

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Dana Marie Halbersleben for the Master of Arts

in English presented on May 4, 1998

Title: The Character Contingency

Abstract Approved: *Amy Sag Webb*

This thesis is a collection of short stories prefaced by an aesthetic statement. The stories themselves deal with characters and their struggles with their own shortcomings. The characters have to come to terms with their new knowledge about themselves, or deny the knowledge entirely.

The preface discusses how best to make a character appear mimetically real. I outline first the position of the self-reflexive author, which states that such a thing is impossible. I then discuss the position of the mimetic author and the way limited use of authorial intrusion achieves a textual reality. I substantiate this claim with examples from several texts. To conclude, I discuss the concept of character interdependence and the reasons for which I view it as an author's best means of showing a multi-faceted character. Examples from my own work substantiate the point.

THE CHARACTER CONTINGENCY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Division of English

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment

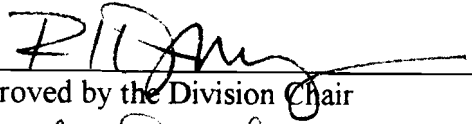
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Master of Arts

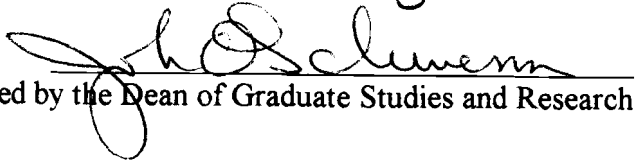
by

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May 1998



Approved by the Division Chair



Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my mother, who was a fighter and taught me to fight for what I believed. None of this would be possible without her. I would also like to thank my father, who made my education a reality, and my sister, who is my best friend. I would also like to thank my thesis chair, Amy Sage Webb, and thesis committee members Phil Heldrich and Rachelle Smith. Finally, I thank my friends, who have taught me something about myself and human behavior in general. Through them I have learned to be an observer of humanity, and to act, always. It is through observing others that we can make our own actions wiser.

PREFACE

The purpose of this preface is to define how best to craft a short story in a mimetic tradition. Mimesis may be variously defined, but for the purpose of my thesis, it is defined as fiction which presents a textual reality which mimics or reflects what the reader experiences as reality. I am aware of the many connotations of the word mimesis, from the time of Aristotle to the Postmodernists. For this reason, I re-define it here, for clarification.

If a prose work is to appear to be mimetically "real," the narrative cannot be self-reflexive; it must be subtle. I discuss here the best manner by which to make a character and story appear to be mimetically "real." The characters must be, to use E.M. Forster's term, "round," and they should draw the reader into the prose work through empathy. I then examine my own work, and explain how my own work makes use of mimetic devices.

I. Self-Reflexive Prose

The goal of the self-reflexive, or Postmodern novel is to, "announce itself as nothing more-or less-than a book" (Richter 942). Such a novel announces the fact it is a book, comprised of nothing more than language, paper, and ink. Of such novels, William Gass states:

The so-called life one finds in novels, the worst and best of them, is nothing like actual life at all, and cannot be; it is not more real, or thrilling, or authentic; it is not truer; more complex, or pure, and its people have less spontaneity, are less intricate, less free, less full. (37-38)

Robert Scholes further claims that such Postmodern texts, ". . . do not imitate the world, . . . [so much as] construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poiesis. [language and structure of a text] No recording. Only constructing" (7). According to self-reflexive ideas about text, both author and reader realize the text's limitations as being incapable of presenting a human being in her entire complexity. As John Barthes states, "A novel is as much a piece of the real world as a letter," (276). According to this position, the "real world" cannot be fully recreated by or experienced within the pages of a text. Due to this limitation, a challenge for the self-reflexive text, then, is not to attempt to mimetically reflect reality

through the story within the text, but to reflect instead upon its own textuality.

Self-reflexive authors aim to impose their authorial control upon a book, making obvious to the reader the fact that it is authored. To this end, they employ devices such as lengthy exposition or authorial intrusion. Although not a Postmodernist in a true chronological sense, and despite efforts made to label him as such well after his death, Laurence Sterne employs exposition non-mimetically, for a purpose other than creating plot and characters reflective of what readers perceive as reality. In the following excerpt from Tristram Shandy, Sterne employs exposition in order to diminish rather than advance plot and character development. Instead of immersing the reader more fully in the world of the story, Sterne's exposition as authorial intrusion reminds the reader of the author's presence and his control over the text:

On the fifth day of November, 1718, which to the era fixed on, was as near nine calendar months as any husband could in reason have expected--was I Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, brought forth into this scurvy and disastrous world of ours. I wish I had been born in the Moon, or in any of the planets. (8)

The story does not progress in a logical time sequence, unlike the lives of its readers, thus the text form is less

mimetically reflective of reality. The narrator's intrusion makes the text appear to be less real. It is not until chapter five that we get to the birth of our hero, the preceding chapters being filled with the hero's musings upon events before his birth. It is only in a text that someone could speak before birth, a fact which lends to the feeling of unreality created by Sterne's narration.

The next two chapters of Tristram Shandy refer to the birth of the protagonist, as later told to the narrator by those around him, and repeated back to the reader. Linda Hutcheon addresses such a strategy of narration:

. . . the use of mise en abyme, allegory, metaphor, microcosm to shift the focus from the 'fiction' to the 'narration' by . . . making the 'narration' into the very substance of the novel's content. (28)

Sterne's repetition of information from alternate sources leads to a type of storytelling-within-the-story, which undermines the realistic capabilities of the outer story, the text. We readers cannot hope to view the life of Sterne's protagonist as being real in the way that our own lives seem real, because we are constantly reminded of the story's authoring. The text, thus, becomes its own reality. In the creation of their own rules and realities, "Authors are gods--a little tinny sometimes but omnipotent no matter what, and plausible on top of that, if they can manage it"

(Gass 36). Sterne does not, with his text, re-create the appearance of what the reader knows as life. Sterne does, however, hold sway over the world of his book.

The goal of the self-reflexive author is to create, "fiction which investigates and exposes the processes of its own construction, and, by implication, the codes and shifting parameters of 'literature'" (Maltby 525). The author manipulates the reader, who, due to the poesis of the text itself, is aware of being manipulated. The text itself expands the "horizon of expectations" previously held by its readers. Hans Robert Jauss defines this horizon as being formed by ". . . convention of genre, style, or form," which the Postmodern work seeks ". . . only in order to destroy . . . step by step" (1202). The purpose of each new Postmodern work is to shatter the expectations that, in the realist tradition, previous works of non-self-reflexive fiction have established for readers.

Thomas Pynchon's novel, Vineland, challenges the reader's expectations for narrative point of view. The reader encounters the text with the assumption that springs from non-self-reflexive fiction in the realist tradition: narrative point of view usually follows the protagonist, and, if not the protagonist, at least the principal character(s) through the use of omniscient narrative. In Vineland, however, the reader soon discovers that this expectation will not be met. The "horizon" of the reader's

expectations is expanded by Pynchon's placement of narrative point of view in multiple characters, and even inanimate objects and the dead. Pynchon begins one of his chapters with the point of view of "Weed Atman [who] may have had his points, but as a Thanatoid he rated consistently low on most scales" (218). Here the narration's degree of observation upon Weed Atman shifts from omniscient to third-person omniscient, until the perspective jumps abruptly into another character:

Providing the music tonight was a local pickup group, including, on bass, Van Meter, who'd heard about it down at the Lost Nugget, would have tried to talk to his running mate Zoyd into coming along and playing keyboard, except that nobody had seen Zoyd around for most of the week, and Van Meter didn't know if he should be getting worried yet or not. (220)

The reader is temporarily confused when the narrative centers upon Van Meter and his thoughts. There is no paragraph break to warn the reader of the shift from the thoughts of Weed Atman. The narrative then returns to Weed Atman in the same manner: abruptly.

By not giving the reader a fixed viewpoint, such as first or third-person, Pynchon calls attention to the idea that narrative point of view is a function of the author's will. This expands the reader's horizon of expectations for

narrative, expectations borne of the realist prose tradition which demands that narrative point of view does not shift suddenly in a mimetic fiction work.

In his collection of short stories, Lipstick on the Host, Aidan Mathews maintains a narrative which is fixed within his character's point of view. Mathews also displays the mimetic convention for third-person. The story, "Train Tracks" is told through Timmy's point of view. He is a young boy traveling from Ireland to Germany after World War II, and the reader discovers the emotional complexities of the journey because it is told from his perspective, with the aid of a narrator. Timmy is meeting Claus, the son of his German host family, for the first time:

"Jawohl," says Timmy, and salutes in the old style favoured by fascists. Claus looks at him closely. His face frowns. Timmy's unsettled, uneasy. He brings his arm down. (17)

This excerpt differs from that of Pynchon, because Mathews' point of view stays consistent. It does not leap into other people and objects; the third-person narrator stays with Timmy. It is Timmy's point of view, and that is why the reader knows only Claus' body language, and not his thoughts, unlike the Pynchon work, which informs the reader of several characters' internal thoughts. In the Mathews work, third-person does not randomly choose a point of view; it remains with Timmy and does not shift.

Sterne is not a Postmodern author; Pynchon is. Regardless of the intent of the author, both of the narrative devices they use--Sterne always intruding upon the narration, Pynchon shifting the point of view--constantly remind readers that the story in which they seek to immerse themselves is a text. It is not a reality mimetically imitative of the reader's reality.

Not all authors want their narrative personas to intrude, or display themselves to a reader through the structure of the text. Some authors wish to privilege characters or plot before their own control of the work and that work's textual limitations. Mimetic authors do not call the reader's attention to themselves the way the self-reflexive Postmodernists and other non-mimetic authors seeks to. The goal of mimetic prose is to entangle the reader in the story as if it were reality.

II. Mimetic Fiction

The author cannot intrude into the text in mimetic fiction, or the frame of the fictional world will be broken. A little exposition is necessary, but it must be used sparingly. If it is not, the narration will eclipse the story. For example, in A Farewell to Arms, Ernest Hemingway does not allow exposition to intrude upon the story's narrative. In the final scene when Catherine is dying, no inner thoughts are expressed by Henry, the protagonist:

"Do you want me to do anything, Cat? Can I get you anything?"

Catherine smiled, "no," Then a little later, "You won't do our things with another girl, or say the same things, will you?"

"Never."

"I want you to have girls, though."

"I don't want them." (331)

The above passage demonstrates a clear absence of an intrusive narrative persona. Henry displays emotion through his dialogue. Hemingway is not telling the reader what to think, and is not overtly intruding upon the framework of the text.

The plot of A Farewell to Arms also progresses according to a traditional, chronological time frame. The protagonist meets the heroine, several scenes build their affection for each other, then the heroine dies. However, in Tristram Shandy, the reader receives information about the protagonist's life before his birth. The reader learns early on that Tristram Shandy laments the path his life has taken. In A Farewell to Arms, Hemingway's efforts to follow linear time makes the writing less self-reflexive.

In mimetic fiction, the point of view tends not to arbitrarily shift. It stays with one character throughout, whether it be a reflective, an unreliable, first-, second-, or third-person narration. In Raymond Carver's story,

"Cathedral" the first-person point of view is the husband's, and the narrative stays with the husband throughout the story. It does not shift randomly, like Pynchon's narration. By Carver's consistent point of view through one character, the reader can become more involved with that character, thus the character appears to be more real.

In non-self-reflexive fiction, shifts in the time structure are made more clear to the reader by the author's use of such devices as spacing, italicizing, or transitional phrasing. This differs from the fiction of an author such as Sterne, in which the effect of a storyteller-within-a-story seems more labored. With Sterne's work, the reader gets an image of the storyteller repeating the story to the reader; with Carver's fiction, the focus remains upon the story and character(s) themselves. By using obvious transitional phrasing in "Cathedral," Carver quite clearly informs the reader when his character/narrator is thinking about something other than what is taking place in the present:

I remembered having read somewhere that the blind didn't smoke because, as speculation had it, they couldn't see the smoke they exhaled. I thought I knew that much and that much only about blind people. But this blind man smoked. (217)

The transition from linear time is obvious, thanks to the "I remembered." The reader is aware that what follows is a

flashback. The reader is then brought back into the present, because the focus of the flashback is the smoking. Because Carver maintains a narrative point of view consistently through the husband, the reader becomes involved with him and views other characters and the story through him. The reader can explore, too, the husband's memories of times other than the present.

