

What You Can Imagine

by

Julie Elizabeth Albright

Honors Project

Project Advisor: Sharon Dilworth, Assistant Professor of English

**Presented to the Department of English and the Dean's Office
of the college of Humanities and Social Sciences in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the H&SS Senior Honors
Program**

**Carnegie Mellon University
College of Humanities and Social Sciences**

4 May 1992

Table of Contents

Taking Care of Cynthia	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	1
Holding My Son	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	13
The English Lesson	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	17
The Lizard Wears A Hat	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	29
Custom Clothes	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	32
Someone Should Tell Me	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	40
Uncle Budell	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	43
A Single Blessing	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	58
What I Thought About Snookie	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	61
Previous Baby	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	71
Mema	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	76
Mental Freedom	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	86
Haiti Sleep-an essay	≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈ ≈	89

Taking Care of Cynthia

In March, Cynthia decides to join a weight loss group. She is sixty-eight years old, and gaining weight rapidly. She calls her daughter to tell her the news. She says, "I am joining a weight loss group. I cannot do it myself anymore."

Her thin daughter Lucy says, "I don't think you need to lose weight."

Cynthia says, "Of course you don't. Thin people always say that to fat people because they don't know what else to say, since they're feeling guilty for being thin. What do you think of that?"

Lucy says, "I'm coming over."

The mother and daughter have always lived only a few miles apart. They live in a town very far north, and they rarely leave. They exchange recipes and go grocery shopping together. The mother shops for one and the daughter shops for five. But Lucy leaves microwave dinners for her own family on Sundays, because this is the night she and her mother watch *Murder, She Wrote*. Cynthia has always been a fan of Angela Lansbury. Angela Lansbury is not thin.

Lucy drives over in her station wagon, which has room enough for three kids and groceries. She pulls into her mother's driveway and remarks that the men forgot to trim one side of the hedges. She will make a note of it. When she walks in the side door, the one that everybody uses, she finds her mother sitting at the kitchen bar eating an oatmeal cream pie. Lucy climbs onto one of the stools at the bar and points to the pie.

"What's this?" she asks. "A final treat before you take the plunge?"

"You guessed it," says Cynthia. "My last supper. Ha."

Lucy frowns. She says, "I think you're on the wrong track. In fact, I'm just going to come right out and say it. You are sixty-eight years old and you deserve to eat what you want, and do what you want."

Cynthia fidgets with the salt and pepper shakers. "Why don't you feel that way about anything else? You won't leave me alone when it comes to anything else. Then she

says, "Anyway, I deserve to be thin. Angela Lansbury can be heavy because she has her own t.v. show. *I* need to be thin. You can't talk me out of it."

The next Monday morning at ten o'clock, Cynthia is sitting in class. She is surrounded by large people who all carry identification booklets. She has received a booklet as well; it will be the record of how many pounds and inches she has lost. She picks a chair up front so she can hear everything that Linda, the group leader, has to say. Before the meeting starts, she turns to see the people in the room. Who is fat these days? Cynthia imagines why each is there: mothers with infant babies are still recovering from the pregnancy weight. Young girls in college sweatshirts are hoping to lose ten pounds before the dance. A few men have been coerced by their wives, to "get rid of that beer belly". Middle aged women need something to rejuvenate their lives. Cynthia does not see anyone old so far.

The meeting starts and Linda welcomes everyone. She shows a 'before' picture, from when she was eighty-seven pounds heavier. Goodness, thinks Cynthia. If I lost eighty-seven pounds I'd be gone.

This motivates her already, and she claps with the crowd when the girl at the scale reports the total weight loss for the week.

"And our new members will help make that total even higher next week, right?" says Linda.

"Yes, yes," chants the group, and Cynthia jolts. She doesn't have the cheers down yet.

Linda says, "Today we are going to talk about vegetables, the unappreciated snack. On our program, vegetables are unlimited. You can eat them twenty-four hours a day if you want. Do we like the word 'unlimited'? Raise your hand if you like that word!"

Cynthia raises her arm high and sits forward in her chair. She likes that word very much.

The next evening, Lucy is sitting at the kitchen bar while Cynthia prepares dinner.

“Don’t you need me to do anything?” she asks her mother. “I’m not used to just sitting here.”

“No sir--it’s easy,” says Cynthia. “I just write down what I’m going to eat, measure out the food, and eat it. I’m going to be a stick figure before you know it.”

“Nobody likes stick-figures mom. My kids want a grandmother who’s-- I don’t know--soft? The plush kind. They like you that way. Don’t you think this is going overboard? I don’t even think there’s enough food on this program.”

Cynthia is angry. She opens her pasta box, then puts the noodles on the scale. She cannot read the tiny numbers on the scale provided by her group. She sets it down in front of Lucy and says, “Read that please. And no further comments.”

Lucy looks up at her mother’s face. Cynthia is sucking the loose flesh under her lips up against her teeth, and she can’t seem to keep her eyes still.

“Two ounces,” Lucy says. “And by the way, I called the men about your yard. They’ll fix the hedges next time. You should watch them more carefully or they’ll try to get away with stuff like that.”

Cynthia turns to throw her noodles in the boiling water, and Lucy slams the side door on her way out.

At her meeting the second week, Cynthia learns about discouragers, the people who don’t help you to lose weight. She even contributes for the first time in class, saying that her own daughter is a discourager.

“She thinks grandmothers should be fat,” she says. “She’s always trying to tell me what to do.”

“You can show her,” says Linda, shaking a fist in the air.

“Yes,” chants Cynthia with the class.

Afterwards she is putting on a rain hat when she feels a tap on her shoulder. A young girl is trying to get her attention. Cynthia is not sure she wants to talk. After all, she didn’t come to the group to make friends.

“What,” she says to the girl, who is wearing a grey college sweatshirt.

The *Loyola* stamped across the girl's chest heaves up and down with each of her strained breaths, and she coughs loudly before she says what she came to say. When she finally speaks, she spits out her words as if she is under a time limit.

"Well, I just wanted to say that I have a thin grandmother. I mean she is *really* perfectly thin." She looks away, pushing up the sleeves of her sweatshirt, and Cynthia becomes impatient. She wishes the girl would just go ahead and wish her good luck on the program. Cynthia is very hungry and wants to go home.

She looks at the girl and says, "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," says the girl. "And it's kind of weird."

After five weeks, Cynthia has lost only four pounds. She is having trouble with the program. She should be losing weight much faster, but she hasn't completely followed her meal plans. She finds it difficult to resist eating peanuts while Phil Donohue is on, and when she goes to the grocery store the frozen dessert items seem to make their way into her cart. She has quit watching *Murder, She Wrote* with Lucy, because she can't stand to watch without a snack but she can't stand to watch *with* a snack, listening to Lucy chuckle.

"See mom?" she had said the first time she caught Cynthia eating something bad. "Why do torture yourself and sneak around like a kid? Just eat the oatmeal creme pies or nachos or whatever it is you want to eat. Nobody cares, don't you see?"

Cynthia says less and less to her daughter. She hates this feeling of losing.

Two weeks later, Cynthia makes a breakthrough and loses five pounds. It is hell, but she takes a Polaroid of her naked body and tapes it to the refrigerator. It doesn't matter that it's there, because the only visitor is Lucy, who has stayed scarce for a while anyway. And it isn't even her whole body, because Cynthia can't get the angle right by herself, but it is enough to stop her from opening the refrigerator too many times.

At the meeting the girl at the scale says "Wow", and Linda says "Way to go, kiddo." Cynthia wants to glare at the young girl in the college sweatshirt, but the girl has stopped coming regularly. Instead Cynthia stands up in class to report her total loss of ten

pounds. She doesn't get as much applause as the people who've lost in the twenty, thirty, forty pound range, but it's enough.

She calls Lucy that night to tell her. Lucy says, "That's great, mom," but the enthusiasm seems vague. Cynthia doesn't really notice, since she's looking in the mirror while she talks on the phone.

"I look fantastic," she tells her daughter. "I told you I could do it."

"I really am happy for you. Could you also do one other thing? When the yard men come tomorrow, make sure they don't leave anything out. You keep forgetting to tell them about the hedges. Okay?"

"Got it," says Cynthia, and she hangs up the phone, looking at her shapely arm.

When the yardmen come the next day, Cynthia makes sure to tell them about the hedges. She also mentions that she's started a new lifestyle, and says how young she feels. The head yard man hands her a bill and tells her he'll be in touch.

Reeling in the newness of her successful battle, Cynthia decides to reward herself. In class Linda always talks about giving yourself a non-food treat when you reach a goal. Ten pounds is a lot, Cynthia thinks. She deserves a treat, and she decides to go on vacation. She even invites Lucy, but they both know she couldn't leave home for two whole weeks. Lucy is nervous about her mother being alone for so long, and she drives her to the airport and makes sure her luggage is checked to New Orleans. Standing at the check-in counter, she wants to know why her mother chose this place.

"There are wild and crazy people in New Orleans." Cynthia says this like it's 'New Orleans'." And she adds, "It's warm, too, in the south."

"What will you do?" asks Lucy. "I don't want you to get lonely."

"Heavens, no," says her mother. "The first week I'll be in the French Quarter Holiday Inn living it up, then I'm going out to see your aunt Mona Ann."

Aunt Mona Ann is the sister of Cynthia's late husband. Neither she or Lucy have seen this aunt since the funeral, which was twelve years ago.

Lucy smiles. "I forgot about Mona Ann. That should be an experience." She

hands her mother a sandwich bag filled with mints and gum and TicTacs. "For your trip," she says. "To keep you from getting hungry."

Cynthia does not know how to take this, so she shoves the bag into her purse and kisses her daughter on the cheek, and they walk to the gate.

And then Lucy says, "I hope you can just have fun on this trip and do the things you want to do?" She makes it a question, and they both know she's talking about food.

"Look," Cynthia says, "You worry about you, and I'll worry about me. I'll do the things I want to do. I'll have a good time without overeating. I have beat this thing, Lucy, I have let the real me come out." Cynthia says this and believes it and raises her fist as she boards the plane.

Then the first week's eating extravaganza. At first it is easy: I am thin, Cynthia says to herself. I look better than everyone else and I feel young and vivacious. I can look at the dessert menu and not even be tempted.

She spends most of her time staring at people. It's not like at home, where most of the action is on t.v. In New Orleans she can watch couples and bands and mimes and the crazies she came to see. She sometimes thinks about Lucy, and wishes she had been nicer before leaving town. She is tired each night, and a little tense from the heat. Each day she means to buy a pair of sunglasses, but she forgets when she steps out into the exciting city. She begins to drink less water and more sodas, sure that she needs the sugar for energy.

And she is still good at talking to herself: I look like everyone else. And I think I will eat like they do. I will have an ice cream cone once because I feel like it, I will eat fries three times in a restaurant because they taste good, and I will have the dish that no one can leave town without trying. So she does these things and relishes them as she hasn't before. Walking around town to sightsee each day balances out the things she has eaten. She is a weight-loss pro.

At the end of week one, it is time to go to Mona Ann's house. The sister-in-law picks her up at the hotel in the same van she drove twelve years ago. Mona Ann is set in her ways and has lived alone for even longer than Cynthia. For example, she still does not

let anyone walk inside her house with shoes on. Although she is also almost seventy, she looks ten years younger. She lives in a suburb outside of New Orleans, in a ranch house that has much too much room. When they drive up to the house and Mona Ann asks if Cynthia likes it, all Cynthia can say is, "It's flat."

When they get inside the flat house, into the air-conditioned staleness, Mona Ann says, "Well. Let me take a look at you. Haven't seen you since the funeral, and you sure do look older." This relative has always been quite frank.

"You don't look so young yourself," says Cynthia, but she quickly adds, "You sure have stayed skinny, though."

They go to bed early, because Mona Ann does not like to watch late night television. The first night Cynthia lies in the dark thinking about Johnny Carson and what will be for breakfast. This meal comes early in Mona Ann's house, and Cynthia can barely keep her eyes open over her morning cup of coffee. After a few days she gets used to the pace, and the two women start to enjoy each other's company. They go to the movies one day, and work on a jigsaw puzzle of the United States for one whole afternoon. Mona Ann can cook up a storm, and she always has a green dish full of candy right out on the counter. Cynthia loves to hear the sound of Mona Ann's mixer, which whirls with a low purr and tells her that good food is on the way. But in the house there is also an exercise bike, so Cynthia tries to ride it a little bit every day. The whirl of the bike wheels is not as nice as the whirl of the mixer. On day four, Cynthia decides to reveal that she's on a diet plan.

They are both sitting on the couch, waiting to see the weather on the news. This is important, because tomorrow they will either go to the mall or go on a riverboat cruise. As soon as the weatherman says that it will be partly cloudy, Cynthia blurts out, "I'm in a weight loss group."

Mona Ann says, "I never would have guessed, the way you've eaten this week." Then she laughs her hollering kind of laugh which ends in a loud sigh. "Look, honey, do you like being on this program?"

"Sure," says Cynthia. "It keeps me in control. I don't have to have Lucy over all the time to help me cook. You know, I just eat salad and thin people things. And Lucy

doesn't need the bother."

"Ah hah," says Mona Ann. "I knew it. See, it doesn't matter about the weight. You need to do this to maintain your independence, control over your own life."

Cynthia stares at her sister-in-law. She's not sure exactly what Mona Ann means, but she nods her head slowly and says, "Mmm."

Now Mona Ann is standing and blocking the t.v. set. "You see? All kids want to do is take over your life. They think once you get to be a certain age they have to cook for you, help you shop, take you places. I told my girls to butt out a long time ago. They know who's still the boss. I bet all you want Lucy to do is leave you alone. Am I right?" She does not wait for a response, which is okay because Cynthia is still thinking it over.

Mona Ann decides that the two of them will go out for the salad bar at Morrison's.

"I am with you on this, Cynthia," she says as she clenches her fists. "Don't get me wrong, we both love our children," she says, dragging the 'love' out slowly. "But you can count on me. Just because you're an older woman does not mean you're an invalid. I understand that you need your freedom."

At the cafeteria, Cynthia is thinking about her freedom and wondering if it means she and Lucy will never watch Sunday night t.v.

She takes a cab home from the airport because Lucy is out with the kids. She doesn't feel like giving them their souvenirs right away anyway. They always pull at her sleeves and argue about who gets what. At home, she remembers Mona Ann's parting advice. "Be yourself" was what she had said, and Cynthia had laughed. "Who else could I be?" she asked. They had hugged and cried a little and Mona Ann had driven off in her van before her sister-in-law's flight home had even boarded. Smiling and hearing the sounds of New Orleans jazz mixed with Mona Ann's mixer, Cynthia falls asleep on the couch at home, just before the eleven o'clock news.

In the morning, she looks at her thighs to see how big they really are. Something seems to be hanging around her body like a live innertube. In the bathroom it hangs under

her arms and giggles while she brushes her teeth, flesh jiggling back and forth with each cavity fighting stroke. She feels it under her neck and thinks she ought to wear a turtleneck. This is a fine thing to do since she is back in cold weather.

At the breakfast table she cries. She taps her nails against her coffee mug and cries because she wants to have waffles with syrup. She cannot; what she must do is get back on the scale. This brings even more tears, making her feel old and pathetic. She remembers she needs to get her hair done. She hopes that Lucy made her an appointment. She wonders if she wants to see Lucy. She thinks about Mona Ann and her daughters who don't interfere.

Lucy comes by that day. Cynthia is quick to tell her all about the trip, centering her remarks on the dishes she sampled. Monday was shrimp creole, Tuesday was beignets, Wednesday was the all-you-can eat buffet, on and on. She tells her a little about Aunt Mona Ann, but she does not mention the aunt's theories about mothers and children. She feels uncomfortable looking at Lucy. Then she throws in the real punch, saying, "I only gained a pound and a quarter."

"I'm not surprised. Are you surprised?" Lucy asks. "I knew you could do it."

"Well, let me be honest and say that I expected more of a gain. You know how easily I put on the pounds, and I really felt enormous when I came home."

"See there?" says Lucy. "It's all in your head. It's not how much you weigh, it's how you feel about your body."

Cynthia says, "You sound like a self-help book. But thanks." She turns on the t.v. because it is time for her favorite info-mercial. She watches the hair products one on channel seventy-seven.

"This is just another great reason to have cable," she says to Lucy. "Who would have ever thought they'd have half hour commercials that would be entertaining? Have you renewed my subscription?"

Lucy says yes and that it's time for her to pick the kids up, and she leaves Cynthia watching hair care.

None of this is really true, though, because Cynthia does not feel good about her body. It *does* matter how much you weigh, because when the numbers go up the pants get tighter. And after her vacation, the numbers go up even more. She and Mona Ann write each other once, but neither of them is a great correspondent, so it stops after a few weeks. Cynthia is grateful because she does not want to tell Mona Ann about her gain. She wonders if maybe she is losing her independence, but then she thinks that all she is really doing is gaining fat.

Her original relief turns into anger as she puts on every pound she had lost. Somewhere she stops writing down her meals and measuring her portions, still so overwhelmed at what she thought was a successful trip. But the weight seems to know this, and it creeps back on when she's at home on her couch, watching t.v., eating Oatmeal Creme Pies. Along with it comes Lucy, who seems to be over at the house more often. She has even started calling Cynthia every day again, wanting her to come over for dinner and whatever else.

"You're never safe," Cynthia tells Lucy the next time they visit. This time Cynthia is over at Lucy's house, which she finds quite messy and smelling mildly of cat urine. It is a lovely house, but it is strewn with toys from the kids, and Lucy's husband's papers. The cat walks by and brushes Cynthia's leg, and Cynthia wishes this place were taken care of like her own.

"You need to get a cleaning service, or something," she tells her daughter.

Lucy is stacking puzzles in the corner. "No way. I like things the way they are. Kids are messy, what do you want? Yours is the house we keep nice."

Cynthia thinks about Mona Ann, who can take fine care of herself and her things. Suddenly she is angry at Lucy, who does not butt out like Mona Ann's children. Maybe Lucy doesn't know who's the boss.

"Look, Lucy. I never asked you to do anything for me. Just because I'm older than you doesn't mean you have to do everything for me. I know that you enjoy doing things for me, so I let you." She peers up to see Lucy's face. Lucy will not turn around, but she has stopped what she's doing.

"I'm talking to you, Lucy." There is no answer. "Mona Ann was right. You kids are all alike." Cynthia starts to put on her coat, which now has a trace of cat hair on it.

"What are you talking about, mom?" says Lucy in a voice which is obviously one control away from breaking. "What was Mona Ann right about?"

"She understood how I need my independence. My freedom. I can eat the way I want to and look good, and I don't need you to help me do it."

