumb have to do with my teeth? Thumbs didn't have sugar. Teeth fell out, anyway. I had already lost a couple. My aunt had even made me a tiny little pillow with a pocket on the front to hold the tooth for the fairy. She had left a quarter for each of the teeth I had lost so far.

Mrs. Howell sighed like Mrs. Laughlin does when we forget how much six plus seven makes and said, "It makes them crooked, dear." She said "dear" like it was a curse word. I would have gotten in trouble with the recess lady if I talked like that to another kid.

"Now," she went on, opening up her manila folder. "Do you know who this is?"

Inside the folder were pictures. She held up one that was a magazine cover. Its title was a long word that I didn't know, but the date on the magazine was October 1978—last month. A blonde woman grinned in the picture. I didn't recognize her. "No," I replied.

"It's Christy Brinkley. Surely you know who Christy Brinkley is."

I focused my eyes on Mrs. Howell. I could feel them widen. Mrs. Laughlin never taught us about Christy Brinkley before. Or at least, I didn't remember learning about her. Maybe I wasn't paying attention in class like I was supposed to. Was she a pilgrim? Did she know Johnny Appleseed? A lot of times I was thinking of something else when I was supposed to be listening.

Mrs. Howell sighed and placed the magazine picture on the table in front of me and pulled the next one from the folder. Another blonde woman was on the cover, but I recognized this one.

“She’s one of the Charlie’s Angels.” I said. My friend Kim had a “Charlie’s Angels” lunch box.

“Farrah Fawcett.” Mrs. Howell said. She placed this picture next to Christy Brinkley’s and drew another picture from the stack. “And who’s this?”

This was an easy one. “It’s Wonder Woman.” I said, smiling. I had a Wonder Woman beach towel at home. My mom had sewn my swimming badges on it from the Red Cross summer swimming program. I was already up to Sea Horse. I had even got to jump off the high dive last summer. Wonder Woman was my hero. I dressed in my Wonder Woman underroos when her show was on. I wrapped foil around my wrists and wore a paper tiara with a red star drawn in the center. The only thing I was missing was the red boots. I tried to draw them on my legs once with Daddy’s red pen, but the ink started to run out before I was done, and Daddy yelled, so I wore my white knee socks with the red stripes instead. Mom said it was a “compromise.”

Mrs. Howell smiled. “That’s right.” She sounded a little nicer. “It’s Lynda Carter who plays Wonder Woman.” She placed her photo near the other two. “Now look at these photos. What do they all have in common?”

I glanced over them and said, “They’re all women.” It was an awfully dumb game.

“What else?” Mrs. Howell asked. I looked at them again.

“They’re all wearing makeup?” I didn’t know what she wanted me to say.

“Anything else?”

I looked again. “They all have blue eyes.”

“And?” She was looking at me over the brown glasses again. She reminded me of the hawks I saw in the woods behind my house, looking down from the trees. They were looking for mice. If you walked really quiet and were careful not to crunch on the leaves and the twigs, they would stay on the limbs as you walked by. Sometimes I could tiptoe to the old wooden swing that hung on the maple tree. I could sit there and see all sorts of things... hawks, box turtles, cardinals, black snakes.

“Siân.” My attention jumped back onto Mrs. Howell.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. Maybe there was a secret they all shared. Maybe they had all been thumb-suckers. Maybe they all played kick ball. Maybe they could all remember that “apple” always had two p’s every time you spelled it.

“Would you say they are all pretty?”

“Yes,” I said. “Very pretty.” I looked closer at the women. They were beautiful. Their hair was soft and shiny and combed. I reached a hand up and felt the hair on my own head. The pig-tails my mother had fixed this morning were pulling out. A couple large strands hung in my face. I think they had started to come out during morning recess. Laura, the girl in my class with the rabbit fur jacket, always had perfect pigtails, no matter how many recesses we’d had.

Mrs. Howell reached into the briefcase again and pulled out a small mirror. She held it up to my face. “Do you see yourself, Siân?”

The girl in the mirror looked very small and plain. Her face was smudged with dirt, and her blonde hair shot out in all directions. Her blue eyes looked wide and sad. I looked away from the girl back towards Mrs. Howell.

“Do you want to be beautiful like the women in the pictures?” she asked. Her voice was gentle now.

I nodded yes.

“Well,” she sighed. “You won’t be.” I felt my lip quiver. “You will never be beautiful like those women because you suck your thumb.” She was not smiling. She sounded sorry for me.

She picked up the picture of Wonder Woman again. The white smile was mean on the page now; the red lipstick made her look like a Dracula, almost.

“Do you see how straight Lynda Carter’s teeth are? Your teeth will never be straight like that because you suck your thumb. The longer you keep sucking your thumb, the uglier you will get.”

My teeth fastened together. I didn’t know that I was not pretty. PopPop had always called me his blonde bombshell. He told me that when I got older, I was going to look like the women on my Nana’s soap opera, “As the World Turns.” They were pretty. Had he lied?

Mrs. Howell looked at her watch. “Our time is up. You need to go back to class now.” She pushed me towards the door.

She did not walk back to class with me. I walked down the hallway alone, listening to the tip-tap of my scuffed mary janes. So I was ugly. That was that. Maybe I could still be smart or athletic. After all, Wonder Woman wasn’t a super hero because she was beautiful. She was a super hero because she was tough. I could be tough, too.

But Colonel Steve loved Wonder Woman because she was pretty.

Mrs. Laughlin looked at me as I came into the classroom, but she didn't stop the lesson. I kept my eyes down as I returned to my desk and got out my cigar box again. I wondered if the other kids in the class knew I wasn't pretty. They probably did. Maybe they had talked about it while I was gone. Mrs. Laughlin wrote spelling words on the board. She turned to face the class.

She was about to tell us what they meant when her eyes stuck on me. Her face got red and twisted up. "Siân!" she hollered my name. She looked like what Mom meant when she said she was going to have a conniption. Mrs. Laughlin's voice was mean. "Get that thumb out of your mouth."

THE MONOLOGUE OF TAO, THE AWESOME ONE

*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine: * Domine, exaudi vocem meam.*

-Psalm 129

(Burial Service)

Tonight, I am no longer me. I have transformed, transmogrified. I am transgressing and transcending. I am Other. Self-actualized and all-powerful, I am Tao, The Awesome One, and like Sylvia, I eat men like air.

I have on the Pants. You know the ones, God—the ones you wish you had. The Rock Star Pants. I bought them this weekend, specifically for this purpose, for Dance Patrol, for luring lust and lingering glances and getting testosterone flowing.

Faux snakeskin, ocean green and shiny, shiny. They glitter, like me, in the light. I love that they are snakeskin, because I am feeling serpent-like tonight. I was tempted to pluck an apple from my fruit bowl and carry it, the perfect accessory, but I don't believe any of that Biblical shit, that ancient anti-woman conspiracy. Blaming women for sin. Give me a break. Adam had a mind of his own. Granted, he was no Eve, but he could think for himself.

Besides, tonight, *I* am the object of temptation, sans pomme.

My friends, the Dance Patrol, are in full effect this evening. The girls are all in leather, real and fake, new and retro. The guys are waxing smooth in more subtle ways,

cottons bleached to radiate black light and raw sexual prowess. Tonight is ours, and we strut to the bar, the Lion's Den, ready to take the fucker over. You'll know us when you see us. This Georgia town never held a more fly group.

We invade, pass the turntables, and take the bar. All eyes on me. My skin grows colder in the heat of bodies. I can feel the color draining from my eyes. On nights like this, their warm Pacific color fades to a razor blade grey. I'm sure you'll try to take credit for this, God, but I create the effect, not you. And when they grow grey, Tao, The Awesome One, is getting hungry. Men tremble but can't resist.

I order a daiquiri from Travis, the bartender. I know it's a girlie drink, but that's the benefit of being a girl. Plus, a guy once told me my kisses tasted like strawberries after drinking daiquiris, and there is something eminently Tao-like in that.

Taking the straw in my teeth, I turn from the bar to view the crowd. My mind strays to the words on the Church of Christ sign I passed tonight on the drive in: "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to Life." They don't know how true the words are, and it has nothing to do with religion. Tao-ness is not easy.

I walk towards the dance floor, scanning the faces to see who's here tonight. Dark Eyes lock on mine, and I allow my stare to linger for a fraction of a second before continuing the scan. Slow and confident, I continue forward. The Eyes are still on me when my glance makes its way back, and I feel the smirk grow on my lips. Attitude.

A touch brushes my arm, and I turn from the Eyes to a frat guy, hair gelled to look cluttered, ala Ricky Martin. He leans towards me and says that he has been checking me out since I came in. There is something about the look in this frat boy's expression that I

don't like: Lecherous. "You'll still be checking me out when I leave, then," I quip and walk on.

I draw even next to the dark Eyes and pause to watch the people on the dance floor. I finish the last of my daiquiri and put the glass on the bar. The Eyes freeze me as I turn back. "You cute," he says, tossing his chin slightly at me with the words. His straight-up honesty exhilarates. I am all ego, all Tao.

Another guy (his friend?) stands next to the Eyes, lighter skinned with eyes the color of pecan shells and as hard. He stops me with a touch on the sleeve. He says something I can't understand, and I say that the music is too loud. He pulls me in, breath hot on my ear lobe, and repeats, "Yo wanna crunk, shawty?" I have no idea what this means, and I think he knows it. Fucking power tripper. I hate this macho shit. I squint my eyes at him, knowing their edge can cut, and walk on.

I join the rest of the Patrol, and we dominate the floor with attitude. I feel Tao swelling in me, and the snakeskin pants become my own skin, scales reflecting my contours under the shifting lights. The music is primal, heavy on the bass. I release thought and become elemental, carnal, and pure.

After an hour, T-Bone suggests the Patrol move on to Iniquity, our other favorite hang. But the groove in the Lion's Den is too good tonight. I'm digging the vibe. I tell them to go on without me. I might catch up with them later.