III. Flat and Round

Even after a writer limits the authorial intrusion, creates a fairly traditional (fairly linear) time structure, and employs a consistent narrative point of view, she still needs to create characters which extend beyond their own textuality. If an author intends to appeal to the reader's interest in humanity through the use of character, it is necessary for the author to make those characters as real as possible so as to elicit the reader's empathy for them. The following excerpt from A Farewell to Arms displays human emotions in a realistic manner:

"I wanted to do something for him . . . He could have had anything he wanted if I would have known. I would have married him or anything. I know all about it now. But then he wanted to go to war and I didn't know."

"I did not say anything." (19)

The scene itself seems very believable and realistic.

Catherine feels regret after her boyfriend has died, wishing she had done more for him when he was alive. Henry's response is also very believable, for when informed of another's emotionally painful memories, we often realize there is nothing we can say to make the person feel better, so silence is often best.

In self-reflexive fiction, the emotions of the characters often seem unrealistic because these emotions are often told to the reader, rather than shown through the actions of the characters. In Jorge Borges's short story, "The Garden of Forking Paths" the emotions of the main character, Dr. Yu Tsun, are told to the reader through the use of exposition. Danger arises because Yu Tsun will soon be discovered spying for Germany during World War II. Borges's narrative informs the reader that he "went up to [his] bedroom" (90). Yu Tsun demonstrates no sense of panic at the thought that, as his fellow spies did, he may lose his life. The closest the reader gets to any of Yu Tsun's emotions occurs when Borges writes, that Yu Tsun is thinking, "In the midst of [his] hatred and terror" (90). Even this, though, does not strike the reader as anything approaching terror, since it is told to the reader without ever manifesting itself in the character's actions. We do not read about the character acting frantically, as we would expect. The character and his emotions exist to serve the story's over-arching theme of time and the variety

of choices that people have in their lives. The character is subservient to the concept; he is created solely for that purpose. When this happens, self-reflexive fiction with expository narration does not achieve empathy for characters the way realist stories do.

Gordon Weaver taps into realistic human emotions in the story, "Lie-A-Fornia." From his mature perspective, the narrator is thinking back through the span of his life to Clarence, the young boy he once knew who never told the truth:

I contend we all have-had-good lives, comfortable if not affluent, secure if not untouched, satisfying though unspectacular . . . I seldom wish I had done anything differently, know too well such speculation is idle, feckless, frustrating" (222).

This statement describes most of the lives lived in the comfortable haven of suburbia. For some reason though, the narrator cannot forget the lying boy, and wonders what became of him after he moved away. We have all pondered our pasts, and wondered what became of someone we knew. It is because we can relate to the narrator's emotions that Weaver's story strikes us as realistic, in a manner which the Borges story does not. Borges uses expository narrative to call the reader's attention to the story as plot, keeping character secondary, as opposed to Weaver who uses a first-

person (reflective) narrative persona in order to make character more important than plot. The narrator in Weaver's story could not exist without the plot, because the narrator and his memories create the plot, unlike the Borges story, where the concept creates the character.

To achieve skilled characterization, an author must be an observer of humanity. Of characterization, Hemingway states, "If you make him up from what you know, there should be all dimensions" (234). Ron Carlson, who writes characters in the realistic tradition, continues with the idea by saying, ". . . and that's when you go as a writer and try to become empathetic, try to sit in all the chairs, try to listen" (4). By viewing and observing humanity separate from her own prejudices, an author can make a character appear to be more realistic. If the author desires to create narrative in the mimetic tradition, she cannot remain self-centered, involved with only her own defects. She must look beyond herself to others, or all the characters will resemble the author.

In observing humanity, however, an author needs to remain cautious. While the single-faceted character exists to be subservient to the plot, characters with too many flaws call attention to the unreality of the text. The mimetic author strives to find a balance between the two extremes of character, because too much of either breaks the frame of the realist story. A character is single-faceted

when that character becomes allegorical, such as Faith in "Young Goodman Brown." Hawthorne makes her role obvious to the reader by choosing her name. He even writes, "And Faith, as the wife was aptly named," (65). Furthermore, in the story, Faith does not exist as a person. She has faith in her husband and God, and that is the extent of her depth. A character should not be entirely faulted or pristine, because the reader will not be emotionally connected. If this oversimplification occurs, according to E.M. Forster, the character is flat because she is, ". . . constructed round a single idea or quality" (103-104). Characters must be complex in mimetic fiction; they cannot be flat.

To aid in character development, an author must create in a character a trait that a reader can find empathy with. The main character, or the character that needs to appear most real, must be "round," such as the character Becky, in Evan Harrington, which Forster defines round as, "wax[ing] and wan[ing] and [having] facets like a human being" (106). A round character may be built around a particular trait, but cannot be summed up in a single idea; she contains many ideas and intricacies, as do real humans.

Gordon Weaver writes characters that are round in this way. In his short story, "Fearing What Dreams" the reader is introduced to Parker, the protagonist. The theme of the story can be summed up in Parker's words to a friend: "Are you asking me if I know what life is about or something?"

(15). At the point the reader is introduced to him, Parker does not know much about his life. He has divorced and moved back to his summer childhood home, searching for some meaning to life which he does not find.

It is because he is a character filled with faults and goodness that Parker appears to be what Forster would call "round." As Hemingway said, "Failure and well-disguised cowardice are more human and more beloved" (238). Or, as Weaver states:

Failure seems to me the lot of most men, in any endeavor. We all fail in view of mortality.

We'll never beat the world, but we can find terms, within ourselves, and in our particular contexts.

(366)

Humanity finds ways to get along in life, thus an author cannot hope to reflect life and humanity's complexity if she simply creates oversimplified, flat characters in order to fuel plot. Any character which leans too much in either direction, heroic or faulted, risks becoming flat. Good stories and characters need complexity, but not to the degree of fracture, which in turn, is its own simplicity.

IV. The Character Contingency

Once the writer has created round, multi-faceted characters, these must be placed within a fictional world as complex as they are. Characters, like humans, are

interdependent upon each other. By Forster's model of character, interdependence is, "connected with the principals, [so that] the result is a closely woven fabric from which nothing can be removed" (101). The more complex the interdependencies, the more representational the story seems of human life.

In Carver's story, "Cathedral," the wife is needed to bring the blind man, Robert, to the house, since he is her friend. If Carver removed the wife, the story could not occur, she does not, however, exist only to fuel plot. The wife has her own reasons for wanting Robert in the story. It soon becomes obvious to the reader that the narrator and his wife's marriage has its faults. When Robert and the wife are catching up on old times, the narrator reveals: "I waited in vain to hear my name on my wife's sweet lips" (218). The narrator avoids discussion of himself or their life together. Thus, it is through her interaction with Robert that the reader discovers the faults of the marriage.

Later, the wife falls asleep and the husband and Robert are left alone. The husband is directing the blind man's hand, trying to show him what a cathedral is like. The opposite occurs, however, "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything." (228). The blind man teaches the husband a new way "to see." It is through his interaction with Robert that the husband has learned another side of himself. The

character's interdependence reveals another layer of the narrator.

The purpose of my own fiction is to create multi-faceted characters. Clarissa, in "Love Policeman," conveys an air of invincibility around Leah, the wife. She is also vulnerable at the same time. She feels weak and helpless at the end of the story when she realizes that Lucas did not care for her, and that he had others.

Kevin, in "Alone," is a character with whom the reader can empathize. The reader knows that if he stops drinking it would be the best solution for him. He does not, though. At the end of the story when his own actions has turned everyone against him, (Steve, Sarah, and his wife,) Kevin still does not accept the blame. He projects it on others, because he does not want to accept his own shortcomings.

My characters' interactions depend upon one another. Tom in, "Small Town Waltz" finds out the truth behind his idealized vision of his world, because of his interactions with George Williams and Chuck. He has to choose between his friends and his future by choosing either to keep his secret, or accept that his ideals are not reality. In "Alone," the reader learns, through Kevin's interaction with Steve, why he has been driven to drink. There is a social rift due to his promotion. The reader also learns the result of the rift and alcohol, an affair with Sarah. The story ends with the reader knowing that Kevin is his own

worst enemy, and that nothing will change. All of this is brought about because of Kevin's interactions with other characters.

The story, "Involvement," also uses interdependence. Lisa is beginning to realize that maybe she does not matter to the people that surround her. By her tendency of not becoming involved with other's lives, they are not likely to care about hers. At the end of the story, she has alienated Kelly, and her husband's friends. The final image, when even her own husband ignores her, makes her realize that maybe he does not even care about her. All of this is shown through Lisa's interactions with those around her, not by authorial intrusion.

Without the surrounding characters in my stories, new layers of the protagonists would not be revealed. By my displaying characters in this manner, contingent upon each other, the frame of each story is not broken. My goal is to portray round characters, thus self-reflexive authorship must be kept from calling attention to the frame of the text. Empathy for my characters will further draw the reader into these stories, thus my goal as a mimetic author has been reached.

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Small Town Waltz

Chuck clambered into the truck. He looked excited, like a dog going for a ride. He turned to Tom and said, "It's all right, we can go now. I called Tami, and she was home. She even sounded sick this time."

Tom started the truck. He was trying not to show his annoyance with his friend. Chuck always had to call his girlfriend. He always had to know where she was. Tom put the black truck in reverse and pulled out from the gas station onto Highway 75.

They left the small town behind as they drove through the night. They passed Richardson's barn and turned onto Old Lake Road, which didn't lead to a lake, but passed a ditch that filled up with water when it rained. They didn't say a word. Randy Travis's music came out through the truck's speakers.

Tom would be leaving soon, after graduation. He would be gone for the summer. He needed to go to Curtis and take a few ag courses. Tom didn't really want to, he would have to meet a whole new group of people. He would have to live in an unfamiliar place. His girlfriend would be left behind, but Tom's dad thought it would be a good idea. Tom would meet some different people, and in the end, Tom's dad always won.

They passed the ditch, and it was dry. Tom knew the perfect off-road would be coming up. They passed two more

pastures. It was hard to see where the black velvet of the ground joined with the black velvet of the sky. The truck's lights illuminated the brown of the twisting dirt road. That was all Tom needed to see.

He saw the spot he wanted and slammed on the brakes. The truck did a perfect cookie, sliding off to the side of the road. "What the hell did you do that for?" Chuck snapped at his friend. Tom didn't reply. He grabbed a case of beer from the passenger-side floor. Chuck grabbed the one that had been next to it, still glaring at his friend. They both stepped out of the cab.

It was the perfect spot to drink, the whole purpose of the journey. Tom and Chuck's last hurrah before Tom had to leave. Chuck mumbled, "Are we going to be okay here?" Tom didn't answer. Chuck was a townie. Only a townie would've asked such a dumb question. Anyone who knew the land the way Tom did would know whose pasture belonged to whom. This land belonged to Jack Randall, Tom's dad.

They stepped off of the gravel road and began to cut through the carpet of the tall grass until they reached a barbed-wire fence, both dropping their cases of beer on the other side of the fence. Tom pulled the top wire down until it joined the middle wire. He stepped over it casually, keeping the wire between his legs. He briefly looked like a rider straddling a bull in a chute before it was sent into the ring. His other leg joined the former safely on the

other side. Tom released the barbed-wire. The fence vibrated, then stilled.

Tom stood on the other side, looking at his friend. Chuck looked at the fence, and tried to imitate Tom's earlier moves. He couldn't pull the wire down far enough to step over it.

"Want to lower the wire for me, Tom?"

"What'sa matter, Chuck? Afraid your dick might get snapped off?"

"At least I have one." Chuck fumbled with the top wire again. He tried to climb over, but his pant leg ended up getting snagged. He was standing with one leg down and one leg in the air, a near perfect ninety degree angle, frozen in time like a still photo.

Tom let out a chuckle as he freed his friend. "Hell of a trap. Might be able to get a raccoon."

"Shut-up," Chuck said when he had regained his freedom. He didn't like being laughed at.