"Oh yeah?" says Lucy. Now she is facing her mother and waving a puzzle piece in her hand. "Oh yeah?" she says again, seeming to be stuck on that one phrase. "Well, let me tell you something, *Cynthia*. I take care of--no, I help you--for two reasons. Number one, I love you and I want you to be happy. Number two," now Lucy is yelling and she has flung the puzzle piece to the floor, "you are sixty-eight years old!"

"See there," Cynthia says smugly. "You just think I should be a fat old grandmother."

Lucy puts her hand to her forehead like the sun is in her eyes. "No, mom," she sighs. "I think you are just sixty-eight. That doesn't mean you have to be fat or thin or a cudly grandmother or a vacationing single. It just means that I want to give you a little help whenever I can. Not because I don't think you can do things, but just because you used to do the same thing for me."

Cynthia has sat back down on the couch, one arm in her coat and one clutching her purse. She is not sure what to say now. Lucy is a persuasive arguer.

"And mom, it is true that sometimes you forget things if I don't remind you." Lucy gives her mom a little nudge with her shoe and tries a laugh.

Cynthia doesn't look up. "I did tell the men about the yard." She is a little embarrassed that it took her so long to talk to the yard people. But she did do it. While Cynthia is debating about what to say next, Lucy walks back over to the pile of toys, shaking her head. The mother decides to change the subject.

"So like I was saying: you're never safe. I've gained back all of the weight."

Lucy whirls around and says, "Oh mom," just like Cynthia knew she would. "I couldn't even tell," she adds.

“Well,” Cynthia says again, “I quit the group. I thought I would stay thin, but since I’ve quit, I just can’t seem to do it.”

This is not the entire truth; Cynthia gained most of it back while she was still a member. It is only the last two bitter pounds that have resurfaced since she told Linda she wouldn’t be coming back. Linda had been quite understanding, in a false sort of way. She had wished Cynthia good luck and told her that she was a beautiful person. Then she had smoothed her form-fitting jacket around her waist and excused herself, class was beginning.

“It’s okay,” says Cynthia now. “Don’t worry about me. I will just enjoy the way I am and if I want to make a change in the future, who knows? Maybe I’ll try something new.” She stands up from her armchair, and when Lucy isn’t looking, she kicks several toys underneath its skirt.

“Mom, I want you to know that I think this is for the best. I’ve been trying to tell you you’re fine like you are.” She moves toward her mother, but Cynthia is already at the door, turning the metal latch back and forth. “I’ll call you tomorrow and we can go for groceries.”

“Well,” says Cynthia slowly, “I’ll go, but I’m making my own list. I’m picking out my own food, and I’m pushing my own cart.”

“No problem,” says Lucy.

“Yes,” says Cynthia, letting herself smile just a little. “No problem.”

Holding My Son

Austin was the name Lynn and I chose for this baby. We did it together; we both always liked that name. Together we redid my study into a baby room and went to Lamaze class, and I drove her to baby showers, thinking the whole time that she looked like an eighteen wheeler cab without the eighteen wheels. Like the ones you see on the street, just a rounded cab in the front with nothing to balance it out in the back--she protruded so much in the front that I thought she might topple over. I didn't say this, but Lynn knew she looked funny, so sometimes we laughed about it and sometimes she'd tell me to put a sock in it. The whole time was like that; we never knew when she'd feel well or sick or grouchy, but we were together every day, all the time.

The two of us went in for one of the final checkups the other day, because Austin was supposed to be born in just two weeks. But when the doctor went to check the heartbeat, he couldn't find it. In that moment I thought of myself. Almost as if Lynn didn't even exist, I started thinking that I couldn't breathe, that no one would ever help me to be able to breathe again, that I was the only one left in the room.

Throughout all the next tests, I didn't say a word. Neither did Lynn. Together we sat in the waiting room and listened to the doctor tell us that the baby was dead and that Lynn would still have to deliver it. She started to cry, and I cried too. We had spent so much time waiting for Austin, so I couldn't really believe that he wasn't coming, but I held onto Lynn's hands and we put our heads together and cried.

She went into spontaneous labor two days later. I stood beside her while she remembered all the techniques we had learned, and I watched the baby come out with a sea of grey fluid. We got to hold it in our arms a little while later, and the nurse took pictures for us. Then they took Austin away to find out why he didn't come out alive. We went home with a box of the things that live babies come with: a lock of his hair, his footprints. Also a death certificate.

And then we were home, with nothing. Nothing except a whole house full of baby shower presents and a baby room waiting in anticipation. I've been thinking that I would like to get a nice wooden box in which I can save a few things of Austin's. Otherwise, we'll have to pack up all these things and put them away, I don't know where. I can't think about it for too long yet. When

I first saw his crib, I got a kind of underwater feeling, like I could never come up, and when I told Lynn about this, and about maybe getting a box for the things, she walked away from me. In the week we've been home from the hospital, she's been walking away from me very often, and I don't follow her.

She still looks strange, Lynn does--a little puffy and very pale, and she still walks like she is carrying a weight. When I look at her swollen feet pinched into her shoes, I can't help but think of those soft dolls who come with slip-on shoes that don't ever fit right. That's what my wife looks like, white and limp and not fitting into even her softest slippers.

It's funny, because I don't know much about dolls or toys at all. I thought I would come to know these kinds of things. This morning I was looking at Lynn, and I realized that I don't know anything of what she has felt for the past days. We had done the whole thing together, Lynn and I, until for two days she carried a dead baby inside of her. I don't know why I didn't think of that sooner. I haven't asked her about it yet, because she is still spending most of these days in bed in a little ball. But I needed to know what it was like, because there's not much else I get to know about Austin.

So today I walked around the house with a whole chicken under my shirt. It was the closest thing I could think of to the baby. It was white and heavy and dead, and if I had removed the plastic wrap, its skin would have flaked off in the same way as the baby's. I didn't think I would need to hold it in my arms, because I got to do that with the real thing, and once was enough. I had thought that nothing could be worse than holding your dead child in your arms, but I suddenly I thought about my wife and realized that she had held it inside of her.

I went to the Giant Eagle and bought a whole big chicken. A turkey was too big. The chicken was just about Austin's size, and when I got home, it fit right under my sweatshirt. I put my hands on the lump it made and I stroked it.

"Feel this," I said to no one in particular. I tried to be calm, but my voice was already a little shaky. I thought of Lynn, in her tight shoes. I thought of her being tight and uncomfortable even when we did all those things together--and me, balanced and unweighted, driving the car and taking part in what I thought was all of the pregnancy.

And then, "It's not moving. I'm a little worried," I said to the room full of shower gifts.

“I think I should be able to feel something,” I said, feeling things around me start to speed up, as if compensating for the baby’s lack of motion. I couldn’t stop then, my mind was hurling ahead and sideways and struggling to come up for air. I had to look at it, and I ripped the chicken out from under my shirt and I shook it until my hands were covered in bits of chicken skin. I held it up in the air and I saw that it wasn’t breathing, that it was falling apart. I heard my own gasps, far away. I shook the chicken until my fingers hurt. Then I took the thing in my arms, which were ready to be a father’s arms, and I rocked it until it until dinner time.

It’s night now, and Lynn never even got out of bed to eat. Neither of us bothered to turn on the lights after sundown, so I’m standing in the darkness of our bedroom doorway, straining to see her shallow-breathing shape. From here she looks so far away, and I can’t think that I will ever really know what she’s feeling.

Maybe someday I will tell her that if you squint at one of those whole chickens long enough, maybe in a dark room, it really does look like an infant body. In the dimness, it fits right into the crook of your arm, feels like it belongs there. There is no head, no slick hair or slow-moving¹ hands, but its heaviness and color remind me of a baby. Remind me of that tiny, motionless body, the eyes that never opened, my son.

The English Lesson

I watch television.

Laila looks at her grammar book and checks her spelling. She has just mastered the English alphabet which is so vastly different from her own Arabic. This is her last homework exercise, then she must start dinner for the family. She glances over at her husband Ahmed, who is watching television. He is a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh, and he can understand the news on t.v. Laila has had three weeks of English, so she only watches the weather reports. This is not crucial because she almost never goes outside. She wonders why she is even learning English. It was Ahmed's suggestion, and Laila agrees that it will help her feel more at home here in the United States--but what she wants to do the most is go home.

What's this?

It's a computer.

Laila answers all of her homework questions correctly. She is a speedy pupil and she will make great strides with her English. When her American teacher nods in approval, Laila looks down at her book and says "I am happy."

Today during the English lesson, the teacher asks Laila what her husband is studying at the university. Laila cannot answer yet. She knows the words in Arabic but has no idea how to translate them. This makes her feel simple and slow, and she can only look at the teacher and shrug her shoulders and say "I cannot".

They move on to study families. The teacher wants them to get to know each other, so they both fill in a family tree in the workbook. They repeat the words father, mother, brother and sister over and over, and they tell each other the names in their own families, smiling at the different sounds. Laila starts to feel a bit more comfortable when the American teacher smiles so nicely, but she wonders how she will ever be able to really understand much more than this.

In the next week, they move on to present progressive verbs. Laila *is studying* her English. She *is not smiling*. She *is eating* dinner.

Ahmed leaves the dinner table early to start his own homework. At the university, he is studying business. He learns the stuff of commerce, the things that will make him a rich man when they return to Saudi Arabia. He has worked a long time learning English in order to be able to come to the United States, and now he is diligent with his business studies. He spends hours each night reading and taking notes and writing papers at his desk. His desk and chair are the only pieces of furniture in his study room, the walls are bare except for a Muslim calendar. Laila peeks into the room on her way to bed, and he does not look up from his studies. She looks in on their baby, who is sleeping and does not stir at the sound of his mother.

When the couple arrived two years ago, they were childless. Laila hated Pittsburgh as soon as they arrived. It took her a long time to remember which apartment was theirs, in the mass of tan buildings. Everyday it was cold, and Laila looked for the sun. She was lonely everyday for almost a year, until she became pregnant. And suddenly she had a little piece of her country inside of her, a little Saudi Arabian son.

While she was pregnant Laila felt sick every day. Ahmed worried and brought her breakfast in bed, and said that she should not move until the baby was born. She laughed at his fussiness, but the doctor seemed to agree with Ahmed. Aside from checkups at his office, the doctor insisted that she remain in bed most of the time. This put off English lessons, so Laila lay under a quilt for nine months with nothing to do but watch t.v. she couldn't understand.

When it was time for the baby to be born, it made Laila angrier. Not angry at the child--she loves Noaf completely. She was angry at Ahmed for making her come to this strange, cold place, for making her carry a child with no family nearby to help, for leaving her alone in the Magee Women's Hospital while he went to class.

But when the baby came, Ahmed held him gently and showed him to Laila, and the couple thanked Allah for families.

I take care of my baby.

Noaf has thrown up on Laila's shoulder three times today. He is crying through the entire English lesson, and she can tell that the American teacher is losing her patience. She

comes back to the dining room table with her third new shirt on and tries to concentrate on the present progressive.

“You must practice speaking,” says the American teacher through her teeth. “You must concentrate. I really want you to work on speaking well. You can become fluent if you *think*.” Then she looks at Noaf’s black hair, which is sticking straight up, and she lets a smile appear. “He is very cute,” she tells Laila. “Now concentrate.”

Laila is concentrating. She holds the rattle above the baby’s head in one hand and fills in the blanks with the other.

We are learning English. The baby is crying. My husband is sleeping.

Sometimes Ahmed refuses to take care of Noaf during the lessons. They are scheduled so that he will always be there, but he only sometimes likes playing with the baby, so he often sleeps right through the English classes. Laila knows he is unsure about the American teacher. The first day of class he had given her pointers about how to teach, and all three of them became uncomfortable. The teacher was patient, but Laila could see that she was more at ease when Ahmed left the room.

Now each time the American teacher comes, he greets her nervously and shakes her hand, not knowing what to say. He fingers his beard, smiles and nods his head; he always pulls out the chair for the American teacher to sit in. Today during the lesson he prepares a tray of cookies and cakes which Laila made the night before. The stack of food is more than the three of them could ever eat, but the American teacher seems pleased, and tries each one of the unfamiliar desserts.

The woman is buying a dress. She buys a blue dress.

Laila has learned all of the colors, and she knows how to name the things she wears. Most lesson days it is her American clothes--long skirts and soft tops with beads or lace. She likes to wear sweatshirts very much, and she decorates them with these kinds of trimmings which she buys at the fabric store. On days when she wears one of her dresses from home, the teacher comments on how beautiful they are.

“I love your dress,” she says. “Purple is one of my favorite colors.”

Laila fingers the gold stitching on the cotton and wonders what the teacher would look like in such a dress.

Ahmed and Laila agree that the American teacher wears skirts that are very short. They try not to look at her legs when she sits down. Ahmed focuses on her eyes, and Laila steals glances down at what the teacher is wearing. She is fascinated by her dress, her talk, her laugh. The teacher has a new joke story every day. She tells Laila about people she knows and things she has done, or funny shows on t.v.

One day while they are studying new vocabulary, Laila says “I eat my baby.”

The teacher tries not to laugh, but it is impossible. Laila feels foolish, knowing she has made some sort of mistake.

The teacher covers her mouth and says, “I’m sorry. It’s funny, though. I think you meant to say ‘I feed my children’.”

She pantomimes what the word ‘eat’ means, and then Laila realizes her own error. “Ah,” she says, her eyes starting to squint into a happier face. “I eat my children,” she repeats, pretending like she is biting a piece of food. Then they are both laughing.

Laila had believed that there was almost nothing funny left in the whole world. ‘Not much is funny in Pittsburgh,’ she had thought, ‘so why does she smile and joke and look like she is having fun?’ Now she begins to look forward to the lessons, knowing that she and the teacher have become friends.

The woman was laughing. The man was going to school. The dinner was tasting terrible.

“You cannot say that,” says the American teacher. “The dinner *tasted* terrible. That’s simple past, which you don’t know yet. Right now we are doing past progressive. The dinner *was burning*.”

‘How does she know I burned the food last night?’ Laila thinks.

The teacher reads the confusion on her face and points to the kitchen, where a

blackened pan is visible on the counter. Laila realizes that the smell of burned chicken is still lingering, and she is embarrassed in front of the American teacher. She thinks this woman must find her dull, even if she is a fast learner, even if they have fun sometimes.

‘I am a terrible cook,’ Laila thinks. ‘I sit at home all day. When the teacher asks me what I have done each day, all I can say is that I watched “Who’s the Boss?”. What is there to find interesting?’

The teacher says, “Don’t worry. I’m a worse cook. I burn everything I try to make.”

“I can make creme caramel,” says Laila.

“Wow,” says the teacher. “See, you are a great cook.”

Laila wonders if Ahmed would agree.

A few weeks later, Laila and the teacher have a talk about customs. They read vocabulary from a book which shows pictures about American traditions.

Christmas. Trick-or-treating. The National Anthem. High five. Praying before meals.

The teacher asks about Laila’s Muslim practices. Laila prays five times a day, and one of these times falls during the lessons, so she leaves for ten or fifteen minutes. The teacher has not brought this up since the first day, but now Laila has more ability to discuss such things.

“What do you do when you go to pray?” says the teacher.

“Wash before pray,” says Laila, imitating her ritual of purification. The teacher is obviously surprised.

“You have to be clean before you can say a prayer? That’s interesting. Do you like to pray each day? Or is it more of a custom?”

Laila understands the question, but cannot think of an answer. Of course it is a custom, but she likes doing this thing which makes her more holy. She only nods at the teacher, who moves on to vocabulary. Laila sees that she doesn’t quite understand, and she taps her pencil in time with the frustration she feels. The American teacher will never understand her religion if Laila does not have the words to speak about it.

toothbrush

toothpaste

towel

Laila repeats the words after the teacher, pointing to each one in the picture of the bathroom.

“Why haven’t you prayed this week?” asks the American teacher.

Laila does not immediately understand.

“Why have you not prayed today?” she asks again slowly, folding her hands and motioning to the mosque poster on dining room wall.

“Oh yes,” says Laila. She doesn’t know the word ‘menstruating’. “Blood,” she says. “I am unclean this week. One week each month.”

The American teacher nods. “You have your period and you can’t pray?”

“Yes,” says Laila. “Unclean.”

“I understand,” the teacher says. “You did a good job of explaining.” She pauses, and the two women look at each other awkwardly. Picking up the spelling book so they can move on, the American teacher says, “Your rules are very different from many we have here.”

“Rules,” repeats Laila, not knowing what it means.

Ahmed clips out coupons that night for the American teacher. She has been teaching Laila about the supermarket, so he decides to give her the coupons they do not use. He does not know the names of what he has cut out, but altogether they may save her ten or fifteen dollars. She smiles appreciatively when he hands her the fifty cent savings for things like Aqua Velva and Brut deoderant stick. This is his gesture of friendliness to the American. She has helped Laila speak more and more. Ahmed seems to enjoy talking to her about his class work, too, even though Laila tells him not to interrupt.

“It’s okay,” says the teacher one time after Ahmed leaves the room. “It’s good for you to speak English with your husband.”

Laila laughs out loud. "No English at home. We speak Arabic."

The teacher smiles. "I know, but you could try to practice with him more. What do you think?"

Laila thinks that speaking English at home would be exciting.

Laila has started to work hard and smile much during the classes, and when the teacher leaves, she seems restless. At dinner she tells Ahmed that the teacher wants to go out to lunch one day for class.

"No," he says immediately. "The veil, the people staring--it's too complicated, I don't want you to be seen with a woman in such clothes."

"It would help me to learn the restaurant vocabulary," pleads Laila. "I want to learn how to order from a menu."

"I'll think about it," says Ahmed, looking surprised to hear her protest. "I don't believe it's a good idea, though."

Laila knows that to go would not be considered good behavior. To be out with an American woman in a restaurant would be daring. Perhaps it would be against the writings of the Koran. She understands Ahmed's hesitation. This is how they have lived all their lives, this is what they believe. She wants to explain to the teacher. She will tell her that it is good to be Muslim, that she prefers to stay the way she is. "But I would like to order a hamburger," she says to herself.

Ahmed gets up from his shaky chair at the dining room table and goes into the bedroom. He spends the rest of the evening studying business while Laila plays with Noaf and reads from the Koran. She does not know how to tell the teacher that she may not go to the restaurant.

Mothers give birth to _____.

Cowboys, writes Laila. It is the only word from the list that might fit. The American laughs out loud.

“No no,” she says, chuckling. She draws a quick picture of a cowboy and Laila giggles. She understands some jokes now, and she feels proud, even in her mistake.