I return to the bar. As I wait for the blender, I look back around the room. From a thick gold chain, a crucifix glints, strikes my eye with minor lightning, and I turn away. Travis hands me the daiquiri, and I notice the snake tattoo slithering on his arm. This is good. This is my element.

I notice the frat boy from earlier in the night glaring at me as I walk past. He mutters, calls me a “cock tease.” I lean towards him and hiss, “I can’t tease what you don’t have.” He turns away, and I grow tall. I have knowledge of good and evil. I am stronger than the ignorant. The lights and his insult slide off my skin.

Night slips away as nights always do, even when you’ve decided to make them Forever. When the lights come on, I ask Travis for water. The Eyes pass me on his way out. “You STILL cute,” he says, and I smile. His friend asks me again if I want to crunk, and I smirk. He smirks back, and they leave. I see the frat guy watching this, glaring at me from the corner, and I decide it’s time to go, too.

On the way out I see Billy, who I met while on Dance Patrol last week—a sweet kid really. He told me then that I had good hair. He wishes me a pleasant night, and I return the wishes. I feel a good vibe in the air here, at the entrance to the Lion’s Den, as it closes for the night. I hear Billy’s voice behind me as I turn down the street in search of my car. “I still say you’ve got great hair,” he says, “but the pants make the hair.”

My head tilts back like the lid of a mason jar whose clasp is sprung, and a laugh comes from deep inside. The full moon catches in my eye, heats my pagan blood, and I strut on.

Two blocks down the road, I have the city to myself, and I look towards the moon again. Softly, so that it won’t carry in this night air, I let out a small howl, no louder than a coyote on a distant hillside. I feel wild and primal and right.

Somewhere, the memory stirs that coyotes, dogs, and wolves howl when they are lonely and in search of another. This is appropriate; I would like to find Another. Not just any other, but the one promised by my Tarot deck—the two of cups—the man who

will complete without diminishing me. Then I remember that I was howling to myself, not to others, and this seems more appropriate still. Who can complete me better than me? I am Tao, the Awesome One. I am all-powerful.

BREAK UP

The fight had been stupid, like fights always are, but it was our first.

“Fuck him, Janice,” was Rebecca’s advice. “You don’t need him.”

And I wish the question were that simple. I know I don’t need him. The question is, do I want him? And it’s not even that simple. Obviously I want him, or I wouldn’t be thinking of him, but do I want him enough?

Nicholas was going to play tennis. They needed a fourth for doubles and couldn’t find one. I wanted to play; I offered to play. He didn’t want me. I said maybe I would play on another court with different friends. He said he didn’t want me there either. He said the game was planned months ago. He said it was a guy thing. But they called Denise to see if she would play. He called Denise.

I know it is ridiculous to make a big deal out of this, but all I feel is mad. Exhausted mad. All I understand is that he doesn’t think I am capable of doing anything. I want him to think me capable.

I think, maybe, he is an asshole.

I just lie here, listening to the choking gurgle of the emptying bathtub drain as it gasps for breath, watching the now grey water edging its way down my thighs, over my ankles, sliding gently away.

My body is stiff, and I think, flat as a pancake, stiff as a board. This is what we used to say. Flat as a pancake, stiff as a. Flat as a. Stiff. This is the trick we used to use when we wanted to float away. The magic words. They didn't work then. They still don't.

Even when you mean them.

So instead I watch the last of the bathwater funneling whirlpools over the drain. I used to be afraid of washing away with the water. But now, I want the washing away. I crave it. I want to be thrown out with the bathwater.

Maybe the problem is deeper, but actually, I think it's less deep. Shallow. Surface, really. The problem, I'm thinking, is skin in which my thoughts, too, funnel and whirl. If I could just get out of this skin for a while, maybe I would be all right.

I've been through this before. This not wantedness. Seven years with my ex-husband taught me notwantedness. And I still didn't get it until that midnight call from his other girlfriend. Her little voice. Shame in it. Sham shame. Shame because she knows that's what I should want her to feel. That I would desire remorse. Where was her remorse when she was fucking my husband?

I don't want that ever again. I want wantedness. I thought I had it this time.

I want Nicholas to call. I want him to call so that I can say I can't talk to him right now. I want him to hear the tired in my voice. Bone-tired. Exhaustion.

I am weary. Weary, to wear, worn, worn out. Wearing away. An audio tape played and replayed until each loop, each threading through the paths and gears that I

have traveled and retraveled threatened to break me. I think, SNAP. But snap has more energy than I have right now.

The *wisest* words of wisdom ever told to me were these: There's a reason for denial. Sometimes we need it. Sometimes it is all that protects us. I think sometimes it is a casing, holding me together. Thin, translucent, tenuous. But something.

So I am not going to think about him right now. I am not going to think about the phone sitting next to me, not ringing and not ringing. Pestering me with its silence. Pestering and festering. It's under my skin like that. A disease. An infection.

I'm not thinking these things.

The *dumbest* words of wisdom ever told were these: Love conquers all. These words are dumb, not because they are untrue, but because they are true, and no one is hearing them. They are listening and misinterpreting. The words should have been less vague. Love does conquer all. I thought there was something inside me, at least, that was unconquerable.

I want the phone to ring.

I want it to ring so I can tell it to shut up.

I can't seem to drink enough water.

I am driving home, and what I am trying to believe (in repetitions, until I believe it) is fuck him. I don't need him. I deserve better than this. But instead, I am thinking in moments, scenes flickering and playing across my windshield like a movie. As if they were things that didn't happen to me.

I see me, making chicken curry. I can almost smell it. Exotic. And plain white rice, already cooked, left over, sitting in an open tupperware, ready to go into the microwave when the curry is almost ready and the time is right. These are the things I'm focusing on.

Then, he's behind me, enveloping me in large, powerful arms, protective I think, his arms around my waist as I stir. He is kissing my neck. The nape. I feel that I am sexy. I feel that I am loved. And I know only now that this is my delusion.

My pillow is wet. I think water should be cold. These tears, however, are hot. Scalding. I wonder if this is where my passion has gone, if it is heating these tears, if it's there, microscopically, suspended in saline.

These thoughts are stupid.

I think: So this is how things end. Not with a right or wrong. Not with a fault. Not even with a ring of the phone. Just an end. Inexplicable. I try to remind myself that it has only been a few days, that I am over-reacting.

I don't understand these things. I don't understand why Friday was good and Saturday was bad and it's Tuesday now and he still hasn't called and although I've seen him twice in the hallway he barely spoke to me. Just cursory phrases. Civilities. I wonder if beneath all civility there is contempt. I suppose there must be. Otherwise, it wouldn't require you to be civil. Otherwise, it would just be kindness.

He doesn't even have kindness for me now.

I am trying to remember that this is just fighting, but it feels like ending.

* * *

It is morning now, and light out, and somehow it is possible to be cold again. To put up the façade. To detach.

It's my eyes that give me away when I look in the mirror; above and below, the skin is puffy and red. Full. Like something waiting to be hatched. The whites are bloodshot. Not white at all anymore really. This is how eyes look when they are bruised. Or when what is behind them is bruised.

I don't want to think these things any more, I remind myself. I don't need him. I don't need anyone.

I am all I ever need. I am all I ever need. I am all I ever need.

I'm half afraid to leave the house. Today, I broke down and called him. I left two messages for him to call, but the phone is still not ringing. I'm afraid if I leave the house it will ring.

Then I think perhaps it is more likely to ring if I leave. A watched pot type of theory. So I go running. Mainly because I haven't been sleeping. I want to sleep. I want the sleep to come tonight like the tide. Unavoidable. I want it to wash me away. Or maybe, just to wash me. Clean. Like a seashell.

When I come back, I go straight to the answering machine, but the red dot just stays a red dot, like an eye, cruel and glaring. Unblinking.

These are the thoughts I will not admit to:

When I brought the now empty recycling bin back in, I half hoped there was a black widow waiting inside the lip of its edge. I saw myself in the hospital, on life-

support, insensible. Fading fast, they would say. She's fading fast. And he would rush to the hospital, to me, even though it would be too late.

Are black widows even deadly?

Or jogging. I think of the creepy red Camaro. The one that passed me four times slowly when I was running—I guess that was two weeks ago now. What if I was kidnapped? What if I was to disappear? He'd hear about it in a few days maybe. When they noticed I hadn't show up for classes. Or when they found the body. My body.

I don't really want these things. If I wrote them down I think even I would see myself as crazy. To speak them would be more honest and more unavoidably stupid than any action I can imagine. Yet there they are, lurking.

It occurs to me only now, after the phone call, that I am wearing the exact same outfit I was wearing on the day we met: jeans, white v-neck tee shirt—the cheap kind that come in packets of three, and my fatigue woolen jacket. We began and we're ending in the same clothes.

Dogs are smarter than humans. They put no stock in voices on the telephone. They don't react. Not even if they know the voice. Not even if they love the voice. There are too many missing pieces. Sight. Smell. Touch.

My dog, who is all wiggles and panting affection when Nicholas comes over, does not even wag her tail at his voice, which I'm sure she must be able to overhear. What she sees and what she hears is me, and I am trying to stifle sobs so they don't carry

through the line. She sits next to me, rests her chin on my knee. She and I are both waiting to see what happens.

As I talk, I look around the room.

The daffodils on my counter are dying. I water and light them so they can die slowly, naturally, as becomes daffodils. When the leaves are completely colorless, I will fold and bundle them and cloister the pot under my kitchen sink for perhaps a month. Then I can set it out again to be reborn.

This is what we do. We make metaphors.

I am reflecting:

Was he shocked or stunned? There is so much difference there, in synonyms. Shocked is active. Motion. Emotion. Stunned is different. I don't know which best suits.

I'm not sure which I hope he was.

He didn't expect me to break up with him, to be willing to be alone. He didn't expect me to say that I won't stay with someone who doesn't want me around. Perhaps I am growing Strength. Is that root or flower?