They grabbed their respective cases of beer and started climbing the hill that sloped down to the fence line. They both left darker trails, like paths of slugs, as they climbed the grassy hill. Occasionally Chuck stumbled. His tennis shoes snagged on dirt clods, but Tom had no such problems. His cowboy boots cut through the grass and dirt like a machete.

They both stopped at the top of the hill, and Tom lit

a cigarette. "Can't see a damn thing," Chuck muttered. There seemed to be a black lake spread out before them. Even the stars were hidden by the darkness.

"There's a windmill over there." Tom pointed to his right. Chuck squinted, then nodded.

The two boys started walking toward it. "Remember Chuck, 4-H camp, up at Halsey? You climbed up the windmill on that nature hike and pissed off Mrs. Miller."

"Yeah. She thought I'd fall off or something." They reached the tank below the windmill. Chuck dropped his beer next to the tank and pulled out a can. Tom adjusted his Stetson, and followed his friend's example.

Chuck took a drink. "I still can't believe you're going to be leaving. I remember meeting you in kindergarten. It's amazing the stupid things you remember."

"Yeah, you took my crayons. My dad had to buy me new ones."

"Sorry about that. My old man didn't buy me anything."

"Yeah, I know." They both took a sip of their beers.

"Think I can climb this windmill?" Chuck asked looking to their right. He reached out and put his hand out on the windmill's ladder. He looked up at the slightly imposing, two stories tall, metal structure. The steel blades at the top looked like cleavers.

"Go ahead, Chuck. Mrs. Miller isn't here to stop you. Just don't sue my dad if you fall."

"Well, even if I do, your dad has enough money. He can cover it."

Chuck started climbing up the windmill. One hand passed the other as he climbed, but he was careful. He couldn't spill his beer. The wind started to blow, and his blond hair flew up in tufts like the fur of a golden retriever. Tung...Tung...followed Chuck each time he stepped on a metal rung. Tom remained down below, looking at his friend as he climbed. Another gust of wind blew across the grass, and the grass whispered as it passed. The windmill groaned when the breeze reached it, and the cleavers did a slow half spin, like a couple who didn't get to finish their dance on top of a music box.

Tom walked the two steps from where he was standing to the water tank. He removed his black Stetson and ducked his head beneath the water of the tank. The liquid dripped from his short black hair and down onto his t-shirt. Tom never let his hair get too long. Long hair belonged on girls.

"So Tom, do you really want to go to Curtis?" Chuck yelled down from the wooden platform of the windmill. He sat behind the cleavers, occasionally glancing back and keeping an eye on them, in case they turned on him.

"Town seems nice. I just hate school."

"Yeah, but your dad has you by the balls. Don't go and you don't get the land. I wish you could stay here for the summer. We'd have a lot of fun, just like last summer."

Tom took another drink. "Yeah, that was a lot of fun. Had to work my ass off though, summer's a busy time. I can't believe my dad is shipping me off like that. He'll probably need my help. I'm sure he'll have to hire another man to do my work."

"You should fight your dad, tell him that he needs you. Tell him you won't go." Chuck was now doing a balancing act on the edge of the platform. He walked on the edge like a potential suicide victim.

"Naw, too damn risky. I really don't think he'd short me on the land and give it to my sis. It's just, you know." Tom hesitated, and scratched his elbow. "Sometimes it's just easier not to cross my dad. It's easier to go with the stream than fight it." He dropped his beer can and crushed it with the heel of his boot. He then threw the crushed metal into the grass. He listened, hoping to hear it drop. He heard nothing but Chuck scraping the platform.

"Yeah, I don't blame you. I wish my old man had something to give me." Tom never knew what to say when Chuck started talking like that. The truth of the matter was that no one felt sorrier for Chuck than Chuck. Chuck just didn't shut-up and take his problems like a man. If he wanted to share his feelings, Tom thought, that's what a girl-friend was for.

"At least you can stay." Tom walked over and grabbed himself another beer.

"I wish I had somewhere to go. I would like some money, go to school. I'm stuck here, no future, no ranch, no nothing." Tom thought about adding that Chuck could've saved up some money for school himself, but decided not to say anything. Tom liked where he lived. He liked the small town, and the land. Chuck's dad wasn't sending him away for the summer, even if it was "for his own good." Chuck got to do whatever he wanted to do.

"Tom, would your dad be driving out at night?"

"No, he's at home."

"Then hide the beer. I think I see a truck." Tom quickly picked up the two cases. He scanned around, glancing for the can he had crushed and thrown. He hoped that the grass would cover it. Tom headed for a small dirt pile, and started kicking it with his boot. Chuck was descending the metal ladder. The tung noises sounded much faster than when he had climbed up the ladder, as though Chuck scrambled down a fire ladder. He joined his friend, and they hid the beer as best they could.

"This way," Chuck whispered. Tom followed him.

"Do you have any idea who it could be?"

"No, no idea. All I can say is it's a truck."

Tom wondered who it could be, and reasoned that it was a trespasser on his father's ranch. His father had a couple of enemies who bad-mouthed him. The two boys climbed to the top of another hill, and lay down.

Two headlights speared the night. The stalks of light disappeared as the truck dipped behind a hill, then reappeared, closer, as the truck continued coming. It stopped in a valley below the two boys, headlights on, spearing a spot of brown grass. The truck itself was red, an older model. A portly, shadowed figure got out. Tom wasn't sure who it was, until his friend asked, "Is that George Williams's Ford?"

"Yeah, I think it is. What is he doing out here? My dad says he can't leave the house without his wife's permission. Why the heck would he come out here?"

"This is your dad's property, Tom. We have every right to check it out." As Chuck spoke, the shadowy figure walked out into the spotlight and dropped what appeared to Tom to be a duffel bag before disappearing back toward the rear of the truck. He appeared to be searching for something, but it was hard to tell from their vantage point.

"What the hell is he doing here?"

"I don't know Tom, but we have to find out. I have to know what's in the bag."

"Okay, I'll ask him why he's here. I'll talk to him while he keeps on digging in the back. You go towards the front and search through the bag, Chuck." Tom thought it was a better idea he do the talking. His friend wasn't known for his tact. Tom got the ability of smooth talking from his dad.

The two of them made their way slowly down the hill. George Williams didn't notice. He was still digging in the back of his truck. Chuck separated from his friend and headed for the front of the vehicle. Tom was heading towards the back. He walked up behind Williams.

"Hello, George. Care to tell me what you're doing on my father's spread?" Tom had his hands tucked into his jean pockets, striking what he hoped was a manly pose. Williams's shoulders tensed up for a minute. He turned around, shotgun in his hands. Tom realized what Williams had been digging for.

"Whoa, George, there's no reason for that. I just want to know what you're doing here." Tom raised his hands in the air, like the criminals did in the movies. He didn't really think Williams would shoot, but he didn't want to take any chances.

"Are you alone?" the man holding the gun asked. As if in answer, a scream ripped through the night. It was Chuck yelling from the front of the truck. Tom and George both ran in the direction of the scream, and stopped by the front fender.

"Chuck, what is it? What's wrong?"

"It's a baby. A baby! I touched it and it was gross and smelly. It was a fucking baby!" While Chuck screamed he wiped his hands on the grass. Tom was staring at his friend. A baby? How could it be a baby?

He turned and looked at Williams. "Is what my friend saying true?" Williams didn't answer. He pulled his cap down and looked at Tom instead. He placed the butt of the shotgun against the ground.

"You're the Randall boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Tom Randall, but I don't see what that has to do with a dead baby."

"And your friend, he's the Hazen boy?" Tom looked over at his friend, still having an epileptic fit in the grass. His gaze returned to the questioner, and the gun.

"Yes, he's Chuck Hazen. And you're George Williams. Now, that we've established everyone's names, what are you doing with a dead baby?" George didn't answer, he just laughed. Tom stared at him. He had no idea why he was reacting this way. Nothing seemed very funny right now. Chuck came alongside his friend. The two glanced at each other, and Chuck shrugged his shoulders.

"You two, hold on." George disappeared from the circle of light. After a few minutes, he re-appeared with a shovel. The gun was gone. He walked until he was right alongside the duffel, then he began to dig where Chuck had smashed down the grass with his earlier fit.

"I can understand about you two having questions, but let me tell you, I'm no murderer." He tried to sink his spade deep into the ground, but roots of the grass held hands, impenetrable.

"So, where did the baby come from?" Tom cautiously lit up a cigarette. So long as the gun wasn't in George's hands, that's what mattered. He had to know what was going on.

"It's my wife's and her lover's." Chuck turned and looked at his friend. Tom let out a cough. They had heard some vague rumors of a lover. Like all rumors, they hadn't been sure what to believe.

"I know you two may have heard something, hell, I did too. I just ignored it. After being married for twenty years, I figured I didn't have to worry about it. So long as I could do what I wanted to do in the marriage, that's what mattered. I started to ignore her, and she found someone else." Williams stopped his attempts at digging and removed his hat. He ran his fingers through his thinning brown hair, and put the hat back on. Tom thought he should say something, but he decided to be quiet. He assumed Williams would resume his story, and he did.

"He was a long-haul truck driver, this other guy. I didn't know anything about it until I came home. There was a note on the fridge. It was just me and my five kids, no momma. The note said she was going down to Olathe and visit her sister. Her truck driver would meet her there. They would live happily ever after. I told my kids she was visiting her sister, and would be back. I told the town that, too. Of course, people talked. I didn't give a shit.

I knew I was alone." He turned and looked at Chuck. "You ever been alone?" Chuck shook his head no. "I tell you what, boy, it's the worst damn feeling in the world. Your kids are always fighting each other around you, asking you for your advice, but you're by yourself."

Tom spoke up. "So, how did she come back to you?"

George looked down at his work on the ground. The black of the soil was beginning to peep out, like an eye, through the eyelashes of the grass that framed it. "Well, lover-boy didn't show. My wife gave birth in the bathroom five months after I got the note. Her sister is a nurse, after all. I didn't know any of this. All I know is I was standing in the kitchen cooking hot dogs when the call came. My wife was hysterical. She begged for forgiveness and for me to take her back. Of course I did. I knew she was the best thing that ever happened to me, and the kids needed her. I had wasted all that time thinking she'd never come back. All that time calling and pleading, and now she wanted me back. She needed me, her husband."

"You took back a cheater. That is so wrong, George. She cheated on you, end of story." Chuck was staring at the man, almost daring Williams to contradict him.

"When you've been married as long as I have, then you can talk. When you love someone, you'd do anything for them. Even when she came back and handed the trash bag to me. There was a blanket in it around the baby. The blanket

was caked on, and I had to rip it off a little at a time, like a scab. I did it away from my wife. She never wanted to see the baby again. I did it for her. I forgave everything, and the children ran out of the house to hug their mom. We were a family again. And the corpse? It's my responsibility now. I'm the man, I'll clean up, even if I didn't make the mess. That is what real love is, Hazen." He stopped digging temporarily, and looked at both of them. "And that's what a real man in love does. As soon as I bury the bastard, everything can go back to normal."

Tom just looked at the man. The poor, pathetic old man. Even at his age, Tom knew that wasn't love. "So your wife killed the baby?"

"Nope, born dead. That's what my wife said."

Tom lit another cigarette, and motioned for his friend to join him outside the beam of the headlights. The only noise was the chugging of the truck's engine.

"I tell you what, I hope you two aren't thinking of going anywhere and telling anyone." Williams stopped digging, and glared at the two boys.

Chuck shook his head. Tom replied, "Why shouldn't we tell someone? It's late at night and you're on my dad's property, George. You're trespassing. You're burying a baby no one knows about. The kid deserves a few kind words or else it will rot in hell, but you just don't seem to care about any of that."

"It's a bastard, Randall. It got what it deserves. And you two, I told you two for a reason. I admit it has been hard keeping this secret, but I've been keeping secrets about you two to myself." Williams leaned against the spade, like a crutch. "Randall, how do you think you got such a spread coming to you? Your dad has always played fair? He sold out his neighbors and screwed everyone over. It hasn't always been above board, him and the local bank. He got what he wanted, one way or the other."

Tom removed the cigarette from his mouth and dropped it in the grass. "That's a lie. My dad is just a good rancher. You sound like some of our neighbors, but my dad told me they were just jealous."