“It’s okay,” the teacher says. “The answer is *baby*. You know that word, don’t you Laila? Noaf is your baby.”

“You have baby?” asks Laila. The teacher laughs again.

“I’m only twenty-two, and I’m still in school,” she says. “I’m going to wait until I am older to have children. It’s not like Saudi Arabia. Here women can have babies early, but they can also wait until they are much older. You’re only nineteen aren’t you?”

“Yes,” says Laila. “Ahmed twenty-six, Noaf three months.”

“Ahmed *is* twenty-six,” says the American teacher. “Noaf *is* three months.”

“I am young to have a child,” Laila tells Ahmed the next day when they make a trip to the mall. “In America you can wait to get pregnant and you can wait even to get married.”

“Stop telling me these things,” yells Ahmed right in the middle of the shoe store. “You are not American, you are a Saudi Arabian and you are a Muslim. You will learn English and that is all. It doesn’t matter when American people have children.”

They stop in the drugstore to buy diapers and Laila is conscious of the people staring at her. Children point out her veil to their mothers and mothers take a glance themselves before they tell their children to hush. Behind the gauzy black material Laila wishes she could be American for one day. She would like to go out with her teacher and wear a skirt, not too long, and her hair down, no veil. ‘No,’ she thinks again. ‘I just want to be home in Riyadh. With Noaf, with my family, with my mother, without this ridicule. At home.’

They got married. They tied the knot. They got hitched.

“These aren’t idioms that you really need to know,” says the American teacher. “But I thought you might want to talk about something new.”

She and Laila look at pictures of an American wedding, then Laila gets out a photo album with pictures from her own wedding. Her dress looks similar to a typical wedding

dress in the United States, white and lacy and full.

“You looked beautiful,” says the teacher.

“I had a good time,” admits Laila. “I could be alone with Ahmed after.”

The American teacher laughs and pokes Laila’s arm a couple of times, and they are both glad that Ahmed is asleep today during the lesson.

“How did you meet him?” the teacher asks.

“My parents met us.”

“You mean your parents introduced you?” says the teacher. “Did you like that?”

“Yes,” says Laila.

She thinks about the first few times she and Ahmed met, sitting across from each other on the hard couches in her parents’ living room, not quite sure what to say. She thinks about Ahmed wanting her to stay home. She thinks about the way he brought her breakfast in bed and the hours he studies so that they will have money. She thinks of the child they have together.

“I love my husband,” she says. “It don’t matter that my parents made the marriage.”

“It *doesn’t* matter,” says the teacher.

Later, the teacher asks again about taking a trip with Laila, to give her some American experience, to give her practice in the real world.

“Do you want to go to the library? To a restaurant? To the mall? We can go anywhere you want to,” says the American teacher. “I think it would really help your conversation skills. And it would be fun.”

Laila holds a Kleenex in front of her mouth and shakes her head.

“No. It is not good for me to go,” she mutters.

She cannot look up.

“Well, maybe later,” says the American teacher. “Whenever you’re ready. Let’s start today with the simple past.”

I was in class yesterday. I arrived in this city two years ago. It rained last week.

It is raining again for the fourth straight day. Laila and the teacher pantomime verbs to each other, trying to guess what the motions mean.

“You are driving a car,” guesses Laila.

“Good,” says the teacher. “Now try that in the past progressive.”

Laila takes out her barrette and smooths back her wavy hair. She needs a few seconds to think. “You were driving a car?” she says cautiously.

“Yes! You are making such progress. Your pronunciation is wonderful. Let’s practice vocabulary.”

The American teacher opens a magazine on the dining room table. She turns to a makeup ad and points to parts of the woman’s face. Hair, eyes, eyebrows, chin, Laila knows them all now. Mascara, eyeliner, lipstick. She can even remember the names of the products. She had asked the teacher what these were. She likes to know what these women put on their faces. This is one thing she has in common with them. Laila lines her black eyes with dark blue eyeliner and draws the lines out to a point at the corner. She coats her lips with a gold color and outlines them in fuschia lipliner. The American teacher says she looks quite beautiful. Laila likes her dark skin better than the teacher’s whiteness.

“Yes,” she says, “I wear beautiful makeup like the American models.”

“Yes you do,” says the teacher. “And you talk like them now too.”

Laila know this is not true, but she smiles.

“I would like to go to the mall with you,” she says. “But my husband will not allow it. I like to look at beautiful clothes and makeup, but it is not good. Ahmed says no and I am--what is the word?--angry.”

They hear a cough, and Ahmed is standing in the doorway with his backpack in one hand.

“I say no,” he says loudly, and the teacher looks up quickly. Laila seems to look right past her husband, her eyes dull. His Arabic accent is heavier when he speaks quickly and furiously: “No mall, no American models, no short clothes. My wife obeys me and I say it is so. I am tired of many questions about your country and your ways. Tired of these American lessons.”

“But the semester is almost over,” says the teacher, whose knuckles have whitened around the edge of the table. “We only have six classes left.”

Ahmed stares at Laila. Six classes.

“No,” he says slowly. “No more. This is the last day. My wife does not need English. Enough. Good day.”

Ahmed leaves the apartment, slamming the door so that the chain rattles against the metal. Laila stands up to get Noaf, who has begun to cry in the bedroom. Alone, she takes a minute to press her face into her son’s hair, holding him and matching his tears. She calms herself and the baby quickly, and when she comes back the American teacher is still at the table with the grammar book open.

“We’ll continue with the future tense,” the teacher says when Laila sits down. Her voice is quiet, almost hoarse.

Noaf rests against the softness of her robe and looks up at his mother. There is no expression on her face. She looks at the teacher. The teacher looks up into Laila’s lined eyes.

“I am Saudi Arabian,” says Laila. “I will be Saudi Arabian.”

The Lizard Wears a Hat

Imagine a lizard with a double chin. Her eyes are slanted and her mouth makes a V from which one would anticipate the occasional flicking of a forked tongue. And yet she is not a like a reptile whisked away by a broom or run from in mock terror. She is a kindly lizard; her extra skin makes her gentle. Her body continues in this manner, all lumps and round places, and her breasts set low underneath her black sweater.

She sells jewelry. She is quite good at it. This comes from being alone in her store all day. Few customers come in to view her new goods, so she has much spare time in which to prepare speeches. She practices holding the bracelets across the back of her hand, displaying their genuine silver and lovely stones which will set off any dress. She tries on the hair ties although her own hair barely reaches her chin. At the top is a patch of grey which is immediately noticeable against the orange-red of the rest of her hair. The lizard knows how to conceal this patch with a cloth covered piece of wire; the kind that can twist in all different ways and be used as so many accessories. She takes this same wire--the "pretty snake" she calls it--and wraps it around the brim of a hat, for color. All day she does this. You can see her sitting behind the glass-top counter, breathing gently through her nostrils, waiting for someone to enter the store.

And when you do enter this cluttered mound of jewelry, the lizard immediately flicks her tongue. She caresses you with her breathy talk of headbands and bangles, she holds up a necklace and her lizard hands brush against your collarbone. Even though you had no intention of buying anything--oh, maybe a cheap pair of earrings or a barrette, but nothing substantial--you end up purchasing anything she chooses for you. In an instant you find the ankle bracelet that was made for you, you are miraculously wearing the watch for which you've searched all your life. Your eyes are glazed as she writes up the items on a slip, and you do not even flinch when you hand her the money. After all, she has given you a special deal on the hair ties.

Then there is the hat. The most divine, the most magnificent, the most gorgeous hat she knows would look darling on you. And seconds later it is on your head and you are standing at the counter, purchases in hand, saying, no, I couldn't possibly. And then you make your way toward the door, taking off the hat, which she receives gingerly. You hear the bell ring at the top

of the door as you go out, and the clink of your new earrings which you decided to wear home. You look back into the store where this magician of a salesperson has once again seated herself behind the counter, looking lovingly at the saleslip she has just tallied. And now the lizard wears the hat.

Custom Clothes

Mr. Luther walked right into Aunt Imogen's Custom Clothes store and told her a letter was missing from her sign. He was handsome, although Aunt Imogen always said after he left town that he was nothing special to look at. When he walked in the door, I ran to the back of the store and whispered the news to my Aunt.

"Aunt Imogen!" I always managed to make more noise when I was trying to be quiet. "He's here! Mr. Luther is here in the store, come out quick!"

I ran ahead of her out to the front counter and smiled my biggest smile at Mr. Luther. He took my hand and kissed it gently, and I realized I was still wearing the purple feather boa I had been playing with.

"Greetings. You must be Imogen's niece. How pleasant to meet you." I stared at Mr. Luther with amazement. Nobody had ever kissed my hand before, and as far as I knew, it hadn't really been anybody's pleasure to meet me. I was already in love when Aunt Imogen stepped out of the back room.

"Hello Luther." When Aunt Imogen finally said hello to Mr. Luther I thought my heart was going to stop beating altogether. I turned around to look at her, and my eyes bugged out about a foot. She was still in her sewing smock, teeth clenched and fist tightly around knitting needles. Aunt Imogen *never* greeted a customer without making sure she looked like a t.v. star. When she heard someone come into the store, she would shove her needles into my lap and tell me to "Stall them while I fix my face." She would take off her smock and quickly apply a shade of mauve lipstick and a dab of her perfume. She would prance out into the store and surround her customer in a welcome of flesh and sweet smells. Most of the time they were a bit taken aback, but she was always convincing with her made-up face and firm fashion advice. Today, she was different, and I backed away from the two of them with an open mouth.

"Good afternoon, Miss Imogen. I am so glad to see you once again." *Miss Imogen?* I crept further behind the counter and snickered softly. She was no miss--she was Aunt or even just plain Imogen, but not miss. I looked up at her, and her face looked about like the rock collection I have in my closet. She was not returning Mr. Luther's friendliness.

“Do you have something you’d like to see me about, Luther, or were you just passing through?”

“Why, Imogen, I wanted to come in here and see your beautiful face after all of these years. And I must remark that you do look lovely today. Just like high school.”

If Imogen didn’t do something soon, I was going to claim this man as my own. He looked like a real city man in his three piece suit and slicked backed hair. My fourteen year-old heart was sold on this flash of manners and culture. I looked longingly at Mr. Luther and imagined riding in the shiny car I was sure he had.

Then he made the mistake.

“You know, Imogen,” he said as he took her plump hand in his. “You have really gone places since I last saw you. You should be proud of this little place. Oh, I did want to mention something I noticed on the way in. Your sign is missing a letter. The “e” must have fallen off the end of “costume”. Just so you know--but you probably knew it already. Now, how about a nice lunch for old friends, and I’ll take you for a ride in my new Ford?”

I should have known to run. It took me a minute to figure out what he was talking about and why Aunt Imogen’s face was turning that shade of deep scarlet red. Then I knew what he meant. I can’t say that I blame him for the mistake, because her clothes were kind of like costumes you’d wear on Halloween. But I watched Aunt Imogen’s entire body begin to shake and I knew the roof was going to come down.

“Is something wrong, Imogen? You look awfully flushed. Why don’t you have a seat and your sweet niece will get you something cool to drink, I’m sure.” He turned to me. “Run get a Coke for your Aunt, honey.”

There was no way I was moving one inch. My eyes were glued on Aunt Imogen and my mouth was hanging open so far an elephant could have crawled in. But Mr. Luther was firm about it, and he practically shoved me out the door to go get a Coke for her. About then I figured I should go get some help, because Aunt Imogen was just standing there like stone, beet red and sweating like a hog.

I ran as fast as I could across the street to Mel’s service station. We always went there for

Cokes and ice cream and sometimes gas if Aunt Imogen felt like paying for it. So Mr. Mel knew us, and he wasn't surprised when I came bursting in his door and hollered, "Gimme a Coke, Mr. Mel and come quick 'cause Aunt Imogen is about to do her stuff." He grabbed a bottle and ran out from behind the counter, yelling at his wife to watch the store. He grabbed my hand and we ran back across the street to the shop. I flung open the door and nearly ripped the welcome bell right off, but when we got inside, nobody was there.

"Aunt Imogen!" I screamed her name and ran around the shop looking for her.

"Imogen?" Mr. Mel yelled also, but he looked mighty scared and didn't move an inch.

Then we heard the car horn toot, and we whirled around to see Aunt Imogen out in front of the store in Mr. Luther's shiny new car, waving and smiling at us, and wearing my favorite purple feather boa.

"See y'all in a minute," she said. She had that look on her face my daddy always said looked just about like the devil himself. Mr. Luther had let a crazy woman in his car and he didn't even know it. Mr. Mel and I tried to persuade her to come back, didn't she have work to do at the store, but they were already driving away, leaving us in a trail of dust.

My Aunt Imogen is a white haired box of fire packed into a Sunday dress and a pair of hose. I can't remember ever seeing her without her finest dress on, skin bulging out of the seams and strutting like some rare zoo bird. She takes pride in her appearance, and pride in everything she does. Aunt Imogen always tells us how she had to overcome hardships in her life, but thanks to steel determination she made a place for herself in the world. I can't really see how a women's clothes store in Sulphur, Louisiana is really much of a place in the world, but I do believe the part about a steel will. None of us would ever try to cross Aunt Imogen's path.

There was the time cousin Ray found the rat in Aunt Imogen's second floor rec room; she denied the whole thing. Ray swore that the rat was as big as the four pound catfish he caught three years ago out at his daddy's camp. Aunt Imogen likes to think that her ranch house with the added second floor rec room over the garage is a spotless place. Ray has always been informing her of some mess and getting her riled up, it's been his favorite hobby for years. Last year, he found a wasp's nest in her garage and told her right in the middle of the quilting bee she was

having in her living room. Aunt Imogen does not take too kindly to her nephew being so troublesome. Back when we were little, he came up to her and leaned down by her white beauty-parlor hair and whispered something in her ear about the rat.

“Get off of me, you low-down dog,” Aunt Imogen said back to him out loud. We knew that she was real mad, because never before had she called him a low-down dog.

“Get out of my house,” Aunt Imogen said. She propelled him toward the door and the pink fleshy part of skin that hangs down from her arm swayed like a stretch of bread dough.

“There are no such creatures in this house, do you hear me? No rats in my house, no *sir*.” Aunt Imogen yelled at Ray as he scrambled out the door.

A few weeks later, when we all thought she had forgotten about it, Aunt Imogen invited cousin Ray over for supper and fed him beef stew. After dinner she told him it was actually rat meat in the stew, and that it certainly didn’t come from her attic.

There were times when she wouldn’t plan revenge like that, though. Like the time she jabbed her next-door neighbor Audrey’s behind with a sewing needle right after Audrey told her that she should try this new wrinkle cream she had found.

After each one of these outbursts, it was like nothing had happened. Aunt Imogen would go back to being her old self and whoever was her victim would pretty much stay clear of her path.

There was one thing that Aunt Imogen couldn’t seem to forget. For years she had told us about a man named Mr. Luther. When she heard something in the paper about a man committing some kind of crime, or when she heard gossip about family problems, she would get out her wallet-sized picture of Mr. Luther and tell us about how you can never trust men. He and Aunt Imogen had been high school sweethearts; he was attracted to her beauty and she liked his citified air. His family had moved to Sulphur from New Orleans, and he was surely the most dignified man she had ever laid eyes on. Aunt Imogen always thought they would be married after high school, but when graduation came, he announced that he was leaving for the big city he came from. He promised he would come back for her when he was rich and famous, but after a few months and even fewer letters, Aunt Imogen knew it was over. He had no idea how terribly upset she was, but she had told *us* all about it for the next thirty years. I imagine that’s what gave her the mean streak, because after that she wouldn’t let anybody walk on her. She married my Uncle

Frank, who died when I was a little girl, and spent her life fixing up her house and her face, making sure that she would be recognized for the beauty and home queen she thought she was.

Every once in a while we got word about Mr. Luther. We saw pictures of him in the paper and heard that he was going off to Europe or buying more land, and pretty soon he became a local hero. That is, to everyone except Aunt Imogen.

"Shut your mouth about that man," she would snap at us. "He is *nothing*. He idn't even much to look at." Then she would draw out the picture of him which was fading with each year and make us "look hard into the eyes of a snake". After a few years of this, we learned not to tell her when we found out anything about Mr. Luther. So we didn't even tell her when we read in the paper that he was coming to town for the dedication of the new park named after him.

We had all learned exactly how to keep Aunt Imogen happy. Tell her she was wearing a pretty dress or say how mighty clean she kept her house, and we'd be safe. We did this an especial lot the week before he came, to butter her up. But Mr. Luther didn't know anything about how to treat Aunt Imogen. I guess he just thought she'd be like she was in high school; he really didn't have much cause to think any different. I never dreamed he would do what he did, though. I about thought the earth would shake when he came to town and told Aunt Imogen her business.

My aunt's store is a white wood building that looks like it was painted by kids, which I guess is true since way back then Ray and I and our cousin R.D. were the ones who painted most of it. Here and there a few places of green paint show through; the store used to be Sid's Flower Shop, but I guess nobody in Sulphur had enough use for plants and flowers and plastic basket arrangements. But Aunt Imogen knew they would have a need for her keen fashion eye, so she bought the place from Sid and painted it white, just like her hair. She is a wizard with a needle and thread, and she had always wanted to be in business, so she started out with a few bolts of fabric, some patterns and a red and white sign outside that reads "Imogen's Custom Clothes".

In the two front windows she displayed her finest outfits. They were gaudy satin blouses and wildly printed skirts, frighteningly high heels and some chunky flashy jewelry--nothing that anyone in their right mind would wear. Nobody wanted to tell Aunt Imogen that she had terrible taste. We were all too scared to say anything for fear that she would feed us rat gut or burn all of

our clothes or something worse. I secretly liked her sequined and shiny custom clothes, but I was young and in awe of Aunt Imogen. I would hang around her store after school and watch her sew dresses and hem pants, wondering if she liked me or if one day she would poke me with needles and tell me to get out. She never seemed to notice me much, though. She would just hem and measure and hum, and occasionally say something about her five years-dead husband or why she was the only person in town with a fashion sense.

It was on one of these ordinary days that Mr. Luther came to town, and things began to change in ways that I never expected. Thinking the sign read “costume”, he said the worst possible thing to Aunt Imogen and had no hint of an idea what he’d done.

A few hours later that evening, Imogen finally came back, driving Mr. Luther’s luxury Ford.

“He gave it to me,” she said, looking out of the corner of her eyes and shrugging her shoulders. “I guess I just have a way with men, even if they are all filth.”

Nobody wanted to ask where Mr. Luther was. I think we were all scared of what Aunt Imogen had done. She was capable of some pretty hateful things, but I sure didn’t think she could actually get rid of someone. Except that it was Mr. Luther, the man who broke her heart back in high school. Nobody knew what to think, and Aunt Imogen wasn’t offering to say much more about it.