Maybe I should admit that this is just an illusion of strength. Breaking up because I lacked the endurance for an ambivalent relationship. In this light, strength is weakness.

JUMPING OFF THE ROOF

I remember how I measured the garage in Megans, an inchworm kind of measuring. I figured it would take about three little sisters to be building-tall. “Yeah, you can do it,” I’d said. “It’s safe.”

“Are you sure?” She squinted at me, small and brown in the sun.

“Definitely.” I looked back at the garage. “Use the umbrella, though, just to be sure. Like a parachute.”

She hesitated a moment, looked at our friend Kim who stared wide-eyed at the garage. Megan smiled, turned, flew over the gravel and up the steps in her orthopedic shoes. For a moment, she disappeared. Reappeared, on the roof, giggling.

“Come on,” I said, impatient. “Do it.”

She popped her red umbrella open. Her legs still pale on the sides from metal braces. Kim said, “I can’t watch, I can’t watch.” Megan didn’t wait for Kim to turn her head.

I had thought she would float to the ground like Mary Poppins, but she came fast. The umbrella inside-outed itself.

When her shoes hit the gravel, they sounded like triumph.

FEARLESS

*If you're going to judge yourself in a mirror, at least make
sure you have good lighting.*

-Megan Griffiths

Even the promise of complimentary popcorn wasn't drawing customers into Tristate, "Idaho's Most Interesting Store," today. Bethany couldn't help but wonder why Mr. Arnold, the owner, had insisted on printing that catchphrase on their nametags. "Interesting" was one of those ambivalent adjectives that seemed more likely to be pejorative than positive. And it didn't fit with the name of the store itself. Tristate implied that they spanned three states, but Tristate only had branches in Idaho and Washington. Mr. Arnold argued that the third state was the state of mind and, furthermore, that no one would shop at "Bistate"—that just sounded kinky.

Bethany pondered this condensing of three states to two to one, Idaho, as she marked down Levi's 501 Shrink to Fits. The pegboard wall in the rear of the store and the yards of steel shelving seemed to grow longer as she worked. Shelf after shelf of stiff blue denim, some needing refolding and most needing to be sorted for size. At least it provided some distraction for the first hour and a half of her eight-hour shift. *\$7.50 earned*, she thought, *minus taxes*. And she only stabbed herself with the tagging gun once. It hadn't bled too much. She'd been able to put a band-aid on it before it stained any of the jeans, at least. She wondered if financing art school was really worth this.

Bethany threw the plastic tagging gun in the Clothing Department Employee closet, glad to be done with it. It was beige. *The color of resignation*, she thought. The damned gun jammed constantly on the plastic clothing tags, and the needle at the end was far better equipped for pricking fingers than piercing fabric. *What did the pricked finger cause in that old fairy tale...the one with the grumpy little man...*

As Bethany emerged from the closet, she spotted Thomas striding through the racks in his red supervisor's vest. He managed the Sporting Goods department and spent most of his day behind the gun case distributing buckshot and reeling off facts about Tristate's assortment of Winchesters and Smith and Wessons. Twice a week, though, he was floor manager, which meant he became a pain in the ass to everyone in the store instead of just the Sporting Goods employees.

Bethany forced a smile as he approached, trying not to treat him as the enemy. A little polite respect went a long way. At any rate, it seemed to get him out of her department faster.

"What are you working on?" The question was fired off like an accusation, but Bethany let it slide off.

"Just finished marking the 501s and figured I'd tidy up a little bit around here."

"Humph." His moustache breathed out with his response—was he *trying* to look like Yosemite Sam?—and he glanced around. Bethany was aware that he felt out of place here. He knew the most minute differences between every sleeping bag and fly rod in his own department, but Clothing was a foreign world to him. "Well, good then... Carry on."

“You got it,” she said lightly, directing the words towards his back as he retreated to the Shoe department.

Bethany worked her way from rack to rack towards the running shorts. Ahead, she noticed a woman enter the department with her pre-teen daughter. They were out-of-towners, an easy distinction to make. Moscow, home of the University of Idaho, was as different from the surrounding farmland as Jackson Pollack and Norman Rockwell. The feathered bleach blonde hair of both mother and daughter, the fringed Justin ropers, and the over-tight Wranglers stretched over generous thighs gave them away. The daughter could pass for a small clone of the mother, frumpy and housewifely even before she hit her teenage years.

“Is there anything I can help you find?” Bethany asked. Her voice was plastic even to her own ears.

“No, not right now,” the mother answered, not bothering to look up from the blouses she was examining.

“Let me know if you have any questions.” Bethany returned to sorting and sizing but watched the ladies in case she could give assistance and make this endless shift pass a little more swiftly.

The girl rifled through the racks of Columbia hiking shorts that wilted from silver-veneer hangers. She sorted through them as if on work detail, like this was part of a prison sentence. Bethany thought she had never seen anyone who looked quite so forgettable, bland in features and style. *No sense of aesthetics*, she thought. *Clothing's not just about covering your body with any old fabric. It's a reflection of your personality. It's what you carry with you, inside and out, to beautify your world.*

The mother pulled out a blouse with red and blue flowers appliquéd around the buttons. “Hey Shawna,” she called over, “how about this?”

Shawna looked up. “Oh, God, Mom. No, I’m not wearing that.”

Good for you, kid. Those shirts have “Dweeb” written all over them. Bethany examined the girl more closely. Her misshapen tee shirt displayed an eagle perched on a dying cedar. The girl’s shoulders sloped downwards, an angle emphasized by the limp teal cotton of the shirt. Her chin multiplied as she gazed down at the racks. The stiff, over-moussed segments of bleached curls further added to the disastrous depression of downward angles. She was a sculptor’s nightmare.

That girl could have been me ten years ago, Bethany realized. It had taken time and thought to develop her look, a good Northwest mix of grunge and granola, with a little California skater-style thrown in for spice. There had been some hits and misses during those junior high years, but she had managed to work herself out of nerd-dom.

Shawna’s mother held up another blouse. This one was blue and white striped with forget-me-nots embroidered on the white collar. “This one’s nice.”

“Mmm-ooooommm,” Shawna breathed, horrified. Her eyes sprang wide.

Bethany smiled behind her racks. *The poor kid must catch hell at school,* she thought. She wanted to take the girl to the mall. Some flannel shorts, waffle-weave long johns, and a few good tee shirts would do her a world of good, she was certain—a healthy dose of Kurt Cobain to bring her into the 90s, the Now. And a hair cut. That would be the first stop.

Shawna, Bethany noticed, had strayed to the table of No Fear shirts that had been set up two weeks ago. Bethany had questioned the decision to order so many of those

shirts. That brand hadn't really been in style for two years. None of the college students would have touched them, and most of the high school and junior high students—even the less trendy—had moved on to Mossimo and Stussy. Not one shirt had sold since they had come in, and they had already been marked down.

The mother was in the Lee Relaxed Fit Khakis by this point. She held up a pair of the petite length. “How about at least trying on a pair of these?” Her voice was tired.

Instead of answering her, though, the girl pulled a brown shirt from the pile. A skull blazed across the front like a comet, the words “No Fear” aflame underneath. The girl's full face flushed as she aimed a dazzling smile at her mother. “What about this shirt, Mom?”

“Shawna, be serious,” the mother's voice dismissive. “We're here to do school shopping.” Her face pulled downward in a frown as she turned back towards the pants. Bethany got the distinct sense that this was old territory.

The girl turned the shirt so she could gaze again at its pattern. She seemed hypnotized by its image. “I could wear this to school,” she asserted.

Bethany was neglecting her rack now, enveloped in the battle of couture. She knew the shirt wouldn't do anything to help this poor girl. She was already a lost cause to the fashion world. One shirt, especially this shirt, couldn't change that, but it would have been a huge step forward on a long road Bethany knew well.

“Shawna. That shirt has a skull on it. You can not wear that to school.”

Shawna was not going to be so easily deterred, however. “Well, I can wear it around the house then. Look, they're on sale.” A broad grin grew again on her face.

The mother glanced over the rows of blouses. “I think it’s time to go,” she replied. Shawna’s face fell. Overhead, one of the fluorescent lights began to flicker. Shawna remained by the shirts. She gradually exhaled a long sigh...a mixture of the weariness of certain defeat and the building momentum of the last stand. She cocked her head slightly sideways.

“But, Mom,” she pleaded, “It can be my *power* shirt.”

The words hit Bethany with the force of a shotgun shell. Suddenly, the girl HAD to have that shirt. It didn’t matter if it was in style or not. There was strength there, perseverance. Every girl deserved a power shirt.

“Put the shirt down, Shawna,” her mother replied. “I’m sorry,” she said, turning towards Bethany. “Kids.”

Why is she apologizing to me? I’m not the one being done a disservice. But Bethany bent her thoughts and lips to form a different response: “No problem.” She tried to smile, but she was still too mystified by the force of the girl’s words to quite pull it off. The fluorescent lights were humming louder in her ears over the silence as the mother collected her daughter, and the pair disappeared out the double doors. *Damn*, Bethany thought, *get the girl that shirt!*

But the battle was over. Bethany stared out the glass doors after them. Her brow, knit in frustration, relaxed in stages. *That girl’s going to be all right.*

Bethany looked down at her own plain black tee shirt. She picked a few stray cat hairs off the sleeve. She wondered if there was any power in this shirt.

“Bethany.” Thomas’ voice pierced through her back. She jolted upright and spun towards him. He loomed directly behind her. “What are you doing?”

“Still straightening.” She attempted to sound casual and confident, but she could hear a quiver of weakness in her voice. “I want to colorize these Lees, then I’ll work on refolding some of the Carharts.”

“Good.” He nodded and strode towards House Wares.

Bethany stared briefly back towards the row of empty glass doors at the storefront. Enough was enough. She strode into the clothing department closet and grabbed the marking gun. She rolled the rubber numbers to read \$1.49, and strode to the table of brown shirts. One by one, she found the tag of each shirt and stamped them with her new sale price. Everyone needed a power shirt.