Tom turned and looked at Chuck. He was hoping Chuck would help him defend his father, but he was squatting down, pulling the grass away from the soil.

"And as for you, Hazen," Williams's stare moved over to Chuck. "If you get any ideas, I know some things about you. Your dad whales on your mom, then you beat up on that Winters girl. One big cycle of hurting going on in your house."

Tom turned his gaze from his friend, and stared off in the distance. He had heard about Chuck, but didn't believe it. Chuck always seemed like such a nice guy, and Tom never heard Tami complain. It was between Tami and Chuck, and Tom didn't feel he should get involved with what he assumed was

a false rumor. Tom now wished he had said something. Chuck was his friend, and it was Tom's job to tell him what was being said about him behind his back.

He expected his friend to counter the charge. Chuck replied instead, "Hell, Williams, who said I was going to tell anyone?"

He went over and wrapped an arm around his new friend. "I just don't understand why you took your wife back. A man has to control his woman." Tom turned and looked at the two. What was going on? How could Chuck agree with the man, let alone touch him? He'd lied about Tom's dad. He'd lied about everything. Williams thought that by burying the child and keeping the secrets away from the law he could make all the problems go away. The lies he told would decompose underneath the soil like the baby. And now Chuck was hugging the man? Tom knew that he would never forget what had happened this night. The picture of those two, in some twisted embrace.

"Well, like I said, Hazen. I'll see you in twenty years." The new friends let out a laugh. Tom felt the grass wrap around his legs. It seemed to hold him in place. He felt like a permanent part of the land, like the windmill.

"What about the kid?" Tom asked. No one heard him. They were whispering back and forth between themselves. This couldn't be Chuck. The same Chuck that had come to his

mother's funeral. The same Chuck who had always been his friend, who he knew so well. Tom turned his back on the two and returned to the darkness.

"Hey, where are you going, Tom?" Chuck removed his arm from his new friend and followed after him.

"Don't forget, Randall, don't say a word to anyone! You got to learn the rules of a small town! We all keep quiet, or we all go down!" George Williams called after him in a voice that echoed over the hills. Tom knew no one but Chuck and he could hear it. He kept on walking, wishing he hadn't heard.

Chuck caught up to him and put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "You okay, buddy?"

Tom realized it was the same hand that had touched the baby. It had been on Williams's back. He shrugged his shoulder, knocking Chuck's hand off. He stopped and looked at his friend. "You're really not going to do anything?"

"No." He shrugged his shoulders. "Why should I? The kid was a bastard. No one cared about it. We all keep our mouths shut, and the whole thing works out. Don't worry Tom, you'll forget about the whole thing."

Tom doubted this. He turned around and started to walk towards his truck. "Wait up, Tom, I'll get the brew."

"Just leave it." He never wanted Chuck to do another favor for him.

"That's good beer. No way." Chuck separated from his

friend and walked towards the windmill. Tom turned around and lit another cigarette. He saw the truck below. Williams was still digging. The black soil eye had become a hole, a mouth. It would soon become a grave. It would swallow the child up, and no one would ever know about the infant.

Everything was dark, except for the spotlight that contained George Williams. Tom knew he would have to see that man again. When he returned from school, he would bump into him at the feed store or the gas station. The two men would make small talk, and talk about the weather. They would never mention the baby again. They would all be ensnared into some huge web. A web Tom would never, not quite, break free from.

Tom turned around, stumbling over a small rock. He would also have to see Chuck. Chuck would marry Tami, and Tom would be there. Tom would sit in a church, and say nothing in protest. Even when the preacher would ask if anyone had objections to the marriage, the joining, he would remain quiet. Tom's future wife would sit next to him, unaware of the whole thing.

"Hey Tom, c'mon, I'm at the truck!" Chuck yelled. It broke Tom away from his thoughts. He looked down one last time, then turned away. George Williams waved farewell from his pool of light. Tom didn't notice, he was walking slowly towards Chuck.

Stargazing

They both sat there, on the swing for two. She stared up, at the stars. He rubbed his hands up and down his thighs, feeling the skin his denim shorts didn't cover. James looked at her.

"Do you think Candy likes me? I mean really likes me? I don't want her to stare at me and think I'm a dork, I want her to really like me."

"You mean like marriage-liking?"

"Yeah, kind of..."

She looked down at the dirt her sandals had been stroking. Her thongs barely made an impression. James dug in with the heels of his tennis-shoes. The left one was untied.

"Your shoe is untied."

"I think you're avoiding my question."

She leaned back and started swinging her feet, avoiding the soil altogether. She recalled the time she and James had gone out to eat together. He promised her it would be a special night, for a special friend. James would listen to her problems, let her do the talking, and it was his treat. James was going to re-pay her for all the time of hers he had wasted.

They sat at the booth with the bright green seat covers, and she listened to his usual laments. He hated being alone. He needed a girl. She played with her straw,

moved it through the soda, splashing little bits outside the glass. Then he started to flirt with the waitress. He told the waitress she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. No one could compare. The waitress did her best to ignore him.

She sat there, watching her friend being ignored. Her hand moved from the straw to play with her short brown hair. The waitress wrote the order down, and walked off quickly, disgusted. She didn't look at him for the rest of the night. The Coke sign behind him seemed far more fascinating.

She tapped the wood arm of the swing. It made a hollow sound. "How do I know, James? Candy is some little girl who's still in high school. That's your problem. You never date anyone your age. You always go for the young and stupid ones."

"She's an honor student." She knew in his mind, that made his feelings alright.

"And you're in college."

She rubbed the fabric of her yellow sundress between her fingers, and glanced over at him. He appeared to be looking at the stars. "It is a pretty night," she said. He said nothing, but she continued. "I think any girl would be lucky to have you, so even if you and Candy don't work, there will be others."

"I want her. She seems so nice. Candy always listens

to me when I have problems, really listens, and I like her smile."

She pretended she didn't hear the comment. She turned and looked directly at him, continuing to stare, hoping he would notice. He was looking up at the sky.

"What do you think of when you look at the stars, James? She waited for him to answer, but only heard the creaking of the swing. She continued, "I wonder who else has looked at them, and what they were thinking." She spanned her arm across the horizon, as if he could miss the pinpoints. "The ancient Greeks looked up at them. Did they think what I do? I doubt they worried about school, but they worried about men. They worried about life. What do you think of when you look at them?" He was running his hand up and down the swing's chain. She continued to stare at him.

"So, you think I have a shot? You do think Candy will think she's lucky to have a date with me?" He turned his head, and actually looked at her. She knew he hadn't heard a word she'd said. If it didn't involve him or Candy, he couldn't care less.

A sigh escaped her lips, and she shook her head. "How do I know, James?" The swing let out an odd creaking noise as he stood up and began to walk around it.

"I have to go. I need to talk to Candy. See you around." He walked off, leaving her behind. She looked up

at the stars again, wondering what she would think about James at some point in the future. She hoped she wouldn't feel resentful of the time she gave him now, but she thought she might. She also hoped Candy would keep rejecting him, and he would return to her. James always returned to her.

She stood up and re-traced the path James walked around the swing, and she saw his shoe prints on the dirt path. She tried to make her sandals fit into his prints, but couldn't do it exactly. A car honked as James drove by, and she watched the vehicle as it headed towards Candy's house.

Love Policeman

The shooting didn't happen when he was on his shift. If it had, she would've known. Clarissa lay across the sofa, filing her nails. She had lit several candles, and the smell of cinnamon filled the air. Her legs were crossed, and she sat in her best black lingerie, as though she belonged in a classic Hollywood movie. Occasionally Clarissa paused on her nails to flick the ashes from her cigarette with a flourish.

The only thing out of place in the apartment was an occasional static crackle noise from the police scanner. It was a fairly small town, so violent crime was almost unknown. Clarissa glanced constantly at her cat. As a rule, she hated cats--too much hair, but Clarissa had read somewhere that cats knew before their owners who was coming up the stairs. That certainly was true, because whenever Luke came over, the cat knew. It would look at the door, stopping from cleaning itself, shake its head back and forth, then hide underneath the sofa. Luke always seemed to appear when she least expected him, and the cat gave her a brief warning.

Clarissa always dressed as nicely as she could. She got up from the couch and looked from the windows of her loft down to the street, scanning for his police car. When the shifts were slow, and he was on duty, he would visit. The cat had once made the mistake of jumping on the bed

during foreplay. It had gotten swatted, but the cat didn't repeat its mistake.

Clarissa moved from the window and walked over to her paints. She stared at some of her work. It had been so long since she had last painted. She looked down at a self-portrait. Her eyes locked upon the picture, like she was admiring her own reflection in a mirror. The scanner let out an obscene crackle, as if a truck bore through a tunnel.

"Hey, did ya hear about 0814?"

"Yeah, poor bastard. How's he doing?"

"It ain't good. Bullet ripped a lung."

"Poor bastard."

Clarissa glanced at the scanner. Her robe dropped from her shoulders. Luke was shot? How was that possible? That didn't happen here. That didn't happen to any of her friends. She had seen his number numerous times when she had rubbed the badge, loving the feel of it. It was smooth, shiny, and manly. She felt the masculinity throb from it, warming her. She remembered looking over at Luke, who was lying in the bed, smirking at her. Clarissa smiled at the memory, then mentally pushed it away. It was a tempting memory to retreat into, and she had too much to do in the present.

What would a widow in distress wear? Clarissa stopped to think. Black, of course, they always wore black, the color of mourning. She walked into the large closet and

started to slide into her Christian Dior. The black velvet showed the cat hair. Clarissa walked out and looked briefly around the apartment, hoping to blame the cat. The phone rang, and she thought about not answering it--she had to see Luke at the hospital. She ended up picking it up. Even though Luke never called her, she thought it might be him telling her everything was okay, and he was thinking of her.

"Clarissa, it's your father."

How dare her father call her! She needed to get to the hospital. "Daddy, I don't have time to talk right now!" She yelled into the receiver.

"Are you okay, honey?"

"I'm fine, I just don't have time to talk right now." She struggled to get her voice under control. She had to get him off the phone. Clarissa knew better than to hang up on her father. She had done that once, and the check was three days late.

"I was just wondering about you. And your painting. Did you get the check?"

"Yes, Daddy. I did. Someone's at the door. I have to let you go." She rolled her eyes, grateful that he couldn't see her. She loved phones. Oh so close, but not too close. He mumbled his apologies and she hung up, making kissing noises to her father and telling him she loved him. She looked down and noticed the cat hair on her clothes again. Clarissa stood up and looked around the apartment. The cat

was going to get it if she found it. The cat remained hidden.

It wasn't hard to find the right hospital. There were only two. Clarissa tried to look as much like a grieving widow as she possibly could. She had pulled back her flame-colored hair into a severe bun, so that she looked as if she'd had a bad face lift. True mourners, she reasoned, didn't have time to worry about their hair.

She walked to the front desk. "Excuse me, could you tell me which room Lucas Shelt is in?"

The nurse didn't even bother looking up from her papers as she replied, "immediate family only."

"But I am. I'm his wife."

At this, the nurse did look up. She quickly glanced at another nurse, who shrugged her shoulders. Her gaze returned to Clarissa. "Okay, he's in 202."

Clarissa smiled, extended her thanks, and walked down the long white hall towards the elevator. How should she act? Should she run to the elevator, as though running into the arms of a seldom-seen lover? She imagined a camera filming her. No, running would look tacky. Quiet, yet dignified control was the best way to proceed. She walked slowly, deliberately, with her head up and her lips drawn tight, into the elevator.

Nothing could happen to Luke. He was her lover, the

physical pleasure of her life, she thought as she pushed the button for the second floor. She knew better than to get too involved. She was thankful she was smart enough to use someone for sex only. If you got too emotionally attached, bad things happened. Most women weren't as bright as she was. But now, what had happened to Luke? It must have happened recently. She needed to find out before she read about it in the paper. That seemed too cold. She didn't want to read his obituary while she eating her cereal.

He might be angry at her coming into his life like this. He had made it clear he needed his freedom. He had told her once to never call him, that he would come to her. She couldn't stand it if he was mad at her. She knew she was supposed to stay outside of the circle of his life, his friends, but she had to find out. She got out of the elevator and walked down to the room, hesitating before the door. She re-applied her lipstick. It matched so perfectly with her hair, and she had to look good for Lucas. He couldn't see her plain. She thought about the camera again.