We were all sitting around Aunt Imogen’s kitchen table. Practically everyone in town knew what had happened already, and my whole family had come to her house to see what she had done with Mr. Luther. Aunt Imogen had pulled up into the carport and strolled right in the house like nothing had ever happened. She poured herself a glass of iced tea and began to wipe the kitchen table right under our noses.

Every face around that table was as scared as I don’t know what, waiting for Aunt Imogen to do something or say something that would explain what was going on. But nobody had the gumption to actually speak. We all just sat there watching her wipe every speck of dirt and germs off of the table then sit down to drink her tea, then cousin Ray started to fidget with his fake switchblade comb. Finally I couldn’t stand it one second longer.

“Aunt Imogen,” I said quietly.

She looked up at me and fluttered her eyelashes. I noticed that her lipstick was in need of a touch-up, and her permanent was losing some of its curl.

“What is it, Louise?” I knew she was off her rocker then, because no one ever calls me by my real name. I’ve been Lulu ever since I was a baby, and Aunt Imogen knew that as well as anyone sitting around that table. I cleared my throat and stared her right in those sagging blue eyes and yelled, “Where is Mr. Luther?!”

“Why darlin’,” she reached out and patted my hand, “he’s in the trunk.”

Well, I can’t remember witnessing anything more chaotic. Ray just about wet his pants when Aunt Imogen said this, and I’m sure I heard my daddy say a curse word. Mr. Mel started praying to the Lord Almighty and I yelled, “C’mon, y’all, let’s go see!” We all ran out to the car and then realized we didn’t have the keys. I ran back inside and Aunt Imogen was standing there waving them in front of her face, smiling like a beauty queen. I grabbed them, ran back to the Ford and stuck the keys in the lock.

Mr. Luther was not dead. He was just a little damaged. Aunt Imogen had somehow tied him up with that purple feather boa and stuffed him into the trunk. To this day I don’t know the details of how she did it, but I can easily imagine her roping him in there with just her fiery looks. Aunt Imogen is a woman to be reckoned with. Mr. Luther found that out, because he just stood there like a statue while we untied his hands and feet and removed the knitting needles she had stuck between his teeth. Then he thanked us all and hobbled off. He didn’t even stay in town for the park dedication.

I can’t say for sure, but I believe my Aunt Imogen is a somewhat brilliant woman. After this incident, business picked up for a few months, and everyone in Sulphur was wearing those purple feather boas. My favorite purple boa had become a kind of banner for Aunt Imogen and her crazy ways. Although interest died down soon and people stopped wearing them, there remained a hint of fear in the air. We are still never sure what Aunt Imogen will do next.

Someone Should Tell Me

All that needs to be said of my history is this: I had a family, I had an enviable job, I ruined it, and now I'm a janitor. I work at the mall every day. The job they hired me for is washing the tile throughout the mall, so I do. With a tin bucket on wheels, an eaten up mop and a yellow two-sided sign that says Caution. The bumper sticker on the side of my bucket reads Go Ahead, Make My Day. The mall crowd steps on my floors. They *go ahead* and step on the tiles I have just finished mopping with slow swirls of the mop strings. In the shinyness of the white wet floor they leave a dirty footprint, the smudgy kind that runs into the cracks. It ruins the space and makes each push with the mop handle have less purpose, give less satisfaction.

I mop the floor in front of the frozen yogurt counter. The rhythmic motion of the mop is interrupted by a deft kick to the bucket, which inches my work space to the right along the food court floor.

It never lasts for long. Three girls with permanents and high tops trounce past the caution sign across my border. Businessmen and mothers and daughters, high heels and old people and boots all make their way right through my floor. I try to catch the eyes of a sympathizer; someone who will help me tell all these people that they are ruining my floor. I think that I may see a woman's eyes which look like they could be my cohorts, then I don't know.

But today I don't keep my silence. I have crossed the line, one too many shoeprint has appeared in the shinyness I see under my eyes. Without even thinking, I sound an alarm, I give them the unexpected. It's a show to see the mop man lose his mind. I do not even let them pass. I clench the mop and press the handle right up to their bodies, maybe even their necks. They start to push it away and then they look at my eyes and see that I am not moving. "This is my floor," I say. "I clean *my* floor with *my* mop, *my* bucket," and I shove the wet end up towards their faces and they gag at the chlorine smell. "Get off of my floor," my voice is low and growling, then stronger, like a truck speeding by.

I circle to face the crowd which is all around me now. "Read the sign! Read the sign and get off of my goddamn floor. Get off of the floor I mop every day and watch you dirty right after. Get out of the one space I am trying to keep clean."

I shake the mop in all directions now, flinging grey water onto women's clothing and over the frozen yogurt counter. Mall shoppers are furious. Glued to their footprint positions in the wet floor, they glare with the indignance of valued customers. "This is *our* floor," they yell back. "What is your problem," shouts the frozen yogurt employee. "Get a life," say the high top girls.

And maybe, just maybe I see that woman at my shoulder. Aside from a mopper of floors I will be her counselor, her role model, the vision of emotion and expression. This is my seminar. She has been watching me and she follows my lead. "The problem is yours," she yells to the crowd. "Can't any of you read? Can't you see what you are doing to this man's floor?"

She and I are a team, we both hold the weapon in our hands, we scream to the same tune. Then the mop is in her hands alone and she is twirling it in the air, making the rotten strings into a propeller. She takes the battle, ignoring the streams of water running down the mop handle and into her shirt sleeve. She is drenched in the burning smell of bleach water, crying at the crowd and saying what I inspired.

She says, "Why do you have to mess things up? Why couldn't you have looked at the sign? He works so hard to keep it looking good." Her voice is raw, she is breathing as if she has come up after staying underwater too long, she has kicked over the Make My Day bucket. The dingy water seeps along the floor, over to the trash cans and along the wall.

"The mop?" I ask, motioning for her to give it back, our weapon. It is clutched so tightly in her hands, it is clutched so tightly in my hand, it has never left my grasp. I am holding the mop and standing alone in the food court. There is no woman around, there is no crowd. No one has attended my seminar, I have taught only in my mind. I stroke the gnarled strings and bend down to pick up the overturned bucket. I am a janitor who looks for a class, for a pupil-- I look for someone who will echo the voice in my head that says I did a thing that is not okay.

Uncle Budell

The summer I was seventeen I learned I was going to hell. This news came from Uncle Budell, owner of Nashville's most popular miniature golf courses. Maybe the air being so heavy and intolerable was what made Budell a little crazy, thinking he knew my fate. It was a usual summer, with me looking for something better to do and Gloria having to find a job she didn't want. We'd fan ourselves in the heat, counting the hours until I had to go to the next church service, and my girlfriend Gloria would try to convince me to skip it and go with her for ice cream. She and I had been friends since we were born, and we would've walked a million miles for each other. That's what we were doing that summer, when the days were transformed and Budell let me in on the secrets he knew.

Uncle Budell was obese. A mound of a man, he lorded over his miniature golf. "Uncle Budell's Fun Golf" was located just off of Route 64 in Nashville. He had built these courses with his own hands, way back when Gloria and me were kids. Those hands are what repulsed me the absolute most, all fleshy and red, cut down the middle with painfully tight rings. Budell liked to flaunt what wealth he had gathered from the golf courses, so he wore the rings all the time and drove an enormous maroon Cadillac. I had seen Budell in church all my life and Gloria knew him from around town, but neither of us ever dreamed that we would end up getting to know him so well.

After our last year of high school Gloria's daddy made her get a job. She hadn't done well in school, and he felt she should learn some responsibility. Gloria fought it all the way, but her daddy was a man to be reckoned with. I was over at her house many times when he would start in on her.

"I don't want a daughter of mine lounging around and sipping Pepsis all the time. Get off your lazy behind and get a job."

"I will not." Gloria had a lot more guts than I did to speak back to her daddy that way.

He would say, "You will too and you'll do it this week. Or *I'll* find you a job."

That was what finally pushed Gloria to searching. No matter how good she was at standing up to her daddy, she believed him when he said he'd find her a job himself. That

prospect was too much, so she started peeling her eyes for available work.

It was slim pickings for jobs in Nashville that summer, and Gloria had trouble getting hired anywhere. As a last resort she applied at Uncle Budell's golf park, not realizing what a devil he could be. Uncle Budell was a church man from head to toe; he headed up lots of committees and programs, wallowing in the spotlight of such a huge congregation. He expected his employees to be the same kind of religious. He quizzed all applicants about the Bible and its meanings, something Gloria knew nothing about.

My mama thought he was a revolting man, but he belonged to our church, so she never said too much bad about him. When I told her that Budell had such holy requirements for his employees, she could only shrug her shoulders.

"Annelle," she said to me over and over, "I'd be the last one to judge, but that man is awful hard to take."

"Yes ma'am," I said every time.

"All I can say is that we have to love folks every day, even if they do things we don't like."

I tried to do this, but it was much more fun to hang around with Gloria and talk about who was seeing who or who was doing something that was bound to be trouble. At first I didn't care about Budell one way or another, so I tuned out my mama when she started ranting and raving about him.

"Bye mama," I'd say. "Gloria and me are going to the Dairy Queen. I'll be back in time for supper." I'd run out the door before she could stop me, but as much as I wanted to listen to Gloria's persuasion, I'd always be back in time for supper or prayer meeting or whatever it was my mama wanted me to do.

She *didn't* want me to work the summer before I went off to college. Since I'm the only child in the family, my parents have always hovered over me like I was a prize catfish, and Mama was especially emotional when I made plans to go to college in the fall. Even though I would be close enough to drive in on weekends, she acted like I was moving to Jupiter. She pleaded with me not to get a job, saying that these were her baby's last days of freedom.

"I want to spend time with you, honey. I want you to spend time with Gloria. I don't want you to have to miss any of the youth activities on account of a job."

That was the real clincher. All my life we've been going to church on Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, and sometimes in between. My mama forbade me to miss any of the activities planned for my age group, and she peppered every conversation with some reference to church. I never used to mind, but sometimes I felt uncomfortable talking to Gloria about it. Her family never set foot in a church and she didn't have the first idea about the gospel. We got older and did more thinking about religion, and by the time we graduated, it was clear that I was born again and Gloria was not.

That was the situation when Gloria went down to Uncle Budell's office to get the application form for the job. He handed her a listing of the golf courses: one had a theme of Bible characters and one was a course of country stars.

"This is a listing of all my putting holes. The Nashville stars course is my personal tribute to the country artists we have in town. And as for the golf-through-the-Bible course, I think you'll find it quite in keeping with the scriptures. Here at Uncle Budell's we all know our Bible. I require all my employees to do so as well. You can study these as much as you want, but I'll also quiz you on your other knowledge of the Old and New Testaments. I don't want any pagans running this show. Understood?"

Gloria said, "Yes sir," and she stared at the list. She wasn't as good at talking back to this man. Her quick-talking tongue was lost somewhere in front of all that flesh. She said she had had to look down at the list or she wouldn't have been able to take her eyes off of the stomach pudge squeezed in between Budell's chair and the desk top.

"I'll see you in three days, young lady." He leaned over to shake her hand and Gloria flinched as he pumped it up and down. He wasn't even looking at her, though; he was already yelling at one of the other employees. One of the girls was taking a break outside the window of his office, smoking a cigarette.

"This is exactly why I need to hire someone else," Budell sputtered, and he lumbered outside to put out the fires of Satan.

Gloria was not at all sure she wanted the job, but her other choices were zero. Knowing I was a star in the Bible department, she enlisted me for help. We planned that I would help her learn enough to get the job and keep it; in return I could hang around the golf course instead of at

my house. If my mama saw that I was helping Gloria in a spiritual way, she'd leave me alone. Nothing was more important than her only child being a testament to the Lord. So I coached Gloria on memory verses and Bible characters for three days, and just before her interview with Budell we reviewed the more difficult questions like predestination and free will. She memorized it pretty fast, but the whole time she kept complaining that she didn't get it.

"I don't believe this predestination stuff, Annelle. Why would God choose who he wants in heaven and who he doesn't? If I was God I'd want everyone there, don't you think?"

I said, "Sure, Gloria."

Inwardly I had the same serious questions about all of the things I was teaching her, but I never said so. Seventeen years with sanctuary-loving parents had numbed me to all the confusing parts. If you hear something too many times, you don't even realize how crazy it might sound. When I really sat down to think about it all, I knew why people like Gloria had questions. I knew I wanted to be born again, but it sure did limit you. Gloria had no mama telling her about youth group outings, no set in stone days to go to church, no ideas of guilt about anything she did. But I did feel like I had something kind of special in my life--something that set me apart from people like Gloria. What really stopped me was the eternal life part; I had been taught from the start that I was going to heaven and that there were certain people who might not if they didn't accept Jesus as their Saviour. I never mentioned this to Gloria, but I was a little nervous for her soul. I figured that one day she'd get around to believing it all, so I kept my trap shut and went on being a little jealous of her freedom.

She wasn't totally free, though. She had to learn those scriptures before Budell would hire her. We sat on my front porch and practiced for hours. My mama would bring us Pepsis, winking and nodding to tell me I was doing a good job witnessing.

"Gloria," I said, "who was swallowed by a whale then spit back out?"

She said, "Are you crazy Annelle? What kind of question is that?"

"That is the real question, Gloria. God can do anything He wants. He could make you be eaten by a cow and then squeezed right out the udders if He wanted. It was Jonah in the whale, and you better learn it, because I know Uncle Budell is going to ask you that one."

"Annelle, why don't you just tell your mama that you're old enough and you don't want to

have to think about this any more?"

"But I do want to think about it, and I do like going to church. I believe all of these stories and I believe that you've got to be saved. I wish you would just lay off. Now who betrayed Jesus so that he got caught and crucified on the cross?"

Gloria twirled her hair and tried to remember Judas' name while I stared hard at her and pretended what it would be like if I didn't know the answer either. I wrestled back and forth with the notion that I was saved and the desire to be like Gloria. Hanging around with her and helping her get the job was the best way I knew to mix the two. Uncle Budell hired her the day she had her interview, commenting that she was a bright young gal.

The first day of work, Uncle Budell made her putt both courses three times each so she'd be better able to help the customers. His easier level course was a trip from "Eden to Heaven". Each hole was made to represent some kind of Biblical event, and on your scorecard you had to write down which one it was. If you got them all right, you won a free game, so this is where Gloria had to prove she knew them by heart. Gloria forgot a few the first day and Budell was pretty steamed, but he gave her one more chance and sent her off to work behind the counter. I didn't know any folks who could get all the answers right, so if they did win a free game it was probably because Gloria helped them out in the end.

The second course was the challenger level. Budell called it "Every Hole a Nashville Star," and the golfers had to write which star they thought Budell had created. These were real tricky ones--like an outhouse with dollar signs all over it meant Johnny Cash. Everyone always guessed Dolly Parton when they played the hole with two big barrels, but nobody ever got more than about three of the stars right. I always got so embarrassed when Gloria had to score people's answers, but Gloria thought it was a real howl.

Budell didn't think anything was funny, though. In fact his famous words to Gloria were, "No funny business, you hear me?" Every day he would make her rake the whole grounds, and if she left a gum wrapper he'd make her go over the whole thing again. Then she'd have to clean the balls and the putters and sharpen all of the pencils for the scorecards. Uncle Budell would pop in every once in a while and check to see if she knew all her Bible stories.

"What's hole two?" he would shout into the shack.

Gloria was a little nervous, she wanted me to come and help her out. It was strictly employees only behind the counter, so I had to sneak in when Budell wasn't looking. There was a good spot next to the Pepsi freezer where I could crouch without him seeing. Sometimes Gloria knew the answer, but when she hesitated I would whisper the right verse to her and she would smile and repeat it to Budell.

"Eve tempted by the devil," she would yell back.

"That's right, Gloria. Satan sees those who don't know their scriptures," he would breathe down at her, sending hot nostril air onto her face.

"Yes sir," she replied every time. Afterwards she would tell me how many rolls of skin she counted underneath his chin. Time had set the fat lines deep into his skin, and little hairs peeked out of his tightly buttoned shirt collars.

"You're getting good at this," I said to her one day. "Too bad Budell don't know you're a heathen." I loved to kid her like that. It helped me from admitting that Budell scared me to death. His physical presence was so overpowering, and the fact the he knew the Bible, knew the church and knew my mama had me trembling behind that Pepsi freezer. So I would tease Gloria and make like I wasn't scared a bit. She acted real shocked every time and quoted me a scripture.

"He is one strange agent, Annelle," she said after a few weeks and many close calls. "This is crazy. I'm never gonna remember all of the things he wants me to know. I should quit this job before he makes me sharpen one more of those goddamn pencils."

"Don't say goddamn, Gloria. He'll hear you and send you off to Bible college."

She said, "Goddamn, goddamn, goddamn. I don't care what he hears. What kind of person gets so uptight about a golf course, Annelle?"

We loved to get fired up about Budell. I felt extra good to swear behind his back since I knew it would make my mama have a fit. I was experiencing so many things all at once: I was trying hard to get Gloria to remember the verses and maybe even believe them, and I was frightened of Budell, but at the same time I was having a ball being bad with her. We lived to make faces behind his back and give away free games without him knowing. Behind the shack counter we'd giggle and stare at boys and repeat from the sign posted at the gates of the courses where 'put' was spelled like 'putt':

“PUTT courtesy first. PUTT litter in containers. PUTT offensive language, drug-alcohol use elsewhere. PUTT Uncle Budell in your will.” That last part would crack us up every time, then Budell would come over and holler and I’d have to hide or run or pretend like I was playing the country star course.

“Do I see a young girl being tempted by the devil?” he said to her one time. “The Lord and I want you to take this job serious. This is no circus where you go for laughs. Hard work will be rewarded, don’t you know that Gloria?” He would grab a drink from the cooler and swig it all back in about thirty seconds. “Now get back to work. No funny business.”

Towards the end of summer Gloria was having a harder and harder time remembering her Bible scenes. Her memory was fine when she concentrated, but after a few months she couldn’t seem to care as much.

“The Lord and I want you be serious about this job?” she would imitate Uncle Budell. “What is wrong with him, Annelle? He doesn’t have the first idea what the Lord wants and neither do I. I’m sick to death of this golf course.”

I had to whisper more and more answers to her or else she’d stare blankly at Budell. She asked her daddy if she could quit, but he said absolutely no, she had to stick it out until the end of August.