FALLING IN TRINITY:

CCD MEMOIRS

Communion (6 years)

My mom laughed at me when I asked her what God tasted like. She said it wasn't about the taste of God but the feeling of God. You could feel him all around you, she said.

I practiced hard so I could do it, too. Left hand on top, right on the bottom. Receive the host. Pick it up with your fingertips. Be careful. Don't break God. Put it in your mouth.

In CCD, we didn't get to practice with the wafers. They used regular old Wonder bread cut into squares. It tasted like nothing and turned to glue in my mouth, but I knew God would taste different. Bigger, maybe, somehow. I tried to imagine myself warm all over like God might make me feel, but with Wonder bread, it doesn't work. They gave us grape juice for the blood but I hate the taste of purple, so I just touched it to my mouth and tried not to swallow.

But today is different. Today is the big day with the real bread and the real wine. Nana made me a new dress and my mother's veil is strapped to my head with elastic. I don't match. The veil is old and yellow and the roses sewn into it are crooked, but the dress is new and white. I hope God won't mind. I love the veil even though it's yellow

because I look like a bride. I've been trying to get my Mom to let me use it when I play wedding, but she said it had to be saved just for today.

My hair is brushed and curled, and my shoes don't have too many scuffs. Nana and Mom and Dad are in the rows and rows of folding chairs behind us, but I'm in the front. PopPop is standing beside me in his suit. His chest is puffed out, but he keeps looking down and smiling at me. He knows what God tastes like, too, but no one will tell me. They all said I would know for myself soon enough. Maybe it's like a birthday present, and it's better if you don't know until it's time. But today I get to find out.

The truth is, though, I shouldn't really be here. I never learned the Hail Mary. I can't say it all the way through without help, but they said it was close enough because I know the Our Father. The Our Father is easy. Mom gave me a small, pink, ceramic book for my dresser. It was hers when she was little and Nana's when she was little. The statue book is open and has a rose on one page, but a lot of the leaves are cracked off. On the other page, it has the Our Father in gold paint. You have to squint to read some of the words, but they're all there.

Nobody ever gave me a Hail Mary book, though, and that stinks because it's the hard one. It starts over in the middle, and I always say the whole beginning over again when you're supposed to say different words to get to the end. They have it in the CCD book with a cartoon picture of Mary. She's tall and wears a blue dress, and I wish they made an easier poem for her like they did for the Our Father.

Father Michael is smiling in front of me. He is a nice man, and I think he's smiling because he knows what God tastes like and soon I'm going to know, too. His robes are long and white, and he has a cloth that goes around his neck that we made. It

has the handprints of each kid in our whole CCD class cut out in different colored felt and glued on. When we gave it to him, he said it was the nicest one ever. Now he says, “The body of Christ,” and I say “Amen,” just like I am supposed to. PopPop nudges me smiling, and I remember to put up my hands, left hand on top, and Father Michael gives me one of the breads. I put it in my mouth and try to taste God, but it doesn’t taste. It just sticks to the roof of my mouth and I can’t get my tongue underneath it.

I look at my grandfather because I am worried. PopPop smiles because he doesn’t know I can’t taste it. Maybe I can’t taste God because I don’t know the Hail Mary and knowing the Our Father isn’t enough. God knows I don’t belong. I don’t know the words, and I’m not ready. I’m pushing the roof of my mouth with my tongue trying to get the host down, but it won’t budge. When the man with the wine says “The blood of Christ,” I tilt my head down and lisp “Amen” and hope he doesn’t hear because then everyone would know that I’ve got God on the roof of my mouth and can’t get him down.

Penance (11 years)

Father Michael is in South America this month, so we have the guy from the downtown church. I can tell by the way he’s frowning at our folding chairs and plain wooden cross that he doesn’t belong here. I’ve seen his church. The floors are red and the walls are white and everything is gilded and full of statues, and over the altar is a crying Jesus on the Cross. His sermons aren’t nearly as good as Father Michael’s are. Before Father Michael left, he told us about the faith healers in Mexico and how he

thought they were all frauds, but one of them touched him last time he was there, and he dropped like a stone. “I don’t know what that means,” he said. “I can’t explain it.”

This guy from down town doesn’t talk like that. He talks about the power and the glory and things we’d basically already covered in the ritual parts of the ceremony. His robes are embroidered, and the cross that hangs from his waist isn’t plain like Father Mike’s but bumpy with carving and stones.

This is the guy I’m supposed to confess to. This stranger. I’ve been thinking all week of sins, but can’t come up with much. Now church is over, and I’m waiting my turn, and I can’t believe they didn’t postpone this until Father Mike got back.

He calls me upstairs when it’s my turn, and I go on reluctant feet. He’s sitting there on a chair with another empty chair in front of him. “Have a seat,” he tells me, but he doesn’t even look up as I sit. There is a long pause before he says, “Well?”

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I try to say the right words. It is my first confession. He asks me about my sins, and I mumble something about taking the Lord’s name in vain. He assigns me some prayers. He seems unimpressed. “Come on,” he says, when I say I have nothing further to confess, “There must be something else.”

“No.” I am unsure.

“Nothing. Ever.” He says the words flat, but I can hear his doubt. “That’s not much sinning for, what is it, eleven years?”

I am not sure how much sinning he expects me to have done. “Well,” I say, thinking hard on the last several years. “There is one thing I still feel kind of bad about.”

He bows his head.

“It was about two years ago. I got this call from my friend—she lives up the street from me—well, I don’t *know* that it was her but it sounded like her. It was a prank call—the person sung ‘The Cat Came Back’ and hung up. I was home alone with my little sister, and it made me kind of scared but kind of angry.” I look at him. He doesn’t say anything, so I go on. “Well, I decided to get her back a few days later, when I knew her mom was gone. I called her, and when she answered, I didn’t say anything. I just let her keep saying hello. When I hung up, though, I felt bad, because I thought I might have scared her.”

“That’s very bad.” The priest says, looking at me now with his little eyes all squinted up.

“I know,” I say. “I felt horrible. I told her that afternoon that it was me and said I was sorry that I’d done it.”

“I doubt very much that you did anything of the sort.”

I stare at him. My tongue can’t make any words.

“I think if you had said something, you wouldn’t still be feeling guilty about it after all this time,” he said.

“I feel bad because apologizing wasn’t enough to take it back.”

“That’s right. It wasn’t. A sin is a sin and will stay with you. You need to do some serious praying and ask for God’s and that girl’s forgiveness.”

“But, I already told her it was me. I already said I was sorry.”

“Are you afraid to ask again?”

I don’t know how to answer.

“How can you expect God’s forgiveness if you are afraid to confess this sin to the little girl up the street?” He smiles at me, and I wonder if he is trying to look kind or encouraging. His smile isn’t as true as Father Michael’s.

“But I told her. I confessed.”

The priest looks at me, and now there is anger in his eyes. I don’t say any more. When he asks if there are any other sins, I say no. He looks at me doubtfully and tells me now is the time to confess them. I say I don’t have any. We go through the formalities, and he says I can go back downstairs. As I got to the top of the staircase, though, he says, “That was an evil thing you did. I hope you think well on it and don’t do it again.”

I step my way down the stairs without answering because I have thought well on it for a long time now. My mother is waiting for me in the folding chairs of our church with the other parents. She smiles at me, her I’m-proud-of-you smile, because now I am sin-free, and we go to the car.

Confirmation (13 years)

So far, we’ve just focused on learning the saints. We haven’t gotten to the ceremony part of the course yet. All I know is that eventually we will choose a second name, a saint’s name, as part of our own. I don’t need to know all the saints. I already know who I want to be: Joan. The name isn’t pretty, but Joan was tough, and if anyone’s going to be looking over me, I want it to be her. We learned about her in my history class at school. She pretended to be a boy so she could fight, and she led a whole army before they burned her at the stake. She broke every rule; she gave up her family and her home.

She was brave when people thought girls couldn't do much, and she wasn't much older than me. I don't care what other saints we learn about. She's the one for me.

Roy, the Confirmation teacher, is a moron. He tells us stories he can't explain and asks us questions he can't answer. For instance, this morning, he was telling us about times when Catholicism was illegal and the martyrs who died so they could go to church. Then he said, "Let's say church was illegal today." The let's say game is his favorite. "You go anyway because you are all good Catholics, and you want to get into heaven, but one day a guy at work comes up to you and says he saw you going to mass. What do you say to him?"

He looked infinitely pleased with his question and told Heather to answer first. "What will happen to me if I'm caught?" she asked because she is practical.

Roy looked at her, smiled, and said, "you'll be hanged." Heather thought for a few moments.

"I would say I was there for the same reason he was—to turn in the people breaking the law." She knew this wasn't the right answer. All of us knew what he wanted to hear, but lying is a sin.

"You would deny your Lord and Savior."

"Only so I could continue to serve him on Earth," she said, trying to find some good in the selfish motive of wanting to live.

"What about you, Tommy?" He turned to the boy on his right.

"I would let them kill me if they wanted to. I would say I was going to church to worship the one true God." Roy smiled. I always knew Tommy was a brown-noser. His shirts were a little too clean.

“But then they would hang you.” Roy still smiled, though, encouraging him with yes nods.

“Then they hang me. The worst that happens is that I go to heaven and be with my Father.”

I felt ill. I couldn't believe Roy was buying this.

I think most of the other kids in the class knew Tommy was full of it, too, because when they were asked, most of them agreed with Heather. Most of them admitted that, if their lives were on the line, they would tell a small lie rather than face the noose. I admired their honesty.

Roy was saving me for last. I suppose he was still mad at me for saying last week that the Bible could just be a really great story, like any other novel, and wasn't necessarily the Word of God at all. Finally, though, he turned and said, “Well, Siân, what would you do?”

“I'd ask the guy what the heck he was doing there.”