Clarissa walked into the hospital room as if she had stepped off a fashion runway. She expected to see Luke, alone, lying in a bed. Instead, her eyes immediately went to a young woman sitting by the bed. Her brown hair was badly permed, and it looked to Clarissa like a pile of sawdust. The woman was flipping through a magazine, without really reading it. Her make-up was streaked and her clothes

looked like they came from a discount store. It was obvious that the woman didn't spend any time on her appearance, or her clothes. She simply bought things when they were on sale.

The door clicked behind Clarissa, and the woman in the wood grain chair turned and looked at her.

"Who are you?" The woman stood up, assuming a protective stance over the bump in the sheets, arms spread over him, like an umbrella trying to keep the rain off.

Clarissa gave a little jump. This person was the last person she had expected. Who was she? She ran the list through her mind. Maybe it was his sister. Luke said he lived with her. "I'm his wife," she replied. She knew it was a lie, but she needed to see him. She could lie to the sister and say the marriage had just happened. He hadn't told the family.

"No, I don't know who you are, but I'm his wife." The woman protected the bump even more by leaning over, until her chest covered him.

Clarissa removed her gloves, trying to buy herself some time to think. She slid them into her patent leather purse, pausing for appearance.

"He's married, and he married you?" Clarissa looked at the wife. She was just so... average. She wasn't tall, or distinct, or anything. How could Luke make love to both of them? They looked so different. How could he choose such a

plain, stupid looking girl? He was a sexy, exciting man, and he had chosen that little mewling mouse to someday have his children?

"Who are you?" the wife asked, her voice like a squeak. "No, never mind, you don't have to say." She waved her hand, as if dismissing Clarissa.

Clarissa walked to the other side of the bed, avoiding the tubes and army of machines Luke was tied to. She walked very delicately, the high heels on her shoes didn't hit the ground. "Get away from him," the wife snarled as if she was protecting her child.

"I have to see him," Clarissa whispered.

"Get out of here."

Clarissa glanced down at her lover. She couldn't see anything. He was covered. There were so many tubes, she couldn't clearly see his head. Luke was a white bump with tubes. She walked towards the door, stopping to get one more look at the wife. Her mouth opened, then shut. Her heels clicked on the linoleum as she continued her walk. Clarissa slammed the door behind her.

The paper stated that Luke had been shot in the back by some man. It went on and on, but that was all it really said. They had the man who did it. That made Clarissa feel very happy. She walked to the mirror and looked at it, still smiling. Her teeth were bright and white, and

perfectly straight. Her red hair hung down, curling at the ends, framing her smile. The nicotine stains hadn't shown up yet on her teeth.. She had only begun smoking a year ago. All artists smoked and lived tortured lives.

Clarissa had gotten up and painted this morning. She'd dreamt of something that had happened. She remembered a semester when she had studied abroad in Spain. Her goal had been to have an exciting affair with a foreign man. Clarissa had achieved that goal. She had looked off a balcony as the bulls were let loose. Jorge had held her as they looked down, and some brave fool had sprinted in front of a charger. She had whispered to Jorge that the young boy had to be mad. He had kissed her ear by way of a reply.

She had gotten up and painted that bull's face this morning. He was a red, angry blur with horns. The background was a blur too, but it was different colors, and twisted like a spiraling rainbow. "One big blur," she muttered, her gaze moving from the painting to the open window.

The phone rang, and she picked it up. "Clarissa dear, is that you?"

A smile spread across her face as she replied, "Yes, Daddy, it's me." She tilted her head and put her shoulder on the back of the phone, leaving her hands free to comb her long hair. She knew she had to be very friendly to her father today, she thought as she reached for her hair brush.

"Is everything okay? You sounded a little off last time I called."

"My life has never been better Daddy, thanks to you and mom."

"I just want you to know I paid your rent for this month. How's the painting coming, dear?"

"Just fine Daddy, I got up early and did one this morning."

"Oh good... so, have you sold one yet?"

"Not yet, Daddy. But you know, it takes time. I'm so lucky that you're so supportive." Her voice grew higher in pitch with the last sentence.

"I know, Clarissa, but you know, your rent isn't cheap. Your mom and I, well, we hope to retire at some point."

Clarissa stopped brushing her hair, and returned her hands to the phone. "Daddy, I need time to paint. I went to school to learn, and now I need time. If I have to work at the same time, that would be counter-productive. Please don't make me get a job, Daddy. Painting is my job." Her voice pleaded, sounding like a little girl. She always used this voice when things weren't going well with her father.

"Well, you know I love you. I'll give you some more time." Clarissa heard a knock at the door. "I'll talk to you later, honey." She pushed the off on her cellular and headed for the door.

Clarissa opened the door and stared, cursing her apartment. As much as her father paid in rent it, should have peep holes. It was the wife. "Can I come in?" Clarissa didn't answer, but stood back from the door.

The woman didn't say anything as she entered. Her eyes were looking around the apartment, no doubt admiring it, Clarissa thought, It did look like an apartment in a movie. There were no rooms, but there was a bed and furniture. Windows framed the place, letting in lots of light and warmth. The cat was licking its paw. It stopped and looked at Clarissa, then moved underneath the bed.

"Hello, Clarissa. I think we should talk." She turned and looked at her enemy as she shut the door.

"How do you know my name? How do you know where I live?" Clarissa's voice was rising. This was her and Luke's place. What was the wife doing here? She didn't belong. Was there going to be a confrontation, like they had on "Dynasty?" Her decorations were far too expensive to be flung through the air by some hussy simpleton in a rage.

"I got it from a friend of Luke's. I simply reminded him I was the wife, Leah, not the slut."

"I didn't know he was married." Leah didn't say anything, but she walked towards the painting that was on the easel.

"So, you've gone to school for how long? You have a Master's, and yes, I do know quite a bit about you, and

you're not bright enough to know that if a man never takes you out in public and only comes over and fucks you when it's convenient for him, he's not married?"

Clarissa merely stood by the door. She ran her fingers up and down the edges of her silk robe. Luke cared for her. This woman was just jealous. She wished she was as smart and beautiful as Clarissa.

"I guess, I didn't think about it,"

"No, I guess not, or else you were totally stupid." Leah turned back and stared at the painting. Clarissa knew the woman was too simple to appreciate it. She was probably thinking that it was just a bunch of splotches. She wouldn't be pleased with anything Clarissa did, because she was jealous. Suddenly, Leah picked up the painting and pushed it against one of the white walls. The painting made a slurping sound as the wet paint made contact.

"What the hell are you doing, you white-trash bitch?" Clarissa screamed as she ran over to Leah. She grabbed the painting from her hands, and removed it from the wall. A red spot remained behind. She looked at the painting. It was ruined, the bull was gone. It now looked like a letter O with two lines protruding from it. Leah crossed her arms and smiled at her.

Clarissa knew the wife had gone over the edge. The wife was supposed to bend on her right knee, begging for Clarissa to leave Luke alone, screaming he was all she had.

She was too boring and insipid to have anything else. Clarissa had tolerated Leah's intrusion into her and Luke's life, even been civil to her. Now she was ruining her work and her apartment. The wife had it coming, after all. She would have to face reality sooner or later.

"Do you want to know how your man fucked me, bitch? Or, as he called it, making love?" Clarissa's face was sneering as she approached the married woman, with high dramatic steps, like an ostrich. Clarissa was pointing at her with her right hand, accusing. Her left hand still held the painting. Leah's arms started to uncross, and her smug smile disappeared.

"Don't you even...."

"He held my breasts, he said they were the best he had ever seen, he put his mouth on the right one...."

"Shut up, shut up!" Leah covered her ears with both of her hands. She looked like a child, protesting an unfair rule.

"And he made me come. He was the first man that ever did that. He is the perfect combination of gentleness and masculinity."

Leah didn't hear the rest. She shoved Clarissa backwards. Clarissa stumbled, the ruined painting fell from her hand. She hit the apartment floor.

"Your husband's very oral, isn't he?" She was smiling through her tumbled red hair.

Leah picked up a small statue of a praying Virgin Mary and threw it at her. "Shut up, bitch!"

The statue spiraled through the air, and Clarissa twisted her body, bracing herself for when it would strike. It struck her on the arm. The statue hit the floor and shattered. Clarissa didn't say anything. The women both stared at each other. Leah continued looking down upon Clarissa.

"You knew all along too, wifey. But you didn't want to face it. That's why you let me go at the hospital. You suspected all along, but Luke denied it. Instead of finding out for yourself, you let the whole thing go. You didn't want to know." Clarissa got up, and went over to the black marble coffee table. Clarissa sat on the black leather couch and lit a cigarette. She shook the match out, like she was waving a tissue. The anger seemed to drain from her as she inhaled each time. Leah watched her smoke. Clarissa took long, dramatic drags.

Clarissa finally asked, "How is Luke?" She knew he would be okay. He had to be. The shooting was only a temporary distraction. Everything would be okay again.

"He'll live, but he'll never see you again." Leah's eyes never moved from her enemy. She stood in front of the windows, the sunlight making her hair appear to be gold.

Clarissa smiled at her. "If you say so. I truly felt as if I was alive, when he touched me." She exhaled deeply.

"He came to me because you got boring. If I marry, I'll never get boring, or take a man for granted." She would always be beautiful, she thought, as she inhaled again.

Leah shook her head at her. Clarissa didn't know what to think. No witty retort? Clarissa thought she saw a look of pity come from the wife, but she had to be wrong. All wives were plain and simple. It was the mistress who was sexy and supple.

"Yes, the rich do have that luxury. You get to avoid real life." Leah said, as she looked up at the slowly spinning ceiling fan.

"Just because I have money doesn't mean life is easier." And it didn't, she had troubles too. She dealt with her father on an almost daily basis. That would bother even the most holiest of saints.

"Sure." Leah started to stare at the walls, and her gaze focused on the red spot. Clarissa knew what she was thinking. The wife had done that. Luke's wife had done that. It would never come out. Maybe Clarissa would hide it, hang a picture over it, but that would just be covering it. The spot would remain. A smile returned to Leah's face. The wife would have a permanent marking, a reminder, in the loft where Clarissa and Luke had made love.

Clarissa saw the smile, and it angered her. She had to get this woman out of her place. If she was here, Luke might not return. How long would he be in the hospital

anyway? She would have to call the hospital. The wife had to leave. She caught herself. That is, if Luke wanted to come over. It wouldn't affect her either way. She was above such simple emotions for a man.

"Anything else, or have you done your part?" Clarissa asked, as she calmly crushed the cigarette in the ashtray.

"Do you care who shot him?"

"They got the guy. That's what matters."

"The guy shot Luke because Luke slept with his wife. Luke is quite the man. I thought when we got married he would stop, but he didn't" She looked directly at Clarissa. "But you already know that."

Clarissa looked away from her gaze. There was someone else? Someone besides the wife? Who was she? What did she look like? Panic traced over the nerves where the nicotine trails had just traced pleasure, where Luke had touched her a couple of weeks ago.

"Such is marriage. You take the good with the bad. He always comes back to me. This is the real world, not a richie soap opera." She started walking towards the door, avoiding the shards of the broken statue.

"If I had known, I wouldn't have put up with it. Marriage is something sacred." Clarissa said.

Leah kept on walking. She stopped in front of one of the paintings leaning against the wall. "I honestly don't understand modern art. It all looks like a bunch of over-

educated people trying to justify the fact they have no real talent."

"Your husband, he really is very good, sexually."

Leah stopped in front of the door and turned around. "He always behaved himself after he spent a night with you. He even bought flowers." She turned and walked out the door.

The cat peeked its head from underneath the sheets. "He never sent me any flowers," Clarissa mumbled as she knelt and started to pick up all the shattered pieces of the statue. She picked up the praying hands, still whole. The bruise on her arm began to throb. The cat came over and rubbed its face against her leg. She threw the hands, along with some of the pieces she had picked up, across the room, and began to cry. The cat continued to rub.