One night she was working and I snuck in to save her. It was a busy Friday night and I was getting bored sitting around while she handed out balls and putters and Pepsi’s. There was a wall on one end of the course with a gigantic picture of the Judds, painted by Uncle Budell’s sister who’s an arts and crafts lady over in Burns. I’d figured out a long time ago that this is where people went to make out, so I scooted on over to see if I could see something interesting. At the far end of the wall I saw what looked like two people entwined on the ground. I crouched down and waddled a few feet further, checking behind me for Uncle Budell. A few feet further and I heard sounds. It was Budell himself, down on his rear, head in his hands, crying like a baby. It wasn’t the squealing pig sounds I would have expected from him. He sounded more calm, kind of quiet and low and real desperate. I didn’t think he heard me, so I crawled over to the fence and jumped back into the golf park.

It took me a few days to say anything to Gloria. I didn’t know quite what to make of the

whole thing, and I knew she would just laugh. When I finally did tell her, she was colder than I thought she would be.

“Good for him. He has a lot to cry about, that beef side. He’s probably wailing ‘cause he’s so dang huge.”

“This job has made you truly heartless. I’m shocked.” I smiled at Gloria and she rolled her eyes way back into her head. She was probably right. There seemed to be something kind of fake about his crying; maybe it was just that it was so surprising to see him doing anything but yelling. I dropped the subject and spent the rest of the night counting golf balls. We always came up short and Uncle Budell would make Gloria pay for the missing ones.

The next day I said, “What if there’s something really wrong with him, hunh?” testing to see if she’d changed her mind. She shot me a look, but I kept on. “You really should have been there, Gloria. It was a sight to see him wailing like that.”

“I’m going to give you something to cry about in about five seconds,” she threatened me.

“PUTT courtesy first,” I said back, and we ended the conversation by repeating the Uncle Budell rules and regulations for the nine hundredth time.

I didn’t say more to Gloria, but the situation had me puzzled. Budell wandered around the courses more and more, talking to himself and polishing up the Eden to Heaven holes. I would see him over by the Old Rugged Cross at hole ten, dusting the crown of thorns and looking weepy-eyed. Something was strange with Budell, and I had an uneasy feeling. Gloria and I continued to sit around at the courses trying not to think about the end of summer. The days were coming up when I would move to school, and neither one of us wanted one less than perfect thing to happen in our few remaining weeks.

Two weeks later Budell called me into his office to have a chat. When Gloria had done something wrong he always called her in for a scolding, but this time it was me. We didn’t see how he knew who I was, but he told Gloria, “Tell that little friend of yours to come see me.” I was ready to admit what I had done and beg for Gloria so she could keep her job. I was real good at confessing sin after all those years. I looked at it like going down at the altar call, ready to be healed. Except this time it was Budell at the head of the church, not the Lord.

She said, “Be careful, Annelle. He can be real fierce when he’s mad. You don’t have to

go in there. I'll go in and tell him what's really going down. I'm tired of worrying so much about this job anyway."

"No way. You'd get yourself fired in five seconds. If I go in there, maybe I can convince him otherwise. Don't worry, I'll be fine." Really, I was petrified that he had said something to my mama. He went to our church, but I didn't think he knew me personally. And if he said something to my mama she was going to chew me out for sure.

When I entered the office, Budell wasn't fuming. He was sitting at his desk reading the Bible. It was a huge edition, leatherbound and with his initials in gold on the front. As soon as I sat down he began to read aloud in a preaching voice.

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. Romans eight, twenty-nine and thirty."

"Yes sir," I said.

He looked up at me and sighed. "Annelle, do you know where you're going when you die?"

"Excuse me?" I waited for him to start shouting, but then he was staring out the window like there was something new out there to see. I looked left with him because I couldn't help it, but I saw the same old putt-putt course I knew he was seeing. No sign of sinful behavior.

"I watched you creeping away the other night, Annelle. I know you were out behind the Judds' wall."

"I can explain that. You see, Gloria needed me to--"

"Hush up girl. I don't care why you were out there. What I care about is that you saw me like I was." He looked up a little hopefully. "You did see me, didn't you?"

I said, "Wait a minute. How do you know my name?"

"I know everyone in our church community. And I know that you hide in that shack and whisper to Gloria. You're not as subtle as you think. Now did you see me last night or didn't you?"

"Yes sir. I did. But I won't go back there again, I swear to you."

“You are missing the point, Annelle.” His voice rose and then lowered again when he looked down at the two-ton Bible on his lap. “I’m about to tell you why I’m suffering.”

Oh Lordy, I thought. Now he’s going to tell me he has some horrible fat man’s disease and he’s about to die and I’m gonna have to keep my big mouth shut. I decided that I would have to tell Gloria. Especially if it was something gross. There’s no way she’d forgive me if I didn’t tell her and then he died and I’d known about it all along. Besides, she’d have to start looking for another job.

He said, “Annelle, honey, there are things a man considers when he gets to be my age.”

I had no idea what his age was. He looked permanently fifty-five, but he couldn’t be that old forever. Maybe he was younger and his bad health made him look old. Maybe he was seventy and at death’s door. I couldn’t figure, so I waited for him to go on. He picked some sleep out of the corner of his eye with a ringed pinky finger and stared hard at it.

“I have tried to be a contributing member of this community for thirty years. I go to church, I am a deacon. I taught Singles B Sunday School for twelve years, and I try to keep this miniature golf park a nice place for young folks like yourself. But the Lord has shown me a new light. I have been called by him to lead a flock of my own.”

I didn’t understand. I knew he taught Sunday School, and I always told my mama I’d quit before I got to be a Singles B. That was years away, she’d tell me, and remind me how important it was to participate in Sunday School at all ages. But all the mumbo-jumbo about Budell leading a flock of his own made me decide I didn’t really care to hear the rest of his speech.

“Congratulations, sir. I wish you luck with your new sheep.” I started to stand up.

“Sit down!” In a flash I sat down on my hands so I wouldn’t fidget. He leaned across his desk and squinted at me.

“You are going to hell, young lady. How do you feel about that?”

I said, “No sir. I have accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior and I am not going any such place.”

“Annelle, you have not. The Lord has given me a vision of this town and he has told me to move on. He talks to me, sweetheart. He tells me that I’m wasting my time trying to minister to you folks. You say you’re saved, but I can see what’s really beyond. That’s why I am moving on

and starting my own church. A church where folks will appreciate me for the servant of the Lord I am. A predestined man.” Uncle Budell had spit flecks around the edges of his mouth and circles of sweat under his armpits. I leaned back in my chair and looked out the window. Gloria was fighting off flies and trying to count up a scorecard. I tried to think what she would have done in my place.

Uncle Budell said, “You probably wonder why I’m telling you this.”

“Sure,” I said trying to sound nonchalant. “I guess maybe I am wondering.”

“I weep for you, Annelle.” He raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders. “I tell you this because I think it’s only fair to let you in on the truth. You are not one of the chosen ones.” His voice was louder all the time and he leaned so far over that desk I thought he would stretch out his pudgy hands and wring my neck.

“You have not and will not truly receive the Lord in your heart. You and your goggle-eyed friend will be the ones weeping on the Judgement day. Not me, no sir. I am a servant of the Lord. He speaks to me, He tells me, Annelle, He tells me the truth.”

Uncle Budell sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. He was breathing heavily and seemed to be completely out of words. I was scared to death he was about to pass out. Then his eyes bolted open. His weeping for my soul suddenly turned into anger worse than I’ve ever felt from anyone, and he opened his mouth so huge I could see his red gums.

“Go ahead and go, sugar. I’ve told you a little secret because I think you deserve it the most.” He was yelling now. “You’ve never done an honest thing in your life and you rip me off every time my back is turned. Lying and cheating all summer long, you have no shame. God has told me who is worth the time and who isn’t, and he made you A-number one on the list of heathens. Now get out of my office and don’t ever set foot on my miniature golf course again!”

I ran out of that office like I was running from my daddy’s belt. Budell ran to the door behind me, waving his King James and hollering about the wicked who shall perish. I couldn’t get out of that office fast enough, away from the putters and scorecards and golf knick-knacks. Away from Gloria, who saw me take off and thought Uncle Budell was out to kill me. She would have died if she knew that he wasn’t out to kill me, but that he thought I was already dead. It seemed like I ran for miles that day, stomping on cement and thinking about eternity.

Part of me knew he was a crazy man, but something stopped me from saying so. All his talk about judgement and predestination scared a part of me way down deep. Gloria would have dismissed it before you could name the four gospels, but Budell knew what he was doing when he let someone like me in on the secret of my fate. I'd been in church for seventeen years, hearing three times a week that I was a sinner. I went into that office knowing I must have done something wrong, so when Budell handed down my judgement, I fell right for it.

He did fire Gloria that very day, and she ended up having to work on her Uncle Heffner's dairy farm for the rest of the summer. Her daddy was furious and he almost didn't pay for her to take classes at the community college that fall. But after a few months he settled down, especially when Gloria made straight B's. I didn't see her much after I went to college myself, but we tried to keep in touch with phone calls and a letter or two. Before I left, we spent some time together, and surprised each other with the things we said.

I could never keep anything quiet for long, and Gloria pressured me to tell her what had happened in Budell's office. After Budell told her she no longer had a position at his establishment, Gloria came running to find me. I avoided her for the next couple of days, and until my mama finally told me that it was rude not to take phone calls. I wanted to tell Gloria so terribly, and yet I knew she would just make fun and then never want to hear about anything religious again.

When I picked up the phone and said 'hey', Gloria sounded so relieved.

"Annelle! Where have you been? I've been worried and I'm just dying to know what happened in that office? Did he do something to you, because if he did then I'm going in there and he can deal with--"

"Gloria, it's okay," I said.

"Well, then, what happened?"

I sighed and said, "Meet me at the Dairy Queen."

So we went for ice cream, just like usual, and I told her word for word what had happened, while she licked her double cone and stared at me, hardly blinking. When I finished and waited to hear what she'd say, I felt nervous, like this was it. She would say I told you so and be angry that we ever went to Budell's in the first place.

“Oh Annelle, you are dumb.”

“Look, Gloria,” I said right away, ready to be angry and maybe even a little mean.

She said, “If anyone is going to heaven it’s you, girl. And you ought to know that.”

My mouth was still open to defend myself and I realized that Gloria was saying something nice. She went on. “Budell is just goofy. I bet you know your Bible better than he does, and you helped me out all summer, and--” Gloria stopped, and popped the end of her cone into her mouth, suddenly seeming a little embarrassed. It was the first time I’d ever seen her stumped for words, and I felt uncomfortable myself.

“What I’m trying to say, Annelle, is that you believe all that stuff and it really makes you different. Or saved, or something. I don’t know how to say it. But Budell doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

I handed her the rest of my ice cream cone. I didn’t want it anymore. Now I was even more confused that I had been.

“But don’t start thinking *I* believe any of that crap about whales and snakes and miracles,” Gloria was already looking at me with those familiar raised eyebrows, her one hand on her hip.

“Okay, Gloria,” I said. “And thanks.”

“Anytime,” she said, wiping a little glob of ice cream off of her lower lip. She smiled and shook her head. “Boy are you dumb without me.”

I drove up to school a few weeks later with my parents, my mama crying all the way. On the way that afternoon, she gave me a new King James Bible, the kind with Jesus’ words marked in red. She twisted herself around in the car to look at me in the back seat.

She said, “I know you’ll be good about reading this, Annelle. We raised you right and I know you won’t forget the things we taught you. It’s just a shame that you and Gloria aren’t going to school together. You were such a good influence on her.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, and I stared out the window, eating the sandwich she had packed. I thought a little more than I told her, “I guess it’s all already been decided, mama. Who knows what will happen to Gloria?”

Or to me. My mama nodded slowly and got out the handi-wipes from the glove

compartment.

Budell left town soon after that, and people lost track of him all together. His business was taken over by a national chain a few years later and changed into a generic putt-putt course. The cross and the Garden of Eden were turned into electric windmills and the typical things of miniature golf courses. Gloria wrote me one time and said that she had been, but that it wasn't the same without old Budell. I think she even missed him a little.

I never moved back home, but I visit every now and then to see Gloria or my family, wondering each time if maybe I'll find something I haven't seen before. I think about that summer sometimes when I drive out Route 64 by the new golf park. When I'm driving in the summers and I feel that same heat I did when I was seventeen, I pretend I am back there, with Gloria, so frantic about life and death and what to do about Budell. I think that maybe he was smarter than I thought, trying to make me skeptical about my own self like that. Maybe Uncle Budell knew just what he was doing. Part of a predestined plan.

A Single Blessing

To go on with everyday pleasures and satisfactions, I have plans to become a one woman show. When someone leaves or dies or disappears, it is necessary to make your own conversations, your own love, your own companion. In my case it is death that necessitates change. The most unexpected thing about this route is my transformation into two people. Where there was a husband, now there is me, quite talented at recreating what requires a pair.

This is my plan. I will get back on the bed, throw myself down on the comforter and toss my hair behind me, then I will run my thin hands along my body and shiver. I will say his name once for effect, then add sighs and quickened breath. I will make believe that this unbearable moment and then this release are caused by him. Caused by his hands which could bend my fingers backwards and press into my skin so that I thought they would come right out the other side. Caused by the feel of his skin against mine, always brown on white, man on woman, muscle on softness. Then I will hang my head over the side of my bed and remember that it will always just be me, doing this to me, for me, in place of him.

On to breakfast, where I will talk to him while I'm eating. I will look him straight in the eyes I can only recall and say *good morning, honey, how did you sleep ?* The answers won't be satisfactory, but hearing a voice out loud has become very important since he is gone. I will listen to my own chewing and swallowing and talk about what my day will hold, and I will feel a little more that these things are real.

I will neatly stack the mail addressed to him, I will wash and fold the clothes he left at the bottom of the laundry chute. I have plans to keep his toothbrush on the sink and still yell *I'm home* when I walk in the door. I will tell people who call that he can't come to the phone right now, and when people who know the truth question me about this action, I will tell them that I do not yet live alone.

And after a time, I will go to church, which is a place I have not been to since this change happened in my life. I do this to break my routine, because all the time of silence and no answers and self self self have grown tiring. I will sit in the pews which are covered with red velvet

cushions, and will have to stand up to pass the offering plate, since no one is sitting near enough for me to just hand it. I will write my name on the “Getting to Know You” register and stand up again to send it along the pew. I will think that the people on the far end of my row are glancing down at me when they read my name, so I will smile and squint and shrug my shoulders like nothing is of much consequence.

The sermon will be next in the order of worship. It will be difficult to follow, especially since I will be concentrating on digging a hole through my skirt with my nails, which are frosted pink and very perfect. And I will hear the pastor say something about blessings and curses, and what a fine line there is between them. He’ll tell me that we have the power to do either one, and to receive either one; and the effects are sometimes immeasurable. He will speak of the babies in the New Testament who were brought to be blessed by Jesus, and he will wonder about how they may have felt growing up blessed, holy.

I will think of my own life, and I will wonder if I am blessed or cursed, and whether it really matters. Even if good can come from evil, even if there is a hint of something positive that will come from my experience, the fact remains that I am a one-woman show, and there in the pew I will start to cry. I will not have a tissue to help me, so I will use my fingers, careful not to poke my eyes with my nails. I will think of nails through hands, and I will try to consider blessings, I will think about the things that might save me. And I daydream about the lunch I will eat alone after this service is over, what I will have, how it will sound in my mouth.

While I am not listening, the service will end, and I will have a hymnbook in my hand I didn’t even know was there. Then I will close my eyes while the pastor says the benediction, which comes from the back of the church where we can’t see. I will think how in fact I do feel cursed, and then I will think that in my silence maybe someday I will hear the blessings; they will come from somewhere, from something I can’t see, and they will tell me I really don’t live alone.

What I Thought About Snookie

Snookie Drysdale's body immobilized one Thursday night. She had gone to get her nails done that afternoon, and was extra careful making dinner so she wouldn't chip the polish that night. Snookie set her mixing bowl down on the counter and the next thing she knew, she couldn't move an inch of her body.

At least, that's what I think happened. I made it up. I was in the hair salon one time getting a manicure, and I was waiting for my nails to dry. I don't go to this place often, so I was passing the time while my nails dried staring at the customers, who were obviously regulars. I wondered what it would be like to have everyone in a place know you like that. Anonymity had crept into my own life, and I wandered from work, to my apartment, and back to work, only talking when necessary, but all the while wishing I could be a regular somewhere. I didn't have that flair it takes to be recognized, though. I blended right in to the plastic chair and tray of nail polishes just like I do everywhere else. I feel okay about all this, if I can find someone to think about, someone to envision as a person I actually know, someone who actually knows me. Being a little bit lonely is fine with me when I get to witness a woman like Snookie.

She was at the station next to me, an extremely loud and painfully thin woman, in to have her nails done too. Her voice was low and gravelly, and after a few seconds I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I forgot to even watch my own nails or notice the time, and instead I watched Snookie and her manicurist spar and glare and bicker.

I knew I would never see Snookie again, or maybe I'd see her back in the salon, if I got lucky. I wanted to have a part of her to take with me, though. She seemed like a terror, but I imagined that having her around would at least give me someone to talk to. Or listen to. I wouldn't even have to get in a word--I could just sit there and listen to this out-of-proportion, grumbly woman, ranting and raving about her body. Even having this awful creature in my house would be better than coming home to no one. Sitting there in the chair I almost loved her like the pet you don't get to take home from the pet store, like the giant gorilla in the toy store that will never be yours.

So, like usual, I just made up my own story to take home. It's the next best thing, and I'm pretty good at it now. I got the preliminary information about Snookie's immobilization from Snookie herself, and I built on it from there. That day she was in a rotten mood, complaining and moaning to anyone who would listen, saying that she just wasn't herself. She wanted to read a magazine, but the manicurist demanded that she put it down and lay both hands on the table. These two were very casual, even rude to one another, and I couldn't figure out how either of them had the nerve to say what they did. Snookie finally sighed theatrically and put down her copy of Glamour.

"Here," she said. "Paint them red and make it bright. I've got to get out of here."

"Look Snookie," said the manicurist. "I don't have to put up with your attitude. What's it gonna be? Your nails painted red or me kicking you out of here?"

Snookie tossed back her hair, then pushed up her reading glasses--the magnifying, skinny rectangle kind. She and the manicurist stared at each other for nearly a minute, and I could tell that the shampoo girls were straining to hear what would happen.

"Do me," said Snookie.