“That doesn't answer my question.” Roy sounded proud.

“Sure it does, because this guy doesn't have a leg to stand on. The truth is, he was there to worship just like the rest of us. If he knew there was a church meeting going on, he should have turned us in to the proper authorities, and there would've been a bust. But this guy didn't do that, which means he's a Catholic, too, or is interested in becoming one. Either way, it's too late for him to turn me in because then he would have to admit that he went to the service, which he knows he can't do if he wants to save his own neck.” The other kids were staring at me and then at Roy. “More than likely, he's just looking for a fellow Catholic to talk to. It'd be my *Christian duty*” (I looked Roy right in

the eyes as I said this) “to make him admit he’s a Catholic so he has someone else to talk to and didn’t feel so alone.”

Roy was turning red. “I’m afraid it just doesn’t work like that.” He said. “We’ll assume that because of your evasion of the answers, you would probably be hung.”

“They got nothing on me,” I said under my breath, but he turned towards Tommy and asked him to tell us everything he could remember about the story of St. Francis of Sales.

My mother looks at me with sorrowful eyes when I tell her this story. I want her to see like I do how stupid it all is, why I can’t possibly listen to Roy. “I’m sure he has a lot he can tell you,” she says.

I look at her for a few minutes, wondering whether she’s a clone mom sent down from Mars to replace the sensible mother who would see my point. She’s met Roy at least once. She should have seen what a dork he is. “Anyway,” I say, “I don’t think I can handle it any more. I think even Roy would prefer it I wasn’t there.”

Her silence tells me they’ve already spoken to her about me. I swallow the lump that’s forming in the back of my throat. “I’m not ready to be confirmed yet,” I say. “I just don’t know if I can buy any of it. Confirmation would be a lie.” I know the sacraments are too important for her to debate this logic.

During the silent car ride home, I think of the name I was going to take. I will never be Joan now.

EXPERIMENT IN DETACHMENT

There are no more words for white. All the similes have been used and overused and become trite: snow, ghost, bleach, paper, death. How can I describe that pure white cotton sheet as the spider webs of my blood overtook its blank and crumpled landscape?

My mother is frantic, manhandling the Dodge Ramcharger towards O'Bleness Hospital. My parents' mouths are moving, seem to be yelling, shouting, but all I can make out is the loud crashing of radio static. Shock.

The spider webs are fascinating, splintering the sheet into crystal shards, like the storm door fragments lodged in my arms and chest. I don't feel them as they burrow deeper under my skin, persistent gophers. My body seems to be made of white noise, flickering and transitory. No signals are coming through. They will come back later, the signals. Color and clarity. My senses will bloom from this stark winter.

CHRISTY HAGLAR

I don't recognize the "hello" on the phone. There is a vague familiarity, something about pitch maybe, or intonation? I recognize the California lilt, the upspeak and flattened o and a that still taint my own accent. But it's been three years since I talked to anyone in Riverside, my old home.

Then she says, "It's Christy," with that rising excitement, that convulsion of vocal chords, a chaos of pitch even in two short words, and I am thrown backwards. I am in memory. I try to listen. To acknowledge. To give the appropriate um hmms in the appropriate pauses. Instead I feel myself sliding away.

"Hey! Wait up!"

I know the voice behind me. I know it well enough to not want to wait. I know it well enough to want to run. But that would be mean. Mom would demand a "talk" if I did that. So I turn and say, "Hey, Christy. What's up?"

"Helen," she wheezes, correcting me. Her face is red. She's huffing from running. She's skinny, and I am not, but she always runs out of breath before me when we race. Her red face makes her eyes seem watery and too bright. The blue stands out against the red. Her whole face is colors. Her hair looks flat next to it. Boring white blonde, like her white tee shirt.

I don't talk as we walk to school. I don't want her to think I am her friend, because I'm not. She's a year younger than me—just a fifth grader. I am her neighbor

not her pal. I don't think she sees the difference. She comes over every night, won't leave until my mother makes her leave, spills her guts for hours. She mainly talks with my mother because Mom is a social worker and understands. *Even then I must have been starting to doubt, wondering how much Mom really knew about anything, wondering how much "talking it out" could really help. Maybe growing up with someone who counsels for a living does this to you. Creates cynicism. Allows you to see beyond the question asked and to the web of diagnoses each answer might yield.*

How old was I when Mom said I "didn't hug back any more?"

This morning, as usual, Christy doesn't seem to notice that I'm not talking. She's babbling away next to me, about her adoptive mother not letting her get her ears pierced, about *Dark Crystal* (her favorite movie), about her brother Chris who sent her a picture in his last letter. She shows this to me. He looks just like her but younger and chubby. I wonder what it would be like not to live with your brother. Not to have him trying to read your diary. Not to have him scratch your records. Not to have him tease you about the boys he thought you liked. I'm starting to feel a little sorry for not being Christy's friend, but I'm also angry that she isn't cool. She makes it too hard.

By this time, we're at school. We have to hang out in the outdoor cafeteria until the warning bell rings. I wish Christy wouldn't sit next to me, but I know she will. I'm not a popular kid anyway, but it's worse when the other kids think I'm her friend. On my own, I can defend myself a little. Christy lets things get to her. She cries sometimes. Right in front of them. Big horse tears. It's embarrassing.

That wasn't really true, was it? That Christy made me less cool? When Christy was around, I wasn't the bottom of the hierarchy anymore. I just didn't want to be

associated with her. I wanted to be free of the bottom all together. I have to remember that, too. To remember that I was not the good guy. I pushed her away for the same reason they did. What was the reason? Is it even accurate to call it reason?

Can I really blame myself? I was young. I was just trying to survive, wasn't I? Was I? Was I ever really in danger? Christy was. She always was.

I can see Gretchen and Kristen laughing at the corner table. Gretchen keeps looking over at us. I feel invisible spiders on my arms when she looks like that. Something is up. John walks up to them and is drawn into the talk. I see him blush, then he starts laughing, too.

Her voice in the telephone asks me what I'm up to now, jokingly calls me the big shot college student. The phone lends a tin quality to her voice. I'm answering something. What are the words coming mechanically out of my mouth? Something about my sophomore year. Something about switching to a creative writing emphasis. Do I say that Idaho is nicer than California? That I'm glad to have escaped?

Mrs. Matulich is teaching the Gold reading group in the front of our classroom. The rest of us are supposed to be silent reading, but Gretchen is whispering to the others at my table.

“Do you know what *I* heard?” she hisses. Sarah, who sits across from her, smiles but nods no. “*I* heard that she got caught in Mrs. McMillan's class putting a pencil up her skirt.”

“What?” Sarah sounds confused but looks thrilled.

“And not just under her skirt, either,” Gretchen continues, smiling around at the table and dropping her whisper slightly lower. “She put it up underneath her underwear.”

Sarah and the others gasp at this, then start giggling. Mrs. Matulich looks up and snaps at them to be quiet. They look down at their books and laugh softer. After a few minutes, Sarah looks back up at Gretchen. “Christy—Helen—whatever she calls herself—is so *gross*. I can’t believe she did that.”

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Gretchen looks at me, and I realize I’ve been staring. “What are *you* looking at?” She glares at me. “*Pain*” she adds. I look away. They call me Pain because it rhymes with my name. Sometimes I hate my name.

I wonder what I would have changed my name to if I could be named anything. I’d have been smarter than Christy. Her real name, the name her parents gave her, was Christina Peoples, but when she got adopted, her new parents said she could chose her own name. She chose Helen Haglar. Stupid. If you shorten Helen (and she should have known the kids at school would), you get Hell, and if you shorten Haglar, you get Hag. Christy was a hell hag. With Peoples, they had shortened it to “pee,” but that wasn’t too big a deal. And Christina couldn’t be shortened much past Christy. She used to remind me to call her Helen when it occurred to her, but I wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t open her up that way, even if that was what she wanted.

I wonder if there is such a thing as a perfect name.

Christy is asking me if I’m seeing anyone. I tell her something about Justin. Standard things. His height. His hair and eye color. I’m listing facts. I say he’s a good guy most of the time. I am noncommittal. I don’t want to make my life sound good. I

try to make it colorless, bland. To blend my life with what I imagine to be the bleakness of hers.

I always bring a sack lunch because only losers eat school lunch. Sack lunches aren't always safe though. I only eat zingers at home now, and I only let my mom make me cream cheese and olive sandwiches on the weekends. Peanut butter and jelly on Wonder is a safe bet. Twinkies are the dessert of choice, but you can get away with Hostess crumb cakes, which I like better.

I've finished eating and am headed towards the field. I ate fast, so I'm the first one out of the cafeteria. *I always used to sit under the pepper trees that separated the little kids' playground from ours. The field was usually empty. Most of the kids played on the blacktop: foursquare, dodge ball, basketball, tetherball. Sitting under the pepper trees, even though I was allergic to them, everything was ok. I could imagine that I was in England and that a group of friends were meeting me here for a picnic and boating on the river afterwards. There wasn't a river, but it didn't matter because there weren't any friends either.*

The recess lady stops me on my way out to the field. "Where do you think you're going?" Before I can answer, she says, "didn't you see the pink flag on the flagpole on your way in? It's a first degree alert. No one goes out." I can taste the smog in my nostrils when I sigh.

I hate smog. I don't know why my parents decided to move to California. I liked Ohio. We had woods behind our house, and the kids there didn't say, "You can't play on the monkey bars unless you're wearing Guess jeans."

I go back to Mrs. Matulich's room so I can read my book. I don't get very far when Gretchen and John come in. They're laughing. Gretchen's face is red, like Christy's was this morning. She has white blonde hair, too, but her mother curls hers. Her mother also lets her wear eye makeup. She's the only girl at the whole school whose mom lets her wear eye makeup. I wonder if this is what makes her popular as I try to concentrate on *Bridge to Tarabithia*.

Sarah comes in next, though, and she and Gretchen start whispering. They are standing right at my shoulder, and I can't think about my book.