Alone

Kevin didn't know much about life. The only thing he did know was there were no guarantees. Life was a huge dance floor, and you had your choice of partners. Some you didn't even know and never would. They would waltz past you, unaware of your existence. Some you danced with for only a brief moment, they would slip out of your life like shadows. Some you danced with for a long time, like his wife. Tonight he felt as if they were about to waltz right over the edge of the ballroom floor, and fall into the orchestra pit, or down a flight of stairs.

He was sitting at a bar, drinking his beer. He had to leave the house, because he couldn't stop thinking of one of his former dancing partners. Whenever it seemed as if the band would stop playing, he thought of her. He knew he should be at home, trying to make things right, trying to make his wife's dance go on forever with him. He couldn't, he didn't know why, but he couldn't stay at home tonight. He had to go to the bar and have a drink.

"Hey, Kevin, buy you a beer?" Kevin's head jerked up, startling him from his thoughts. He flashed his friend a smile and brushed his brown bangs away from his face. It was Steve. They had worked on the same floor at the factory.

"Hell yeah, I'll let you do one better. You can buy me a pitcher."

"Guy like you makes management, I think you can buy, buddy." Steve slid along the brown fabric of the booth across from Kevin.

Kevin didn't say anything. He would let the comment slide. He knew what they were saying back on his old floor where men worked with their bodies. They were saying Kevin thought he was better than his old friends. He couldn't understand the comments. Kevin knew he had withdrawn from his old friends, but it wasn't the job. He had his own problems to deal with. No one ever thought about that, or cut him any slack.

Kevin waved his hand in the air, motioning for the waitress. It was a crowded night in the bar, but Kevin had still managed to get a corner booth. A deer head hung over it, some hunter's trophy, but you forgot it was there after you drank enough. The whole bar smelled of cigarettes, and even the wood paneling looked like the brown of tobacco. The people in the bar seemed to be whispering in unison.

"What can I get you two?" The waitress asked as she came over to their booth. She had her blonde hair pulled back into a bun, and was smiling a phony waitress smile, working for her tip. Kevin informed her they wanted a pitcher, she smiled again and walked off towards the bar.

"She's a cutie, Kev. Know who she reminds me of?"

"No clue," Kevin replied, while pulling a cigarette from his pack.

"That one girl you trained before you got promoted. She always wore her blonde hair back, but it was in a pony tail. The tall girl who showed up at your barbecues." The waitress came by and put the beer on the table, and Kevin paid her the money. Steve was giving her some sort of a weird smile. He was probably trying to look sexy, but it looked more like a leer.

"Sarah, right." Kevin finally replied after the waitress left.

"Yeah, that was her name. Bet you regretted being married when she was around."

"Nah, I may have my faults Steve, but I've always been faithful to my wife." Kevin finished pouring the beer into the mugs, and put the pitcher back down on the table.

"Oh, sorry, Kev. I didn't mean anything by it. Where is the wife tonight?"

Kevin was looking down at the table, trying to match his beer glass with rings left by previous drinkers. Should he tell his friend the truth? That his wife had gotten sick of his drinking? She wanted him out of the house if he was going to get drunk tonight? He glanced up at Steve, who looked like he was hoping for bad news, something he could tell the boys at work during a break.

"She's doing good, Steve, just has a bit of a stomach ache, that's all."

"Oh, well, tell her I said hi."

Kevin nodded in reply. Steve started to refill their nearly-empty mugs. It always amazed Kevin how fast he drank. He really didn't mean to drink. The problem was that once he got started, he couldn't stop. He liked the way it tasted, and how if you drank enough, it would help you forget. It didn't seem to be working tonight.

"Hey, Kevin, are you going to have another barbecue before the weather gets too cold? It's been awhile since your last one."

"Yeah, it has been. Sorry about that, but we probably won't have another one. My wife got tired of cleaning up afterwards, you understand."

"No, not really. That's why I've stayed single."

Kevin knew Steve was remembering every word of the conversation, so it could be repeated tomorrow. He remembered what it was like when he was on the same floor as Steve. Steve jutted his jaw out like the man he was imitating, looking like he had a bad under-bite. He raised the level of his voice, so he talked in a shrill tone. They all laughed, even though Kevin felt a little uncomfortable. He was thinking he was glad Steve was his friend. Steve was hard on people and possessed the luxury of self-ignorance, the luxury of belittling people until they didn't seem like they were people anymore, and were remembered for their faults.

It would be during break, and they would all be sitting

down, not Kevin though, he always stayed up above in the box of offices. Steve would be talking about how he had seen Kevin, and how drunk Kevin had been. Far too good to even have the barbecues. Blamed it on his wife. They would all laugh, while Kevin would be upstairs, head in his hands, wondering how he could get his life under control again. Kevin finished the beer off in a gulp. He was getting angry. What the hell had happened to everything, his friends, his wife?

Kevin poured what remained in the pitcher into his glass. The waitress came by again. "Another?" She sweetly asked.

Kevin looked across the table at Steve. Management or not, it was his turn to buy. He nodded yes to the waitress. Kevin said nothing, but got up from the booth and followed the waitress. She was cute, Steve had been right. Nice butt, and she was wearing tight jeans. If she had been taller, she could almost be Sarah. "God, I am drunk," he muttered to himself as he entered the bathroom.

Kevin knew he was staggering a bit when he came out. He sat down again at the booth, and poured himself another glass. He spilled some of it down the side, and ran his fingers along the surface, stroking. Steve glanced at him and said, "I tell you, Kevin, I think the waitress wants me. Her name is Kim."

"Nah, you couldn't do that good." If he was going to

be ripped apart tomorrow, by God, he was going to get his punches in. If he would be remembered as "Mr. Management that thinks he's better than everyone else, the drunk, the excuse maker," he was going to make Steve hurt.

"Oh, I don't know about that. If you would've helped me get closer to Sarah, she would've gone out with me."

Kevin took another sip before replying, "I doubt it, she has very classy taste. She was only temporary summer help. She's going to college now and can have her pick. I doubt she would look at you twice, she's too pretty."

"I have nothing against pretty and smart women, unlike some people at work." Steve then took a large drink, and seemed to be looking up at the deer head, avoiding his friend's look.

"Are you saying I can't have a smart woman? No wait, I see what you mean. You mean I married a dumb woman!" Kevin slammed his fist down. It felt like a large rock. He wanted to smash his fist up against his friend's face.

"No, I'm not saying that at all!" Steve started to scramble to his feet, totally surprised by his friend's reaction.

Kevin grabbed his cigarettes. "Well, fuck you!" In his mind, it sounded clever. It came out slurred, because he was feeling his beer. He walked toward the door, doing his best impression of a power walk. It was something he could do at work, while he was sober, without a problem.

His friend was saying something, but Kevin ignored him. He didn't need his wife, or his friend. Kevin opened the door to the night. The coolness washed over his face like water. He thought about driving home, but dismissed the idea. He had better walk.

"Fuck them all," he mumbled. Kevin started walking down the alley, his feet crunching against the gravel. He stopped to light a cigarette, and continued walking his uneven line. He wasn't sure how long he walked, or if he was going in the right direction. He cut his way through the park, stopping to urinate. He regretted he had left before he had at least finished off his beer. He wondered what time it was. He had been at the bar for quite some time.

Kevin continued walking along the sidewalk through the park. There were lights. He couldn't look directly at them, they hurt his eyes. His wife, He knew, would be asleep. She didn't even wait up anymore. His shadow stretched before him along the path. He preferred to look down at it.

He walked until he saw her apartment from the top of a hill. He remembered that night. It had started off very innocently. Only a few people had shown up to that night's barbecue. Kevin's wife had been out of town. She didn't like his friends. Sarah had needed a ride home. She had far too much to drink that night. Kevin had drunken too

much, but he had still taken her home. He had talked in her apartment, and she had listened. He had felt as if he could tell her anything. He had kissed her, telling her to be quiet about the whole thing. She had told him she had never done this kind of thing before. Of course, what else could she say? People very rarely admitted the truth to themselves.

Sarah was different. Kevin did think Sarah was telling the truth, she didn't seem forward, brash, or slutty. She moaned when he touched her. That's the problem when you have an extended dance partner, like a wife. They get used to your pattern, your dips, but if you changed the dancer, everything that had been routine was different. Sarah made him feel different. That was, until the next morning. He prayed Sarah would keep her mouth shut, and she did, but the problem was, even with her silence, he remembered. In his mind, he couldn't silence the night it happened. He really did love his wife.

Why was he here? It had been almost six months ago. He couldn't answer the question he asked himself, so he decided to stop asking it and just be. He had come here by accident, really, he decided. Kevin wasn't even sure if she lived here anymore. He walked up to the front door. There was a light on inside. What if a cop lived in the apartment now? The thought brought a smile to his lips. He rang the doorbell.

No answer. He rang it again, and nothing. He began to pound, like a hammer. She always took forever to answer the door. Another thought sprang to his mind. What if she had a boyfriend? He was going to slink away when the door opened.

Her eyes were half closed, from drowsiness. They shot open, and she took two steps back. She was wearing a large red flannel nightshirt, and some red and black striped boxers. Her hair was still blonde, no roots. "Kevin?" she whispered. He wasn't sure if she wanted him to respond. She seemed to be asking it to herself, trying to find some answer.

"Bet you're surprised to see me. I was the last person you were expecting."

"It's pretty late."

"I know, Sarah, but I really need to talk."

She shook her head at him. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"Let me come in."

"Kevin, it was only that one time. I didn't sign on to be a baby-sitter. I'm not sure about the rules of one night stands, but I don't think you're supposed to come back."

He started pounding the wood frame of the door. "I don't need a baby-sitter. This whole day." He stared at his feet. He pounded louder. He looked back up at her. "Please let me come in?"

She stepped away from the door. "Only for a minute. I don't want you disturbing the neighbors."

He stumbled through the door, and sat down on a beige easy chair. He bent over, and put his elbows on his knees, as though he was going to vomit, then he sat up and looked around the apartment. He had been here several times, before that one time. She was sitting across from him on some wooden chair. The couch was placed against the wall of the small living room. He briefly remembered what she had looked like naked, spread across that couch. He thought of his wife, but pushed the image away.

He turned back and looked at her again. She was just sitting in that stupid chair. She looked like some prissy teacher, as upright as she sat. He motioned for her to sit on his lap. "Come here, my life has been awful rough today." He told her, told her everything he had wanted to tell Steve. His wife and he were in trouble. He knew he had pushed her too far with his drinking. It never used to be much of a problem, then he'd been promoted. It seemed as if everything was beyond his control. His own friends hated him. He was in the office now. He needed sympathy, and he needed her. She merely sat in the upright wood chair, her face unchanging.

"I know it was only that one time, but I need you." He told her after he had finished telling her his story, and looked directly at her.

"No, why should I care about your problems?" She stood up, and walked the four steps to the door. She motioned him towards the door. "It's not like you cared about any of mine."

"Sarah-"

"Look, Kevin, you excluded me so totally out of your life. You made me feel like the whole thing was a mistake. You kept on ignoring me. I would try to talk with you, and you didn't even have the decency to say anything back. You know what pisses me off? I had to face the guilt alone. You couldn't tell your wife, true, but you could ask her to hold you. You could ask her to fuck you. You could buy her gifts to make yourself feel better. Me, all I could do was sit here." She was getting closer to him. Her tone wasn't hysterical screaming, it was demanding. "You just didn't give a shit about anything that happened to me. Now you want me to care about what has happened to you?" She had moved until she was a foot in front of him. She suddenly stopped, and crossed her arms. She then looked down. He thought she might be crying.

He started to shake his head. "I wasn't mad at you. Why didn't you say something?" He knew it sounded pathetic, but he didn't know what else to say. He couldn't understand why she was flipping out so much. It was just a one-night stand.

"You know, the Amish punish people by not talking to

them. They ignore them outright. A court decided it was cruel and unusual punishment." He knew she was crying now, just a little bit. He looked right past her, at some poster. Watches were melting.

"But Sarah, that night. It was wonderful." It really had been too. And now she was crying in front of him. "I didn't want to hurt your feelings. We were two people just having fun."

"Yeah, the night was nice. It was the next day at work. You became something horrible. I didn't want you to leave your wife. I didn't ask a damn thing from you. You think you could've been civil to me. That's all I wanted." She was still standing in front of him. He cautiously put his foot out, and touched her lower leg. He wasn't sure why.