I have since learned that this is the language of manicure appointments. Do me Saturday at ten, fix me quick, patch me here on the index finger. The woman proceeded to soak Snookie's hands in warm water, and Snookie launched into her tale of immobilization:

It had lasted for about a minute, then Snookie fell into the nearest chair in her kitchen. She sat in the same spot for two hours until her husband came home. "You're late," she said to him when he entered the room. "You're late and I have immobilized. Pick up the phone and call Dr. Frank." He did just that, and scheduled an appointment for the next morning. "This is an emergency," said Snookie's husband Al. "My wife cannot move one iota."

Then, one week later in the shop, when I was there, Snookie said that all doctors are quacks. Although Dr. Frank helped her get her move better the next morning, it was really to her own credit that Snookie was well. As they moved on to cuticles, Snookie revealed that she had made a comeback. I was there to hear her say the reason she could be getting her nails done instead of lying immobilized in her bed. I was there when she revealed the secret to life. It turned out to be interior design.

Snookie decided to redecorate her house, and suddenly, she was cured. All the salon girls were saying what a miraculous recovery she had made; she looked so healthy, so vibrant, and her nails didn't look bad either. I thought that she didn't look right to me, but I hadn't seen her before-they had. Snookie was perched in the leather chair as the manicurist push back her cuticles. I noticed that she digging into the cuticles rather fiercely, but Snookie didn't flinch.

"Yes, I know," she said. "It is quite unbelievable, especially since Al was playing golf and didn't return home until two hours after it happened. Who knows what permanent damage could have been done? Dr. Frank says that I am a modern day miracle, which I could have told him anyway. Today I want something red. In celebration of being back on my feet."

"There is no stopping you," said all the girls.

"Yes dears, and do you know what the secret is? I have decided to redo the house. The place is tired and old, and who needs it? The minute after I left the doctor's office I went to look at wallpapers. Instantly I felt better." I saw all her teeth when Snookie said 'instantly', and I wondered if they were real. Not much about her seemed real at all. I couldn't look away.

When Snookie said that the key to recovery was in upholsteries and fabrics and tiles, the manicurist jabbed her with the cuticle stick.

"Ouch," Snookie said, finally realizing that she was being attacked. "What is the problem?"

"The problem is you," said the woman. I remember thinking that she was rude to tell Snookie her business. I wondered if they had known each other long, and I figured that they had just learned to put up with each other.

The manicurist went on, "You are not going to get well if all you do is redecorate your house. You buy and you buy and you have a new couch, and you think you'll be fine. Last year it was clothes, then it was having your bedroom dripping with flowers, then it was eating out every night of the week. Now it's your new living room." The manicurist shrugged her shoulders and began shaking the base coat of polish. "I don't know what to say to you anymore."

"Then don't say a word," said Snookie, pressing her lips around like they weren't exactly in the right place.

I left the salon before Snookie was finished. I watched the two sit in silence for a while,

then I just had to go. My nails were dry and I didn't have an appointment for anything else; there was no reason for me to stay. I don't like for people to know I'm paying attention to them, conceiving them as a friend of mine-- I imagine it would make them uncomfortable. So I got up from my chair and didn't look back. As I paid at the counter I heard Snookie saying that when she couldn't move, her whole life flashed before her eyes and she wondered what Al would do without her. I heard the manicurist say, "Heard it all before," as I walked out the door.

That day I made up a little idea about Snookie. I knew the facts: her body sometimes immobilized, so she was probably not healthy. I also knew that she was convicted of the benefits of interior design. I couldn't help thinking about what the rest of the story was, and gradually I came up with what she was doing. I imagined that Snookie was a familiar of mine, someone I could think about when I came home from work every night. I thought about what it would be like if I could flip on the t.v. or read a book, trying to concentrate, but really being too worried about Snookie's health. I knew I could be so good at caring about her, but then, it was all in my head. I could see her, even thinner and more demanding, and sometimes worried about her future. This is what I saw:

At home that night, with new red nails, Snookie thought about her body. She sent Al to the den with his dinner, and said she was going to take a bath. On the edge of the sunken tub she sat wrapped in a towel and looked at her skin. It had wrinkled a good deal, mostly from too many years in the sun. Her hair was chin length and white-blonde, too young looking for someone her age. Her face had shrunk so that when she smiled or spoke or wrinkled her forehead she could see the skin moving across the flatness of her bones.

She thought about the appointment where Doctor Frank had said that it could happen at any time. She could be driving a car or laying in bed or getting her nails done, and her favorite old body would immobilize. Snookie didn't think her body was her favorite anymore. She could tell stories about home design, but really she didn't feel so good. It used to be that she could stop what she was doing, knowing that she could start again at any time. Now stopping contained the possibility of forever. Snookie wanted to be like she was before that Thursday, when standing still was a brief rest from her busy life, not a permanent state.

She decided to tell the salon women that she was actually fine. They all knew she had been

sick for years, but his time she would tell them she had found the cure. Then maybe she would invite a few of them over to see her new things. Or maybe she would just invite the manicurist, since they had known each other the longest. Let's say the manicure woman's name was Vanessa, and let's say that she had been doing Snookie's nails for three years, the whole time Snookie had been sick. At first she had been polite, but she soon learned that manners would not tame Snookie. They had become closer as they fought more, each willing to tell more and react more, and suddenly they were friends. So by the time of the immobilization, Snookie decided she would indeed invite Vanessa over for dinner with she and Al, and Vanessa would see the house and see Snookie in it, well and alive and glowing in her new palette.

The next morning, Snookie up and dressed before Al got out of bed. She realized that she did not want him to see her body. Their bodies had been undressing and dressing in front of each other for nearly forty years, but Snookie was now afraid. What if she were halfway dressed when she had an episode? What if Al came out of the bathroom to see her motionless, part-naked and utterly gaunt? "What is this pile of bones in my bedroom," he might say. "And why can't it move?" Snookie winced at the thought and climbed out of bed an hour early.

At this point in the story I had two options. I could have imagined the slow demise of Snookie Drysdale, or I could have turned it all upside down and saved her with her new furniture. I chose to save and savor her, since Snookie was very entertaining and keeping me good mental company.

In the next months, she and Al ate out every meal except two. But this time it wasn't a get-well technique. It was necessity: there were plasterers in the kitchen, wallpaperers in the hall, carpet men in the bedroom. Everywhere they turned there was a new set of workers, dribbling and spilling and slushing paste or some other pungent substance. So they dined out and got to know each other a little better. Snookie would never admit directly that she was scared to let Al see her naked, but Al became aware that she was hiding something after he hadn't seen her in five months.

"I never wake up with you anymore," he said. "I used to open my eyes and you'd be there, now I open my eyes and you're downstairs already showered and dressed. And worrying about the house. I never get to be with you anymore."

Snookie chewed her salad loudly and asked Al to pass more ranch dressing.

"Darling," she finally said when she had doused her lettuce, "I'm sorry. You'll just have to understand me at this time in my life."

And because Al had experienced Snookie for thirty-seven years, he did just that. He didn't say another word about it, only tried to let her know in subtle ways that she was still his favorite. Snookie knew this, and loved him for it, but she couldn't bring herself to change. While she was sick, she did not show an inch of her flesh, aside from her hands and face. Even her skinny toes were covered in knee-highs or house slippers.

And how long was she sick? Snookie felt better on the first day she started redecorating, but it took some time for her body to catch up. She immobilized several more times, but she lied about all of them.

"It was horrific," she said to Vanessa. "There I was, about to get in my car, and I couldn't move. But it passed and I'm feeling great."

What really happened is that Snookie stood next to her car for a good three and a half minutes, and then when it passed she could not press her foot down hard enough on the gas to start the car. She was quite handicapped, but also quite a good liar, and the hair salon women believed her when she said it was a breeze to recover from such restricted movement. Snookie was almost a hero.

What she told the truth about was her recovery, and this secured her heroic status: after the final touches were put on the house, Snookie had been immobilization-free for almost three months. She felt great, she put on about ten pounds, and although she was still slim, she did not look as sickly. When she went into the salon, Vanessa told her she "didn't look as bad as she used to" and they fought as usual. They needed each other to stay on the edge, ready to attack, alive.

Snookie invited Vanessa for dinner, but Vanessa told her that she wouldn't eat Snookie's food if she were starving. Snookie replied that she had terrible taste in nail polish, and the two hung up angry but smiling, because these conversations were exactly what they loved.

That's what I decided about it all. I was driving in my car when I put the ending on that story, and even laughed out loud a little. The man stopped next to me probably wondered what I was thinking. It was kind of nice to have someone really staring at me, really seeing me, so I didn't drive off when he made a face like 'what a weirdo'.

Then last Saturday I made an appointment to get my nails done. "Pat can do you at one," they had told me over the phone, and I took the appointment, secretly disappointed that it wasn't Vanessa. Of course, when I arrived, it was Vanessa. Remember I made up that name? The famous manicurist from my head is really named Pat, and I sat down at her station and hit my knees on the bar under the table.

Halfway into the manicure, she was filing my uneven nails. Both of our hands were covered in nail dust, and she moved the file so fast I thought it would fly off track and rip off some of the skin on my fingers. She was skilled at keeping it right on the edge of the nail, though, so I gradually relaxed and tried answer her attempts at conversation.

"When was your last manicure?" she asked me without looking up.

"Over a year ago," I said. "I'm not too good about keeping them up."

"Did I have you then?" she said.

"No," I said, seizing the opportunity, "but you were here. You were doing some woman's nails, and her name was Snookie." I looked up at her expectantly.

What do you think happened then? I'm sure you have guessed Snookie's fate. Or maybe you haven't, since you thought my story was true. It wasn't even close. Pat looked up at me, and without missing a beat she said, "Oh honey, she died."

I felt like I was blushing, and I hoped that under the hot manicure lights my face was already red.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I guess I shouldn't have asked."

"No it's okay," she said. "It's a sad story really. I'm not surprised you remembered her from last time. She was a real trip. You probably thought I was mean to her, didn't you?"

"N-no," I stammered. "She seemed pretty tough to handle. I don't blame you."

"Let me tell you something," Pat said.

This is when I got the true story, the one that really counts. I was wrong about Snookie, and I had missed out on part of her relationship with Pat. But this Saturday I got things straight.

Pat said, "Snookie had cancer for six years. She was the longest surviving ovarian cancer patient they've seen in a while. She had all kinds of crazy episodes, some from the disease and some that she just created herself. But she was very, very ill. And I did her nails the whole time.

She would come in here and gripe about everything, and I talked back to her, but we really did like each other. She kept me on my toes."

At least I was right about one thing.

"Anyway," said Pat, "she tried everything to keep herself well, but it just wouldn't work. She never took it slow, she was always out and about, with perfect nails, until the last month or two when she was just too sick to move. She died on Christmas Eve. Other hand please."

I handed her my second hand and she began putting on the final coat of polish. I looked up into her eyes, which were surrounded heavily with mascara. I saw that Pat had some tears in her eyes, and I began to wish her name was Vanessa and that I had just stuck with my own story. I should have known that it was too good to be true.

Then I realized that I was sad about Snookie. I wouldn't be able to make up stories about her anymore. I can imagine a lot of things, but having a pretend friend who is dead is not one of them. So I wondered what I would do, until Pat told me one true thing that was far better than anything in my imagination. She told me about the hospital.

"See," she said, "when Snookie was nearing the end, she needed more and more operations, but she was so so scared about looking bad. She called me all the time, and bothered me at home, and asked me to come to the hospital to do her nails. And it bugged me and I told her so, but I went. I went to that hospital every day for a month while she died. The minute she woke up from surgery I was there, with my kit, painting her nails any color she wanted. I came the second I could when she called, and I stayed until her nails were dry every time. Every time."

We were silent for a few minutes, Pat and I. Her mouth was closed tightly like she didn't want anything else to come out, especially nothing that sounded like crying. In one hand she held the brush, which was loaded with pink polish. In her other hand was my hand, and she squeezed it as much as she could without messing up my job.

"Thanks for telling me about her," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"That's okay, honey," she said. "I wish more people remembered the good parts about Snookie. She was a real pain when she wanted to be, so I can see why people would focus on that."

"Yeah," I said. "I can see why people might not get the whole story."

Then my nails had to dry, and Pat had to eat lunch, so she left me at the station alone. This time there was no one for me to watch, no more ninety-pound characters to listen to. So I just watched my nails dry, which is not nearly as exciting, and I thought about Snookie. I thought about coming back to this place, where I knew the real story about Pat and her friend Snookie. I thought about maybe becoming a regular.

Previous Baby

We are moving through the Picadilly cafeteria line after church when Clarence Junior starts the squabble.

“Darling,” he says, real casual-like, “why don’t you do something about that runner in your pantyhose.”

Clarence Junior and I have been together for about four months and seven days. Longer if you count the month we were looking at each other starry-eyed during prayer meetings. But it was when my mama had him over for fried chicken dinner four months and seven days ago, Clarence Junior and I became an official item. He said right then that he had found the woman of his life, and I hit him on the chest pocket and said he was a a crazy man. Inside I wondered if he might be right, but I laughed anyway when he asked what made me think he was talking about me?-- Clarence Junior was in love with my mama and her fried chicken.

That kind of love-foolishness wears away quick, though, and today things are not only about good feelings. Today in the Picadilly Clarence Junior can tell I am madder than usual. Lately his remarks have been more often and a little more cruel. This is the first time he has ever said anything mean to me on a Sunday, though. And right after church.

So he says, “It’s not a question of fashion, baby. It’s just that those hose make you look a little less good than your usual scrumptious self. Super Dilly with catfish.”

This is all it takes to send me flying down the line, away from him, toward the dessert shelf.

He piles three rolls on his plate and practically runs after me. He grabs my arm while I am putting a glass of Hawaiian Punch on my tray.

“What is this all about?” He looks at me with those baby-don’t-do-it-eyes, and I spill some of my drink. It trickles right onto his arm but he keeps looking at me. “What’s bugging you, Irma Mae?”

“Let go of my arm, Clarence Junior. So what if my pantyhose have a run in them? Huh? So what?”

“Calm down, sugar. Let’s go sit down and not have this scene in front of the whole

Picadilly.”

We sit down and I fume for a minute. Then I make the same mistake I always make, thinking about how he can make me feel on good days.

“It’s okay, Clarence Junior,” I say taking a deep breath. “I’ll get a new pair of pantyhose. You wouldn’t want the woman of your dreams looking one bit un-put-together, would you?”

He stares at me with a bite of catfish lodged in his mouth. He manages to gulp it down and swig some water.

“That’s it, Irma Mae. The woman of my dreams. Yes sir, wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He stops by a few hours after our fight with a letter and some daisies. As soon as he leaves I sit down on the sofa to read his words.

Dear Irma Mae, it reads,

I am sorry for the way things turned out today. I hope you are not still mad. Here are some flowers for you, my previous baby.

love from Clarence Junior

I stare at the note long and hard. My previous baby. Clarence Junior is breaking it off with me, from now on I am his previous girlfriend. In his own subtle way, he is trying to tell me that he doesn’t love me anymore. I start crying right then and don’t stop until I realize, hey, something’s not right.

This morning Clarence Junior calls and leaves a message on my answering machine, acting like nothing is different. I glare at the machine while he’s talking into it, then I get out the note again. I look at the words ‘previous baby’ over and over. It is awful weird of him to use such a phrase. I decide to call him back, and when he answers the first thing I say is, “What do you mean by calling me your previous baby?”

Clarence Junior doesn’t say a word. So I ask him again. “Answer me Clarence Junior, you ninny. How am I supposed to respond to being called a previous baby? You could have come told me in person that you are through with me. And if I’m previous I am most certainly *not* your baby.”

I wait for his answer and tap my foot on the carpet.

“Uh, Irma Mae?”

“What?”

“That was supposed to say *precious* baby. I must’ve messed up on the typewriter keys. You know how it is. I guess ‘c’ is kind of close to ‘v’.”

“Oh yeah?” I say. Then I hang up.

Clarence Junior might be right. ‘C’ is right next to ‘v’ on the typewriter. Anyone could mess it up. I’m a little embarrassed that I didn’t see it coming. I should have, since this is very similar to a thing that happened just a few weeks ago.

Clarence Junior had invited me over to play dominoes after church one Sunday night. He and some of his friends met me and two of my girlfriends over at his place, and we set out the card table and played a game of forty-two. We had an odd number, though, so I sat out the second round, and went into the kitchen to make something to eat. On the counter was a huge plate of fried chicken, so I went back into the den and said, “Clarence Junior you didn’t tell me my mama made you a plate of chicken. Wasn’t that nice of her?” He just mumbled something while I went back into the kitchen to get myself a piece.

Of course as soon as I tasted it, I knew it wasn’t my mama’s. Nobody can make chicken like her--even Clarence Junior said so. So I went right back out there into the den and walked right over to him and held that drumstick up in his face and said, “Do you mind telling me who really made this chicken?”

And Clarence Junior laughed and said, “I told you, honey, it was just little Fern Rogers from church. She wanted to do something nice for me, that’s all.”

“Then why did you say it was my mama? And why does Fern Rogers care about you anyway?”

“You know I get sidetracked when I’m playing a game. I didn’t hear you right. It was Fern, and it was just a friendly gesture. You know I love your mama’s chicken more than life.” Clarence Junior looked up at me, then back down at his hand of dominoes. “Now, baby, I’ve got to get back to my round. We’re winning.”

So today, after the whole Picadilly scene, I’m thinking about Fern Rogers and the chicken, and whether or not Clarence Junior can type. When I put them all together, I don’t think it really

matters if 'previous' was a mistake or not. There is something in the back of Clarence Junior's mind that's not being truthful with him or with me.

I'm crying now, sitting next to the phone I just slammed down, but I think this is what we needed. Maybe it's time Clarence Junior learned a thing or two about me. He needs to know he just can't get away with lying about my mama's chicken. He needs to know that if 'c' is close to 'v', then precious is even closer to previous. And lots of things are right close together. Next to his remarks about my pantyhose having a runner is me, walking right out of Clarence Junior's life.

Mema

The grandmother loved to show off her son's children, as she loved to show off her son. It was a circle of pride, displaying what she brought into the world, taking it all back in with satisfaction. The kids were terribly young, so they shrugged her away from their shirt collars and wiped off lipstick when it remained on their skin. The parents changed the subject when Mema wanted to bring out newspaper articles she had saved about her son. She was hurt by their oh-no-not-again groans, but she left the scrapbooks and picture boxes on the table, knowing that eventually one of them would take a look. When they watched television, none of them could help noticing the clutter above the screen. On veneer bookcases were all of the son's track trophies. They had sat for twenty-five years, relics in the guided tour of Mema's life.