"Did you do it?" Sarah is whispering.

"Yep," I can hear the smile in Gretchen's voice, the pride. "It's in her desk. Mrs. Brown wasn't back from the teacher's lounge yet. John stood lookout while I went in. It's all set."

Did I realize Christy was their intended victim? I must have. But I think I just felt relief. I wasn't the intended target. We were restricted to staying in our own classes during smog alerts anyway. I couldn't have done anything if I wanted to. Could I?

Perhaps I didn't really hear this much. Maybe the teacher's name was garbled. Maybe I didn't know the plot. Perhaps my memory isn't quite accurate. I would like to believe that.

Christy is telling me something. I'm blankly looking at my dorm room walls. I don't want to know how her life is going. I already know how it must be going. I grew up with these stories, the stories my Mom brought to the dinner table after work. I know how victims turn out. I know that abuse is habit-forming.

Instead of listening, I am looking at my dormitory walls. Beige cinderblocks. The bedspread is also beige, with sage and dusty blues mixed into the pattern. When did I become so safe? I think of the room I had then. Loud. White bedspread sprinkled with rainbows. Blue carpet. Posters: ocelots, mountain lions, bobcats.

My dormitory is aptly named. It occurs to me now that I have tried to make it a cocoon. That I long to be dormant. That I have been dormant for a long time.

Mrs. Matulich made me stay after class to talk to her because I failed my step math test. Again. I hate math. It's dumb. I don't know why I have to know long division. All the adults always use calculators anyway. Even Brendan Beck, who's all the way up in the Trigonometry step—a step they had to invent just for him—gets to use a calculator.

All the other kids got to go out into the sunshine, smog or no smog, while Mrs. Matulich looked at me through her dumb old thick glasses and tried to tell me why it was important that I know math. She told me she could see I knew how to do the work, but that I was making stupid mistakes. She told me I had to check my work and be more careful so I could move on to the next step, Geometry I. She told me I was in the lowest step of any kid in the class. I already know all this.

At last, though, she lets me out, and I'm running away from class and school and back towards beautiful home with the Atari all hooked up and Space Invaders waiting. It's the wailing I hear first, loud like a siren, and I slow to a walk and look around to see who's hurt. I remember when Scott fell off the candy cane last year, before they took it out of the obstacle course, and broke his leg. He sounded like that.

This time it's not Scott but Christy, or Helen, or whatever you want to call her. She's bawling by the flagpole, standing on her own two legs and not looking hurt at all. And just slightly less loud, I hear Gretchen laughing. John is pacing behind her. Mainly, he looks worried.

I walk towards Christy and Gretchen. I don't know why I'm doing this because, to tell you the truth, I don't think I should. I think I should go home and not pay attention to any of this. But I can't let Christy stand there like that. She's making a fool of herself.

I don't get any closer than I have to, though, before calling to her. "Hey Christy, come on." She doesn't hear me. She's screaming, and her face is redder than I've ever seen it. Ketchup red. I walk up closer and call her again. Only now I hear Gretchen talking:

"Oh look, it's the Pain coming to rescue the hell hag." She laughs, and I'm wondering how she ever got into the gifted class. I'm wondering why Mrs. Matulich is keeping me after to talk about being a better student. I'm wondering why no one's talking to Gretchen about being a better person.

It should have been Gretchen I hated then, but it wasn't though. I hated Christy. I yelled at her. Told her to quit being a baby.

Did I? Maybe I was kinder. I would like to think I was kinder.

This time, she finally hears me. She seems startled when she looks at me with those terrible, fearing, rabbit eyes. "Come on," I say lower, trying to sound gentle, "let's go home." *I think I said that. I think that was the tone.*

Gretchen isn't saying anything now. She's just laughing and laughing in that witch laugh she has, and I know she's laughing at me because I have no one better to call

a friend than this crybaby sitting under the flags: the red, white and blue, the California Bear, and the snapping pink smog alert silk. *It lashed like a tongue, that flag.* She doesn't follow us, though, when Christy and I walk away, heads down.

She always needed saving, but I was no tool for salvation. When a person grabs a life preserver, part of it sinks. But the other part becomes that much more buoyant. The sinking creates lifting. But when the life preserver is defective, everything sinks. Still, she clung. She hoped. She had faith that I was not defective.

She's spilling everything now. The boyfriend who left. The baby. The fetal alcohol syndrome. The threats to take the child. The heroine addiction. "Riverside is the drug capital of California," she says, and there is something in her tone that sounds almost proud. She wants this to be an excuse. She wants it to be the cause of her problems.

We are halfway home before Christy starts talking. Her sobbing is slower now, but her face is still very splotchy and pink. "John wrote me a letter," she said. "He likes me. He wanted to kiss me after school today. I don't know how Gretchen found out."

"Christy," I start, and I'm trying to think how to explain this and not make her feel worse, "what if John didn't write the letter?" I can see she's about to interrupt, claim it was his handwriting, so I say, "OR, what if he *did* write it, but she told him what to say."

"Why would she do that?" Christy looks honestly confused, which makes me both angry and sorry.

* * *

I don't want to be talking to her. I don't want to know her anymore.

“Christy,” I sound like I'm begging, and in a way I am. I'm begging her to understand, to see how things work. “It's a joke. A trick. The letter, the whole thing, it's all a joke.”

Her eyes are wide as she looks at me. “You *knew*,” she says. “You knew all along, and you didn't warn me.”

“NO. No. I didn't know.” The words are gushing out. “I mean, I didn't know what was going on. I know them, though. You know those girls—and not just the girls—John, too, and all those kids. That's what they do.”

Christy isn't hearing me, though. Her eyes are red with blood vessels. “You *knew*,” she says again and turns on me, like *I* did something wrong. She throws her bag off her shoulder and into her hand and flings it into my face. It knocks me backwards a few steps and lands on the pavement. She's running home now.

I'm angry. My face stings where the books hit it. I'm just her neighbor. It's not my fault she couldn't see through stupid Gretchen's stupid mean tricks.

I pick up her bag and carry it home.

KICKING CHEKHOV

“Hey, Stu!” Jay yelled down the admin building’s steps at the thin blonde man below. Stu didn’t look up. “Stu!”

“What.” Stu still didn’t raise his eyes. Instead, he concentrated on the paperback that skittered away from his toe as he delivered kick after kick.

Jay smiled, thinking of pebbles and pinecones and childhood. “What are you doing?”

“I’m kicking Chekhov.” Stu’s voice sounded almost angry. This was just like Stu.

“What are you doing that for?”

“Because,” Stu let the word hang on the air for a moment, “he can take it.” He brought his heel almost to the back of his thigh before delivering the next blow. “He can take it.”

WINDFALLS

Outside, the October wind of north Idaho was showing what wind could be. Dusty stirred her chamomile. If she closed her eyes, the clink of spoon on coffee mug was the same as silver might have been on fine china, and the wind in the eaves of the small farmhouse was the same as if it had been roaring around a solid stone mansion on an English country plain.

She opened her eyes, remembering that this same October wind blew the doors off the Henderson's car last year. Not their going-to-town car, thank heavens—that was safe in the garage. But the old Chrysler that they used for parts out by the farm shop. The wind got a piece of the driver's side door edge and tore it clean off. And that same year those folks' trailer down in Moscow was crushed by a pine tree with the kids just one room over.

She decided she'd better give Jay a call and try and talk him into driving home early. He should be done teaching by now, and there couldn't be anything too pressing. Nothing worth staying out in this mess.

Most folks must've already left the Ag building. Estelle, the secretary, patched Dusty through, and Jay picked right up. His voice, spry as the old man himself, crackled in the phone lines. "What's shaking, Sugar?"

"Hey, hun," Her voice always felt flat next to his. Her eyes followed a paper bag flying across the yard outside their picture window. "Wind's picking up. Thought you might want to head in early tonight."

“You read my mind, as always... You don’t have anything on the stove yet, do ya?”

Dusty took the cordless into the kitchen where the Tupperware was defrosting. “Nothing yet, but I was fixing to cook up the rest of that stew we had last Thursday.”

“Stick it in the fridge, Hot Stuff. I’m bringing in dinner tonight.” He sounded like he just won first prize for something.

“Ernie get another elk?”

“Nope. And no fair guessing. You’re just going to have to be patient, Prudence.”

“Well, then, Smarty, how’m’I supposed to know what to fix to go with it?”

“I told you,” Jay said in mock exasperation, “I’m bringing home dinner. The whole deal. So don’t you worry that pretty head of yours.” The phone line clicked dead before Dusty could reply. She stood listening to the dial tone for a moment, then put it back in the cradle.

She sat back in her easy chair by the window. Outside, the pine trees pitched and bowed, waving their limbs in graceful swooping gestures. In all their years together, she had always fixed Jay a good supper, ready on the table when he got home. What did he think he was doing bringing dinner home? He didn’t mean nothing by it, she reminded herself, just trying to be nice. But still, suddenly, her stew wasn’t good enough.

It was another forty-five minutes before the Ford F350 pulled into the drive. Jay called it his Last Hoorah, the last new truck he’d get before he retired at the end of the year. That was supposed to justify the huge sum he’d spent. But even though Dusty had pointed out the silliness of trading in the good old ’72 that had gotten them through so many years with so few problems, she had to admit that she felt a spark of pride pulling

into the Pullman Garden Center last spring, everyone gawking at the beautiful cobalt paint and shining chrome. (Estelle still driving that crummy old Buick wagon, and Vern in that old piece of crap Cadillac he bragged on so much.)

Jay pushed the truck door open against the wind and emerged with a steamy cardboard box, white with proud red letters on the side, and bounced to the door with the spring in his step that should have sprung years ago. “Mama mia,” he said, affecting an accent, wind flinging the front door wide, “itsa pizza.”

Dusty pecked him on the cheek. “You know, I coulda made pizza if you wanted pizza. You didn’t have to get that cardboard stuff from downtown. Probably aint even real cheese on the top.” She tried not to sound reproachful, but it was hard to get anything by Jay after all these years.