"What the hell are you doing?" She staggered back a step, nearly tripping over a wooden coffee table. "I've forgotten about you, about your touch, and even how you looked. If I touch you again, it'll bring it all back. I'll have all that guilt, and I can't go through those feelings again." She had regained the firmness of her earlier posture. "You know, I didn't tell your wife. You'd think for that act alone you could have treated me like a human being."

"Why should I be nice? You had your fun that night, and there's no rule I have to be nice. I had to deal with

the fact you might tell my wife. I had to keep you two apart." He was getting mad now. It was just like a woman to blow everything out of proportion. He had told her that night that he loved his wife. He had never lied to her. "I had my own guilt to deal with the next day."

"Yes, I know that feeling. My first one-night stand and a married guy, all mixed into one." She appeared to be calming down. Sarah was walking towards the door again, but turned around. "If you felt so bad, what are you doing here? Why aren't you ignoring me like you have been?"

He staggered until he was in front of her. Their eyes were locked on one another, neither one of them blinking. "I'm drunk, that's why I'm here."

"That's no excuse. You're always drunk. Why are you here? Now?" She kept on staring at him, and it made him feel uncomfortable. He hated it when people looked directly at him.

"I don't know. I thought, maybe, we could have some fun."

"Then you really didn't feel guilty. You enjoyed ignoring me, making me feel like a mistake. You don't care about anyone else but yourself. You only love your beer."

"That's not true, I love my wife."

"If that was true, you wouldn't be here." She turned and opened the door. He realized he hated her. She was supposed to be his salvation, and now she didn't care.

Sarah wasn't even looking at him, she was looking over him, ignoring him, and he was right in front of her. He had made the effort to come here. She had been his last link. If his wife and Steve didn't care, Sarah was supposed to. Why couldn't she see it as a compliment? Why didn't she care about him? He thought blindly, through his rage. His hand felt like a giant rock again, and this time he had to smash it against something.

He drew back his hand and slapped her. Her head jerked to the side, and she fell backwards, into the opened door. Her hand slid off the door-handle. She looked up at him, from underneath her long bangs, like child peering through yellow curtains.

"Do you feel better now?" she asked. She sounded sweet, like a waitress working for her tip. He thought he was going to be sick.

He walked out the door, and lit a cigarette. It made him feel sicker, so he discarded it. It flew up in an arc, like a fire baton. He had never hit anyone before. Why her, why Sarah? He had been pushing everyone to their limits, just when he needed them the most. He ignored Sarah and his friends. He didn't mean to drink, or annoy his wife. He really shouldn't have gone over to Sarah's apartment. Kevin headed in the direction of his house. His wife would be asleep, and he would sleep on the couch, again. She wouldn't have put the dog out, as always. He

would have to take care of it. He always had to take care of everything.

The image of Sarah flitted before his eyes. It was a dirty moth he couldn't keep away from the light. He tried to ignore the picture of her on the floor, hurt. He had done that. He had hurt her. It was just like the pain in his wife's face when he drank too much.

He stopped and looked at one of the park's lights, squinting his eyes so he could filter out some of the brightness. It was a small, shining, full moon. "Fucking slut, that's what she deserved. What kind of girl gets involved with a married man?" The light suddenly flickered off, but he didn't fully open his eyes. He turned and walked ahead into the darkness.

Revenge of the Wronged

She placed the mop back in the bucket. The gray water whirled around like a flushing toilet. The water contained everything from an elm leaf to gravel. Tanya considered changing the water, but decided against it. When you are paid less than minimum wage because you're fifteen, you don't feel a real sense of responsibility, she thought.

Tanya drew the mop out of the water, and the gray water splashed on the floor. It spread, like paint hit against a canvas by a brush. Tanya started to move the mop back and forth, thinking. She had been sent to the small amusement park in Cheyenne, Wyoming. She had been working in the concession stand for about a month. Her parents, or more specifically her mother, for she rarely saw her father, thought she was getting too far out of hand.

She remembered being over at her friend's house. They had been in his bedroom, playing a video game. She wasn't supposed to be there. He was a bad boy. Tanya was supposed to avoid people like that. She wasn't sure what made him so bad. Probably the fact he had sex, and it was rumored to be frequent, but just because he was doing it didn't mean she would, and Tanya would never have sex with him. He always wore a leather jacket, and pretended to be tougher than what he was.

Tanya wasn't thinking about sex, she was just playing her game. That was before there was a knock on the door.

Her friend got up, and returned. "It's your mother, Tanya. She wants to see you."

She stood up, and put on her coat. Tanya walked to the front door, and said nothing. Her mother didn't say anything either. She waited until they got home. Her mother got down and kneeled like she always did every Sunday at church. "Please tell me you didn't sleep with him. I know you were in his bedroom, and you had to be doing something. Girls don't just sit in a boy's bedroom."

Tanya looked down at her kneeling mother. Her brown curls obscured her vision, so she brushed them back, to see her mother's hands, still clasped, over-dyed sorority blonde hair swept back in a ridiculous wave. Style of California.

All Tanya said was, "What?"

"Please tell me you didn't sleep with him."

Tanya continued staring. She knew her mother had saved it for marriage, and that seemed to be her goal for Tanya: Young girl sexless for the Lord! Tanya had broached the subject once, asking her mother why, if she didn't plan to marry until she was thirty, she could really be expected to save it. Her mother had replied that Tanya would have to get married sooner if she discovered she needed to have it that bad. Love was more than sex. Tanya had rolled her eyes then, as she did now.

Her mother rose from her position and stood in front of the petite girl. "Do you think this is some kind of joke?"

That's your problem, Tanya. You never think of anyone but yourself. You're selfish. You're not even thinking of my feelings."

The mother turned her back on her daughter, like she was done, but changed her mind. She returned to her preaching stance. "Lack of morality is what is wrong with the coast, and America. Your dad is gone on a business trip, trying to earn a living, and you're running around. It's your type of behavior that leads to affairs, then to sex, and pregnancy follows it all up. I will not have that in this house. You have to respect me and my rules."

"I would if you weren't such a control freak. Let it go, mother." Her mother's eyes narrowed, and she turned around.

Tanya didn't know it then, but she heard about the conversation later. Tanya's mother had gone into the next room to call her sister, Tanya's aunt, in Wyoming. The west coast had corrupted her daughter's morals. Could she ship her back to the good old midwest for a summer? It was time she stopped putting her mother through this, and time she started caring about someone besides herself, Tanya's mother had pleaded to the aunt.

Tanya was knocked from her thoughts when Tiny, the owner, and boss, entered the concession stand. She was a short woman with short blonde hair. She looked to Tanya like a human Tweety Bird. The screen door slammed shut

behind her. Tanya knew she was standing still, thinking, and inactivity probably wouldn't make Tiny happy. She had been leaning against the mop. Tiny looked over the four tables at Tanya, who gave a feeble smile. Tanya resumed her mopping as the boss went around the corner and back into the office.

Tanya finished mopping, and moved the bucket in-between the tables. She kept the mop in the bucket, and used it like a rudder to steer a ship. The bucket bounced off of objects, and she would use the mop handle to try to keep it as clear of the tables as she could. It was hard. One wheel didn't turn. She finally steered it around to the wall behind the counter. In the back area, the supplies were kept in Tiny's office. Next to the door of the office was the big sink.

Tanya lifted the bucket, and started to dump the water. She thought she had done a good job. She was only fifteen, and had never mopped before. Her mother had a house cleaner.

Tiny's head peeped out of the office. "You mopped with that water? It's filthy."

Tanya thought of saying something back. Something like what did she expect hiring under-age under-paid labor? Instead, she said nothing.

"You know, Tanya, I did this as a favor to your aunt. You certainly aren't my best worker. You're lazy." Tanya

continued to look at the water as the last of it gurgled down the drain.

"I'm sorry, I'll do better next time."

"Why don't you re-do the floors." Tiny's head went back into her cage. Tanya turned on the warm water and rinsed the bucket. She felt she was going to cry. No one at work talked to her because she was so young. They talked about their children and their affairs. Tanya just stood there and said nothing. She had never even had a boyfriend. She couldn't relate to their conversations. The water splashed up in her face. She couldn't cry, couldn't. She added the soap.

She biked home at ten o'clock that night. No one had called, worried she might be running late. She walked into her aunt and uncle's house. He was asleep on the couch. The aunt looked up from her paper. "How was work, Tanya?"

"Fine. Is there anything to eat?"

"Yes, we saved you a Big Mac. It's in the fridge." Her aunt's head turned down to look at the paper again. Tanya walked out of the living room and into the kitchen. She grabbed the burger from the refrigerator and sat down at the kitchen table and fiddled with a place mat. The clock ticked loudly on the wall. Tanya hoped her mom, or somebody, would call, but the phone didn't ring. She could hear herself chew.

couldn't escape once you took your place back there. Tanya headed for the counter.

She started flipping switches. Lights turned on, and Tanya could hear the electricity going through the wires. She placed the ice cream scoops into warm water, her mind on the night before. The more she thought about it, the more angry it made her. Tiny hired people who didn't show up to work at all. She had employees who stole money. Compared to these, Tanya didn't deserve to be yelled at. The fact that she showed up on time and didn't steal earned her the right to be called employee of the month.

She placed a couple of hot-dogs on the rotator. Juices began to drip and sizzle. Tanya wiped down the counters, looking out the windows that topped the fake wood. There wasn't much to see. A couple of rides on the left, and trees. The place itself was surrounded by a forest, the exception being the dirt parking lot out in front.

Tanya glanced up at the clock. She would have to open up soon. She opened a can of cheese and dumped it into the nacho warmer. The cheese looked like a round yellow brick. Tanya had three doors to unlock. She started on the left and worked over to the right. When she got to the last door, there was a person standing there, waiting. Tanya didn't want to look at him directly. She concentrated on the lock.

She opened the door, and turned her back on the man.

Tanya slid behind the counter, her place of authority. The man came in and stood in front of the counter. He gave her a small smile. Three of his front teeth were missing. He had long, stringy brown hair, and he looked as if he had spent his night sleeping in the woods. He reached up and scratched himself on the chest, right where his black t-shirt had ripped. He gave another small smile. "I'll have a strawberry shake."

Tanya scooped the ice cream into the metal cup, then carefully added the milk. You had to be careful how much you added. If you added too much, milk went flying everywhere. Tanya had learned the hard way, and it had taken her forever to clean it up, all the while with Tiny making sure to tell her if she missed a spot. She placed the cup underneath one of the metal beaters, and after the ice cream softened, she poured it into a Styrofoam cup.

"That will be two-thirteen." The man shuffled through his pocket, and took out some change. He scattered it on the counter.

His lips moved as he counted the money. He looked up. "I'm fifty-two cents short. I can come back with the rest of the money."

Tanya merely shrugged her shoulders. "Just give me what you have, and don't worry about it."

"No, I will be back with the rest of the money." He slid his change across the counter, and she handed him the

shake. Tanya dropped the money into the register. Tiny didn't require her employees ring things up. Her register didn't have that kind of technology, just an "open" button. The man slowly sucked his shake up through the straw. He stopped at the door. "I will be back with the rest."

"Don't worry about it." She shrugged her shoulders again, as if to tell him to let the whole thing go. He walked out of the place, the door slamming behind him. Tanya watched him leave, and began to hang up the small bags of potato chips on the wire rack. One on top of another. She wanted to make sure none of them were hidden, or ignored.

Involvement

Lisa was stirring the chocolate chips into the dough when the phone rang. She briefly glanced down at the dough, and headed for the phone. She lifted it out of the cradle and said, "hello."

"Hi Lisa. It's me, Kelly. I know it's been awhile."

"Ooooh, Kelly." Lisa wasn't sure what to say, and knew her voice sounded ridiculous, like she was praising a baby for being good. How long had it been? "How are you?"

"Fine, look, I was wondering if we could meet for lunch tomorrow at Lazlo's. How does noon sound?"

"Just great, Kelly. I'll see you then." She put the phone back into the cradle. She didn't want to see Kelly. Why had Kelly even called? When she and Larry had divorced, that was it. Kelly had been thrown out of Olympus, out of the pantheon of the married friends. She no doubt had a single life to lead, so why on earth did she want to see Lisa?