Sometimes the grandkids liked the attention. The girl especially enjoyed telling her friends about how fast her father could run, and both kids were pleased when Mema told neighbors how talented they were. My young geniuses, she called them. Six and ten year old wonders. The kids' faces said they were wondering exactly what she was talking about. They would escape, saying that it was time for the prime time movie. At Mema's house they could stay up late to watch Disney programs, maybe even the eleven o'clock news.

I have come to see my grandmother Mema after a six year absence. I stay a few miles down the road at the only motel in town, and I come to see her each day for as many hours as I can. I have five days to visit her, and to see what she is like after all this time, maybe to find out if I am like her. I want to know if she still talks about her grandkids in the same way. Maybe she still praise my father for the miles he ran so many years ago. I want her to tell me something I don't know, something I can't ask. Something she probably can't remember.

Mema lives in a miniscule town in Louisiana, in a Baptist nursing home, where she has a private room and nurses who make sure she is content. They shuffle in and out occasionally; they don't act as if it takes a great deal to insure her happiness, but they are sweet to her, gentle with her old body, and talking in a stream of soft affirmatives. I watch them and think that they have spent more time with her than I have. For a brief second I wonder why I'm here, then I'm ashamed of

that thought. When she looks up from the news and calls me Mary, which is her daughter's name, I have to let out a half laugh-half sigh.

"Yes," I say to her. I gave up trying to correct her after the third time she called me the wrong name. "What is it?"

"Those lazy crazy hazy days of summer," she says, then she starts to cry a little. There is no sound, only reddening eyes and a trembling of her chin. I wish the nurses were still in the room. I have no idea what she is talking about. It is only the first day with Mema; I wonder if this is what it will be like the whole time, and while I'm wondering this, she has already fallen asleep.

It was time for dinner at the grandmother's house. Her son's family was there again for vacation, in Louisiana in the hot middle of August. The mother and father were in the living room, reading. Their daughter and son were now twelve and eight years old, browsing through their father's and aunt's old books from high school, maybe searching for something revealing. They all heard Mema walk into the living room and call everyone's attention. Standing in the doorway to the living room, she said with absolute sincerity, "I have some terrible news." She paused and looked down and sideways, out of the corner of her eyes.

"There is no ice."

After a moment of silence, the kids finally snickered. Terrible news in this house was not so hard to take. Mema stood in the doorway, helpless, with the ice trays at her sides. She had forgotten to put them back in the freezer after she filled them with water. That day the family laughed at the absurdity of her pronouncement: I have terrible news. There is no ice. Mema acted as if nothing would ever be the same, almost in tears over her embarrassing failure. Like the trophies and the scrapbooks, her son's family pushed the matter aside, saying that it was no big deal, they didn't mind warm drinks. The son went back to his paper, his wife went in the kitchen to help Mema, and the kids followed and giggled and rolled their eyes back in their heads. The boy was too young to keep himself from reacting, but the girl had a tinge of hesitation. She poked her brother hard in the shoulder and said that they should not make fun, but when she saw his eyes she could not help but join him. Trying not to let Mema see, they covered their mouths and turned

laughs into coughs, in the same manner children scoot food around on their plate so it looks as though it's been tasted.

Now I can look at that day and see that nothing did stay the same for much longer. For Mema, the dinner was not the same because of lukewarm drinks. For us, life was changed because of Mema. It takes time for an idea to sink in, and we rebelled against the idea that her quirkiness would become all she was. Instead of the Mema with a few odd habits, the Mema we loved, she slowly became all oddity and unfamiliarity, a stranger to us. The grandmother with the ice cube trays that never froze, the grandmother who made me laugh, is now the grandmother who can't remember my name, is the eighty-three year old woman for whom nothing is terrible, for whom nothing is really anything.

I am sitting across the room from her as she sleeps. She has had Alzheimer's disease for almost five years. I'm still not convinced she isn't just old. Regardless of the title, her state makes her incapable of remembering and at the same time, strangely able to tell a stranger about the events of forty years ago. We tell each other stories, and many times she talks in third person, and I don't know who is my grandmother, my aunt, my grandfather; everyone is a he or a she, and in an instant, nobody. These are the people we have become to Mema. Temporary, maybe a memory, as second of recognition, nothing.

To make conversation, I decide to tell her about the first time I came to the home. Since time has passed, the story is more humorous: I was seventeen and ready to leave the minute we arrived at the Arcadia Baptist Home. We weren't in the room ten minutes before Mema had turned to me and said, "How's your love life?"

"How's yours?" I had shot back, thinking well under pressure, but mortified inside.

Mema laughed until her eyes watered, then she repeated the joke to her roommate and to anyone who passed by.

"Remember that?" I ask her now.

By the end of this story, I notice that Mema is staring at the floor without blinking. She has not heard a word I am saying. She is lost in the pattern on the floor, so I sit back with my own memory of being seventeen and trapped in a nursing home.

The funny thing was, back then she did have a boyfriend. She met Mr. Otha soon after she moved into the home, but she was slow to admit that they had any kind of relationship. He passed by her room with an occasional flower, and he was as sweet to her as she could have wanted. I remember wondering why she had romance in her life and I didn't.

Mr. Otha died a few years later, but by that time Mema had deteriorated and didn't remember him either.

Today is my second day here at the Arcadia home, and while Mema stares at the floor, I wander around the home. I run into her former roommate, Vanessa. It doesn't seem that she should be in a place like this; her mind is sharp and quick and her bones are much more full of life than my grandmother's. Vanessa even remembers me, and she asks all about my family and what we're doing. I explain that I've come alone to see Mema, since I'm not sure when I'll have a chance to come this far south again.

"She doesn't know who I am, Vanessa," I say with a shrug.

"She doesn't know me either," says Vanessa in her growly voice. "And I lived with her."

As she shuffles away, I realize how absurd this comment is, "I lived with her." She is *my* grandmother, I want to yell down the hall. But I don't, since there are heart patients and fragile lives scattered all around this place.

The kids found an old army hammock in Mema's attic. In earlier years they had located other treasures up in this dusty space--an erector set, old letter jackets and a yearbook that belonged to their aunt. This year the younger brother wanted to take out the hammock, and he hung it between a tree and the garage. He was ten, and spent the rest of the vacation zipped inside the hammock, reading comics and imagining he was in another country. Mema brought him iced tea and sugar cookies out to his tent, and giggled when he suggested that she get inside with him.

"Oh no," she said, "I'm too old." That was her favorite thing to say. She wouldn't ever reveal exact numbers, but being an aged grandmother with treasured children in her family was her best part.

She did the traditional things like keeping an endless supply of gum and Lifesavers in her purse, which was a hard, white patent leather box with a gold clasp. She had snacks ready on

command, and she took the kids down the street to the drugstore and bought them just about anything they wanted. For her fourteen year old granddaughter, she bought romance books and a skirt with lace around the bottom. Since the family only came down once or maybe twice a year, she didn't hold back. When the kids asked if they could sleep with her in bed, she let them, smiling when they kissed her cheek and told her how soft it was.

On the third day I go through Mema's desk drawers. She has not done this since the year she moved in. I find pictures of my family and my aunt's family, old letters written from both sides, and drawings from all the grandkids. There is a Christmas card I drew in red and green crayon the year I was eleven. It makes me think about Christmas presents, and I remember the year Mema stopped sending them to us. It was her second year in the Arcadia home, when she couldn't quite think what she was supposed to do this time of year. My mother faked it for that year, giving us money in Mema's name. But it wasn't the same, and after that we just didn't get presents from her, which was okay.

Today is Mema's day at the whirlpool, which gives me some time alone. The nurses wheel her away, talking about how nice she's going to feel. I look out the window and think about old ladies in a bubbling tub. Then I wonder how it has been to look out the same window for five years. Outside you can see the heat, it reflects off the pavement and the tan grass. There is a white sign that says Arcadia Baptist Home in plain red letters. Underneath it reads: "Caring For Those Who Cared For Us".

The summer they cleared out the house, the parents let the kids go through boxes of photos and take the ones they wanted. They would all point to an old prom picture and laugh at the father's short pants. They clutched their stomachs when they found his senior picture and joked about how much the father and son looked alike. And when they found the yellowed picture of young Mema in a polka dotted spring dress, some of them cried.

They argued over vases and a lamp or two, but not too much in the house was anything they were dying to have. The son took home all the trophies which were tarnished and dusty, and his own son was ecstatic to be given Mema's old green lava lamp. A few things were moved to the

home, but the majority of the furniture stayed behind to live with the new family that was soon to move in. When they drove away from the house it didn't seem possible they wouldn't be back next year for vacation. The father talked about the dog he used to play with in the yard, and how he could work the ham radio that used to be in the garage. The kids fought about where to go for supper, and no one said anything about the empty house.

I take a drive on the fourth day I'm at the home, thinking I need to escape for a few hours. Only I soon discover what I had already known; there is nothing to see in Arcadia. I stop at the drugstore for some gum and a magazine, and I circle the whole town six times in only a few minutes. When I get back to the home, Mema is sitting in her usual green chair, talking to no one.

"My daughter has three boys," she says, which is correct.

"Yes she does," I say, trying to prod her into a real conversation. I open a pack of gum and sit down on the bed across from her. "They were here last month, do you remember?"

"Oh yes," Mema says, "and my granddaughter will visit me soon."

I smile, because there is nothing else I can do aside from cry. I think about how I once mattered so much, in the years when I shrugged it off and instead wanted to explore the garage. Then I think about now, about the granddaughter that used to be so crucial to Mema, about me, tucked up somewhere in her mind, behind those eyes that don't recognize. I don't bother telling Mema that I'm already here, that I've been here for four days and that tomorrow I will be gone. Instead I let her look at the magazine I bought, and we talk in circles about the old beauty parlor she went to back home in Sulphur.

As long as I can remember Mema has looked old, like a grandmother should look, except for her hair. It is still almost all brown, even though she is eighty-three. My father's hair has not turned gray yet either, and in Mema's room I look in the mirror to see if there are any strands in mine. I already know they won't be there. I don't even look like Mema at all.

The nurses help her put on a little makeup sometimes, and her cheeks have a bit of rouge making them flushed. Just behind her wrinkles I can see her soft skin, and even the slight pink scar on her nose from reconstructive surgery doesn't hide that she was once beautiful.

The first time the family came to visit Mema in the home, she wanted her son and granddaughter to sing. Each day there was an entertainment hour for all the residents, and it would be the perfect opportunity to show off her kin, so at her request they sang "Fairest Lord Jesus". Looking out over the fluorescent lighted auditorium, which was also the cafeteria, the father and his daughter saw that many of the residents were asleep. And some were crying because they loved this hymn, and some were telling Mema how proud she should be. Mema ignored them and sat on the edge of her seat with expectant joy. When it was over, all those awake applauded and said how much the son and daughter reminded them of their own.

Later that day, the family and Mema went out to the back grounds of the home. They sat on the wrought iron benches and fed the ducks, and sweated because it was so hot and humid. The son, who was now twelve, was bored. He made up a game where he leapt from bench to bench, trying not to step on anyone. He lost his footing and fell, hitting his head on the cement below. He was not badly hurt-- only a welt on his forehead--but in the confusion Mema began to say over and over that she had been a nurse, she could take care of it, just leave it to her. "Don't move," she said to her grandson. "I'll fix you up in just a minute." It took all four of them to convince her that he was alright and could get up by himself. Later on she became angry, saying that he shouldn't have been horsing around like that.

The next day the incident was forgotten, except for the son's headache and foul mood. Before leaving, they each kissed Mema and said how much they loved her. When they drove away, they waved out of the back windows of the station wagon and saw that Mema was crying. She was alone on the sidewalk outside the home, and she waved a slow wave while her other arm hung limp at her side.

This morning I pack my bags and explain to Mema that I will be leaving after lunch. To kill time until then, we watch morning talk shows, and Vanessa stops by to visit.

"I didn't want to move out of this room," she tells me. "It just didn't work out when Ruby started getting bad. You know how she is now, she can't take care of herself."

"I know," I say. It is strange to hear someone call Mema by her real name.

Later I ask Mema if she remembers Vanessa. At first I don't think she has heard me, but

then she begins to talk softly.

“The grandmother was so sad the year her granddaughter came to visit and brought a friend. The granddaughter had just turned sixteen, and it was the last summer they would all be in the house together, although they didn’t know it at the time. Mema let the girls sleep in Mary’s old room, where she could hear them giggling late at night through the panelled walls. It was the first time that her granddaughter didn’t ask if she could sleep in Mema’s bed, and one night the granddaughter even forgot to come kiss her goodnight. But they had a good time anyway, and Mema took them out for dinner two nights in a row. When they went shopping, she even bought something for the granddaughter’s friend.

“She watched out the window while the girls sunbathed in the backyard, and she worried that they might burn. When they came inside all flushed from the sun and smelling like coconuts, she kidded with them about the lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer.

“‘I’m glad you girls are enjoying the summer. The men are going to come along and snatch you up if you get any prettier than you are now,’ she told them, and they snickered and said ‘no way’ . . .”

Mema stops talking suddenly and starts humming a song I can’t place.

“Mema,” I say to her more loudly than I mean to. “What’s the rest of the story?”

She keeps humming until the attendant comes in to check on her. Then she starts to talk about my father, her son. “He’s a doctor, just like I am a nurse. And my daughter wants to be a nurse too,” Mema tells the woman who is unfolding the wheelchair to take her to lunch.

After I have said goodbye to Mema and she is wheeled off for a mashed potatoes and chicken lunch, I sit on her bed and look at the chair which still bears the indentations of her body. I think about where that chair used to be, in the living room next to the old wooden stereo we left for the people who bought the house. I think about the summer I went down to visit Mema with my best friend, and how we tried on all of Mema’s jewelry while she was making dinner. I remember spreading out towels in the backyard and debating about what number suntan oil to use, and I remember the way we couldn’t see anything when we came inside into the dark, cool house.

I try to recall the crazy lazy hazy days of summer and what Mema’s story was about, but I

can't. I try to think how it is that she has that memory and I don't. We are a pair with half-memories, we are sometimes just alike. I am made up of so many different things, though. Mema is all past and far away and not quite with me anymore.

I sit in her chair and try to make my shape match the imprints she left. It's not just right, but the vinyl makes crackling noises like it's trying to shift into place. I lean forward with my elbows on my knees, forehead on my palms, and I say the name 'Ruby' out loud, just to hear it. The vinyl stops its creaking and the only sound is the hum of the air conditioner. Staring at the pattern in the floor, I wonder who remembers more, who could tell the stories best.

Mental Freedom

In junior high the coach said it was good for us to experience abandon; she called it “mental freedom”.

“Today we’ll be swimming without bathing suits,” she said. All of us gasped.

Co-ed mental freedom would have been too much--the only reason we even considered it was because we were an all girl team. But were all incredulous: who would actually let us be in school with nothing on? Some girls wouldn’t try it, and Rita Carlisle sat on a bench and told us we could catch diseases from chlorine getting inside of us. The rest of us whispered in the locker room, where even whispers bounced off of the lockers and around the hollow room, becoming a ping pong wind of *should we? are you going to? this is crazy.*

Mental freedom came at that time when I was wishing crazy hard that I would have either no chest or a good one, none of the in between stuff. The first day we took off our shirts in the locker room, we all grinned and I turned a little red, and we looked around to see what we had yet to come or what we might have already achieved. We had all been used to undressing so that no one saw anything: taking off the bra under the shirt, mastering the complexities of pulling on the bathing suit the instant after we took off our underwear, taking off our shirts at the same time we pulled up the suit over our chests. And then this delicious thing came to save us, let us pull everything off at the same time and run around with no clothes on. In an instant we were little muscles running around a slippery pool floor, diving and dunking in the nude.

That morning I saw all kinds of breasts and legs and skin, and I laughed and splashed, but stayed safely underwater, glad no one was wearing goggles. We all left our towels right by the side of the pool for rescue, just in case we were overcome with embarrassment. Nobody even ended up using them except to wipe the water from our eyes. I even wrapped my towel around my head, Egyptian queen style, and strutted back to the locker room with my palms in the air.

After a few times we got more used to the idea of being naked. We were less hesitant to walk around the edge of the pool, we began to spend more time climbing in and out; even Rita Carlisle did a cannonball off of the high dive, and we hooted when she re-emerged from the chlorine water. We became synchronized swimmers, twitching our feet to keep above the water and

look graceful. I pretended I worked at a water park, and I was the entertainment, leaning back and spitting water out from between my front two teeth. I began to love this treat which only came once every few weeks. Other mornings we had to swim hard, we struggled out of our wet and sticky bathing suits after practice, we winced at the red lines the straps made on our shoulders.

When we were nude, we lifted our bodies up and down, amazed at how pubic hair sprung right up when it came out of the water. We learned how it felt to sit bare skin against a pool ladder, the grooves making lines across our behinds. I did the backstroke with water in my nose and eyes and I won every time. I marched around the sides of the pool, chlorine water dripping from my hair down my shoulders to my sort of breasts down into my bellybutton down into that amazing hair between my legs down my goosebumpy thighs all the way to my toes, which were calloused from walking on the bottom of the pool.

I held my breath every morning at practice, waiting to see whether this would be a mental freedom day. And when it was, I stood proud on the diving board and felt it give underneath my feet, felt that in an instant my body would be catapulted into the air, slick and bare and free.

Haiti Sleep--an essay

“You . . . are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.
You are all children of light, children of day.
We do not belong to night or to darkness.
So then, we must not sleep like the rest, but keep awake and sober.”
1 Thessalonians 5:4-6

In these nights when Isabelle's body falls asleep before her mind, she is reminded of Achille. There it was the same thing each night, her brain running wild and acute, while a thick coating formed underneath her eyelids. It became harder and harder to open her eyes, yet she was far from sleep. In Haiti she had heat and the insects and the work to keep her mind occupied.

She has been back in the United States for two weeks and it is the immediacy which keeps her from sleep: she has just returned from a country which screamed its imprint onto her mind. Behind closed lids she sees faces of Haitian children, so darkened by the sun that they are almost black. She pictures the crowd which followed her group of fourteen white missionaries anywhere they went:

They run alongside the truck which carries the team, clamoring to see who can get closest to the white men. Hundreds of dusty feet running toward her, young feet so worn they look a hundred years old. These are feet used to traveling, used to taking the children over any terrain to find what might help them, what might make the day have a little less pain. As they run to find water on dry days, they run towards her. Isabelle sees herself, standing among them--the whiteskin, the new hope.

Isabelle went with the missionaries to Achille for the purpose of helping. To help the people who live daily on the cost of a cup of coffee, the people no one wants to acknowledge, the age-old otherman. Her teaching job affords the summers for such experiences, so she filled out the appropriate forms and got her immunization shots. Isabelle was sure she had been called to go, sure that Haiti was a seed she could water. "There are things and people and situations I know nothing about", she told her family. And when they said, "is it safe?" she replied that no one is really safe.