“Ahh,” Jay sighed and winked at her, “come on, pumpkin. Even you need a night off once every forty years or so. ‘Sides, this is from the new place on Main. We got some the other day at lunch, and it was—”

“—the other day? What do you mean the other day? What happened to the lunch I made for you?” She felt like a hen-pecking nag as soon as the words were out of her mouth, but it was too late to pull them back.

“No worries, darlin’.” His smile turned sheepish. “Plenty of hungry grad students in need of a little home cookin’ once in a while.”

“Glad to know someone appreciates my efforts.”

“Now, now. Don’t get in a snit. Here I’ve brought this delicious meal all the way from Moscow right to your door and attitude is the only tip I get.”

“And the only tip you deserve,” she said, arching her brows, but then she leaned in and gave him a second peck on the cheek to make up for it.

“Mm-hmmm. That’s more like it. I think you’re still a little short of just desserts, but we’ll settle with that later.” And with that, he raised the pizza like a torch and strutted into the kitchen.

The wind had died down enough the following morning to allow her to work in the garden. There were few places she would prefer to be. To her, the garden represented the proud tradition of the farmer’s wife. Here, she could tend plants that would nourish her household. Most of the greenery had already gone for the winter, but there were still a few weeds to be plucked and bulbs to be planted. She cleared the windfall apples from around the base of the trees and set them aside to make applesauce in the afternoon, keeping an eye on the stellar jays in the branches overhead, their song like trickling water.

She loved the apple trees that lined the garden. They had to be as old as the house, and they were bushy and wild. She had tried pruning them a bit when they first moved into the farmhouse all those years ago, but the trees reacted by yielding smaller, mealier fruit, and much less of it. Since then, she just let them go. If the summer was especially hot, she gave them a little water from the hose, but other than that, she didn’t touch them. Most years, they had more fruit than she knew what to do with. She sent Jay to work with bottles of pie filling and applesauce during the holidays and fed the more bruised windfalls to the neighbor’s horses over the fence. She loved the velvet of their noses as they searched her hands.

* * *

At lunch she went in to reheat the foil triangle of pizza in the oven. Jay had forgotten the lunch packet she'd left for him. Maybe. How often had he "forgotten" a lunch just to go purchase something some two-bit cook had slung together? All these years she thought that she could be there in food if not in body. All these years, she thought she was necessary. All these years, he had taken her lunches to be polite.

As she peeled back the foil, a fog of mushroom and pepperoni steam burst out. "Damn it," she said, whipping her fingers back from the heat. She sucked on the tips while she fetched a plate and a glass of milk. She carried her lunch into the living room where her book was waiting from yesterday. It was a murder mystery about a pair of young lovers on a cruise down the Nile. She read for the descriptions—the lush green of the river and the dust of the pyramids—not caring much for the plot line. Her last book was set in Alaska and the one before that in Venice, both with great scenery and a crappy love story.

Jay would never go anywhere exciting like that. When her mother was still alive, it was a trial just to get him to leave for a few days in the summer to visit her at her retirement get-away in Phoenix. He liked it well enough in Viola, he said. No need to ever leave paradise.

He had lived in Viola, Idaho all his life without the least bit of curiosity. She had lived there her whole life always wondering what was beyond.

Of course, she reminded herself, sometimes she loved Jay more for not being who she thought he was. She thought of those first days after the miscarriage. After all the time they had spent trying. After all the dreams they had woven by the fireplace,

chattering like a pair of knitting needles. She hadn't even wanted to see him in the hospital when the doctor told her the grim prospects for ever having children. Jay had only asked one thing of her love, a child. He had worked so hard those years, trying to prove what a mature man he was, so ready to be a provider and a daddy. Nothing she would be able to do would ever make up for the child she couldn't give. She had stared at that pale green hospital wall for hours. She remembered how the shadow of the blinds and the tree outside her window filled that wall, and she had thought how appropriate that was, like a giant spider web she was caught in, a paralyzed bug. Her body not doing what she willed it to do.

And then Jay had burst in, with a big jar of daisies from her border garden and a bag of McDonald's. It was the worst burger she had ever had in her life—the lettuce brown and soggy from heat lamps and everything lukewarm. Jay had poured the paper cup of Coca Cola into wine glasses that he pulled from his jacket pocket. “Boy I can't wait until you get home,” he had said. He was acting like a kid again. And she had suddenly realized that she could give him something after all. A hot meal, if nothing else.

All these years gone, and now she knew that it wasn't enough. He wanted takeout.

She closed the book unread and looked at the picture on the front: a plain white cover with the Great Pyramids two-thirds of the way down and to the left. She could go; Jay didn't need her. The realization swept through her like a gust of wind. She laughed at herself and walked into the kitchen to peel apples for sauce. The pizza box hanging off the edge of the top of the refrigerator caught her eye, and she laughed again. She pulled

it down and opened it, flapping the top open like a wing. She laughed harder, wondering if she was really going crazy but holding the box above her head and making it flap like a seagull. And then she started squawking. Loudly. This made her burst into new fits of laughter.

And then she heard the knock. She closed the cardboard and straightened her shirt. Sam stood at the door, his brown uniform crinkled as usual. At his feet was a large box printed to look like a Holstein cow. She thought she saw something like a suppressed laugh in the way he held his mouth. “Needa signature, Dusty.” She couldn’t tell if his voice was just the way it always was or if he was laughing at her. It was the lack of gossip that gave him away as he silently waited for her to return the clipboard, eyes averted. *Jesus God*, she thought. He must have looked in before knocking. *The whole town’s gonna hear about this.*

The box had Jay’s name on it, so she set it in the corner under the coat pegs and returned to the kitchen, this time as a mature adult, she decided, and began to peel apples.

Jay was ecstatic when he saw the delivery, shouting “It’s a cow box!” By the time Dusty walked in, he already had it out. He sat in her easy chair, fascinated by the whirring and chirping piece of folding black plastic balanced on his knees.

He pulled himself away at dinner long enough to eat the stew they were supposed to eat last night. After they finished the dishes (she washed, he dried), he drew her into the living room by the elbow and spent the rest of the evening showing her how to access the Internet. She tried to beg off, wanting to just read her book in peace, but he insisted. He showed her how to search for everything, showed her book sites and cooking sites,

gardening sites and bird-watching sites. After a half hour, she caved in to interest and insisted on having the computer for a little while to search on her own.

She managed to ignore the laptop for the next morning, knowing that once she started, nothing that needed doing would get done. Instead, she planted daffodils. At lunch, she ate a BLT in the garden and watched pine grosbeaks fighting over the sunflower seeds in the feeder. While they distracted each other bickering, an astute chickadee hopped in and cleaned out as much of the smaller seed as possible before they turned on him. She fed apples to Sugar Lump and Carrots over the pine board fence, swept the back porch and watered the planters, and finally couldn't think of anything more pressing that needed done.

Jay had written down instructions for how to get on line and find what Jay called the search engine, though she could see no resemblance to any engine her father had ever pulled out of tractor nor truck. She searched the book sites first, like Jay had shown her, then clicked back to the engine to look up some more information on chickadees. She looked up information on caring for wild apple trees but scoffed at the advice for pruning them, deciding that "Mr. Greenthumb" had no clue what he was talking about. She returned to the search engine thinking about what she would like to see next. Egypt, she decided, and typed the word in.

The first several sites listed were elementary school projects. One had overlapping yellow triangles to represent the pyramids. Even though the spelling was correct, the segments had to have been written by the students. She returned to the engine and scrolled through more of the search results. She was just about to abandon

her search when she clicked on one last link. The site turned out to be a travel site, offering discounted fares to Cairo. She hesitated. It wasn't that expensive, certainly not as bad as she imagined. Of course, she had never asked anyone how much it would cost to actually go. But she had never thought it was so close. Within reach. She disconnected.

She felt faint and walked into the kitchen to get a glass of water. Her mind was spinning. She could actually go. Jay didn't need her; he had his pizzas. His colleagues would keep him company. She could take some of the money from the retirement fund and just go.

She sat down. The whole idea was ridiculous. She was not one of those sluts who abandoned their husbands and ran off for their own amusement. She was a good wife, always keeping the household running.

She went outside to walk around the garden. Maybe the wind would blow these thoughts out of her head. But the wind seemed to have died down almost completely. The birds were fighting at the feeder again, and two deer had hopped into the corner of the neighbor's pasture and were silently grazing. Nothing seemed to notice her, and she began to wonder if she were even still visible.

When Jay came home, she cooked a salmon filet with hollandaise sauce, red potatoes, and peas. He said it was scrumptious, and she wondered which graduate student would eat the leftover portion he carefully packed in a Tupperware. I've always been good at this job, she told herself, the full-time work of the farmer's wife. Dinner

piping hot and on the table every time. Maybe that's not what Jay wanted. More frightening still, maybe it wasn't what she wanted.

For the rest of the week, she day-dreamed of Winnebagos while picking weeds, imagining the Grand Canyon at her feet or the Rocky Mountains looming above her head. She did her chores and allotted herself an hour of net time, which was devoted to searching for plane fares to "exotic locales," or researching "hot vacation spots." Often, the hour stretched into two. When Jay came home, she served him dinner and they sat and read, or perhaps watched a little television. He would try to joke with her, and she would try to laugh. She would not look at the computer, making her eyes avoid its corner of the room like a guilty secret. When he asked if she ever used it, she said, "not too much," and left it at that.

Saturday, Jay went into school in the morning to help with the cows. He was proud of that herd, and dragged her out last year to see them. They had implanted a glass window in the side of each cow so the students could witness digestion in action. Now, when they fed the cows various grains, they could actually see how the stomach reacted to each substance. Dusty had to admit she was amazed by the experiment, but it also depressed her. Each cow had its own portal, like a cruise ship window, but instead of looking out, they looked in. She wondered how the cows felt about the people looking at their inner workings, swabbing their white sides down with green antibacterial jelly.