Lisa glanced back at the big yellow bowl that held the cookie dough. Her husband and children loved fresh baked cookies. She should get them done before they returned home. Lisa looked down the hall at the bathroom. The lights were off, but there was still plenty of sunlight. Lisa could vaguely see her reflection.

She started walking down the hall, her feet gently touching the plush, peach carpet. Why didn't her husband

get a Caller I.D.? That would've solved the whole Kelly issue.

The truth was, she hadn't even liked Kelly when they had all been a group together. Kelly was always so, well, Lisa didn't know. The truth was, the divorce seemed like such a surprise. Kelly and Larry seemed to have everything.

She walked past pictures of her family life and turned on the bathroom light. She continued looking at her reflection. Black curly hair, and an apron declaring "kiss the cook." It was a birthday gift from her children. The apron hid some of her slightly bowled figure, and she was grateful for that. Lisa wasn't wearing any make-up, but she would, for tomorrow. She would look nice, and proudly display that married life agreed with her.

It was another Super Bowl party, and the three couples were there. Larry and Kelly, George and Lisa, and Nate and Heather. They were in Lisa's living room. The over-sized windows showed the outside acre, and snow on the pine trees and ground. The kids were over at relatives.

"C'mon Broncos, you can do it!" Nate exclaimed. He was bent over in a chair, hands clenched, and his receding blond hair stuck to his skull. He looked like some maniac car driver clutching the wheel. He always threw himself into any game, like he was a member on the team, and could make the difference between winning and losing.

"Yeah, thirty-three points down, and he thinks they can come back," George said in a sarcastic tone. Larry let out a loud, booming laugh. Kelly was sitting on the couch next to him, and turned to look at him.

"Hey, hon," Larry asked, but not really looking at anyone in particular, "get me another beer, will you?"

"Don't you think you've had enough?" Kelly was still looking at him, concerned.

Heather and Lisa were standing off to the side of the group, not paying much attention. They had been talking about some accomplishment their children had achieved.

"Aww, c'mon Kel, it's the Super Bowl."

"Don't worry, Kelly, I can get the beer. I understand how you just want to sit, the hours that you work and all." Lisa turned and walked into the kitchen. She heard a cheer from behind her. Someone must have scored a touchdown. She heard someone walking behind her, and turned around. George, her husband, had entered the kitchen.

"What are you doing here, sweetie? I can get Larry the beer."

"Oh, it's not that. He knocked an ash tray onto the floor." He reached for a dish-towel on the counter.

"No George, use a rag, not a towel."

"Rag, towel, who the hell cares?" He threw the dish-towel back on the counter.

Lisa opened the refrigerator and grabbed a beer.

Samuel Adams, the group's beer of choice. She shut the door quietly, and it made a slight sticking sound. She saw George had finally grabbed a rag. He turned to her and asked, "Kelly looks nice tonight, don't you think? That tailored suit looks real nice, and I like how she cut her hair."

George stood there, slouching, with his thick black hair and non-receding hairline. He still looked good for his age, had hardly aged since the marriage. He wanted her opinion.

"I think the skirt is a little too short. She kind of looks like a tramp."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I think it looks kind of nice. She's still young, and has kept her figure. Most women lose it after marriage." He walked out of the kitchen. If Lisa had been a different type of person, she would've asked what he meant by that. What exactly was nice? Was he saying that she didn't keep her figure? She wasn't that type of person, she thought, but she wished she was.

Lisa walked into Lazlo's and looked around. The restaurant wasn't very crowded, which was rare. "Can I help you?" the perky girl behind the podium asked. Lisa nodded, letting her know she was here to meet a friend. The girl led her up the stairs to one of the restaurant's rooms. She

saw Kelly sitting at a booth, and waved at her. Lisa smiled in return.

She slid into the over-sized blue booth. Kelly did look good, and that fact didn't make Lisa feel any better. She was growing out her blond curly hair, it stopped at her shoulders, and she was wearing red. She looked pretty in red. Lisa felt the urge to suck in her gut, but decided against it. That was why she was wearing the large brown jacket. She had thought it went well with her long black hair and light complexion, but now was having second thoughts. She should've worn white.

"How have you been, Lisa?"

"Good, good, and you? We haven't seen you since you and Larry, well, you know."

"Divorced, it's okay to say that word." The waiter came by and asked for a drink order. Lisa felt a moment of relief. She wanted an ice tea, and Kelly ordered the same.

"You're probably wondering why I called." Kelly was fiddling with a blue cloth napkin on the table. The silverware jingled inside of it, like a wind chime.

"Oh, I just thought you wanted old friends to catch up. It has been awhile." Lisa gave a big smile, but knew it would show her developing double chin. She shut her mouth quickly, teeth clicking together.

Kelly looked a little surprised, then upset. She stopped fiddling with the napkin. Lisa had no idea what was

going on, but she wanted to be at home. She hadn't told George about the meeting, but now she wished she had. He should've come with her. He could explain Kelly's odd mood-swings.

"How's Larry? He will not talk to me at all." Lisa could hear the concern in Kelly's voice, and wondered what it was doing there. She had left him, after all.

"The truth is, I don't know. After the divorce we stopped hanging out as a threesome. Nate, Larry, and George go out together. You know how Nate loves sports. They go to trendy sport bars all of the time. I haven't seen him in a long time."

"Do you still see Heather?" The waiter came by and dropped off the teas. He asked if they were ready to order. Lisa said she was. She was avoiding the question. The truth of the matter was, it was the guys that always liked each other. The three of them were a nucleus. The women in their lives were protons and electrons. Attract, repel, hell it didn't matter to the men. Lisa never really had liked Heather. She smoked too much, and she had koosh-ball hair. Her bangs went out half a foot. What kind of look was that?

It was some other game that brought them all together. Lisa didn't know or care. She knew George had invited them all over without giving her enough warning. The house was a

pit. Every time she picked up one of George's socks, she stared at him. She should've told him she was upset, but decided against it. He would see her troubled expression, and ask. The problem was, he didn't. He changed his clothes in silence.

The doorbell rang, and George answered it. She heard the joy of exclamation that came with greetings. She walked out and saw George hugging Kelly. Lisa turned around, after all, she was the hostess. She had chips to get.

Could George be having an affair? They had looked happy when they hugged. No, she had to think of something else. Kelly and George may have even looked horny, but Lisa had forgotten what the facial expressions were. It had been awhile. No. think about... Chips. Chips with ridges, chips without. Everyone loved chips.

Lisa grabbed the bowl from the kitchen and walked out into the living room. "Chips anyone?"

No one heard her, they were watching the game, and talking among themselves. George was talking to Kelly, and Lisa gripped the bowl. Heather asked for an ash tray. Lisa set the chips down on an end table, and retraced her path back into the kitchen.

Lisa had to keep her mind on the ash tray. Which ash tray? How about the one from Hawaii? No, too tacky. How about the one proclaiming "BEER" in big bright letters? No, even worse. She decided on one her children had made for

her in some pottery class. Lisa walked over and handed it to Heather.

Lisa went back through the wide arched door and into the kitchen. She needed to breathe. The idea of George having an affair came up again, and she decided that she craved a beer. So maybe she wasn't as pretty as Kelly. No stop, she thought. She concentrated on the bottle. Dark brown, like a, well, a tree, that was it. No, trees weren't smooth and wet, like this bottle, this bottle was like-

"Lisa, can we talk?" She turned around and saw Larry, Kelly's husband, standing behind her. His black hair was uncombed. He seemed to be wobbling a bit. Could he be drunk?

It suddenly hit Lisa he drank a lot. How come she never noticed before? She assumed he was always celebrating. She handed him the beer she had been holding, and he placed it on the counter. Lisa reached into the refrigerator and grabbed another one for herself.

She twisted the lid off. "You know, Lisa, is something wrong? Did I do something wrong with Kelly? She always seems so mad. Has she told you anything?" He was leaning against the counter, his head in his hands.

He do something wrong? No, couldn't be. Kelly was being cold to Larry. Maybe because she had another man? She grimaced. Was Larry going to cry? No, she wouldn't know what to do.

"Kelly says I drink too much. What do you think, Lisa?" His eyes looked up at her from the counter, from between his hands, his fingers looking like the bars of a prison.

Lisa knew she had a choice. She could tell him the truth, or lie to make him feel better. It was like high school. She could be the teacher everyone liked because they didn't have to learn anything, or do any homework. The teacher the children joked with, who taught them nothing. Or she could be the teacher that made the students work, made the students learn. She could be the teacher the students came back to thank, while they walked by the teacher that had once been their friend. Sometimes, the truth hurt, and sometimes, you had to be a better friend, no matter what the consequences.

"No, you don't drink too much. You're just trying to have fun."

"That's what I told Kelly." He went on, but Lisa didn't hear him. She looked over Larry to see Kelly standing there, looking at her. She was leaning against the wide doorway, her arms crossed. Kelly looked at Larry's back. Lisa didn't know what she was thinking, but she had an idea. If Larry's friends wouldn't stop him, what chance did Kelly have? His drinking would ruin other parties, other friendships, but no one would stop him. He would eventually destroy himself. Would he take Kelly down with

him? Lisa found out the next morning, when Larry called to say she had left.

Lisa placed her order and thanked the waiter. She hoped Kelly wasn't here to tell her about the affair. If she did tell her, she would ignore it, pretend she didn't hear it. Kelly wasn't saying anything.

"You would never leave your husband, would you?" Kelly asked. Lisa looked up from her tea, a little startled. She placed the drink back on the table.

"No, no, I don't think I would." She started drawing patterns in the sweat of her tea glass.

"You got lucky. George is a good man."

"Yes, yes, he is." She was aware she was stuttering her answers, and needed to stop. She thought Kelly would go one but she was silent.

A few minutes passed, before Kelly finally asked, "How come no one said anything? How can you let Larry destroy himself? You said you're his friend."

"I didn't realize his drinking was that bad," Lisa whispered. She knew how weak it sounded. Only a self-involved idiot wouldn't notice, but she didn't. Her mind had been on other things.

"Lisa, I could forgive a man for not knowing. Men stand by and let men destroy themselves. They don't stop affairs or addictions, but women have to try. I tried for

so long, and you should've known. He was at your house all the time. I needed a little help, just a little help." She wadded the table cloth in-between her fingers, and looked down at her lap. The waiter came by and dropped off their food. Lisa smiled at him, thankful for the interruption.

"Boy, your salad looks good, Kelly." Kelly was visibly shaking by now. The table vibrated. Lisa didn't know what to say. So, she repeated herself. "That salad sure does look tasty."

Kelly looked up at Lisa, and released the table cloth. Her eyes were bright, on the verge of tears, but they couldn't hide her contempt.

"Yes, I suppose it is." Kelly picked up a fork, but she only ate a couple of bites. Lisa ate her food in silence. She didn't want to think of the conversation, so she remembered the family trip to Hawaii. Tropical beaches, the hot sand burned your bare feet.

They both said their good-byes, and Lisa told Kelly they had to do it again sometime, not meaning a word she said. Kelly just walked off. Lisa watched her march down the side-walk. She knew she wouldn't hear from her again, and that made her happy. She watched Kelly until she hit a crowd, and disappeared. She had become one of the thousands of unknown people.

Lisa turned and walked toward her car. So, George didn't have an affair. She slid into the Lincoln, liking the way the leather seat cradled her expanded bottom. She took out her checkbook, and looked at the heading. Mr. and Mrs. George Higgins. She muttered it outloud. She used to like the way it sounded, but now her voice lacked emotion.

Lisa closed her eyes and leaned back, smelling the car's interior. What would she do if she wasn't married, if she wasn't a parent and George Higgins walked out of her life? Would someone, Nate perhaps, or maybe even Larry, stop George if he did have an affair? Would someone stop George from ruining his life? An even worse thought came to her mind. Who would stop her if she started to destroy her life? Would anyone even notice?

She took another deep breath through her nose, enjoying the sensation. It smelled good, like leather, and she pictured the leather shop she went into at St. Thomas. There were leather purses everywhere, like a jungle, and they were cheap. She had spent way too much money, even at the shop's bargain prices. George didn't notice, or even comment. He had remained at the beach, keeping his eye on the children, watching them bob up and down with the waves.

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