When Isabelle was young her family drove the scenic route to get anywhere. "Look at the panorama", her father would say, and she would glance up from a book with disinterest. On the occasion when she spent a quantity of time looking out the window, Isabelle fixated on the

farmhouses and trailer homes they passed. Life cannot go on in these boxes, she told herself. Who could survive in a square red house in the middle of nothing? She would stare and stare until she felt panicked, almost claustrophobic imagining a life contained in such emptiness. When coming home they saw the first signs of the city, she would let her breath out and savor each skyscraper and bridge and city person. “This is where I belong”, she would say to her parents, who were tired from the drive and bitter that vacation was ending.

Instead of taking a vacation, in August of her twenty-fourth year Isabelle arrived with the missionary team at the only Haitian airport. In this semi-city called Port-au-Prince, she felt touristy, crowded, safe. Even the boys clamoring for her hat or watch could not deter her sense of mission, her confidence at being in a new place to help. Yet after one night in Port-au-Prince, she loaded into a truck with the team members and set out for the worksite, a remote location. What would have been a brief ride in the States took eight hours over dirt roads and clogged town streets. She blinked the dirt out of her eyes as she watched the hillside they passed. The mountains were the only thing that looked cold in this scorching heat. Stripped of any vegetation, they rose grey and impenetrable, and closed around the team. As the towns became fewer and smaller, Isabelle’s sense of desperation increased. I am on a truck to that place, she began to say to herself. That place I saw out of my car window.

The trip has now been over for almost a month. Back at home in September, driving to work, Isabelle loses concentration. Her eyes remain on the road in front of her, her mind on Haiti. Instead of the highway she sees her Haiti room, her bed, she feels the heat:

It is the first night in the place which will be home for a week. Her bunkbed is in the back room of the missionary facility. The electricity has been shut off for the night. It is a miracle that they even have electricity here for the whitemen, she has been told: nine miles away, people sleep in utter darkness. She anticipates this village in which they will work, wondering what night will be like with no hope of light. The sound of the fan turning round and round on wobbling attachments drones in Isabelle’s ears. Sweat soaks through her back and onto her sheets and in a dream-state she wonders why someone has put a brick on her chest. The shallow breaths of the other teammates reminds her that they are all struggling to breathe through the night. She flicks on

her flashlight to make sure of her surroundings. Spiders are frozen on the grey cement walls, and Isabelle shuts off the light quickly so that they will no longer exist.

Home again. Before going to bed each night here in the United States, Isabelle takes a moment to write down thoughts. Of Haiti, she writes about gratitude: how lucky I am to have modern conveniences. She writes of the accomplishment she feels: how fortunate that I was able to contribute something. Then she scratches all of this away and throws down her book. It is all true--but what propels Isabelle is the memory of what did not happen in Achille.

Isabelle cannot keep the children from traveling across her eyes, through that space that separates her from sleep. She hears their laughter and the calling of her name with a heavy Creole accent: *Eez-a-belle, Eez-a-belle, Isabelle, play, Isabelle sing, Isabelle come*. She turns over on her side and considers how tired she will be tomorrow. This sleeplessness angers her. She hears the sounds of Haiti in her quiet room:

In the truck nicknamed the "Green Machine" they ride from their own quarters into the village. Isabelle ducks to avoid low branches and clings to the side of the truck so that she will not be thrown by the bumpiness. Haitian men catch a ride on the truck, and they sit on the sides, not needing to hold on for balance. They know when each leaf will swoop down over them, they have memorized each ditch and every branch. They are traveling across a dry river bed, the white rocks spread out under them, an endless glare. In the distance Isabelle watches barren mountains and heat skies; beyond that is a sea they can't see, which won't run into this river, the water that makes Haiti far away from anything else.

After arriving in the village Isabelle lets herself be dragged along by the children. They take her hands and lead her to sit underneath a tree where they braid her long straight hair in fascination. A twelve year old girl named Michelin heads up the impromptu salon, dividing Isabelle's hair into two equal sections. In a matter of seconds she braids the two sides down to the very tip, making them stay in with no hair tie or ribbon. Micheling stands back and clucks over her skillful work, and Isabelle runs her hands along the braids, feeling the heat of the sun, even there under the shade. Michelin and her friends speak rapid look-at-that language and Isabelle shakes them off to go work, promising she will return.

This village is probably a mile in diameter, with one pump for water which only occasionally flows. Even in this remoteness there is a type of main road, where an old woman sits selling fried bananas and coconuts. Skinny cows graze in the few clumps of grass, a pig is tied to a tree in one clearing. Stationed like guards under every patch of shade are the villagers, waiting, watching.

In November, Isabelle remembers thinking of the sandbox she built with her father. When she was six, he said that it was time for her to have a sandbox of her own and she would help him build it. Together they cut the wood and formed it into a square and bought the pounds of sand. In the backyard, Isabelle helped her father empty the bags into the box, and then she played in it until the grass started growing up through the bottom. When she asked her father why they hadn't put wood underneath, he replied that he hadn't thought it was necessary. Isabelle hated the grass and weeds which invaded her smooth sand piles, and she did not play in the box any more.

In Achille she had spent morning and night for six days working with the team to build a school and to put the roof on an outhouse. She joined her teammates in making cement; the Haitian overseer showed them how to mix it on the ground and how to smear it onto the crude walls of the school building. With the help of the translator, Luckner, they learned that this would be the first actual school building in the village. He walked amongst the team while they worked, shouting tour-guide-like words and patting them on the back: "Over two hundred children will be able to attend, thanks to the help of the missionaries. A very smart young gentleman will come to teach in our village". While Luckner moved in and out of the workings, encouraging, translating, they became skilled at smoothing a mixture into straight walls and neat corners. The team swarmed around the site, carrying buckets, mixing, pouring, scraping, wiping the sweat away with gritty hands.

Turning the sand and rocks and water over and over into a pile had been a little like the project with her father. No grass will grow up through this cement, she had thought. We will build safe walls and a roof and floors which will separate outside from inside, wild from tame. This mix will mean civilization and education and the advent of comfort. With the shovel gripped

in her hands, Isabelle felt the power of her mission. Each callous on her palm reminded her that she had come to help, she was helping, she had a purpose. God was throwing her a wink, watching her build a road between peoples.

By mid-November, Isabelle wonders at the starkness of the city. Every leaf is gone and the city seems to be only made of branches and corners, raw and cold things. She has always parked on the roof of parking garages so that she can see buildings. Sometimes they are level with her and she can see the detail around the edge of the roof. Sometimes she can look down and see the top of another lower building. In either circumstance, she is surrounded by the city, by stone, by man's creation. In Haiti it must still be warm, she thinks. The people are still looking for water in a dry time--they are probably thirsty today. They know nothing about cities or cold weather.

In Haiti it seemed that she was giving them a piece of city-progress, of the world she knew: the stuff of a wall, of structure, of community. When lunch time would come, she peeled almost-dried cement off of her t-shirts and wiped her dusty hands on the grass. From a distance she looked over at their accomplishments of the team and smiled up at the children who watched her eat her peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She gave them some extra sandwiches, which the pastor replaced with spicy beans that made her eyes water. Michelin and the others laughed at her eating the Haitian food, and scrambled to divide the peanut butter and jelly. What would they do in a city? she thought. I am giving them a piece of one now, in the most remote way, and they will never know what that means.

As the team ate and worked and lived, the children watched. Every day more came, bringing mothers and grandmothers and any who were not working themselves. They hung around trees and traced lines in the dirt and never took their eyes off of Isabelle and the others. Older girls kept pots and banana bunches balanced on a circle of cloth on their heads. Hands on hips, wrists bent at dangerously bony angles, the thin cloth of their dresses swaying in thanks for the occasional breeze.

Michelin and her gang of twelve year olds approached almost every day. After braiding Isabelle's hair they would pull on her sleeve and try to make her play clapping games with them. She obliged for a while, humming Miss Mary Mack and flinching as their hands slapped her own sore palms. After tiring of this, they taught her how to make gas noises with the armpit; they had

perfected it into an orchestra of tiny arms flailing and farting in rhythm.

Driven by duty and the eye of the Haitian overseer, she told them that she must not play for too long, for she was helping to build them a school. *École*, she said, motioning to the building. Her limited French was lost on their Creole ears; she smiled at each one and went back to her shovel. They remained nearby all day, every day, waiting to see if she would give them anything, say any white person words, let them touch her hair. Each time Isabelle looked over at Micheling, she was smiling an enormous smile, her big teeth showing off. She would nod her head as if to say, yes we are friends, and Isabelle nodded back. She stayed there even after the other children were chased off by mothers who seemed frustrated with the time wasted, staring at missionaries. She rocked herself in her arms and hummed songs from the church while the team continued to work.

This is not wasted time, Isabelle began to force herself to remember. Thirst sometimes pushed this line from her mind, and the misery she saw created a pang somewhere in her stomach, making it harder to think why she had come, or rather, what she could do. She had watched one day as the missionary doctor on the team tried to heal a boy's wounded thumb. He had been playing with a rusted machete, digging into the dirt piles around the site. The cut was deep, down through the tendon, and it stayed open, bloody, thumb motionless. The boy laughed with the doctor and smiled even as his cut was cleaned and dressed, then he ran to play with the other children. Soon it became obvious that he would lose his thumb to gangrene, that his games would soon stop. Isabelle went into the church and asked God why they could do no more, why there was such a deep hurt. "Isn't there some rescue?" she repeated over and over. Outside, the pastor thanked the team, calling them angels.

From on high above her home city, Isabelle stares, remains motionless on the top floor of the parking garage, watching the heads below. In an instant they are the heads of children. She walks away from the edge of the parking lot railing, shaking her head, tired of visits from Haitians, wishing she could see what was here rather than what was there. And yet that night she was back in bed, trying to remain still so that she could sleep--not being able to:

It is the fourth day of the project, time for the whitepeople to have Bible School for the village children. After singing and a Bible lesson, the pastor comes to give a short message. A Haitian translator carefully relays his words: "they have come to help us", he says. "God has given us more than we can possibly thank Him for. We are blessed."

Isabelle thinks how little they have done yet. Wait, she thinks. Wait and see what we will give you, what we can do. She is still hoping that change is in air, in the pores of the cement, coming soon. When the service is over, the children shake hands and tell the team their names over again. Isabelle tries to remember each one, but they are foreign sounding and coming quickly, in a pummel of *this is my name's*. This is me. Odina, Tami, Gustave, Katyli. Then in the midst of the shouting, a boy of about nine takes Isabelle's hand in his and quietly says, "Pray for me sister."

Afterwards, the children receive treats. Almost one hundred line up at the door, and Isabelle helps to hand out ribbons and barrettes and balloons and candy. She watches the tops of heads and the chalky hands that reach up to get seconds. The fluorescent plastic barrettes are bent, her hands are sticky from Lifesavers. She sees the sea of round bellies below, she becomes more numb with each finger grabbling her arm, each gift she gives. She passes the bag of gifts to another teammate. She leans against the rough doorway of the church until all the children have gone.

It is near Thanksgiving now, and Isabelle's own mother calls to see if she has been keeping up with the turmoil in Haiti. Isabelle is agitated by the conversation--she has been putting Haiti in a locked drawer of her mind. "I think about it a lot," she admits. "I wonder how it is, how they are. It's getting more distant. I keep thinking about how there aren't any lights in Achille."

After the conversation, she turns out her lamp and tries to put it out of her mind. She puts the pillow over her head, drowning out the noise of the children singing:

It is nearing the end of the week. Creole songs fill the stone church and echo off of the windowless walls. Triangles of light filter in through the only openings, up near the ceiling on the front wall. The boys are lined up on the platform in front, singing a song they prepared for the missionaries. They motion along with the words, singing in Creole about the lost sheep. Michelin sits next to Isabelle, head on her shoulder, looking up occasionally to insure that they can still nod

at each other. Isabelle rocks three year old Tami on her lap, both of them watching the performance intently. When it is over, Isabelle claps her hands along with Tami's in between, and the girl looks up with a smile. Her front two teeth are almost completely rotted away, and around her mouth are traces of coconut milk. Isabelle strokes Tami's hair and feels the hot, sticky skin of her face.

Next, the little girls take their turns singing for the white visitors, and sounds of 'Jesus Loves Me' breathe out of a four year old in a yellow dress. While she listens to the familiar song in foreign words, Isabelle's eyes are fixed on the tears in the girl's yellow gingham fabric. The lace around the neck has torn from the body of the dress. The little girl sings with her eyes lifted to the sky and Isabelle looks up to force the tears from spilling out of her own eyes. We are both looking heavenward, she thinks.

Now looking up at the cracks in her United States ceiling, Isabelle recalls the day the team had to leave. She has become used to this nightly routine, thinking of Haiti before sleep, dreaming in Haiti sleep--and each time the recollections are more dim. After three months, the faces themselves do not grow fainter, nor does the desperation; it is only that her mind is used to these things, and she finds it easier to let them carry her into sleep than to fight, trying to see them in the light:

By sundown before the last day in Achille, it was apparent that the team was not going to finish the school. "It's okay", Luckner said. "All we wanted was some help, and you gave it gladly. The next team will work on completing the facilities."

The next team was not scheduled to arrive until November, almost four months later. When she knew this, Isabelle began to breathe more rapidly. "We have to complete the school before leaving", she said to the pastor, forgetting for a moment that he did not understand English. "What have we done yet?" The pastor held her hands to his chest and gently fingered her callouses.

The next morning they rose before dawn and began furious work. In a dark that came right up around their ears and mouths and eyes, they shoveled and dug and mixed. Instead of hovering children, night bats and unfamiliar sounds hung above their heads. Isabelle bent low and inhaled

the dusty earth, breathing in expectant heat and looking at her cement for the last time.

The team stopped working at four in the afternoon, in order to make it out of the village before sundown. Isabelle was the last to put down her shovel, surveying the project slowly. Any newcomer would barely be able to tell we've been here, she thought.

In the same way, she surveys the city skyline when returning from the Thanksgiving trip to her parents' house. Her eyes eventually do not see the individual buildings. They do not see civilization:

Before the team are the remains of a human cement factory, the scrapings of the white man in the dirt. The walls of the school are dark with dampness, patched here and there with drying spots. Isabelle's eyes blur with fury. The team has not finished the school, and perhaps even the next team will not finish. She cannot see the work that has been done, she sees the mesh of used shovels and cracked buckets, all grey and filthy from the land. Someone pulls at her sleeve; it is Michelin, pointing in the direction of the Green Machine which is about to leave.

Isabelle does not know what to say to Michelin. She wants to say that she'll be back, that things will be better, that she'll bring some more ribbons and barettes. Instead she plays one more game of clapping with the girl, and Michelin stops midway, grasping Isabelle's hand in her own. On her face are two things; one is a desperateness spilling up on the surface and the other seems to be thankfulness, and then Isabelle knows that in this short week these two have fallen in love. She and Michelin, who is proud and quick and friendly and bossy and hungry and desperate all in one. They are now both wondering how they will let each other's hands go, and then the truck is starting and sputtering, and Isabelle hears her name and in an instant pulls away. Michelin runs along side, holding on to the pocket of her shorts. She wants to turn around and hold her barely-there body in her arms, she hears the growling of the truck. She heaves herself onto the high truck, scraping her knees on the jagged wooden platform. She is barely on before it pulls out, forcing her to sit down and hold on to the sides. The children are in a line behind the truck, seas of faded colors and torn t-shirts. They are waving and singing the Creole praise Jesus, their voices nasal and piercing, their hands clapping. She sees arms and hands, in rhythm, mouths smiling, teeth, eyes grieving, plastic barrettes.

Isabelle looks down at her bloody knees. She is crying from the pain in her heart.

Rest comes easier with each night. Only when there is no other sound, Isabelle hears Michelin directing, the children singing, Tami clapping, hears the wail of a woman and her dying baby. As they dance around her heavy eyes, weeping and shouting and grinning, Isabelle counts them all and gives them a space. In her wake-sleep she can smell the earth and the beans and the sour milk around the mouths of her children.

On the first of December, Isabelle reads the newspaper at the kitchen table. A small article states that all missionaries have been expelled from Haiti. Many Haitians are dead, trying to escape their land. She never make it to the end of these articles. She finds herself letting the newsprint blur into grey, and somewhere she is picturing her own Haiti:

In the cities, the prospect of civil war quivers in the heat waves rising up from the cement. In the village, there is singing in the church. Out loud, the pastor reads letters sent from some of the missionaries. He thanks God for supplying his needs. For the microphone and speaker the team sent, for the medical supplies, for the baseball hats, for prayers.

A young man in the back of the church thinks of his trip to the city, he thinks of the miles between this church and the fighting, his shoulders shake with sadness. Outside Michelin shows three young girls how to braid each their hair with missionary ribbons.

No one is left to help with the work. The bags of cement are all used, other supplies are low. Will-power sifts along with the dust and settles underfoot. In the day, the sun bakes the walls of the missionaries' building, scorching it to the core. At night, the people sleep under the dried black-ink sky. In the center of the village, Isabelle's school remains empty and grass grows up through the cracks in the unfinished cement.

Isabelle knows all of this, and it only keeps her questioning. Why did we even go? she thinks sometimes. And other days, she concludes: it could be that nothing will ever change there. But she can't believe that God would have forgotten Haiti, then she thinks that maybe God is not the one to blame.

And then after a while it is March. Isabelle gets word from one of the missionaries that a

few teams might be allowed to go back to Haiti in several months. The amount of teams allowed may be slim, but any help will be good. Soon the wheel will begin turning again, and the cycle will start, progress will be born again.

Isabelle takes a walk outside since the warm weather has conceded to stay. Although the city is still bare, there are hints here and there of greener days. Outside in the sun, Isabelle lifts her face, re-acquainting herself with its touch. For the first time since last summer, she is warm from something that does not come from a radiator, she can feel the pleasure of short-sleeves and no coat.

Isabelle wonders if she will ever go back to Haiti, and then she realizes that certainly all of her never left. She stops walking and stares down at the chipped sidewalk, where little bits of glass reflect the sun. She knows that a piece of her is still there, in Achille, still helping.

While here the children still invade her sleep and squeeze into her life through invisible cracks, the same might happen in the village. Perhaps Michelin plays a game of clapping and she thinks of Isabelle. Maybe they braid each other's hair and play with faded ribbons and remember the missionaries or the Bible stories or the songs. And in the midst of a hungry day or the sound of songs from the church, maybe they catch a wink from God, have a little piece of light in the dark.