Silas Renfrau was heading up this year's project, with Jay as his advisor. Dusty didn't know all the particulars of their work, just that Jay usually went in for a little time each weekend, chirping as he left that he was "off to help Silas at the silos." Dusty made bread first thing and spent most of the rest of the morning turning the soil in the vegetable

patch, digging out the weeds as she went. The computer was out of sight, but she could feel it sitting there inside the house, in the corner of her living room. She wouldn't use it today. The weeds had been getting ahead of her this past week, and Jay could be home any moment. She tried to think of birds, but the thoughts that had been enough last week didn't seem sufficient any more.

Jay pulled in as she was taking the bread out of the oven.

"God damn, that smells good," he called as he walked in the door. "I could use me a hunk of that right now."

Dusty rolled her eyes at him. "Well, patience Prudence," she said, slapping his fingers away from the side of the pan. "You'll burn yourself if you try to eat it now. Besides, you smell like cow. Go take off your jacket, and I'll fix us up a plate of cold cuts to go with it."

He strode out, jacket half off and striding into the living room towards the coat hanger. He came back in moments later rubbing his cleaned hands together and smacking his lips. He grabbed her around the waist as she was arranging turkey slices on a platter. "Come here, hot mama."

Standing there in her apron, she thought about her belly rolls under his hands. She turned her eyes towards Jay, and his expression fell as he read hers. "Oh, come now, sour puss," he whispered, stroking her jaw line with the backs of his fingers. "What's wrong? You're not yourself?"

She thought how kind his eyes were, grey like a grosbeak's downy chest. Somehow, even their kindness was irritating. Invasive. She turned back to the platter, arranging the tomato and lettuce slices. Jay rubbed her shoulders. His hands were strong

and sinewy. She wished he'd go back to work, craving alone time. She picked up the platter and evaded his shoulder rub, carrying the plate to the picnic table on the deck. He followed her out a moment later with the bread.

She stared into the big sky country wondering if there would ever be enough room here to hold her and Jay in the same atmosphere, wishing he would be the travelling partner she wanted him to be, knowing also that she loved him and that these thoughts were irrational. One more year until retirement, and then what would she do with him?

The vastness of the Palouse rolled away from her in wheat covered hills. Her mind, though, was back at the computer, looking at air fares. She could have just hit "buy," type in a credit card number, and then she'd be off. Alone. Anytime this past week, she could have done that. Jay would never have known, not until she was long gone. And even then, would he have missed her?

She knew the answer to that, knew that it was unfair of her to even question his loyalty. She told herself that she would never have gone regardless. When she saw the Mona Lisa, she wanted Jay by her side making wise cracks about how great M.L. would be in a poker game. She could almost hear him. "Look at that face, sugar. Did you ever see such an old pickle?"

After lunch, she moved into the garden, but couldn't think of anything that really needed done. She walked up the bare furrows where tomatoes would be in spring and summer. She read somewhere that tomatoes were once called love fruits or something like that, and people thought they were poisonous. How strange to link love and poison

like that. Now, they were just plain old unromantic fruits that passed for vegetables, topping salads and pasta.

Sugar Lump hung his shaggy head over the post and rail fence at the end of the garden. She grabbed some apples from under the trees and fed him over the fence. Carrots came galloping over at the first sounds of crunching. They were squat little horses, built like tanks and quiet enough to shoot rifles off of during hunting season. Their coats had grown fuzzy for winter, and they nuzzled their heads in Dusty's jacket, searching for treats after the apples were gone.

Dusty couldn't bring herself to fix anything special for dinner. She settled on grilled cheese and soup. Jay silently dipped his sandwich, not complaining that they'd now had sandwiches two meals in a row. Maybe he didn't even notice. It was a slow meal. When Jay finally finished his last bite, he met her gaze over the table. His eyes were as kind as they were this afternoon, as they always had been. "Wind's supposed to be picking up again Monday," he said. She nodded.

Sunday, they hiked up Kamiak butte. It was beautiful, same as always. The view at the top only changed with the season. Dusty had the hills from there memorized, knew where the roads would interlace and tie the hills together. After the miscarriage, she had felt comfort in its sameness. She tried to remember that comfort, but there was no longer any satisfaction in the known. Maybe at twenty-six, she hadn't known it well enough. Familiarity hadn't yet bred contempt.

* * *

The alarm clock didn't go off Monday morning. Dusty squinted over Jay through the morning sunlight streaming in their window to the bedside table. The digital clock bore a blank face. She nudged Jay. When he grunted, she said, "Power's out."

The wind was bad enough to shut down campus, so Jay worked at the dining room table until the laptop's battery ran out.

Dusty pulled their old canvas deck recliner out of the safety of the shed, and fought against the wind to press it to land so she could sit in it. She looked across the fields, fringed with their swaying pines, and wished the wind would carry her away. She envisioned the recliner as a sail or a wing.

Looking at the horses in the neighbor, Dale's field, the view from their deck suddenly struck her as depressing. She wondered if the horses resented the fence and why they didn't ever try to jump it. But Sugar Lump and Carrots didn't seem depressed as they grazed on the swaying grasses. Why would they? Everything they needed was in that pasture: food, shelter, water. They were living the ideal horse life.

They love apples, she reminded herself, and there are certainly no apples in that pasture. She'd asked Dale once why he didn't plant a tree for them so they could have apples when they liked. "Those two would eat 'til they colicked," he'd said. "All those apples rolling around in their bellies would be too much for them—make 'em sick. Colic's the number one killer of horses."

She thought about this, wondering if revelations were ever horse-shaped. It was irrational to leave a place where you had everything you needed and everything that you'd loved until stupid laptops filled your mind with pipe dreams. She wondered if what she wanted most, seeing those foreign places, could kill her. Poison water, she

thought. She's heard in Egypt, you had to boil the water for an hour even if it was straight from the tap. The microbes would get you otherwise. Make you ill, maybe even deathly ill. And now, with all those terrorists and whatnot.

Egypt on the computer screen was a tree of shiny red apples.

The door creaked behind her as it opened and shut.

Jay pulled the other canvas chair out and came to sit with her. "I haven't been much company today."

"That's OK."

"Damn, it's a bit chilly out here. How can you stand this wind, woman?"

"You get used to it." The grasses on the hills rolled in waves like an ocean. "Do me a favor, Jay."

He looked at her, eyebrows raised.

"Tomorrow, take that computer gizmo to the office and leave it there."

Jay patted her arm, smiling sheepishly. "Sure thing, darling. I know I shouldn't have worked on it so long today, but the darned thing's addictive."

They sat in silence a while, watching the wind, before Dusty spoke again. "Power will probably be out all day today. What do you think of dinner out tonight?"

"Sounds good to me. You know, nothing's as good as your home cooking, but sometimes I think you work too hard, out here in the garden all day, cooking all night. You need time off once in a while. And besides, a little variety never hurt anyone."

Again, there was a long silence, then Dusty spoke again. "Jay?"

"Huh?"

"When you retire next year, how are we going to fill up all that time?"

Jay chuckled. "Is that what you've been worried about these past few days?"

Dusty didn't answer, but looked at him until he grew serious again.

"Hell, I don't know. We'll do something. Maybe we can expand this garden back here a bit. Or maybe go somewhere once in a while, a change of scenery. You must get awfully sick of the same old sights every day. We'll figure something out when the time comes."

"Well, you know what they say?"

"What's that?"

"If you aren't the lead dog, the view's always the same."

Jay laughed. "Good thing you're the lead dog then, woman." He gave her a playful sock in the arm. "And I don't think the view from our deck's that bad."

Dusty's eyes skimmed the horizon. "No, not bad."

"You know what I love best about it? It's never the same."

Dusty laughed. "Are those college students giving you some of their funny pills and green cigarettes?"

"Come on, now. I'm serious. Some people would look out at this and only see the hill or the road or the things that don't really change much. But every day, there are different birds at the feeder, different grasses in bloom, different clouds in the sky. Sometimes, I feel like I can barely recognize my own backyard."

When he spoke, the fields seemed to transform in front of her eyes. She watched the tides change in the waving wheat, and the hilltop pines began a new waltz. She was silenced by the array of differences that flooded the fields from one moment to the next.

"Dusty?"

“Yes?”

“What the heck are we doing sitting out here in this weather?”

She laughed. “No power in the house, guess I thought I’d see what was going on in the world?”

“Well, have you seen it, yet? Because it’s a bit chilly.”

“Then what the heck are you doing sitting out here, you old fool? I’m not keeping you.”

“Yeah, but it’s boring in there all alone. I’m always amazed you can stand it day in, day out. I’d go crazy.”

Dusty stood and folded her chair. “Well, maybe that’s how I do it. Maybe I go crazy when you’re not looking.”

“You’re the sanest woman I ever met. And the sassiest, too. Come one, sugar pie, you have to decide where I’m taking you to dinner this fine evening.”

In the kitchen, Dusty paused, her gaze caught by the dishtowel hanging on the oven door. She’d bought it two years ago. It was so bright, then, so cheery. Now, the apples that dotted its border had faded with washing and bleach, become peaches. She wondered if all things changed this way. Not worse, just different.

BREAK DOWN

The subways stopped running. Every tv channel was news. The dust clouds billowed. The schools let out. The houses were quiet.

Later, the subway started running. The tv added a news ticker. The dust clouds fell. The students were ashen. The houses grew flags.

The people said they had changed. They said they were friendlier. The nation said it stayed the same. It said it was strong. A bumper sticker said, "I'd rather be killing terrorists."

I don't feel friendly, and I don't feel strong. I don't trust the flags or the new news ticker. I don't want to kill anyone, and that now seems odd, like most things familiar.

Maybe nothing changed. My clock-radio still talks at 6:02. Those two minutes are still important. But this year, the trees won't lose their leaves. It's an unseasonable fall.